

Methods of Holistic Evaluation

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In traditional Chinese, Greek, Western, and Ayurvedic medicine, use is made of the pulse, tongue, complexion (observation), symptoms (questioning), and analysis of the discharges (observation). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, doctors listened to the heart and lungs, and palpated the internal organs. At the present time, these skills are not as widely taught or used.

Questioning. An herbalist should determine through questioning at least the following: (1) entry complaint, (2) medical diagnosis, if any, (3) current, past, or proposed future medical treatment, (4) major subjective symptoms, physical and psychological, (5) major patterns of symptoms according to some system, (6) origin or circumstances surrounding the origin of the problem, and (7) realistic ability to follow protocols.

Observation. The practitioner should observe at least: (1) complexion of the face and skin (glow, color, dry, damp, oily), (2) obvious signs of discomfort and torsion, (3) appearance of the tongue, and (4) local skin lesions.

Palpation. Ideally, a practitioner should be able to read the pulse and palpate internal organs through the skin, especially those between the ribs and the top of the pubic bone; also over the kidneys. In my practice I make great use of palpating or touching the skin to feel the presence of moisture and the temperature.

Listening. It is worthwhile listening to the voice and the cough, especially the latter. Other senses can also be used. Sweet, diabetic blood smells sweet, as does the skin of the person, very often.

The above are called the 'four examinations' in traditional Chinese medicine.

Complexion, Face and Skin Color

In traditional Chinese medicine there are five colors, white, red, yellow, green, black (blue/black). In Greek medicine there are four colors corresponding to the four humors, white, red, yellow, blue/black, with green a combination of blue and yellow.

Pale. Pallor is usually associated with (1) anemia or malnutrition, (2) blood loss, (3) tension in the peripheral capillaries cutting up blood flow to the surface, (4) thin, watery blood, and (5) cold keeping the peripheral capillaries closed.

Pink. Pink is the natural color of healthy mucosa. Pinkness of the skin can indicate excessive blood in the surface, usually associated with the sanguine temperament, or histaminic sensitivity (rashes, allergies, histaminic over-reaction). In a red head, indicates the latter. When pink/red forms around a cut the indication is excess histamine (wild cherry bark).

Red/pink, carmine. Appearing on the mucosa, tongue, or skin, indicates heat/excitation conditions, high blood, easy inflammation, autoimmune excess tendencies.

Dark Red. This almost always indicates that heat has gone down deeper into the tissues from the above, carmine condition. It is usually treatable with dandelion root, especially if the tongue is mapped.

Purple. When purple or red/purple/blue occurs on the skin or tongue or mucosa the indication is septic heat, or inflammation caused by putrefaction. This is the opposite of the above, carmine and dark red indications, which show heat from overactivity. This is heat from depression or stagnation leaving waste products to burn or even poisoning or toxins on the brink of causing tissue death.

Blue. This indicates (1) viscid blood (use salicylate blood thinners), (2) coagulated blood (use sweet aromatic blood thinners, coumarins), or (3) varicosities (use astringents).

Blue/Gray. This color indicates mildly thickening blood of early old age (50s, 60s) which is usually treatable with sage or madder.

Blue/Green/Yellow/Gray. Blood stagnation with mild tendencies towards cancer. A good indication for angelica.

Green. This color either indicates severe bile duct blockage or cancer, according to traditional Chinese medicine.

Gray. Poor oxidation of the tissues causes gray complexion, which is usually associated with smoking.

Yellow. Intense yellow indicates acute blockage of the gall ducts; jaundice.

Sallow (mild, slightly dark yellow). Indicates the choleric personality (strong bile) or a weak gallbladder (the opposite), with loss of bile into the digestion and blood, with weakness and low will power.

Mild Yellow. Lymphatic stagnation.

Blue, Red, and Swollen (Mottled). Some kind of peripheral congestion; good indication for elder.

Blue and Swollen. Usually associated with a turned ankle or wrist; good indication for elder.

Black. Oxidation almost absent; necrosis. When seen on the tongue a reflection of an area of the body that is approaching the necrotic or cancerous.

Skin Tone, Moisture

Cool, clammy skin. Perspiration of water excessive, unless it is a very hot day; thin, watery blood; acclimatized to

warm weather. Sumach, Nymphaea, Monarda. In the fall, to stop sweating, tonics: astragalus, sumach, witch hazel, ledum, comptonia.

Warm, oily skin. Healthy skin if the weather is cool or cold.

Tacky, sticky skin. Indicates an excess of oil in the skin; usually not found everywhere, unlike cool, clammy skin. Profuse oily perspiration in fever, burdock.

Skin Stiff and Hard. Lack of oil. Burdock, hawthorn (especially if on backs of hands and wrists), angelica, sage, thyme (fingers, skin hard and stiff).

Lichenification (looks like sage leaf). Sage.

Skin Dense and Thick. May indicate hypothyroidism.

Skin Dry and Cold. Cold, depressed tissue state.

Joints Cold. Tendency to joint problems from cold.

Fingers, hands cold, sudden transition to warmth. Tension interfering with circulation.

