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Fundamentals of Therapy, Chapter 1

Anthroposophic Medicine

Introductory Handbook



PHYSICIANS' ASSOCIATION FOR
ANTHROPOSOPIHIC MEDICINE

Introductory Handbook for Learning Anthroposophic Medicine

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Anthroposophic Medicine offers a pathway for meeting the whole human being. It provides tools that allow us to understand more about the roots of both health and illness. The insights are novel and diverse: about the interactions between body, soul and spirit; about the human being’s relationship to the natural world; about new therapeutic possibilities for fostering health and healing; and about the experience of illness as part of a continuous path of individual development. These aspects are often unrecognized or even ignored as part of standard medical school, but they add depth and meaning to the practice of medicine.

The gift, and also admittedly the challenge one quickly meets when learning Anthroposophic Medicine is the breadth of description and the unique vocabulary of this spiritually-extended science. There is a lot to learn: you are challenged to simultaneously take up new concepts, new medical terms, and even new ways of thinking. For this reason, the first few steps towards understanding Anthroposophic Medicine can sometimes feel disorienting. To help you on your way this handbook offers basic “signposts” to aid in your learning—namely, introductions to the fourfold human being, to recognizing threefold patterns in physiology and anatomy, an overview of anthroposophic pharmacy, and a glossary of basic terms.

Standard methods of diagnosis and treatment are very good at finding and naming the physically-observable parts of the human body, i.e. what can be measured, biopsied, chemically analyzed, or spatially imaged. Current practice increasingly prioritizes easily quantifiable results (particularly with the advent of the Electronic Medical Record) with the result that modern medicine has shifted; the definition of health and illness has essentially become an increasingly specialized list of individual symptoms and diagnoses, typically with a corresponding list of pharmaceutical prescriptions. But that creates a sorely one-sided view.

Checklists leave out the more dynamic and more individual aspects of human experience. Many practitioners recognize that these aspects play an important role in diagnosis and therapy, even if they are simply lumped into the category of the “art of medicine.” But without them we run the risk of increasingly practicing medicine with one blind eye. Key questions that are too often left out include:

- How do we harness a patient’s own inner resources for healing?
- How can we best understand the interweaving social, psychological, and sensory influences that contribute to physical health, as well as the influence of physical health on our emotional wellbeing? How does this two-directional streaming work?
- What is this individual person’s experience of illness? What are the person’s priorities? And how can each patient be an active participant in his or her own illness and healing?

A Fourfold View of the Human Being and the Natural World

Clinicians gather and synthesize information all the time. An anthroposophic understanding expands that gathering and synthesis to include a spiritual view of the human being. Sounds great, but how do we create that kind of framework without becoming vague or superstitious, and without sacrificing our capacity for clear thought? By recognizing that there are distinct elements which guide and influence our physiology, and which function on different levels: some are spatially measurable, whereas some can really only be understood by observing in time; some aspects work only through relationships and seeing how the different parts fit together.

An analogy—for language and communication we need the ability to work at the level of the individual letter and word, the sentence, the paragraph, the writing style, the flow of ideas, as well as the intention and organization of the whole composition. Medicine is not much different. To the focus of physical medicine, anthroposophic medicine additionally incorporates what can be reliably observed as:

- functional and recuperative processes
- emotional and sensory activities
- and spiritual and creative elements

The interaction of these four aspects constitute the different layers of human experience. These “constituent members” of the human being are precisely defined, and described with the names: “physical,” “etheric,” “astral,” and “I”:

I	Spiritual	Creative
Astral	Emotional	Sensory
Etheric	Functional	Recuperative
Physical	Material	Structure

These four aspects are not new—they correspond to long-held, even ancient, understandings of the four elements, which were always intended not to describe physical substances but archetypal qualities of process:

I	Spiritual	Creative	Fire
Astral	Emotional	Sensing	Air
Etheric	Functional	Growth	Water
Physical	Material	Structure	Earth

These four layers also relate to the four kingdoms of nature, with different aspects present in different parts of nature:

