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# THE ROLE OF IMAGE SYSTEMS IN COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE

Arran Stibbe

## Abstract

One way of dealing with complex and mysterious phenomena such as illness is to think about them using image systems based on metaphors. The image systems of conventional western medicine are centred on a series of metaphors including ILLNESS IS A FIGHT, THE BODY IS A MACHINE and ILLNESS IS A PUZZLE. However, these metaphors have been criticised from a variety of sources for focusing attention away from the human needs of the patient. This paper investigates some of the image systems of complementary medicine and discusses the way that complementary medicine provides a series of alternative metaphors which lead to different effects on how illness is experienced and treated. These image systems are described, and their role in including patients in treatment and helping them to organise a program of health promoting activities is discussed and evaluated.

## Introduction

While the physical symptoms of illness are startlingly concrete and tangible, their attribution to an underlying cause is a matter of abstraction and uncertainty. In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson proposed the idea that one of the foremost ways that human beings make sense of complex domains like illness is through metaphor<sup>1</sup>. Shortly before this, Susan Sontag was experiencing the metaphors of conventional medicine first hand in her struggle against cancer. Her polemical essay, *Illness as metaphor*<sup>2</sup>, came out in 1979 and since then there has been a great deal of interest in metaphorical constructions of illness and the image systems which arise from them.

The majority of studies of metaphors of illness have focused on conventional medicine, and, like Sontag's *Illness as metaphor*, frequently denounce the metaphors they find. The primary metaphor of conventional medicine, ILLNESS AS WAR, has been attacked on

all sides: Ross points out that patients are 'lost sight of...because there is no role for the sick in a war'<sup>3</sup>, May describes how, when doctors fight illness, 'it provokes in patients an apprehensive passivity'<sup>4</sup>, and sometimes the metaphor of fighting, frequently employed by cancer patients, becomes unhelpful at the turning point when the disease becomes terminal<sup>5</sup>. Sontag ends her later work, *AIDS and its metaphors*, with the words 'about that metaphor...the military one...leave it to the war makers'<sup>6</sup>.

Other metaphors of conventional medicine have equally come under attack: If THE BODY IS A MACHINE then this could cause doctors to be distanced from the 'emotional significance of illness'<sup>7</sup> and ignore 'the full human interaction that promotes patients' involvement with healing'<sup>8</sup>. If THE DOCTOR IS A TECHNICIAN then the patient and the disease may 'fade away as the physician engages in interventions to bring lab values within acceptable limits' (May<sup>4</sup> page 100). If CURING ILLNESS IS A SPORT then impressing superiors with clinical skill may become more important than impressing patients with care and sensitivity<sup>9</sup>. Finally, if ILLNESS IS A PUZZLE then solving the puzzle may become more important than caring for the patient (Diekema<sup>8</sup> page 21).

For Montgomery<sup>10</sup>, critics such as these 'begging a different discourse for illness...have nothing to offer, no new images to propose'. Indeed, critics of conventional medicine rarely acknowledge that other, more positive images are even possible. For instance, Czechmeister recognises that metaphors are: '(a) fundamental to individual and collective expression, but (b) may be negative forces, creating confusion, stereotype and stigma.'<sup>11</sup> There is no mention of metaphors being positive forces, providing meaning and structure to the experience of illness.

Complementary medicine provides one potential source of alternative ways to think about illness. However, the literature on the metaphors of complementary medicine can be

characterised by both its scarcity and its dismissiveness. For example, Montgomery describes the images of complementary medicine as ‘quasi-religious’, ‘pseudo-Freudian’, and a ‘haphazardly concentric system of oppositions’ which have a ‘deep lack of inquisition and a demand for poetic ignorances’ (Montgomery<sup>10</sup> page 73). For Coward, complementary medicine is based on ‘fantasies of wholeness, of integration’, the ‘myth of a whole person’, the ‘paradox’ of a self-healing body’, a ‘mythology of nature’, and the ‘curious’ idea of balanced energies<sup>12</sup>.

Montgomery claims that the image systems of complementary medicine do not exist at all: ‘all the central vocabulary of biomilitarism tends to appear in [complementary medicine] writings; no alternative image system is given’(Montgomery<sup>10</sup> page 76). This claim, however, seems to be based on the examination of technical articles which have been produced for a conventional academic audience outside the world of complementary medicine.

In contrast to Montgomery, this paper claims that complementary medicine does, in fact, provide alternative image systems, and that these systems have significantly different effects on the experience and treatment of illness. These image systems can be found in materials produced *within* the world of complementary medicine, particularly in books and articles which explain the various therapies directly to patients.