Fingers, hands and arms cold, slow transition to warmth. Cold, depressed tissue state. May be hypothyroid.

Eczema dry. Burdock, Oregon grape root.

Eczema damp. Yellow dock root, barberry root, dandelion root.

Cracking palms, soles. Cracking of soles, homeopathic Petroleum low potency. Keratinosis, build up of skin, cracking, Monarda fistulosa.

Nails

Nails thin, crack easily, hang nails. Lack of silica; also hair thin, split ends, silica, horsetail, oatseed, oatstraw.

Nails ridged. Silica, horsetail, oatseed, oatstraw.

Nails, fungus under toenails. Horsetail, blue vervain, henna painted on nail.

Hair

Balding, thinning. Lack of silica (horsetail, oats, homeopathic silica), alopecia (loss of body or head hair in spots or all over), agrimony. Hair thick indicates high estrogen. Thicken hair, wash in nettles.

Gray or white hair. Fo ti (*Polygonum multiflorum*), nettles.

Eyebrows. When the outer brows are gone the indication is hypothyroidism, black walnut.

Teeth

Caries. Oak bark, homeopathic Calcium fluoride. When caries suddenly appears in middle age it is a precursor of osteoporosis (remedies, oak bark, boneset, calcium phosphate).

Gums

Oak bark, plantain, goldenseal, prickly ash, myrrh gum tincture, poke root.

Acne

This condition frequently occurs in association with excess androgen, a hormone that stresses the liver. Other chemicals and toxins difficult for the liver to process also can cause acne.

Acne, large spots. “Liver acne,” from excess androgens, wild lettuce (encysted, scar tissue), burdock, easter lily (encysted).

Acne, sheets of small pimples. Kidney acne, Goldenrod.

Acne, ovarian reflex points under the outer lips. Worse at ovulation and before period, from excess estrogen, white peony root.

Acne, reddish and bluish. Lymphatic and blood stagnation, frequently with depression, scrophularia.

Tongue

In a limited sense the tongue shows the mucosa and the digestive tract; in a general sense it is divided into zones corresponding to all the organs.

The major elements of tongue diagnosis:

Tongue Body

Color

Moisture

Shape

Tongue Coating

Color

Moisture

Thickness

Tongue Body Color

Pale. Lack of blood or heat. Pale and dry, anemia. Pale and moist, kidney anemia (kidneys not signaling the marrow to produce blood). Or, cold/depressed.

Red/pink, carmine. Heat, excitation tissue state.

Dark red. Heat going to a deep layer; heat/excitation.

Blue. Stagnant blood.

Red outside, blue center. Heat and stagnant blood.

Purple. Stagnant heat, tendency to sepsis.

Blue/gray. Stagnant blood, madder, sage.

Black spot. Sepsis, extreme blood stagnation, cancer. Not unknown in old people. Indicates Polygonum persicaria.

Tongue Shape

Elongated, flame-shaped, pointed. Pitta. Fire, heat, excitation.

Long, thin width and heighth. Vata. Dry.

Round. Kapha. Damp.

Thick, Muscular. Strong, muscular person. Pitta.

Thin. Vata,

Shaking on Extension. Wind, tension.

Tooth-marks. I welcome ideas.

Coating

Moderately moist. Normal.

Excessively moist. Dampness, especially relaxation.

Excessively moist 'streamers' down sides of tongue. Damp spleen, lymphatics.

Dry. Needs lubrication, moisture, dry/atrophy. Is not an indication for actual atrophy unless the tongue is withered. Needs a mucilage, bitter, or other moistening remedy.

Dry, shining. Not only dry from lack of lubrication, but hardening is indicated; needs an emollient. Dry, shining, with horizontal cuts, marshmallow root. Dry, shining, with exfoliation of white powder from lips, marshmallow root.

White coating. Cold. The relaxed tissue state is indicated by clear excessive moisture to white coating. Moist tongue with white

coating in the middle, candida, nymphaea. Dirty white coating, wide tongue, red root.

Yellow coating. Heat. A thick or thin yellow coat usually indicates the stagnant tissue state. Usually with a red tongue body.

Yellow, thick coating, red tongue body, cracking in the middle. Smoker's tongue, smell the tobacco on the breath. If a person smokes and these symptoms are moderate, there is less damage from the smoke. More severe and dry, more serious.

Brown coating. Hot with septic tendencies. But, typical of someone who has just drunk coffee.

Mapped, geographical. White or sometimes yellow coating, ripped or burned off in places, to reveal patches of dark red or excoriated pink red, with a generalized dark red color. Dandelion root, very seldom burdock root. This indicates 'phlegm heat' in TCM, or heat in the muscles and bones, or organs. If burnt off in a particular area, refers to the organ there.

Coating in back of tongue. Usually normal. With red spots poking up through indicates intestine heat. Possibly dandelion root.

Pulse

The pulse is an excellent diagnostic tool. As a specific indicator, it refers to the heart, mind, circulation, and blood, but through the pulse positions it refers to all the organs. There are three positions on each side, divided into superficial and deep, making a total of twelve positions, corresponding to the twelve meridians or organ systems. This is the system in the *Nan Jing*.