- a stone has just a mineral, physical existence
- a plant, which grows and changes in time, a physical body and an etheric body
- An animal, which grows but also senses, independently moves, and interacts, a physical, etheric, and astral body
- And finally, the human being with all four elements (physical, etheric, astral and “I”), the “I” making possible experiences of individual existence and self-consciousness

We see the differentiated activity of these aspects in the human being in the following way:

- we truly only observe the physical body—alone and subject to the laws of gravity—in a corpse
- we see the physical body, plus etheric forces of life and levity, in a sleeping person
- the physical/etheric/astral—adding now awareness without full self-consciousness—in the dreaming state
- and physical/etheric/astral/I in daytime, self-conscious awareness and intentional activity.

I	Spiritual-Creative	Fire	Human	Wakeful
Astral	Emotion-Sensing	Air	Animal	Dreaming
Etheric	Function-Growth	Water	Plant	Sleeping
Physical	Material-Structure	Earth	Mineral	Corpse

Study of these fourfold archetypal processes and their differentiated interactions offers insights into the relationship of physical, recuperative, emotional and spiritual influences in health and illness. We start to ask “Where (in terms of these four levels) do we see the greatest imbalance?” A question which naturally leads into therapeutic considerations such as “Which part(s) of the human being need the most therapeutic support?” Corresponding anthroposophic medicines are then prescribed, as well as possible nursing, massage, movement or artistic therapies. All these seek to engage, balance, and nurture patients through a whole-person approach. Some examples:

- the Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*—a plant whose berries grow and form, but then last over a very long growing season without withering or rotting—can be very helpful for supporting etheric “life forces” during recovery from a long illness, either taken orally or used as an oil for baths or massage.
- On an astral level, the very well-known healing plant Chamomile helps to release an over-active sensing or cramping process on both a body level (stomach cramps) and a consciousness level (trouble relaxing and falling asleep).
- On the level of the “I,” *Viscum album*, extracts from the mistletoe plant, stimulate and regulate immune function to better recognize what is “me” and “not-me” as part of an integrative approach in cancer therapy.

Learning to observe the roles and activities of the physical body, etheric body, astral body, and “I” stands at the heart of learning Anthroposophic Medicine.

Recognizing the Threefold Dynamic in Human Anatomy and Physiology

Working to address the whole human being also means learning about archetypal gestures of physiology and anatomy. This is more than just the pattern recognition that comes through clinical experience—it's about enlivening the relationship between form and function. Often, when an organ is not functioning well we consider whether it can be replaced, be it a worn-out knee joint, an eye lens cataract, or a leaking heart valve. That approach works very well for specific illnesses, usually caused by degeneration, and for organs which have a clear architectural and/or structural function. But most pathologic processes cannot be adequately addressed through structural, surgical intervention alone. Most illnesses need to be approached not just on a mechanical level but also on a functional one. And there is a whole group of illnesses which defy structural interventions because their activity is continuously dynamic (think of wound healing, nutrition, the growth of new skin, hair, and blood cells)—it would be a little bit like trying to operate on a flowing stream.

Already within these basic physiologic observations we can start to identify a spectrum of activity: illnesses which are appropriately remedied through structural intervention, usually where there is a predictable relationship between structure and function (think of the joints, the lens of the eye, the anatomy of the central nervous system), compared with illnesses that arise in organs which are dynamic, changing rapidly in time, and which are generally only poorly structured (really unstructured). We can then contrast:

Organs that are highly structured and can be well-met with physical interventions	(versus)	Less well-structured organs that relate primarily to active processes of growth and nutrition
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Contrasting such highly differentiated physiologic processes is a part of many traditional healing practices (such as *Yin* and *Yang* in Chinese medicine). It makes possible *spectrum thinking*. Anthroposophic Medicine, through the insights of Rudolf Steiner, sees not just a polarity of activity in the body but three actual archetypes of physiology. They draw on alchemical traditions, but are continuously enlivened through modern application and research. We find a threefold physiologic picture which is characterized by distinct developmental, anatomic, and physiologic gestures, each of which relates to processes of thinking, feeling, or will:

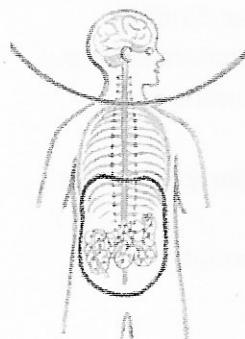
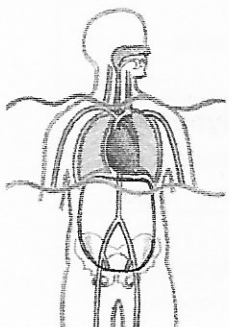
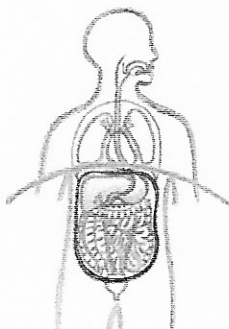
Thinking	Feeling	Willing
Organs oriented more towards the "outer" world, connected to consciousness and sense perception	Organs of mediation, of alternation (inhalation/exhalation, systole/diastole)	Organs oriented more towards the "inner" world, with activities that unfold unconsciously
Structures of the head; Nerves; Sense organs	Rhythmical organs; especially the heart and lungs	Organs of digestion, metabolism and movement
Nerve-Sense System	Rhythmical System	Metabolic-Limb System

This framework brings new context to health and illness, both in terms of recognizing what type of process is inherently healthy for a particular organ and how that should be supported if it is over-taxed or attacked (e.g., how do we help the lens of the eye be a perfect prism; how can we nourish the mobility and flexibility of the intestines?), as well as finding therapeutic approaches to shift and rebalance organ activity when it becomes imbalanced, e.g.:

- migraine, which we can recognize as an organ of the nervous system becoming too inflamed, too “metabolic”;
- or, conversely, irritable bowel, where the large intestine spasms and regularly becomes too “formed” and too “conscious,”;
- or palpitations, which can lean towards either too much form with not enough relaxation (i.e. atrial flutter), or insufficient form and contraction (PVC’s).

Nerve-Sense System	Rhythmic System	Metabolic-Limb System
<p>Migraine: <i>inflammatory and digestive activity in a sensory organ</i></p>	<p><<<<<<< Excess metabolic-limb activity <<<<<<<</p>	
<p>>>>>>>> Excess nerve-sense activity >>>>>>></p>		<p>Irritable Bowel Syndrome: <i>form and consciousness in a digestive, “sleeping” organ</i></p>
<p>Excess nerve-sense activity >>>>>>></p>	<p>Palpitations: either <i>Excessive form and contraction (a-flutter), or Excessive relaxation and loss of form (PVC’s)</i></p>	<p>Excess metabolic-limb activity <<<<<<<</p>

Summary of the archetypal qualities for the three systems:

	<p style="text-align: center;">Nerve-Sense System:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterized by organs where we routinely receive the world, such as eyes and ears, mouth and nose • The gesture of these organs is openness, a willingness to receive, to take in what comes from the outside world (centripetal movement, periphery to center) • We find the most archetypal expression of this in the head, where we also find the most finely sculpted and architecturally complex organ structures • Through these organs of nerve activity and sense activity we are able to think about the world • This nerve-and-senses system functions best when it is still, quiet and cool
	<p style="text-align: center;">Rhythmic System:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The primary activity of the middle system is mediation and alternation, here we find the heart and lungs • There is constant rhythmic activity, alternating between expansion/contraction, inhalation/exhalation, systole/diastole • We find in this middle region aspects of both the head system (contraction, inhalation) and the limb system (expansion, exhalation) • These rhythmic organs are accessible to consciousness, sleepier than our senses like vision and hearing, yet not as hidden as our metabolism • This rhythmic system, relates strongly to our feeling life
	<p style="text-align: center;">Metabolic-Limb System:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organs that transform the world (such as the digestive organs) and create new growth (reproductive organs) • The dominant activity is inner encounter, followed by excretion and release (centrifugal movement, center outward) • Our limbs allow for similar activity, as through the arms and legs we outwardly encounter and then act on the outside world • We find structures that are much less formed, without specific definition (you do not usually take a photo for an ID of your abdomen or ankle) • This metabolic-limb system functions best when it is warm, dynamic, mobilizing and dissolving

