



Tibb Position Statement: Physis and Self-healing

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Contents: Abstract (p1) • Introduction (p1) • Contrasting views on healing (p2) • The nature of Physis (p3) Mechanisms of Physis (p3) • Physis and healing (p5) • Physis and spontaneous healing (p5) • Physis and time (p5) • Tibb and Physis (p6) • Stimulating Physis (p7) • Physis and Lifestyle (p7) • Physis and other natural healing paradigms (p8) • Physis and drugs (p8) • Summary (p8) • Sources (p9)

Abstract

Good health is the outcome of a three-way harmonious and dynamic balance between our nature, our environment, and our diet, lifestyle and behaviour. This harmony, also termed *homeostasis*, is regulated by Physis. This is the vital life force inherent in the human body which helps to maintain equilibrium or harmony within the internal environment, so allowing the proper functioning of the cells, tissues and organs. Physis is responsible for self-protection, self-healing, and maintaining optimum health. It is made up of a complex and dynamic system of many natural processes, which collectively act as the 'governor of the body'. It operates at all levels of the living organism; from the inner working of cells, through the myriad of different tissues, to complex functioning organ systems. In effect, everyone carries within his or her own doctor, responsible for maintaining the harmony that is essential for best health, and healing injury and disease when called upon. When our Physis is strong enough to resist disease, we do not need a physician – our body can heal itself. Medicine does not heal us – it only assists our Physis. Tibb and other paradigms of natural medicine believe firmly in supporting and protecting Physis. We are at our healthiest when we allow this doctor a proper chance to work. Physis can be augmented by a range of natural therapies, including herbal remedies, hands-on techniques such as cupping and massage, and Lifestyle Factors such as diet, exercise and resting. Conventional medicine, conversely, often opposes or diminishes Physis, as with chemotherapy, antibiotics, and anti-secretory drugs. This article reviews the nature of Physis, and the modern understanding of its modes of operation.

Introduction

Hippocrates, regarded by many as the 'Father of Medicine' stated that 'nature is the best physician and the healer of disease', and was firmly convinced of the power of the body's 'vital force' to deal effectively with disease and injury. Physis is our vital life force. It operates to maintain the body's many healing processes during our state of health, and to activate and support them when we are suffering from a disease. It is also active in the psychological domain, being closely involved in emotional health. In the medical context, Tibb regards disease as arising from a disturbance to inner harmony, so treatment aims to support the inner healing properties of Physis.

Traditional Tibb therapy, whether by lifestyle reform, or with herbal medicines, or by hands-on techniques, actively supports and enhances Physis – never to knowingly restrict or diminish it. This is in stark contrast to much of modern or conventional medicine.

The concept of Physis offers an explanation for natural healing phenomena which have so far eluded conventional medicine. For instance, it explains *spontaneous healing*; the unexpected recovery from serious disorders that are considered untreatable by conventional medicine, such as aggressive cancers and crippling injuries. It also offers a reasonable interpretation of the *placebo effect*. It also explains why children recover much quicker from most ailments than do adults, why certain people fall victim to particular illnesses but not others and why some people recover unexpectedly faster than do their fellow patients.

Contrasting views on healing

Until about 150 years ago virtually *all* medicine was considered natural. The existence of Physis was well recognised, and its power in dealing with disease accepted without question. When treating a patient, the healer intuitively sought ways of supporting and boosting Physis. By doing so, the patient was helped in his or her recovery, and strengthened in avoiding similar illnesses in the future. Tibb, as with other natural medicine systems, sees good health as the normal, natural state of the body. It results from a harmonious balance between a person's nature (or constitution), the person's physical and emotional environment, and the person's general lifestyle and personal habits. This harmony – *homeostasis* – is governed and regulated by Physis.

Conventional medicine, on the other hand, has a different view of health and disease. It holds that disease arises as a consequence of our bodies being invaded by alien microbes – parasites, bacteria, fungi, viruses, or prions, or metabolic disturbances within the body, or genetic aberrations, or structural changes to tissues and organs. The emphasis in treatment is therefore based on attacking and neutralising the invaders, redressing the metabolic disturbances, compensating for the genetic aberrations, or reversing the structural changes. In most cases this involves the extensive use of pharmacological agents (conventional drugs), which are often synthetic, new-to-nature chemicals, or derivatives of substances derived from plants or fungi.

