

Anthroposophic Medicine: deepening our understanding of herbs, healing and the human being

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Abstract: Anthroposophic Medicine is a European-based model of medicine founded by the Austrian scientist and philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, around 100 years ago. Anthroposophic medicine aims to increase our understanding of the human being and medicinal substances and serves to bring together ancient medical wisdom with modern scientific research. This article will explore the foundation concepts of this comprehensive and dynamic model of medicine, which are surprisingly relevant and applicable to the modern setting with particular reference to herbal medicine.

“Real medicine can only exist when it penetrates into knowledge which embraces the human being in respect to body, soul and spirit.”

Rudolf Steiner

The evolution of our understanding of the human being and the subtle forces that permeate life has been increasing in recent years with insights from quantum science. Historically, many Western practitioners have turned to the ancient healing traditions such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine to enrich and complement the scientific approach to medicine, which often falls short of treating the whole person. Anthroposophic Medicine (AM) is a European-based model that may deepen our understanding of the human being, herbal medicine and healing. AM is a comprehensive model that includes both Western and Eastern philosophical principles, bringing ancient medical wisdom together with modern scientific research. Despite being founded around 100 years ago, it is surprisingly relevant and applicable to the modern setting. Indeed, some of the new quantum science discoveries brought to light over recent decades are surprisingly similar to what Rudolf Steiner first proposed at the turn of last century.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian philosopher, scientist, spiritual teacher and esotericist. Steiner studied widely including the natural sciences, botany, chemistry and physics. He was influenced by many different thinkers in developing his original ideas, one of the most notable being the philosopher and naturalist Goethe (1749-1832). Rudolf Steiner developed a framework for understanding the human being and our unique relationship and interconnectedness to the macrocosm and microcosm of the universe. This framework is known as *anthroposophy*. Steiner applied the anthroposophic philosophy to a range of fields, with the most well-known applications being in the fields of education (Steiner or Waldorf schools) and agriculture (biodynamics – a holistic organic approach

to gardening and farming that utilises a number of preparations indicated by Steiner, some of them made from medicinal plants).

The development of a medical tradition of anthroposophy was born when Steiner presented a series of lectures given in 1920 to a group of doctors in English, commonly referred to as the *First Medical Course*. As Steiner was not a trained medical doctor, he also collaborated with Dutch physician Ita Wegman in the development of AM. He also further developed teachings from a range of influential philosophers and thinkers within medical history, including Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Hahnemann (1755-1843). For instance, Steiner used the Paracelsian alchemical idea of the *tria prima*, comprising of mercury, sulphur and salt. He endeavoured to understand more deeply the innate nature and quality of these substances and how they could be used in devising remedies.

AM has never aimed to be alternative as it accepts and works with the mainstream conventional medical approach. However, it does not stop at the scientific model but integrates it with another equally important form of knowledge, that of spiritual science. Spiritual science is the application of the scientific method to the human soul-spiritual dimension and related phenomena that fall outside the physical and sense-perceptible world. By incorporating all aspects of the human being it provides a rich and integrated holistic framework. It thus serves to expand our understanding beyond the rational approach in all aspects of medicine from physiology and pathology to medical treatments and therapies.

Understanding anthroposophy

To understand how medicines are prepared and utilised in AM, one first needs a basic understanding of anthroposophy. The word *anthroposophy* comes from *anthropos* (human being) and *sophia* (wisdom) and can

be translated as “wisdom of the human being” or “human wisdom.” Steiner asserted that there were no limits to human knowledge and he emphasized different ways of knowing and a deepening of observational powers beyond the basic senses. As such his methodology is essentially based upon a combination of imaginative, inspired, intuitive and practical intelligences. Fundamentally, anthroposophy respects both intuitive insight and scientific ‘truths’.

A basic understanding of the dimensions and layers of the human being according to anthroposophy is essential to understand how AM works (Huseman and Wolff 1982).

Four Fold Human

According to anthroposophy, the human being is comprised of four layers:

- Physical (dense, material body)
- Etheric (vital body)
- Astral (soul/emotional body)
- ‘I Am’ principle (spirit/higher body) - sometimes called ego.

Three Fold Human

A further three spheres and related processes are seen to govern the functions of the human being. These are somewhat akin to the “head, heart & hara” of many traditions.