Right Hand

First pulse, on the hill (bump). Large intestine, lungs.
Second pulse, in the swamp. Stomach, spleen.
Third pulse, down the hill. Triple burner, heart protector.

Left Hand

First pulse, on the hill. Small intestine, heart.
Second pulse, in the swamp. Gallbladder, liver.
Third pulse, down the hill. Bladder, kidneys.

A simpler method. The three pulses correspond to the three burners (thoracic, abdominal, pelvic). Upper pulse is on the hill, epicondyle, indicates blood in the upper part of the body (heart, lung). Middle pulse is in the swamp, below the epicondyle, corresponds to the digestion (stomach, spleen, gallbladder, liver). Lower pulse is 'down the hill,' corresponds to the lower part of the body, lower back, kidneys (yin on left side, yang on right side).

High, Elevated, Beating Towards the Surface. Acute disease, high blood, immune excess, high blood pressure. Heat/excitation.

Low, Beating Towards the Depths. Chronic disease, low blood (but not necessarily anemia, see hollow), immune deficiency, low blood pressure. Cold/depression.

Rapid. Fever. Rapid and high is acute fever, rapid and low chronic fever, rapid and wiry means the body is resisting the heat, rapid and non-resistant means the heat is having its way with the body, rapid and full means the blood itself is being attacked by the heat. Rapid, full, and non-resistant indicates yarrow. Rapid and hard indicates cold resisting heat, barberry root.

Slow. Cold. If the pulse is slow and low, cold from the dying down of internal warmth (thyroid?) If the pulse is slow and hard, external cold has entered through the skin and muscles. There will usually be depression (wormwood) or negative thinking (wild lettuce). Hard in the liver pulse only (wormwood).

Tense, Wiry, Resistant. Tension, mental, emotional, or physical. Very common. Indicates nervous or muscular tension, or 'liver problems.' Wind/tension. Sometimes indicates agrimony.

Non-Resistant. Lack of tension, atonic, sometimes watery, meaning relaxation. Languid, relaxed. Damp/relaxation. When this occurs with fever make sure the nervous system is not being affected; may indicate homeopathic Gelsemium.

Big, Wide, Broad. Not the same as full (meaning there is something thickening the blood). The beat widens the pulse, a kind of atonicity and non-resistance. Rapid and wide, non-resistance to heat, homeopathic Belladonna. In TCM, heat in the stomach or intestines.

Thin. Even on expansion the pulse is thin and narrow. "Feels like a fine thread, but very thin and clear" (Kaptchuk). Indicates dryness and atrophy. In TCM, blood deficiency. In more extreme cases, weakness and withering. Often appears thin on the left hand, wiry on the right; indicates vata or ectomorphic constitution.

Hard. Internal cold, that is, external cold has invaded and gotten stuck in the muscles and tendons. Rapid and hard,

resistance to the heat from cold, barberry root and others. Hard and slow, internal cold, wild lettuce. Hard in one pulse, scar tissue (wormwood). Hard in the liver pulse, damaged liver (wormwood).

Soft. On compression the pulse disappears, means superficial strength, deep weakness. Easily compressed vessel, see empty, hollow.

Obscure, filmy. The pulse that indicates alteratives. What it means is that the edge of the beat is obscured by filminess in the fluids, in the blood. This refers to 'humors in the blood,' or impurities and toxins that are present due to insufficient metabolism. Liver, thyroid, eliminative problems. Indicates the need for alteratives and possibly laxatives. Filmy down the middle, burdock.

Sharp-edged. Indicates pain, acuity of sensation; needs anodynes. Hypericum.

Full. Something is in the blood, like heat in the blood (rapid and full). The obscure pulse is somewhat full, from filminess and fluid and toxins in the blood.

Empty, Hollow. The vessel feels like a hollow tube that is easily compressed, indicates anemia. Like presses down on an onion-stalk.

Tympanitic, Drum-like. Indicates air pressing up in the pulse, meaning gas. Stomach gas. May be associated with atrophy.

Tendon-like. Feels like a long, stretched tendon, especially in the lower pulses. Tight tendons, lower back problems. Wild lettuce, solomon's seal, homeopathic Rhus tox.

High-walled. The vessel feels like a hard, round pipe with a thin fluid running through it, indicates hardening of the arteries, and points to the homeopathic remedy Natrum muriaticum (salt).

Choppy. The beat hits the artery on a different place each time; in more serious cases the pulse also varies in timing from beat to beat. There is no intermittency in the choppy pulse, though this pulse could occur with an intermittent pulse. Indicates congealed blood, coagulation of the blood. Arnica, yarrow, safflower, homeopathic Carbo vegetabilis.

Intermittent. A missed beat, on a regular or irregular basis. Indicates a heart problem or is congenital or long-term.

Vibratile. Called the 'spinning bean' pulse in traditional Chinese medicine. Feels like the buzzing of a bee's wings. Usually found in one pulse, often the heart. Sometimes on one side. Indicates that the patient is having an allergic reaction right at the time the pulse is being taken. Homeopathic Apis (roasted honeybee).