Vis Medicatrix Naturae —
The Healing Power of Nature

Session #2

NATP121
Naturopathic Philosophy, Principles and Practice
People can study their life force in the same way that a master gardener studies a rosebush. No gardener ever made a rose. When its needs are met a rosebush will make roses.

~Rachel Naomi Remen, MD

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Naturopathic Philosophy

Naturopathic philosophy has 6 guiding principles:

- *Vis Medicatrix Naturae* – the healing power of nature
- *Primum Non Nocere* - first do no harm
- *Tolle Totem* – treat the whole person
- *Tolle Causam* – treat the cause
- *Docere* – Naturopath as teacher
- *Preventare* - prevention
Vis Medicatrix Naturae

• The first & most important of the six principles of Naturopathy.

• The principle that most clearly distinguishes between Naturopathy and conventional medicine & ”green allopathy”.

• The cornerstone of naturopathic practice.
Vis Medicatrix Naturae

Definition

The healing power of nature is the inherent self-organizing and healing process of living systems which establishes, maintains and restores health. Naturopathic medicine recognizes this healing process to be ordered and intelligent. It is the naturopathic physician's role to support, facilitate and augment this process by identifying and removing obstacles to health and recovery, and by supporting the creation of a healthy internal and external environment.

Zeff & Snider, AANP, 1989
In considering this definition, what is the difference between the *Vis Medicatrix Naturae* and vitalism or vitality?
Vitalism

• “Life force” distinguished from *known* laws of nature (material sciences) that animates/enlivens living organisms

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Vitalism

- Presumption that either intrinsic life force or disembodied energy field provides catalyst for healing and life

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Vitalism

• Beyond explanation by material sciences (physics, biochemistry, physiology), although some aspects of quantum physics may begin to touch on it

• Some associate electric field with life force

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Kirlian photograph of a leaf showing a field of energy beyond the physical structure of the leaf

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Versus Mechanism/Materialism

• All of life obeys the laws of chemistry and physics and will ultimately be comprehensively explained by these laws

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Cortisol
Image credit: Wikimedia Commons
Versus Mechanism/Materialism

• Conventional medicine is based in materialism and the assumption that the laws of the material sciences predict the behavior of the human organism in response to illness and treatment.

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Man as Industrial Palace'
1926 Fritz Khan

Historical Emergence of Vitalism

- Egyptian: supernatural forces such as maligned deities and disease demons were the causative factors of illness and healing

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

- Egyptian: \( kA \) (masculine) or \( hemset \) (feminine) were the life force that differentiated between life and death

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

- Greek (primarily Hippocrates): the purpose of medicine is to assist nature’s recuperative power to throw off disease

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

• It is the *nature in the organism*, or the *organism in unity with nature* (*physis*) which heals; doctor (*physician*) assists *physis* through gentle means to restore health via diet and detoxification (Hippocrates)

• Of internal factors of disease, the spirit is important in both practitioner and client

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

• Roman (primarily Galen): *pneuma* (spirit) is the creative force of being, which activates and stimulates all growth, development, and nutrition

• Vital spirit, representing life energy, is found in the heart and is carried on the breath

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

- European (middle ages): Paracelsus (born Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim)

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Historical Emergence of Vitalism

• Paracelsus called the vital force the archeus, the inner alchemist; life is governed by a self-regulating and self-healing intelligence; its function is to assimilate healthy material into the organism and defend it against invasions from outside.

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Vitalism in Other Whole Medical Systems

- Ayurveda/Yoga: prana, the Sanskrit term for “breath”, the unifying principle of life, which has many manifestations; separation from the Divine is seen as cause of disease

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Vitalism in Other Whole Medical Systems

• Tibetan medicine: also incorporates the concept of prana, but cause of disease is imbalanced mental state

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Vitalism in Other Whole Medical Systems

• Chinese medicine: everything is made up of qi/chi, which is both material and energetic; there is no distinction between matter and energy in Chinese medicine (Ted Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver*)

• Unani-Tibb: *Quwwat-e-mudabbira* is the self-preserving force that maintains balance

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Vitalism in Homoeopathy

The material organism, without the vital force, is capable of no sensation, no function, no self-preservation, it derives all sensation and performs all the functions of life solely by means of the immaterial being (the vital principle) which animates the material organism in health and in disease.

~Hahnemann, Organon of Medicine
Vis Medicatrix Naturae in Naturopathic Therapies

- Diet/nutrition
- Lifestyle/hygienics
- Homoeopathy
- Flower essences
- Hydrotherapy
- Herbalism
- Various types of energy medicine
- In other words, all that we do!
Conventional Medicine and the Concept of Self-Healing

• Conventional medicine carries a subtle acknowledgment of the power of the human organism to heal itself—consider the faith a surgeon must have in order to cut into a patient.
Conventional Medicine and the Concept of Self-Healing

- As more antibiotic-resistant bacteria emerge, conventional medicine is starting to move back toward allowing colds, flu, ear infections, etc. to run their own course back to health
Conventional Medicine and the Concept of Self-Healing

• But the strong tendency of conventional medicine is *not* to extend recognition of this self-healing power beyond limited situations
The *Vis Medicatrix Naturae* and Homoeostasis

- We learn in Physiology that the tendency of any living organism is toward homoeostasis.

- Perhaps a better term for this is a *homoeodynamic* state, as there is nothing static about it—it is moving all the time toward an ideal in response to all the forces acting on it.
The *Vis Medicatrix Naturae* and Homoeostasis

- This tendency toward a balanced state is necessary to maintain life.

- But do we know how or why it occurs? Or is there some intelligence behind it that material science has yet to explain? Is this the *Vis Medicatrix Naturae*?
That which is impenetrable to us really exists. Behind the secrets of nature remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion.

~Albert Einstein
Various studies in the US reveal that . . .

- 77% of inpatients would like spiritual beliefs considered as part of their medical care
- 74% of inpatients were never spoken to by any health care staff about their beliefs
- Only 16% of doctors ever inquired about patients spiritual beliefs

Spiritual Distress

• Inability to find sources of meaning, hope, love, peace, comfort, strength, and connection in life

• Conflict between beliefs and what is happening in life

• Can have detrimental impact on physical, mental and emotional health

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How might the state of a person’s spirit be reflected in the state of their vitality?
In every culture and in every medical tradition before ours, healing was accomplished by moving energy.

~Albert Szent-Gyorgyi
Energy/Vibrational Medicine

1. Belief in *universal substance* – vitalism – the VMN, *vital force*, *primal energy*, or *vibration*, of which we are all composed

2. Human beings are a network of complex energy fields that interface with physical/cellular systems

3. Use of energy to positively affect energetic systems that are out of balance

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Your deepest roots are in nature. No matter who you are, where you live, or what kind of life you lead, you remain irrevocably linked to the rest of creation.

~Charles Cook
Connection to Nature

What do we gain by reconnecting ourselves to nature?

- Flowing with instead of working against the synergistic complexity of the VMN
- Exposure to that which nourishes health instead of draining it
- Giving the rosebush what it needs to make roses . . .
Connection to Nature

How do naturopaths utilize the healing power of nature that comes from outside the client?

• A natural substance or force correctly taken in by the patient is bringing the healing power of nature to that client
What about things like manufactured nutritional supplements or other processed substances—widely used by naturopaths, but are they really stimulating natural healing?
Now we face overwhelming evidence that we are not smart enough to recover Eden by assault . . . . We see how everything—the whole world—is belittled by the idea that all creation is moving or ought to move toward an end that some body, some human body, has thought up.

~Wendell Berry