This paper arises from the analysis of thirty-one such books and articles. The method of analysis used a theoretical framework based on the idea of dynamic metaphor<sup>13</sup>. The books were analysed from start to end, and metaphors located by identification of a source domain, target domain and mapping between them. Once located, metaphors which had low activation, or did not have illness as a target domain were discarded, and the remainder categorised according to source domain. The structures imposed by the source domains on

the target domain of illness were compared with those imposed by the source domains of conventional medicine.

The materials were selected for their ease of availability to patients and their readability. For patients turning towards complementary therapy, this kind of material (in conjunction with the explanations of practitioners) has the greatest potential for influencing their way of thinking about illness.

There are a wide range of complementary therapies, from unorthodox therapies such as crystal healing to more conventional therapies such as chiropractic. While therapies which come quite close to traditional medicine sometimes make use of conventional metaphors, this paper focuses on those which fall into the middle of the range, therapies which make a deliberate effort to distance themselves from conventional medicine. These therapies include acupuncture, anthroposophically oriented medicine, aromatherapy, Ayurvedic medicine, healing, herbalism, homeopathy, iridology, touch for health, macrobiotics, polarity therapy, reflexology, rolfing, Shiatsu, and Taoist medicine.

## Some of the image systems of complementary medicine

### *The place called perfect health*

One of the books analysed, (Chopra's *Perfect Health*), starts with a metaphor which promises a way of conceptualising illness which is very different from conventional medicine. This is the first paragraph:

There exists in every person a place that is free from disease, that never feels pain, that cannot age or die. When you go to this place, limitations which all of us accept cease to exist. They are not even entertained as a possibility. This is the place called perfect health<sup>14</sup>.

This metaphor contains the image of a journey to a place inside ourselves that is free of disease. If we concentrated on the literal then we might ask if there is a physical location

inside the body which is free from pathogenic agents. But this is a metaphor, a way of structuring and conceptualising illness, and can be evaluated in those terms.

While THE BODY IS A MACHINE focuses attention on the sick body-part, ILLNESS IS A FIGHT on the pathogenic agents and ILLNESS IS A PUZZLE on the illness itself, CURING ILLNESS IS TRAVELLING TO THE PLACE OF PERFECT HEALTH deflects attention away from these things. Focusing on health creates space for ideas for making patients feel better in ways that do not necessarily involve drugs or surgery. And the remainder of the book gives specific advice to patients about diet, stretches, breathing, massage and meditation which is very different from the advice usually given in conventional medicine.

Since the effects of this metaphor are different from those of conventional medical metaphors, it can be argued that it forms part of an alternative image system.

### *Balance*

An important metaphor in complementary medicine, which was found in nearly all the materials examined, is that of ILLNESS IS AN IMBALANCE. The book *Reflexology: foot massage for total health* defines health as ‘a balanced state’ and disease as ‘an imbalance state’<sup>15</sup>. Curing illness is restoring ‘the natural state of balance and harmony that is commonly called good health’<sup>16</sup>.

The forces that must be balanced to maintain health are different in different therapies: for example, in Ayurvedic medicine they are *vata*, *pita* and *kapha*, for rolfing, the two sides of the body, and for polarity therapy, positive and negative energy.

The image of a balance is quite different from the more violent metaphors of conventional medicine. When ILLNESS IS A FIGHT, the most powerful weapons are the most effective, so the strongest drugs and most invasive surgery are used. However, when ILLNESS IS AN IMBALANCE, powerful remedies can tip the balance over in the other direction. The

metaphor of balance therefore leads to a reasoning pattern where gentle remedies are used to delicately restore the balance.

### *Energy*

The second most common metaphor in the complementary medicine materials examined is THE BODY IS AN ENERGETIC SYSTEM. The following examples illustrate the use of this metaphor:

- a) '[Illness is ]...any condition that interferes with the flow of energy at any point along one of the zones'<sup>17</sup>.
- b) '[Healing involves]...directing energy to rebalance the energy field of the ill person' (Lidell<sup>17</sup> page 132).
- c) '[To treat the patient]...we trace the movement of energy in the body and seek out the critical blockage'<sup>18</sup>.

Within this system, health is a state where energy flows freely around the body, and illness is a blockage which leads to an uneven distribution of energy. The images of energy differ slightly depending on the therapy: In Chinese-based therapies the energy is called *qi* and, like the *prana* of Ayurvedic medicine, it is associated with breath. In polarity therapy the energy is more like electricity, while in Healing, the energy is spiritual.

