LESSON 1: Introduction to TCM

History

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is estimated to date back 2500 years ago, although it is entirely possible that it reaches back farther than that to 5000 years ago, well beyond its written history to the “shamans” or lay people of China. TCM was developed from the close observation of nature’s patterns and cycles. The ancient Taoists believed in living harmoniously with and as a part of nature. Their “system” of medicine was acquired from the close observation of the passing of seasons, the changes in weather, the cycles of the moon and so forth, and how these influences powerfully affect our bodies. Through this observation they developed methods of living harmoniously within these influences and within ourselves. Illness was believed to be the result of unhappy ancestors punishing their relatives who were disrespectful. This theory has been replaced or rather modernized, but we will still see evidence of it when discussing the environmental evils and external causes of disease. Ancient theories and techniques still stand strong within the basis of modern TCM and are still applicable to this day.

The first known recorded history of TCM dates back to 500 BCE to the ‘Yellow Emperor’s Internal Classic’ (Huang Di Nei Jing, or commonly referred to as the Nei Jing). Composed of two parts ‘The Spiritual pivot’ (Ling Shu) and ‘Basic Questions’ (Su Wen), the Nei Jing discusses meridians, physiology, living in harmony, diagnosis, treatments, herbology and acumoxa. Although the official author is the Yellow Emperor in reality it is a compilation of several “shamans” or doctors over a course of several years. This classic first appeared during the Warring states period (475 BCE - 221 BCE), it was added to during the Qin and Han Dynasties and was officially compiled for the public during the early Weston Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 AD). Written as a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and his physician Qi Bo, its contents at times seem cryptic and archaic but its contents at heart are still considered the back bone of modern TCM. Many later texts are based on the Nei Jing and go on to further the discussion and theories.

There are 4 main classical texts that make up the foundation of Traditional Chinese Medicine: the ‘Yellow Emperors Internal Classic’ (Nei...
Jing), ‘On Cold Damage’ (Shang Han Lun), the ‘Treatise on Warm Diseases’ (Wen Bing Xue), and ‘Treatise of Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases’ (Jin Gui Yao Lue). Throughout the first and second decade several texts have been written focusing on specific subjects and theories of TCM, some of these texts include the ‘Divine Husbandmans Classic of Materia Medica’ an important text on Herbal medicine, and specialized books such as the ‘Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach’.

TCM Today

Modern day TCM evolved from the classical texts and techniques. Sterilized and individually packaged needles have replaced the golden reusable needles of the past, but at heart it is still derived from the words written by those shamans and doctors of 2000 years ago. TCM combines various techniques such as Acupuncture, Tuina massage, auricular therapy, gua sha, cupping, various types of needling, herbs with internal and external applications etc., all with their roots in the classics, with techniques mastered and adapted by various practitioners. Still today academics and practitioners alike spend years working on translations of texts such as the ‘Yellow Emperors Internal Classic’ and the ‘Shang han lun’; others have modernized theories such as the 5 phases to fit our modern era and others are developing new types of therapies using sound and vibration on acupuncture points.

Philosophy

TCM is a philosophy and a lifestyle. It is based on the understanding that we are an intimate component of our environment and to live is to follow the laws of our environment and nature. We are in essence a microcosm of the greater macrocosm of the universe. This holistic thinking implies the assumption that all things are relative, and defined not only
on their own, but also by their environment. Knowing this helps us understand how nature ultimately affects our own cycles. For example, when observing a tree's response to the 5 seasons, we see that in the spring a tree is in its growth phase, the sap is moving out to the limbs and new buds are forming. This is the same response in our bodies. After a long cold winter, we are beginning to stretch our limbs and our energy is beginning to rise to the surface, we are releasing our layers and engaging in social activities. As spring turns to summer and the sun spends long hours in the sky, the tree is in full bloom, reaching its maximum potential. In the same way we are at our best, full of joy and activity; we are carefree with no need to bundle up. This is the importance of the observation of nature; it shows us what our natural state is and how to live accordingly.

In ancient times as in modern times living in harmony with the environment means awareness of how to: exercise, dress, what food to eat, how our emotions are affected, etc., all according to which season we are in and our individual constitution.

Role of the Practitioner

**Intention** is a powerful aspect of healing. It explains why some patients recover quickly from an illness, and why others never completely heal. The same is true for the intent of the practitioner. A great practitioner is clear and confident about their ability to correctly diagnose and treat illness, whereas a mediocre practitioner may not have the confidence and therefore their intent will not be as strong and mediocre results will be observed. In TCM a great practitioner is always thinking of the whole picture rather than just at the presenting symptoms; it is said in the classics that “A mediocre practitioner treats the liver, but a great practitioner treats the liver and the spleen”, as we learn more about these organs in TCM we will see why this is so important. Our intention is to see the whole picture, not only the patient and their internal environment, but also the external environment around them, nature, and our presence in that healing.

