

Naturopathic phytotherapy (natural herbalism) A different approach

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Summary

The use of plants to improve health exists from the earliest days of humanity. From this tradition arose attempts to systemise experiences in a synthetic way (e.g. in the description of plant signatures) as well as an analytic search for powerful ingredients, resulting in today's pharmacological knowledge. Modern natural herbalism tries to recover the empirical road to synthesis, using the newest rational attainments. In this it has a long, though nowadays less lonely, way to go. Natural herbalism includes more than the use of herbs because of their (known or suspected) chemical contents.

Introductory

Phytomedicines, homeopathic remedies and foodstuff don't grow in the wild. Plants grow in the wild, along with other organisms for as far as they are dependant on plants to consume (primarily or secondarily). In the course of time there have been many large changes in the way we use plants. The medicinal use of plants has taken on many shapes, like usage as a raw material for regular pharmaceutical and homeopathic cures. Phytomedicines as defined by the ESCOP are also applied in the context of different western and eastern medical sciences like the Ayurveda, the traditional Chinese medical science and the anthroposophical medical science, apart from in the context of regular medical science. In this article we will enlighten you on the Dutch (western) naturopathic use of herbal medicines. Its historical origin will be traced and we'll follow its development in broad terms to the way it is taught presently. In this the focus of attention will be on the difference between working with phytomedicine from a naturopathic starting point as opposed to working with them from a main stream medical science starting point.

The period of mythical consciousness

In the beginning of humanity people saw themselves as being one with (and not separate from) living nature, plant life included. Due to this alliance every plant that was used (internally, externally, as building material or whatever) had a deep symbolic meaning. And of course every way of use had an influence on people's health; for with every use humans found themselves to be in a relationship with the powerful plant sphere. All these ways of usage were surrounded in rituals, like the ones for

sowing and harvesting (2). The alliance with nature was given shape in the form of mythical consciousness, in which man is part of the complete reality and has the duty to maintain harmony between the above world and the under world, between mind and matter, between the inner world and the outer world (see fig.1)

Mankind has always used symbols in a diagrammatic arrangement (fig.2) to reflect the relationship between the above world and the under world. One very primary arrangement is for example the compass card for orientation (fig.3) with the cold north, the dry east etc. they used to view the winds as essences.

The period 1000 until 800 B.C. was a time of transition. A new way of thinking was being developed which allowed for a greater distance between man and nature. In this period ontological reasoning arose in both China and Europe, contemplating subject and object, the forming of concepts and the quest into "what". From then on the world was viewed as that which is outside ourselves. And that went for plants as well, since then plants were divided into four different groups:

- reasonably harmless to man: the food plants,
- slightly toxic to man: the medicinal plants,
- very toxic to man: the magic/witches herbs (later used for homeopathic and regular medicine)

- other usage; useful plants (flax, firewood, etc.)

To begin with the plants themselves could still be placed within the different philosophical frameworks that were constructed around "health" (like the doctrine of humours, which came into existence during the transitional period between the mythical consciousness and ontological reasoning, see fig.4) but because the plants were now placed in the position of an object as opposed to having a relationship to man they got left aside more and more.

Nowadays ontological reasoning has become the standard in just about every culture. It triumphs in both science and technology but also shows its darker side. The ecological crisis and the debates concerning it which are characterized by impotence make it painfully clear that mankind has lost its primary connection with nature. But we can ascertain globally that the mythical consciousness has not yet died out. There is much interest in naturopathic healing methods and other alternatives because many people have experienced the one-sidedness of our modern

culture and are searching for a different approach. But in order not to get wrapped up in romantic conservatism the starting point for this new approach must be the present. So the question is: how can we find the path to synthesis when taking on board the many analytical attainments from our culture? The functional approach (as suggested by van Peursen in 1992) aims to maintain and exceed ontological reasoning and recaptures the attainments of mythical consciousness. In the functional approach the quest into "what" is no longer the primary target, it is the quest into "how"; the question about the situation, about the connection between subject and object (as in system theory). At the same time the functional approach latches back on to the phenomena, it does more than purely consist of intelligible thinking (ontological) but also takes from experience to create the empirically exact images. It then asks the mythical question into "that": that which the phenomenon shows. It will be dictated by the essence, in the case of phytotherapy by the essence of the plants (the term "essence" will be explained later). Learning how to determine the essence of plants in exact images, which should be treated as logically, systematically and methodically as the data in conceptual reasoning are the (life-long) teachings of naturopathic phytotherapy.