Unlike the conventional metaphor of THE BODY IS A MACHINE, which isolates defective parts, the metaphor of THE BODY IS AN ENERGETIC SYSTEM emphasises connections. If energy is blocked in one place, either mentally or physically, it can cause a reaction in any other part of the body along the path that the energy flows. Therefore, diverse symptoms in different parts of the body, which may be treated separately in conventional medicine, can be traced back to a single, underlying cause. But more than that, in some therapies, the flow of energy links the body with the mind, the emotions and the spirit. This allows the mental, emotional and spiritual side of patients to be factored into diagnosis and treatment.



## *Cleaning*

Linking to both energy and balance is a third metaphor used in complementary medicine: CURING ILLNESS IS CLEANING. The excess which causes the balance to tip is often considered to be dirt or poison which much be flushed out, and blockages of energy are often blamed on toxins.

There is a literal side to the cleaning process, for example, a book on Taoist medicine refers to the colon of an unhealthy person as ‘the physiological equivalent to a festering pile of uncollected garbage’<sup>19</sup> and recommends colonic irrigation. But there is also a mental side, for example Ayurvedic medicine talks about the ‘removal of physical and mental toxins’(Chopra<sup>14</sup> page 13), which is accomplished through meditation and other processes.

The effect of CURING ILLNESS IS CLEANING is to discourage patients from taking toxic drugs, especially if the drugs suppress symptoms rather than curing the illness. The symptoms of illness are part of, as *Here's Health*<sup>20</sup> puts it, ‘a natural detoxification process...and the last thing you want to do is to bombard it with drugs’. This advice contains two contrasting metaphors, ‘detoxification’, which is based on CURING ILLNESS IS CLEANING, and ‘bombard’, which is based on the conventional metaphor of ILLNESS IS A FIGHT. The idea of whole body/mind cleaning therefore also leads to gentle remedies.

If patients do not use the remedies or follow the regime suggested by a practitioner then there is the danger that it could make them feel dirty. For example, one practitioner I investigated told patients that their bodies’ were ‘toxic waste containers’ because of the meat and artificial chemicals they habitually ate. But these people were unlikely to give up meat or switch to organic foods.

## *Wholeness*

One of primary ways that complementary therapies examined can be distinguished

from conventional medicine is through use of the image of *wholeness*. There are two different metaphors centred around the idea of wholeness. In the first, HEALTH IS WHOLENESS, a healthy person is defined as someone who is whole, while an ill person has something missing. This is illustrated by 'health is...an inherent characteristic of whole and integrated beings',<sup>21</sup> and 'Homeopathy works with...the laws of nature, and in doing so the patient is integrated and made whole',<sup>22</sup>.

The second use of wholeness is central to *holistic* medicine, the idea of treating the *whole* patient, including body, mind, emotions and spirit. This idea is carried out through the use of the other metaphors described above, particularly THE BODY IS AN ENERGETIC SYSTEM. The integration which results from the metaphor of wholeness has opposite effects to the BODY IS A MACHINE metaphor, and, indeed, to most of the other metaphors of conventional medicine.

## The function of image systems in complementary medicine

### *Providing an alternative to fighting*

A problem with fighting metaphors, as mentioned in the introduction, is the turning point when a patient who has been fighting their illness finds out that their disease has become terminal. At this point, because the fight has been lost, patients are left with no active role in improving their health. The metaphors used in the materials examined tend not to suffer from this problem. Even if patients have a terminal illness, or a chronic illness which conventional medicine can do little about, they can still work within the metaphors of complementary medicine to redress the balance, remove blockages in energy, clean their system and become whole.

### *Setting up a program of activities*

The image systems of the complementary therapies examined not only give the patients a goal to head for, but can also help set up a program of self-help activities to achieve it. If patients understand the image system of the therapy, and understand the cause of their illness within the image system, then they can follow a series of steps to deal with the cause. For example, if the patient understands that their illness is caused by an excess of heat, then they can not only understand the advice given by the practitioner (to take cooling remedies), but they can also think of further activities beyond this advice by using the same image system (eg, taking cool showers).

Occasionally the word *balance* is used simply as a synonym for *health*. Reference is made to ‘states of balance’ or ‘areas of imbalance’ without specifying what is out of balance and how the balance can be restored. Metaphors can only influence patients to construct a program of activities if the advice given by the practitioners and books is consistent with the metaphorical theme.