**Clarity:** When the nature of health and disease are understood, it is possible for the practitioner to clearly discern the cause and nature of illness. The practitioner is aware of the laws of yin and yang, excess and deficiency, hot and cold, internal and external, and then is able to choose the most effective method of treatment.
Qi Gong: Qi refers to the energy of the universe, and gong implies effort or work, like the work of a craftsman. Together qi gong is energy work, but the kind of energy work that comes from practice and effort. In regard to all modalities of Traditional Chinese Medicine, qi gong is considered the most powerful of practices. Qi gong teaches our minds clarity and intent; when we teach it to our patients, we teach them to use their own power and intent to heal themselves. Healing comes from within.

Theories of TCM

Yin & Yang

TCM attributes yin and yang to all aspects of life. Yin and yang are mutually opposing aspects of a whole. Yin is the form and yang is the animation of the form; for each aspect of form and animation there are yin and yang qualities. This categorization of life into yin and yang extends into illness and treatment; all illnesses are yin or yang, and treatments of those illnesses are classified as tonifying or draining the yin or yang.

Qi, Blood, Body fluids and Essence

Qi, blood (xue), body fluids (jin ye) and essence (jing) are the 4 vital substances of the body. Each one is interdependent on the other to sustain each other and each one essential to sustaining life. Qi is the energy of all things; it is yin or yang, depending on the quality of its form. Qi has the characteristic of lifting, holding, warming, activating and defending. When qi enters the body life is formed, when qi leaves the body life ends.

Blood, jin ye and jing are nourishing, moistening, regenerating and grounding. Blood is the product of qi; it nourishes the body, carries qi and nutrients to the other parts of the body. Jin ye or body fluids are the moistening forces, which include saliva, sweat, tears, mucous, digestive enzymes and synovial fluid. Jing or essence is the most yin substance of the body; it is responsible for growth, development, maintenance and metabolism.

Shen is the opposing yang aspect of jing or essence; our shen is our brightness, our personality, and our interface. In order to display shen
we need jing or essence. The perpetuation of life is based on acquiring and regenerating qi, blood, jin ye and jing.

**Meridians**

Meridians are pathways that shunt qi, blood, body fluids, essence and shen. They are the integration of functions for a specific purpose, for example: the lung and large intestine are paired meridians, they are in charge of taking in and letting go, their emotion is grief, and their pathways follow the anterior arm to the index finger and thumb. Meridians are used diagnostically and therapeutically. When illness arises internally, it is the meridians allow the symptoms to be felt externally.

There are 12 regular meridians with Acupuncture or Acupressure points located on them, each meridian is connected deep into the body to its corresponding organ associated and its paired organ. For example: the lung meridian connects deeply inside the body to the lung organ and to its paired organ the Large intestine; the lung meridian then connects to the exterior aspect of the body to points corresponding along the anterior aspect of the arm, and then connects to its paired meridian the Large intestine on the posterior aspect of the arm. Another set of meridians exists, the 8 extraordinary meridians, to assist in transfer and storage of essential substances for the body.

**Organs**

There are 6 yin organs and 6 yang organs. They are not the meridians, but are intimately linked to them. They are responsible for the storage and transportation of essence. The 6 yin organs are the heart, pericardium, spleen, lung, kidney and liver; all parts of the body are subordinate to the yin organs and depend on their smooth function to thrive.
The 6 yang organs are the small intestine, triple burner, stomach, large intestine, urinary bladder and gall bladder. The yang organs are assistants to the yin organs.

5 Phases

The 5 phases are the metaphorical relationship between nature and the human body. It is a dynamic cycle of checks and balances that function to perpetuate life. The 5 phases are also referred to as the 5 elements, which are: Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood. Each element represents qualities that are analogous to that of their corresponding organ; heart paired with fire, spleen with earth, lung with metal, kidneys with water and liver with wood. When there is a breakdown in the relationship of checks and balances illness will arise. Treatment is based on the restoration of harmony among these relationships.

Integration

TCM requires an understanding of the holistic approach, inclusive in this is the ability to move between theories with ease. Each case presents itself differently, and different theories will accommodate each case more completely. It is the role of the practitioner to contemplate all possible aspects of physiology (yin, yang, 5 phases, meridians, organs, qi, blood, body fluids, and essence), to create a holistic understanding and then treat accordingly.