- Nerve Sense Sphere: process of thinking
- Rhythmic (Heart/Lung) Sphere: process of feeling
- Metabolic/Limb Sphere: process of willing

The human being can be seen to be composed of an ‘upper pole’ that processes nervous and sensory functions that are largely conscious processes, and the ‘lower pole’ that governs metabolism and parasympathetic processes that are largely unconscious. The ‘rhythmic system’ operating in the middle offers a mediating sphere that serves to balance the catabolism of the nerve sense pole and the regenerative anabolism of the lower gut and limb pole. It is through the domain of the rhythmic system, the breathing and the circulation that the organism strives to maintain health and homeostasis (Steiner 1920).

In an anthroposophic sense, disease is seen in the context of an imbalance between the interplay of the four bodies or an imbalance in the function of the three spheres/poles. For example, a migraine could be related to too much activity in the upper nerve sense pole and an emphasis of astral (soul) body activity (emotional stress and tension). This imbalance gives rise to symptoms including headache and visual disturbance in the upper sphere and digestive disturbances in the lower metabolic pole. The task of the AM practitioner is to determine which layers need to be strengthened, stimulated or moderated to restore harmony in the human being. Therefore, remedies are seen to have an affinity with the different dimensions of the human being and can facilitate and restore balance where indicated.

Philosophy and approach to Anthroposophic Medicine

With an anthroposophic understanding of the human being in place, practitioners view human wellness and illness as reflections of biographical events connected to the body, mind and spirit of each individual. AM also aims to acquaint the patient with the true nature and cause of their illness and the deeper destiny and insight that may be offered through healing. Health is seen as the ability to attain a certain level of flexibility and resilience throughout life and to grow and learn from life’s challenges. With this in mind, AM incorporates a range of modalities that are suited to each individual and may include painting therapy, counseling, therapeutic eurythmy (movement), and massage, along with nutritional advice, herbal medicine and homoeopathy. Application of homoeopathic or phytotherapeutic substances take the form of oral ingestion, injected forms of medicine and external treatments. (International Federation of Anthroposophic Medical Associations n.d)

Anthroposophic nursing is also pivotal to many aspects of AM practice and often involves hydrotherapy – from compresses, wraps and baths to inhalations. It is important to note that in AM there is also a strong emphasis on education being an important part of child health. Moreover, an education that nourishes the whole child is seen to both promote health and be curative for certain health and developmental issues, such as autism spectrum disorders or attention deficit disorder (Glocker 2002). As such, most Steiner schools have a school doctor who works with the teachers to address how to best meet the developmental and health needs of the children.

Understanding the remedies

In AM, four groups (kingdoms) of nature are identified and comprise the mineral, plant, animal and human kingdoms. Remedies can be chosen from any group and are seen to display an ascending complexity. For example, minerals or metals only possess physical matter, whereas plants contain both physical and etheric substance and animals contain physical, etheric and astral qualities.

- Minerals: physical only
- Plants: physical & etheric
- Animals: physical, etheric and astral
- Human: all layers, organ remedies

Medicines are generally taken from the realm of plants, animals and minerals. Medicines are always devised and prepared according to the intricate inter-relationship between human beings and nature – plant, mineral and animal. While conventional diagnostic and prescribing criteria, such as *materia medicae* from homoeopathic and herbal medicine modalities, are used when determining the best substance, there are also key distinctions. One of the differences between traditional natural medicines and AM is in the growing, harvesting and manufacturing principles. Plant remedies are grown

according to biodynamic principles, harvested with intentionality and according to seasonal, lunar and solar cycles, all of which are thought to help harness additional life forces for the plant remedies. Remedies may be further enhanced through a range of dynamic processes. For example, compared with classical homoeopathy, rhythmical rocking rather than succussing (shaking) is used to potentise a remedy. The lemniscate or vortex may also be used to imprint vibrational forces into the medicinal substance.

Both rational knowledge and intuitive insight is needed when making an assessment and prescribing substances for healing. Questions that need to be addressed might include:

1. Which of the 3 functional systems (nerve sense, rhythmic or metabolic) should primarily be addressed?
2. Which organ is the key?
3. Which substance is needed?
4. Should the medicine be administered in its natural state or should it be transformed through a process that establishes a deeper more effective relationship to the disorder presenting in the human being?

