

# **BREAKING THE PARADIGM**

## **Resolving The Cause Of Fibromyalgia, Not Just Managing The Symptoms**

**By Jonathan Gilbert, NCCAOM**

---

---

### **Introduction**

I have a personal reason for wanting to work with patients with fibromyalgia (FM). I used to suffer from it. As a result, I not only understand what my patients are actually going through, I'm highly motivated to help them get better.

My chosen field of work is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It was through this medium that I was healed of my FM in 1990. In this brief article, I wish to explain holistic medicine from the TCM perspective and show how immensely suited it is to the FM state. In my view, it can provide an answer both in its medications and in its overall approach to the disease. I understand the gravity of this claim, and I can point to a record of ten years of successful clinical experience as its proof.

Explaining the actual methodologies and intricacies of the theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine goes far beyond the scope of this article, as TCM requires years (many might say a lifetime) of dedicated study and practice. TCM is a comprehensive form of health care and stands on its own. Yet, it is made all the more effective when combined properly with other forms of healing such as allopathic (western) medicine or naturopathy. It isn't rocket science, nor is it without its own complexity (especially when applied in the clinical setting). It contains such a wealth of information from such a profound culture that we have a duty as practitioners to consider it. To do so, it is necessary to change the way in which disease is regarded and challenged. Quite simply this involves breaking the existing paradigm.

### **A 3000-Year-Old Tradition**

Traditional Chinese Medicine was formed into a cohesive practice during the Han Dynasty (circa. 300 BC to 300 AD). At this time, many of the great texts of TCM were written. As these texts were a summation and not an invention of new medical practice, we can assume a medical tradition that spans two or three millennia. In this time span, the Chinese developed a philosophy of medicine that was inclusive and holistic. It survived numerous changes and flourished through the many different epochs and dynasties that make up Chinese history. Not only is it the oldest health care system in the world currently in use, but one may see it (as a result of this history) as the most refined. For these reasons alone it is worth our examination.

Oriental health care comprises four main interventions that are used to treat illness. They are herbal therapies; physical therapies (acupuncture, massage, etc.); movement and exercise therapies (tai chi chuan, Qi Gong, etc.); and psychotherapies.

In terms of use by physicians, herbal medicine is by far the most documented, developed, and practiced. Nevertheless, it is not as well known to the Western world as acupuncture which we tend to associate with TCM. This is because acupuncture was the first modality to arrive in the Western world and is far easier to research and analyze scientifically. It also requires far less study than herbalism to reach a level of competency and is therefore more accessible to the novice. However, because the treatment of debilitating, long-term disorders

primarily requires the use of herbal therapies, it is herbal medicine that is the guiding modality for conditions such as fibromyalgia.

### **What Are Herbs? What Are Their Typical Forms?**

The Chinese Materia Medica (list of medicinal substances) has over 9,000 substances of plant, mineral, and vegetable origin. This list continues to be expanded as TCM grows. Many older substances are no longer in use, and for many practitioners, there is a common list of around 500 herbs that are regularly prescribed. Many of these substances are prepared in a complex manner before they are used to change or concentrate their effect.

Traditionally, herbs are given in their “fresh” state, are powdered, or are made into pills depending on their desired effect. There have been reports of the doctoring of herbs with other ingredients and even pharmaceuticals.

There are many excellent suppliers of these substances in the United States. I would recommend one in particular to the reader, the Mayway Corporation (website: [www.mayway.com](http://www.mayway.com)) where an explanation of the production and safety controls in the formation of TCM herbs can be found. At the Gilbert Clinic, we use a vegetarian, plant-based protocol with our patients. This restriction allows us to work with many groups for whom the use of animal and/or mineral products might be a cause for concern.

### **Holistic Practice In Traditional Chinese Medicine**

To begin a discussion of holistic philosophy we need a definition.

*Holistic philosophy is the concept that a ‘whole’ person is one whose mental, emotional and physical self is integrated, and this integrated ‘whole’ being is in balance with his environment.*

The interconnection between Man and his environment is a fundamental aspect of Oriental

medical thought. The Chinese have a reputation for being an extremely observant people. Historically, they have watched themselves over an extraordinarily long period of time to learn how they interact with their environment. In their culture, the interaction between Man and the environment was of the utmost importance, and what was learned could also be applied to medicine and therapy and used to describe the approach by which one assessed and treated an illness. In holistic methodology (like that developed by the Chinese), a disease is not seen in isolation from other elements in a person’s life but rather as a symptom of an underlying imbalance in his/her elementary composition.