Naturopathy

One could describe naturopathy as being "humane ecology", it concerns the relationship between man and nature, both in internal and external sense. That is why it is not in the least surprising that naturopathic theories and treatments link up to system theoretical concepts in biology quite well. It has proved to be very difficult to give an exact definition of naturopathy and attempts to do so have been characterized by negative formulations (no division of mind and body, no use of invasive methods, not just relieving symptoms, etc.). To fully understand the naturopathic approach it is essential to go back to the beginning of its existence which is described in the introductory remark. Naturopathy continues the tradition of mythical consciousness far more than the main stream university sciences, for example its use of symbols and thinking in images, the quest for unity in (part) organ and (whole) man, man and his surroundings, thinking and feeling, the use of qualities instead of quantities. This leads to a number of specific problems in both teaching and applying naturopathy in practice:

- 1) It is very difficult for students/therapists who have been brought up with ontological reasoning to learn to work with these

principals. They tend to change polarities into dualities and/or images into concepts, due to which it is no longer alive which renders it useless.

- 2) But also the shift to the other side; wanting to work with images (intuitively, etc.) without conscious thinking, without wanting to be aware of analytical attainments and not reconnecting them is very common. These so-called images do not stem from experience, but from the mind (and stay there). Naturopathy is and always will be an experimental science; it needs to form an image (for example of a plant) through practise to be able to use it in case of an (ontologically defined) disease (and visa versa; see fig.5)
- 3) Very many new naturopathic diagnostic techniques have recently been developed. They all diagnose illness in their own way and are mainly conceptual. In proportion they expand the conceptual segment unilaterally. Because of this naturopathy gets dragged into the fields of regular medicine, in which the conceptual segment takes up almost the entire circle (fig.6)

Naturopathic phytotherapy

It is apparent, when studying the old texts on herbs and others referring to naturopathy, that many plants are deemed usable for many different goals. This can easily be misinterpreted as a lack of knowledge by the ancients, because they seemed unable to specify. Still in those days treatments were individualised and successful. It would therefore be very interesting to find out in which way they used to decide on a certain treatment above all other possibilities. An example to explain this: when extensive research has been conducted into *Alchemilla* (lady's mantle) and apart from tannins nothing can be found, no hormones or anything similar that could explain a gynaecological effect, the analytical approach comes to a stop. But in naturopathy the plant has been successfully used, in some cases, to combat a diversity of gynaecological complaints. If this were to concern a progesterone-like effect you could wonder why *Agnus castus* isn't used. The answer to this is always: this is not an *Agnus castus*-patient, but an *Alchemilla*-patient, a patient that fits the *Alchemilla* "image". But what is an *Alchemilla* image? The oldest term for this is "countenance" (facial expression); later it was called "signature"; Paracelsus called it the "fifth essence" or "arcanum" (also referring to preparation); nowadays due to system theory we speak of an overall pattern, which includes more than the sum of the (chemical) parts. That which states the difference between the

chemically and physiologically definable, will then be called the “informative” character of the plant (in relation to humans). Interesting parallels can be drawn between the “informative” concepts on plants and homeopathy. Again some things still need to be empirically founded but it would be too much of a diversion to go into that within the space of this article.

In a nutshell: the “image” of a plant is an attempted synthesis of all experience- and knowledge data momentarily in existence concerning that particular plant, so in that sense it evolves along with man. This image shouldn’t contradict the known chemical contents or other scientific findings but must at all times consider, include and complement these findings.