In contrast, natural medicine practitioners regard the person's internal environment, or *terrain*, to be equally or even more important than the infecting organism. This means that the focus of therapy should be enhancing the body's own defences, rather than mounting an attack on the alien microbe. If this fails because Physis is weak, or is overwhelmed by an alien microbe, measures to reduce the number of pathogens can be considered.

In conventional medicine, the body has at different times been compared to a bag of enzymes, or to a clockwork mechanism, or to a computer with parts which can be changed or modified to ensure smooth, efficient operation. From the Tibb perspective, this is grossly simplistic. As we learn more and more about the workings of the body, we realise how infinitely and exquisitely complex it is in its structure and organisation, and how little we know, for instance, of its intrinsic workings, and the nature of our awareness and consciousness. The activities of its astonishing self-protection systems, its integration with time and the environment, and especially of its self-healing potential still largely elude us.

Physis not only has a physical dimension, but also emotional and spiritual ones, which act together holistically to achieve optimum health. In fact, the complexity is probably so vast that we are probably incapable of grasping its intricacies. For example, in one single living cell there are around 300,000 (that we know of) metabolic reactions *per second*. Each of these reactions is tightly organised in time and space, supplied by energy systems, precursor substances, delivery operations, and a whole host of interacting metabolic sequences. Each reaction has also to occur in the correct sequence, the designated space and at the right time, and be turned on and off as needed. This breathtaking complexity is not chaotic, but is controlled by the governor of the body, namely Physis.

The nature of Physis

The various physiological systems in the body – circulatory, respiratory, digestive, communication, immune, etc. – have their own internal organisation. However, they do not work in complete isolation, but are each connected to the other systems in order to function effectively and efficiently. They are fully aware of the activities and problems of the others. In our bodies, Physis orchestrates all these inter-connected systems, a phenomenon known as *homeostasis*. It regulates body energy; how and when it is formed, how it is distributed, and how and where it is stored. This is a critical function in maintaining internal harmony, as energy is the origin of movement and rest.

Moreover, Physis possesses an enormous, astonishing, and robust capacity to heal the body when called upon. Physis heals the body when it is sick and restores its optimum health when it is exhausted. As the regulator for homeostasis, it is essentially the human's 'inborn intelligence of health'. One notable feature is that it operates in all dimensions of health – in the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and, arguably, the social.

A major agency of Physis relevant to health and disease is *the immune system*. This ensures that invading microbes which could bring about infection do not disturb the body's internal harmony. It also maintains extensive surveillance on the body's tissues and fluids to detect any cancers in development, and remove them if they threaten to become established.