The incorporation of fourfold insights (physical, etheric, astral, "I") and threefold insights (nerve-sense, rhythmic, metabolic-limb) allow us to reliably observe the patterns of interweaving body, soul, and spirit. With study, these insights prove to be anything but dry, abstract concepts. They are alive, they are dynamic. They allow us see more, so that we can understand more and do more, help more. And in the process, renew and deepen our own love of medical service.

Anthroposophic Pharmacy and Medicines

To work therapeutically with the four aspects of the human being (physical, etheric, astral and I) and to incorporate threefold physiologic perspectives (nerve-sense, rhythmic, and metabolic-limb systems) requires new therapeutic tools. Anthroposophic pharmacy meets that need with new therapeutic substances and preparations, developed in parallel with anthroposophic clinical practice over the last century. A broad range of natural medicines have been created, incorporating substances from the mineral, plant and animal worlds. Examples include:

- Medicines made from the mineral world, using base substances such as silica, sulfur, calcium, or phosphorus, as well as a range of specialized metal preparations including gold, iron, copper, tin, silver, lead, stibium, mercury and magnesium.
- Medicines made from the plant world, incorporating many different kinds of well-known healing plants (examples include Belladonna, Arnica and Calendula), plus many other plant preparations which may be unique to anthroposophic pharmacy (like Bryophyllum, the “mother of thousands”), or compounds created by bringing diverse healing plants into specific relationship with one another (such as the combination of marjoram, oak, yarrow, shepherd’s purse and nettle to create a uniquely effective compound for balancing menstrual irregularities).
- Medicines made from the animal kingdom. Examples include: oyster shell, honeybee, red ant, or squid ink; also, a large variety of preparations made from animal organs (such as cow thyroid or kidney) which may then often be combined with corresponding mineral or plant (such as combining kidney with copper).

Anthroposophic medicines come in a variety of forms:

- Liquids or tinctures—taken as drops, either straight in the mouth or diluted in a teaspoon to help with taste (particularly for liquids that are very bitter or contain some alcohol as a preservative).
- Pellets (small sugar pills)—sweet to the taste and allowed to dissolve under the tongue before being swallowed. Usually a sucrose or lactose base. Also referred to as “pillules.”
- Tablets—can be swallowed like other pills. Some may contain lactose or wheat starch.
- Powders—the usual dose is a “knife-tip full,” or a portion about the size of a pea (approx. 1/16th of a teaspoon). These do not need to be dissolved in water but can be taken directly in the mouth. May have a lactose base.
- Ointments and Creams—for topical application. A pea-sized portion is usually adequate. A compress for repeated administration can be made by spreading the ointment on a clean piece of cotton or wool cloth and adding fresh ointment every second or third use (most useful if you are using the ointment multiple times a day for an acute problem).
- Ampules—these come as single, sterile, 1ml doses in individual glass containers. These are usually supplied as drink ampules, but are also used, at the discretion of the prescriber, for “off-label” subcutaneous injections.
- Oils—for massage or in an oil dispersion bath. Generally used as one teaspoon for a full bath.
- Eye drops, ear drops, and nasal sprays are also available for specific conditions.

Anthroposophic medicines overlap with both herbal and homeopathic traditions, but are often also distinct, offering completely new and novel ways for working with natural substances. Anthroposophic medicines are sometimes referred to as “remedies” to distinguish them from other allopathic, herbal, or homeopathic preparations.