The origin of the doctrine of humours could possibly have something to do with four organoleptically clearly distinguishable qualities of medicinal plants: bitters, tannins, mucilaginous compounds and essential oils. *Alchemilla* shows us that out of these qualities the tannins quality (that in character is related to the earth element: cold and dry [3]) is the clearest. This has to do with its evolutionary position in the rose family, in which a large number of tannins can be found. If one is to taste these plants the drying, astringent effect of this plant is clearly determinable. Except for the easily re-traceable effects like haemostiptical, anti-bacterial or anti-diarrhoeic effect, it also has an psychological side which is best expressed in the German saying “nimm dich zusammen!”. The most important elements of the *Alchemilla*-image stem from empirical experience, in which the value of *Alchemilla* in case of weakness of the lower back, especially for women (menstruation, menopause), is often reported. This is an effect that cannot be directly put down to the presence of tannins (not through image thinking on tannins either, for in what way is *Alchemilla* in this case any different from raspberry or septfoil?) so we must search for other clues concerning the character of this plant. For these clues we can consider its external appearance, its habitat or other botanical/ecological particularities and not only its traditional use and its chemical contents. To discredit the doctrine of signatures the focus of attention is usually on the latter. Traces of this approach can be found in medieval herb books along with warnings against such a superficial interpretation. It is notable that here too people were unable to clearly put into words what was meant. Nowadays it is still extremely difficult to find the correct wording to describe these relationships. Recent publications on this subject, which persistently appear in this age

based on conceptual reasoning, are lacking a systematic approach to this “in-express-ability”. That is why it is very probable that the invention of the printing press damaged the (previously orally transferred) trade secrets concerning the knowledge on herbs.

Thankfully the plant itself still exists, even in the Netherlands, and it can be consulted so to speak in its natural habitat (fig.7) and it is not yet mentioned on any list of dangerous/illegal substances. And on top of that there is an amount of analytical, conceptually defined knowledge at our disposal, that would have made Paracelsus jealous. For example; we know that the specification of the rose family is still in full progress, with lots of crossbreeding and that in this Lady’s mantle represents a “dead end” branch (100% apomixy), that can only make genetic adjustments to its surroundings through mutation which requires great phenotypical flexibility in order for the species to remain in existence. Furthermore when we compare *Alchemilla* to her other relatives her soft felt-like leaves and modest flowers (absence of wood and fruit) are very notable. The plant is known in the Netherlands as “dewcup” because in the morning the leaves would bare water due to the guttation or “sweating” out of the rib ends. Due to these kind of characteristics the plant has been studied in length and has given up some of its secrets. But for a long time no one has been interested in her biggest secret: her relationship to man. The phenomenological road to a synthetic build up of the “image” that is necessary to achieve this, runs through the daily practice of phytotherapy. In this there are certain reoccurring themes: infertility, extra sensitive and/or painful menstruation, weakness of the lower body, leucorrhoea (fluor albus), possible pre-mature child birth, etc.

What was mentioned earlier in reference to tannins and the rose family can of course be further extended (see fig. 8). Nevertheless it is essential that synthetic images are built up and not broken down analytically by placing plants and patients in separate categories based on exclusion (compare to what was said earlier on polarity and duality).

The naturopathic phytotherapist

The naturopathic phytotherapist first and utmost a herbalist; his/her therapeutic instrument is (among others or especially) phytotherapy. Thus plants are used to improve health rather than eliminate illness. The optimisation of the self healing capacity is the primary target, as opposed to, for example, the killing of germs (although this is clearly one of the possibilities of

phytotherapy). This self-healing capacity (also known as life-force or vital-force) has been banned from biology for a century under pressure of successful mechanically oriented researchers, but the last few decades have shown more and more interest in it (through ecology, system theory, etc.). an important task for herbalists is the expansion of symptomatology (as described by the patient and any diagnosis from regular medicine) onto the entire person, to subsequently work on that level in cooperation with the patient to improve his complete well-being (Asseldonk, 1992, 1994c). Then the naturopathic phytotherapist will search for a plant that fits the complete image that has been acquired. To do this we must take into account both the scientifically determined effect in connection to the naturopathically determined goals, and the "images" of plant and patient as was described earlier. Because of this an optimal combination of both physiological and informative effect are obtained. Furthermore the use of the herb is part of a broader naturopathic treatment, which includes balancing aspects and usually also enhancing and cleansing aspects (for example dietary instructions and breathing exercises) to this aim herbs can also be prescribed.