What this means is that the balance of numerous forces and influences that constantly act on a person in a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual manner to create a vital human existence are not in balance with the internal self. This in turn leads to a conflict or weakness not only in that person’s physical being but in all aspects of his/her life. That is the imbalance.

The practice of TCM does not stop with the clinic room visit but encompasses the entire life of the patient. The physician is trained to look at social, emotional, and even economic aspects of the patient as potential contributors to a malady. This is holistic practice. It is not so much a judgment of the patient as it is an understanding of who the patient is and what has happened to him/her. It requires a different skill set on the part of the physician, and it requires time with the patient.

### **A Fresh Resolution**

From the point of view of TCM, fibromyalgia is a state of exhaustion, a direct result of prolonged stress. What is meant by stress? Stress is any physical, mental, or emotional factor that acts on us to trigger a stress response. These factors include good as well as bad occurrences (e.g., getting married is a good stress while a case of “mono” is a bad stress).

In the case of FM, the stress mechanism has been triggered repeatedly over an extended period of time without remission, leading to the

breakdown of the regulatory functioning of the stress mechanism. In turn, many of the body's systems have become worn out and even deregulated and may have begun to cause detrimental effects within the body. There are many possible symptoms and a multitude of reasons why these events have taken place. If all of these factors are assessed from a perspective of reductionism, one finds a maze without an exit. Unfortunately, so little is known about the human nervous, immune, and endocrine systems that allopathic research currently has no way of completely understanding and measuring the interactions which prolonged stress has with these systems, or the results that stress can have on a patient. The processes involved are immensely complicated.

This is where TCM practice can step in and be of great value. As previously discussed, it does not use a reductionist approach but looks at disease as a process of change over time. Instead of a microscope, three millennia of objective observation in its literary and recorded medical history are relied upon to explain the development of disease and dysfunction as well as the background and events leading up to maladies. Instead of imposing a regimen on the body, TCM therapies are designed to restore and nurture a balance within the body.

When used correctly, TCM therapies will address the patient's physiology not with a purpose of stimulating or inhibiting (and therefore controlling) but by the creation and maintenance of a normal or homeostatic level of functioning. They do this by redressing imbalances in the physiological functions. TCM has the ability to accomplish this in many differing systems of the body at the same time and is unique in its ability to do so.

Because FM involves a state of exhaustion, the last thing the body requires is more demands upon it or further stimulation. The body needs a metaphorical "space" in which to heal. Physical stresses from internal physiological imbalances have to be removed, and the "playing field" has to become level once more. Chinese herbal therapies are employed to create just such a normal physiological environment. This is "space" that has then been created. My experience has been that if this beneficial environment can be maintained for an extended period of time, with nurturing practices and interventions added to nourish and rejuvenate the body, healing becomes apparent in the vast majority of patients--and not just in the short-term. This approach has the ability to provide long-term results. →



### **Are Herbs Safe?**

The most common question asked about the use of Chinese Herbology involves safety. The answer to this question is that "it depends" upon who is prescribing the herbs and how accurate those prescriptions are for a patient's needs. All medicines have the potential to harm, and for the last 3,000 years, Herbology has been the basis for all of the medical care that was available to Chinese people and therefore can be considered a form of medicine. Consequently, it has the potential to do much good but also the potential to harm or injure.

With that said, there is good news. In the hands of a qualified practitioner, Chinese Herbology is one of the safest forms of health care available and has few side effects. To receive a good standard of care, it is vital that you seek an herbalist whom you feel confident has been trained and is competent. There is a national board for herbalism and acupuncture that is recognized in many

U.S. states and can assure a good standard for its members. It is called NCCAOM (National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine) and can be found online at: [www.nccaom.org](http://www.nccaom.org). They have an exam and educational base for their Certification in Chinese herbology and provide a national list of practitioners and their contact information.

## The Need To Avoid “Control”

The present paradigm that exists for FM treatment is one of control. This is evident in existing treatments that are all centered on a concept of symptom management. Such an approach is a reductionism view that has its roots in the systemic thinking that is allopathic or Western medicine. When there is pain, prescribe a painkiller. When there is fatigue, prescribe a stimulant. Even the practices purporting to be

“alternative” seem to have resorted to this method of thinking when confronted with FM. The widespread use of high-dose vitamin regimens or (worse still) animal glandulars is aimed at halting a set of symptoms without any regard for the underlying pathological or social issues surrounding the medical condition. It is an immediate response that may work well in the short-term to bring palliative care to the sufferer (and be



### *Treatment Close-Up*

**Medical Profile:** A 49-year old female patient diagnosed with FM, CFS, and Hashimoto’s (thyroid) disease for which she had been prescribed 90 mg Armour thyroid hormone. The patient had been diagnosed 4½ years previously after a severe virus and had never actually recovered. She had tried multiple different alternative and conventional approaches without success.