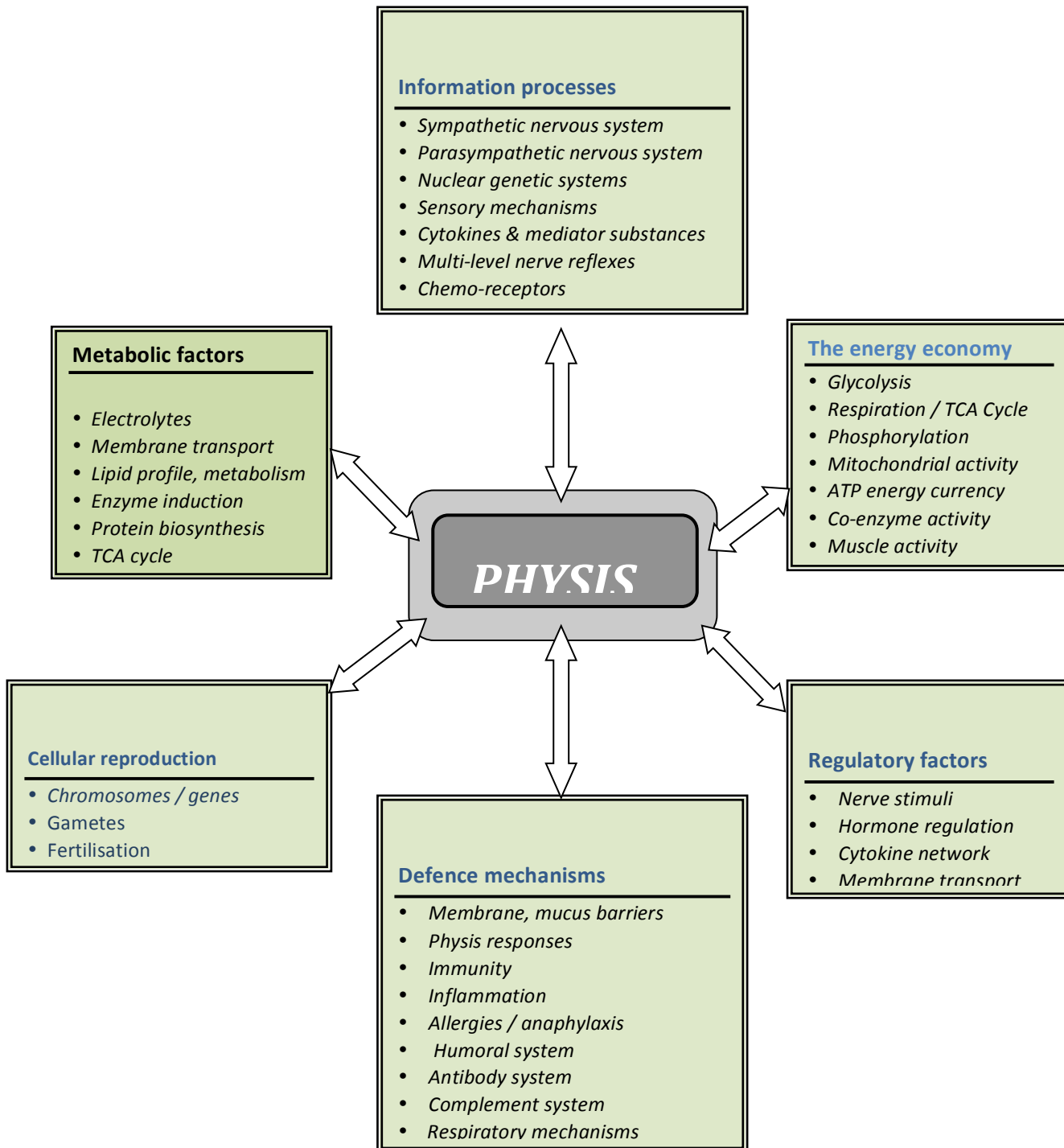
Mechanisms of Physis

At the *physical level*, Physis ensures that the millions of biochemical reactions taking place – for protection, growth, tissue maintenance, reproduction, and repair – at any instant, are started when needed, kept under control, regulated to the ideal rate, and turned off after their job is completed.

Other aspects of Physis in the physiological sphere are the numerous *biochemical feedback* mechanisms which operate in the body's metabolic processes and internal communications, namely the *endocrine*, *nervous*, and *cytokine* systems. Collectively these systems interact continuously to fine tune the body's metabolic processes.

The removal of toxins, both those internally generated, and brought in from the environment in the food we consume or air we breathe, is another critical function under Physis' control. Most conventional drugs, for instance, are 'new-to-nature' substances, and treated summarily as toxins. There is a whole battery of de-toxification and elimination mechanisms which Physis utilises to achieve this.

At the *psychological level*, Physis regulates the harmony or balance of the complex of emotions, the control of destructive urges or thoughts, and the maintenance of good mental health. Memories and experiences are evaluated and stored appropriately.



Physis and healing

The word 'physician' is actually derived from the word Physis. The true role of the physician is to support Physis in maintaining good health and assist it in the healing process. To achieve this, the factors governing Physis must be understood and their importance accepted. This allows the physician to plan and carry out treatment accordingly. It will also suggest when no treatment is necessary, so allowing Physis unimpeded action. *To do nothing is also a good remedy.* [Hippocrates]

The physician will also appreciate the value of a *Physis reaction*. For example, when a person has eaten something that disagrees with him or her, vomiting or diarrhoea is a natural reaction. The physician should be aware of this natural reaction, and assist Physis by devising effective treatment which is in harmony with the body's healing mechanisms. *Treatment comes from outside; healing from within.*