Potency (dilution) designation:

Many anthroposophic medicines are created using a “potentization” process in which a crude substance is taken and diluted (mixing it one part base substance to nine parts water and vigorously mixing). This mixing and stirring process enlivens the therapeutic substance so that it can be more easily taken up by the patient. A preparation that has gone through this process once is indicated as a 1x preparation (or, using the European designation which speaks of “dilution”, D1, or, alternatively, a 10% solution). If one-tenth of that resulting mixture is then combined again with nine parts water and vigorously stirred, the resulting mixture will now be a 2x (or D2, or a 1% solution). This process can be repeated many times. This is the same process that is used to create homeopathic medicines, though, in comparison, Anthroposophic preparations are typically much lower potency, ranging from crude herbs up to a 30x dilution (compared to say a 200C homeopathic preparation which has been diluted 1 part to 99 parts water two hundred times). Anthroposophic medicines are also typically given several times a day over days, weeks or months, whereas some “classical” homeopathic preparations may only be given as a single dose.

- Experience has shown that the resulting shift in activity, based on the amount of potentization that has been carried out, influences where a medicine will work most strongly in the body. Therefore, within anthroposophic medicine:

- 1x-6x potencies primarily address processes in the metabolic-limb system,
- 8x-15x potencies primarily address processes in the rhythmic system,
- 20x-30x potencies primarily address processes in the nerve-sense system

Common Pharmacy Abbreviations:

“carbo” = a charcoal preparation

“cinis” = an ash preparation

“comp.” = a compound, indicates a specific mixture of different substances

“cortex” = the outer portion, usually the bark of a tree, has been used

“cult” = indicates that the plant being used has been cultivated in a special way (such as growing the plant in soil that has been enriched with another therapeutic substance, like a metal preparation)

“flos” = indicates that the flower portion of the plant has been used

“met. prep.” = preparation, indicates a special pharmaceutical method for purifying metal remedies

“planta tota” = the whole plant has been used in the preparation

“radix” = the root of a plant has been used in the preparation

Dosing Guidelines:

For chronic conditions, twice to three-times daily oral dosing over weeks to months is generally recommended. For acute or more severe illnesses medicines can be dosed four times daily.

Age:	6 months-2 years	2-7 years	Older child and adult
Liquids	2 drops	1 drop for each year of age (e.g. 5 years gets 5 drops)	7-10 drops
Pellets	2 pellets	1 pellet for each year of age (e.g. 5 years gets 5 pellets)	7-10 pellets
Powders	1/32 teaspoon	1/16 teaspoon	1/8 teaspoon

Glossary of basic terms

Anthroposophy: Greek—“Anthropos” = human being, “Sophia” = wisdom, therefore a “wisdom of the true nature of the human being”; alternatively described by Rudolf Steiner as the knowledge of *Spiritual Science*.

Astral: describes forces and activities of emotion, sensation and consciousness, as well as specialized organ function in the body; the part of the human being which is shared with the animal world; made possible through the working of spiritual archetypes into the physical world. Also described as *astral body* or *soul*.

Body or Bodies: used in anthroposophy to refer to organization(s) of specific forces such as physical, etheric, astral, or I forces. Alternatively also referred to as *levels*, or *members*. The related term “elements” refers to the physical elements – solid, liquid, gaseous, energy – which are referred to in various medical traditions as Earth, Water, Air, Fire.

Dilution: the process of rhythmically mixing a medicinal substance (generally one part substance to nine parts water), which may be repeated in sequence (each time taking one part of the resultant solution and stirring it with nine parts water); rounds of dilution are indicated by “x” e.g. “3x” preparation has gone through the process of 1:10 mixing and dilution three times (resulting in a 0.1% solution). Also referred to as *potentization*.

“-doron”: Greek—“gift,” used to designate a series of unique anthroposophic botanical or mineral compounds which bring diverse or polar substance-processes into relation with one another, to provide archetypally balanced support to a particular organ or process (e.g. Hepatodoron, Neurodoron, Choleodoron).

Ego: an alternate term sometimes chosen for indicating the “I” or “I-being,” usually seen in older translations of Rudolf Steiner’s works. See “I”.

Einreibung: a rhythmical, therapeutic application of oils to stimulate or support a particular part of the body (i.e. back or legs) or a specific organ (liver or kidney); a part of anthroposophic nursing and rhythmical massage practice. Also referred to as *embrocation*.