In addition, remedies and therapies are given according to a specific time rhythm depending on what layer is being worked on. For example, the physical body may require a whole year of treatment, while the etheric body responds best to a monthly treatment rhythm. The astral body is given a weekly rhythm in relation to treatments (e.g. art therapy) and the 'I am' (higher spiritual process) is given a daily dose until a response is elicited (Vademecum of Anthroposophic Medicines 2009).

Plants in Anthroposophic Medicine

Many different plants are used in anthroposophical medicinal remedies. When observing plants one might notice that they comprise both physical and etheric substances and forces. Plants take earth energy from the ground and solar energy from the sun and transform it into plant energy, food and medicinal substances. Plants do not possess a soul, or higher 'I' or conscious principle. From an AM perspective, the astral layers of plants exist outside the plant and are not found within the plant.

The etheric force is easy to witness in a plant when you consider how the life force directs both the sap flow and the upward growth habit of plants. Both of these activities of the plant defy gravity, with the plant having to overcome the forces of gravity to emerge from the seed and push through soil to reach the sunlight. The invisible force that keeps a tiny seedling upright and orienting towards the sun is the etheric process.

Goethe

Steiner was inspired by the German writer, artist, scientist and philosopher, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Goethe developed a phenomenological approach to science, in particular botany and anatomy, which called upon deepening the human powers of

observation. He distinguished between manifestation and essence, stating, "It is not our senses which deceive us, but our judgment" (quoted in Van Der Bie, 2003).

Goethe wrote the classic book *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) and in it he discusses the archetypal plant known as the *urpflanze*. From his observation, all plants emerge from the seed, develop a leaf process, then develop a root sphere and flower process. The essence of the archetypal 'plant' is found in the green sphere of the leaf. Steiner applied Goethe's theories and extended them, summarising this approach in his book *Goethean Science* (Steiner, 1883). In turn, Steiner's application in relation to medicine and botany was further extended and interpreted by Oskar Schmiedel (1887-1959) and Wilhelm Pelikan (1893-1981). Schmiedel was instrumental in the development of anthroposophic medicines, in particular through his work at the natural medicine company, Weleda. Pelikan was a pharmacist, AM practitioner and gardener who applied a Goethean approach to observing and using plants. He worked closely with Schmiedel at Weleda and also wrote a book entitled *Healing Plants*, which is essentially an anthroposophic herbal *materia medica*.

The archetypal plant gives us a foundation on which to compare all plants and, in particular, herbs. Observing whether a plant has a dominant leaf process, flowering process or root process will offer insight into the plant's gesture or expression. From a reductionist viewpoint, one might predict that a plant will have more of certain pharmacological constituents if the plant's process is dominant in the root sphere. However, with an AM lens, we can widen the understanding further to see what else the plant reveals about its healing potential.

The human being can be seen to have an affinity with the gesture of the archetypal plant form, but it exists in a reverse polarity. This upside down plant is a model that enlivens the way plants can be seen and used for human healing. The root process corresponds to the head or nerve sense sphere, the leaf process to the rhythmic (breathing and circulatory) system and the flowering/fruited process corresponds to the digestive and reproductive domain of the human being. It is interesting to note that many flowers and seeds are used in digestive and reproductive disorders, leaves in lung disorders, and roots for nerve complaints.

The following photos demonstrate this relationship in detail. While this system suggests a relationship to the classic Doctrine of Signatures, there is a greater depth to it than just a visual cue.

Rhodiola rosea (Figure 1) and *Valeriana officinalis* have dominant root processes and possess an affinity for the nervous system.

Verbascum thapsus and *Althea officinalis* (Figure 2) have dominant leaf processes, and are used in lung complaints.