**Major Symptoms:** fatigue, widespread pain, difficulty keeping upright, weakness in the limbs, depression, low libido, constipation, low immunity, hot flashes, cold hands/feet, thirst, bloating easily after eating and a feeling of cold.

**Treatment:** A Chinese herbal formula was given, and the patient reported back after one month. There had been no improvement, and bowel functioning had decreased. The original formula was repeated for a further two months. The patient then returned with major improvement in all symptoms.

The patient was put on a maintenance regimen for an additional three months and discharged as recovered. It has been two years since that time. The patient receives one month of herbs a year and maintains a healthy, vibrant life running her own clinical practice. This case is significant in that only Chinese herbs were given, and the patient responded quickly and coped easily with the return to health. It also demonstrates that it is possible to undergo herbal medicine treatment and stay well.



**Deborah Stokes describes treatment with Chinese herbal medicine**

*“When I first got sick, I was hit with a virus and had a fever of 102 for eight days. I couldn’t get out of bed for a month and a half. I felt totally weak. My head was clear, but my body was very tired. I limped along for almost five years, spending tens of thousands of dollars on every kind of cure, but nothing helped.”*

#### **Following treatment at the Gilbert Clinic:**

*“Along about the second month of treatment, I felt this energy in my chest just sort of growing and spreading out. I can’t explain it, but it’s like a tingling, wonderful feeling. I felt like I was ten years old again.*

*Before I was too weak to do yoga. I remember crying and having to walk out of yoga class because my muscles were just shaking. Now I’ve been going to yoga twice a week for over a year and a half. I wouldn’t miss it.”*

attractive as a result), but in the long-term, it will leave the patient with no fundamental improvement. If this appears a little strong or critical of present practices that are being used, then a clarification is required.

### Is FM A Disease Or A State Of Being?

There is an enormous amount of research being done (and that has been done over the past ten years) looking for a substance or microbe or “magic bullet” to explain or find a cure for FM. From a treatment perspective, such research has largely drawn a blank and continues to do so, leaving physicians, in effect, with existing medications that were never originally meant for the condition of fibromyalgia. This is a poor state of affairs. It is not enough to say that “we are doing the best we can” when doing our best can result in using poorly described rationales to justify the use of medications and supplements that are at best a *bad fit*.

In my opinion, this is also a very short-sighted view, dealing only with physical manifestations as they arise. From a TCM perspective, FM is similar to many emerging maladies that have no single pathological cause because they are the

result of numerous different stressors that have led to a reaction in the human body. FM has as many different presentations or combinations of symptoms as there are causes. This is because FM is a state of being rather than a disease that must be fought. To try to attack this condition in the classical allopathic sense is like trying to catch the wind in your hand.

To effectively heal the patient we have to take the laboratory out of FM treatment and reintroduce the human being into the process. To do this, we must apply holistic principles and common sense to see FM not only in terms of a physical complaint but as a result of the whole of the person’s life. We must break the existing paradigm or way of looking at FM, and then, and only then, will it become possible to see the healing process take place. It requires not only the use of herbal therapies to enact this change in FM but a synthesis of treatment modalities including naturopathy, psychotherapeutic interventions, allopathic medicine, as well as other treatment forms. It is this synthesis that will be discussed in detail in our follow-up article in the next edition of *Fibromyalgia Frontiers*.



Jonathan Gilbert, NCCAOM

**About The Author:** Jonathan Gilbert, NCCAOM, is the founder and herbalist of The Gilbert Clinic, a protocol-based, integrative clinic in the Washington, DC, area, which was designed exclusively to treat fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. Mr. Gilbert is extensively trained in TCM practice; he is a graduate of the London Academy of Oriental Medicine (LAOM) and the Traditional Medical Institute or TMI (Saigon). He also completed a 12-year apprenticeship with Dr. Phouc Huynh in the study of chronic disease. He is NCCAOM-certified in Acupuncture and Herbology and is an exam writer for the NCCAOM. He has recently been Senior Consultant for Traditional Chinese Medicine at the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine and has lectured both at the University of Maryland and at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

To contact The Gilbert Clinic, phone: (866) 546-0777, or visit their website at: [www.thegilbertclinic.com/](http://www.thegilbertclinic.com/)