After all this it will be clear that a naturopathic phytotherapist has to master a number of skills. He/she has to be capable of communicating with representatives of mainstream healthcare, and has to be able to translate their analytical diagnosis, with the patients help, and the specific naturopathic diagnostic methods into an image of the patient. subsequently he/she has to be very much at home in the plant kingdom to be able to find the right plant to match that image (character); and he/she must possess enough exact scientific knowledge of both the plants and the human physiology to know which chemical effects the plant has. Furthermore he/she has to be capable (when working without a general practitioners mediation) of recognising situations that need immediate mainstream medical attention. The road to this profession runs through proper training in practice and (fig.9) in functional thinking. Insight into the attainments of mythical consciousness and its laws is indispensable, but for most of the schools it is rather difficult to find the best way of training and testing these skills. Therefore all this can only partially be found in the goals, and the curriculum usually seems to have a "double agenda".

Unfortunately there are no legal standards set for this profession so that every doctor or therapist in the possession of an illustrated book of herbs can present themselves as being an expert. It would help naturopathic phytotherapy

enormously if these people would be honest about the fact that their advice does not exceed the realm of self-medication.

And to conclude: the patient that comes in enquiring about herbal medicine to enhance his/her health, is usually seeking a different approach. One could give this patient a prescription for a phytotherapeutic that has been proven to be just as effective in countering a specific symptom as a chemical drug. But that isn't an answer to the patients' specific question! In this case a referral to a well trained naturopathic phytotherapist could prove more useful.

Foodnotes

1. The Netherlands journal of phytotherapy aims to advance and support the scientific backup of phytotherapy. Apart from a natural scientific approach it can also be useful (especially for the general debate) to be aware of other insights on phytotherapy, like in this article. However its inclusion in this journal does not mean that the editorial board shares the author's view(s) (completely).
2. For example the Teutons used to place the grain in sheaves in the field to dry after harvesting. When the grain was brought inside they would leave one sheave behind. This would be decorated and would serve as a house for mother nature (goddess of fertility), who would move in when winter fell. Subsequently some of the grain would be used to make flour and another part would be set aside to be re-sown. However, a small portion of the grain would be tied up in a little bunch and hung above the fireplace. There it was kept dry and free of mould. At the same time the fireplace would be Wodan's "porte d'entrée" or entrance way, so he could fertilize the grain hanging there with the power of his mind. And in the spring when the sacks of grain were filled to be sown out over the fields they would put a few single grains in each sack.
3. This refers to the philosophy of four elements that in Greek philosophy has been elaborated into, among others, the doctrine of humours. This philosophy has been the centre point of medicine for centuries, but in medieval times it seized up and turned into an impractical dogma and was cast aside (see fig.3 and fig.4).originally the "earth" element did not stand for an analytical

separation of for example earth, wind and air, but for a process that manifests itself in relation to cooling and drying. These are mainly contracting, conserving, delaying, concentrating processes that are related to for example: autumn, the development of seeds/falling of leaves, evening, melancholy. In that sense "fire" is a process relating to summer, flowering, midday, etc.

Illustrations

Figure 1. The mythical consciousness: anthropomorphically structured reality.

Figure 2. Diagrammatical arrangement, pre-historic pattern

Figure 3. Orientation and primary and secondary qualities according to Greek philosophy

Figure 4. From around the year 1200 the 4 elements are no longer viewed as a process, a movement. More attention is paid to their contents, therefore authors are repositioning them.

Figure 5. Naturopathy diagrammatically structured

Figure 6. Naturopathy dragged into regular medicine

Figure 7. *Alchemilla vulgaris* (lady's mantle)

Figure 8. Four elements, with a broad reference to a few families of plants (like humans, every plant represents several qualities)

Figure 9. Diagrammatic structuring of the study of phytotherapy in Arnhem

Literature

A remark beforehand: naturopathic phytotherapy is a profession about which has hardly been written at any length in specialist literature. Due to this the knowledge is usually handed down orally. At schools and courses in Holland where phytotherapy is taught we have to make do with books that describe plants in a purely cognitive way (for example van

Hellefont, Weiss), possibly in addition with the intuitive approach that for instance can be found in books by Melly Uyldert. More general theoretical background literature can be found in Asseldonk, 1994 a.

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