Vitex agnus castus and *Matricaria recutita* (Figure 3) both have a dominant flowering and fruited process

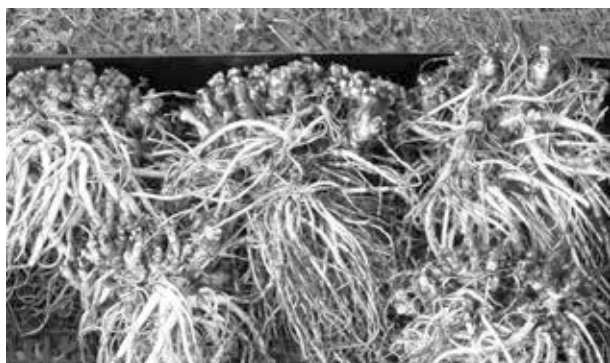


Figure 1: *Rhodiola rosea*. Photo courtesy of Gord Steinraths, Harmonic Herbs.



Figure 2: *Althea officinalis*. Photo courtesy of Kristian Peters and sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

and are used for reproductive and digestive disorders respectively.

Many of the medicinal plant genera hold a signature that can be determined through close observation. For example the *Labiatae* (*Lamiaceae*) family are considered plants of warmth, possessing volatile oils and varying degrees of heat, while the *Umbelliferae* (*Apiaceae*) family are plants of air, displaying a delicate ethereal process in their flowering habit and, in many cases, hollow, air laden stems.

Some AM herbal remedies are identified and utilised because of the way certain plants are seen to have affinities with specific minerals. The remedies do not just contain the mineral and a plant extract, but a mineral having been processed, enlivened and harnessed by the plant. These plants have a capacity to take the minerals up from the soil and as such enliven them and create a new vehicle for the mineral to be utilised.

A mineral that ordinarily belongs to the physical plane only is given some etheric

vitality via the plant. A classic example of this is *Urtica dioica* and iron. In anthroposophic medicine, iron is a key mineral remedy and many different forms are used, in particular to harness the higher 'I' principle within the human being. Nettle has the capacity to take iron from the soil and consolidate it and as such it is seen to be a special herb that can be utilised when iron is needed.



Figure 3: *Matricaria recutita*. Photo sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

Other examples of plant and mineral affinities include *Melissa officinalis* and copper, *Equisetum arvense* and silica, and *Thuja occidentalis* and silver.

Metamorphosis

According to Goethe, plants take a journey of metamorphosis from the realm of the seed through different growth processes, to flowering or fruiting and then eventually decay. The plant is a living and dynamic life form that is constantly evolving towards further stages of growth and following seasonal cycles. Plants possess different qualities throughout the journey from seed to flowering, and selecting plants at various stages can add a further dimension to the healing attributes.

Elder flowers (*Sambucus nigra*) for example are traditionally used for upper respiratory complaints as they possess anticatarrhal and diaphoretic actions, yet the berries that form from the flowers further develop antiviral and antibacterial compounds (Krawitz 2011). The following pictures of *Echinacea* (Figure 4–7) demonstrate the metamorphosis journey where the plant ends up at decay, but holds within it at this point the seeds that enable the next cycle of new plants.

We can apply and observe the principle of metamorphosis to any dynamic living organism and to human development.

“When we study metamorphoses we practice ‘bringing to light’ what is not immediately apparent to the senses. With ‘bringing to light’ we mean ‘making visible for our thinking’” (Van Der Bie, 2003).

The process of expansion followed by contraction that is inherent in metamorphosis is a cyclic rhythm which when studied allows greater insight into the forces that lead to both health and disease processes. The first analysis one might apply involves the senses and perception and the second step is a process that must bring what is perceived to the realm of thought. It is important to refrain from moving straight to the thought and analysis process which, for many of us, is a habit that has to be overcome; instead we need to first apply keen observation through the senses.



Figure 4: *Echinacea*. Photo courtesy of Zantastik and sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>



Figure 5: *Echinacea*. Photo courtesy of Arto Alanenpää and sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>



Figure 6: *Echinacea*. Photo courtesy of H. Zell and sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

In conclusion

To understand herbs and their healing qualities from a higher perspective rather than limiting our view of their actions to a mere reductionist approach, we have seen how an anthroposophic lens can provide a useful and in-depth framework. Rudolf Steiner had a heightened imaginative and perceptive capacity and was able to create an all-encompassing and holistic framework that can be applied in diverse fields and many areas of focus. In many respects, Steiner's teachings and insights were well before his time and are just as relevant and needed today.

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Figure 7: *Echinacea*. Photo courtesy of Arto Alanenpää and sourced from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>