Etheric: the body of forces that lift physical substance into a living state. Makes possible all processes of form and growth; relates to fluid dynamics, makes levity possible. Relates to “chi” in Chinese medicine, or the “Archeus” described by both the Greeks and by Paracelsus. The part of the human being which is shared with the plant world. Also described as the *etheric body*, the *life body*, or alternatively as the *time body*.

Eurythmy: a movement practice and art form which works to make music and speech visible; includes specific gestures or movement patterns for vowels, consonants, musical tones, and geometric forms; eurythmy can be presented artistically, as well as prescribed individually as a therapy.

“I”: the most individualized spiritual core of each human being which allows for self-conscious awareness and has an existence both before birth and after death. This designation is chosen because a person can only say “I” about him- or herself. Also sometimes referred to as the “I-being.” (Note: In older anthroposophic literature the “I” may be translated as the “ego,” but should not be confused with Freud’s use of the word “ego” which relates much more closely to anthroposophic descriptions of the astral body. “I” is a more accurate translation of Steiner’s use of the German word “ich”).

Imagination: used in anthroposophy to describe a process of enlivened thinking, of thinking in living pictures; the development and extension of human cognition to observe the etheric realm. Usually capitalized (as “Imagination”) to differentiate it from more common uses of the word.

Inspiration: used in anthroposophy to describe consciousness that can work to understand astral processes, “Consciousness is emptied of any physical or etheric pictorial impressions, into which content from the spiritual world pour.” Usually capitalized (as “Inspiration”) to differentiate it from more common uses of the word.

Intuition: used in anthroposophy to describe consciousness that is able to understand the activity of individual spiritual beings, of the realm of the “I.” Usually capitalized—as “Intuition” to differentiate it from more common uses of the word.

Ita Wegman MD: (born 22 February 1876 in Karawang, West Java; died 4 March 1943 in Arlesheim, Switzerland), co-founder of Anthroposophic Medicine with Rudolf Steiner. In 1921, she founded the first anthroposophic hospital in Arlesheim, Switzerland. She also worked to develop rhythmical massage, the first mistletoe preparations for cancer treatment, and many other therapeutic treatments. A close collaborator with Rudolf Steiner, they co-authored the book *Fundamentals of Therapy*.

Metabolic-Limb System: the physiologic system encompassing unconscious processes of digestion, nutrition, metabolism and reproduction. Characterized by warmth, dissolution, excretion and centrifugal movement. It includes limb activity, particularly the legs. The system where we unfold processes of will.

Nerve-Sense System: the physiologic system relating to wakeful, conscious perception and thought, concentrated in the organs of the head and the central nervous system. Characterized by cooling, forming, organizing processes, typically moving from the periphery inward (centripetal orientation).

Physical: the substance of the body, subject to laws of gravity. Physical substance alone is not living and will not change in time; we truly see the physical body without etheric, astral, or I only in a corpse.

Potency: an alternative way to describe the pharmacologic process of dilution. See “Dilution”.

Rhythmic System: the middle physiologic system, exemplified by the heart and lungs. Recognized as “rhythmic” from the intrinsic, alternating activity between inhalation and exhalation, systole and diastole; relates strongly to the feeling realm.

Rudolf Steiner PhD: (1861–1925) an Austrian scholar, philosopher, social reformer, teacher, architect. Steiner attempted to find a synthesis between science and spirituality. In addition to his philosophical lectures and writings, he worked collaboratively in a variety of artistic media, including drama, the movement arts (developing a new artistic form, eurhythmy) and architecture, then in the latter portion of his life focused on the practical application of spiritual science, developing, collaboratively with others, Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture and anthroposophical medicine.

Soul: another way of describing the “astral body” of the human being. See “astral”.

Spirit: another way of describing the “I” of the human being, which exists both before birth and after death. See “I”.

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Illustrations adapted from *Functional Morphology: The Dynamic Wholeness of the Human Organism* by Johannes W. Rohen.

Compiled by Adam Blanning MD
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