### *Including the patient through the use of natural terms*

Overwhelmingly the terminology used in the materials examined makes use of terms borrowed from nature. For example, in Chinese medicine, the causes of disease are named *wind*, *heat*, *cold*, *dampness* and *dryness*. In Ayurvedic medicine there are three types of pulse: *frog* ‘forceful throbbing pulse’, *swan* ‘slow gliding pulse’ and *snake* ‘fast irregular pulse’. Similarly, yoga positions (*asanas*) are named after the animals they resemble, for example the cock, locust, crow and scorpion *asanas*. The names of elements such as water, earth, metal and air are also frequently used, and these are always naturally occurring elements which patients have direct experience of.

This use of natural terms, which belong to the directly experienced world of the

patients, has an inclusive effect and allows patients to take an active role in their own treatment. Since they understand heat, cold, elements and animals, they can use them to reason about their illness and make choices about how to go about restoring their health.

## Discussion

The metaphors of *conventional* medicine are particularly useful for illnesses and injuries which have an immediate physical cause, where strong intervention can often make the problem disappear completely. For example, if curing cancer is thought of as a *fight*, then the resultant attack using with radiation, drugs and surgery could make the cancer disappear completely. Likewise, if the BODY IS A MACHINE, replacing a malfunctioning part such as a heart or kidney could cause the patient to recover fully. Conventional medicine, and the metaphors it is based on, is triumphant in an unquantifiable number of cases.

The metaphors of complementary medicine come in only in areas where conventional medicine is not so helpful: chronic illness, illness caused by emotional problems, illness caused by lifestyle, pain with no identifiable physical cause, or terminal illness. It is only in this kind of area that complementary medicine can provide helpful alternative image systems.

Unlike conventional metaphors, those of the complementary therapies examined divert attention towards the patient as a whole person. They link diverse symptoms, taking the emotional and mental side of patients into consideration and leading to gentle remedies.

Overall, the image systems of the complementary therapies examined have quite different effects to those of conventional medicine. Some words, for example ‘balance’, ‘energy’ and ‘cleanliness’ *are* used in conventional medicine, but in a different way. For example, *balance* is used for specific situations such as the balance between drugs and side effects but not for the general health of the patient, *energy* is thought of as a resource which

patients can have a lot or little of but does not flow, and *cleanliness* is an external property of patients, to do with killing germs rather than a general state of being<sup>23</sup>.

The image systems of complementary medicine may be different, but are they better? This depends entirely on the effectiveness of the therapy. Taking into account the emotional side of the patient when deciding on a cure may, in the case of acupuncture, mean choosing different points on the body to place the needles. Or, in the case of homeopathy, it may mean the selection of a different remedy from a range of remedies which are chemically identical. If the appropriate selection provides an effective treatment then clearly the metaphorical system has proved effective, but if the treatment has little effect then the image system has not worked.

The greatest potential danger of the images of complementary medicine is that they might encourage a patient to take gentle cures while effective powerful cures such as drugs and surgery might exist. However, usually patients turn to conventional medicine first, and only if it proves ineffective do they turn to complementary medicine.

A more likely danger is that of false hope or false expectations. If patients believe they will be cured or feel better if they contact the PLACE CALLED PERFECT HEALTH inside them, or redress a balance, or unblock energy, but nothing happens, then there is always the possibility of disappointment. This false hope could be exacerbated by materials which describe exceptional cases such as people being miraculously cured of cancer rather than describing the experience of the majority of patients.

## Conclusion

Complementary medicine, once marginalised, has been increasing in status in line

with the general realisation that there are different ways to think about all aspects of life, including illness. There are many types of complementary medicine, from those quite close to the conventional to quite far out therapies. No system of medicine or set of metaphors is likely to be 100% effective in all situations, and the idea of using different systems in different situations has great potential. This paper described the way that image systems in some complementary therapies provide alternatives to those of conventional medicine.

Already there are conventional medical practitioners who are attempting to make their work more holistic, leading to a situation where the health cultures of complementary and conventional medicine are mixing at the border. With the increasing popularity of complementary therapies, and subsequent patient demand for more holistic treatment we may find images from complementary therapy appearing more and more in conventional medicine.

The aim of this paper was to show that alternative image systems do exist within the literature of complementary therapies, but it was not intended as a comprehensive survey of the metaphors of complementary medicine. The definition of 'complementary therapies' is wide, but this paper focused only on a narrow band of therapies. Further research could determine whether other kinds of complementary therapy have similar effects on patients. It is important for such future research to look not only at the rhetoric of textbooks but also at the everyday practices of practitioners. This could help answer the essential question of whether practitioners implement the image systems described in the textbooks in a consistent and effective way.

## Notes

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