"Behind every natural action of the human body is an inherent wisdom, a mechanism [Physis] that allows the body to heal itself. In fact, no herb, no food or any other substance or procedure can do anything on its own to heal. It can only assist the body in its own self-healing role. If your finger is cut, it is not the stitches or the bandage or the iodine that causes it to heal; it is the skin itself that performs this miracle." [Chishti, 1985]

Physis and spontaneous healing

Spontaneous healing, or disease remission, is the sudden and inexplicable recovery from serious or incurable clinical disorders without any real medical intervention. Unfortunately it is usually regarded by conventional doctors as an unpredictable aberration of behaviour, and considered very rare. Close analysis suggests that this phenomenon may be more widespread than previously thought, and that spontaneous healing provides the strongest evidence of a powerful built-in healing system within us. It suggests that spontaneous remission is the way the body rallies itself to fend off disease.

Physis and time

The role of Physis is to maintain homeostasis in the body, and restore it if and when disease strikes. This takes time, because the equilibrium is dynamic or unstable in nature, as it involves living matter which is constantly in a state of flux. Chronic disorders such as high blood pressure and arthritis take years to develop, and so the self-healing restorative processes will, understandably, also take time. Dealing with the underlying disharmony linked to the ailment cannot be achieved overnight. Physis acts gently, but firmly, and needs time. Another reason is that diseases rarely arise from one single cause, but are multi-factorial in nature. Restoring harmony to this situation needs more time. There is no 'quick fix' with Physis.

What Physis abhors is too-rapid change in the person's lifestyle or behaviour. For instance, it is upset by change from hot to cold in the working, social or domestic environment, and this can contribute to disturbed homeostasis, so making the person more vulnerable to microbes or metabolic changes. Physis also abhors rapid change in food intake, from, say, a normal to a high protein, or high fibre, or a low carbohydrate diet, or the sudden use of high dose supplements and vitamins. These too disturb the person's inner harmony. Any changes to the person's Lifestyle Factors, such as dieting or exercising more, should be done gradually, not explosively: 'start low; go slow'.

Interestingly, indirect support for Physis' slow but steady action can be seen in most people's medicine cabinets. The amount of unused drugs, originally prescribed for conditions which needed a visit to the doctor, is evidence of this. The fact that they are not actually used fully is mute testament that recovery has largely been achieved through inner healing, and that the drugs have merely speeded up the process.

Tibb and Physis

Tibb accepts that no treatment should interfere with the actions of Physis. It regards certain symptoms as part of the healing process. Diarrhoea and vomiting are considered natural Physis-driven processes which aim to expel toxins (whether microbial or chemical, or toxins present in food) from the body as soon as possible. Suppressing these symptoms actually frustrates Physis, to the detriment of the patient. The same attitude applies to fever, inflammation, and skin rash.

One important difference between Tibb and conventional medicine is that Tibb supports Physis via a person's *Lifestyle Factors*, and assessing which can be modified with benefit. Tibb therefore adopts what is termed an *holistic approach to treatment*. That is, as the disorder affecting the person arose from many influences which effectively overcame the power of Physis, so treatment takes a multi-factorial approach, combining several treatment options. This approach is not only more likely to remove troublesome symptoms, but also deal with the underlying cause of the disorder.

"When Physis is powerful enough to withstand the disease, it does not require the aid of the physician, as in the case of minor diseases that are self-healing" [Al-Malki]

The Tibb physician accepts that although treatment is imposed from outside the person's body, proper healing comes from within. It follows, therefore, that any treatment brought to bear by the physician must support, not oppose, Physis. As Hippocrates put it: *"First, do no harm"*. Tibb practitioners recognise and respect the role of Physis.

The support that Tibb offers Physis takes several forms. First, there are herbal medicines which are given to assist Physis in dealing with ailments where Physis alone is waging a losing war. Second, there are a number of recommended changes to a person's diet and Lifestyle Factors which also support Physis. Third, there is a series of therapies, such as cupping, aromatherapy and acupuncture, which are likewise introduced to encourage Physis.

Good health results from the harmonious or dynamic balance between our nature, our environment (internal and external), and our lifestyle (or behaviour). A major role of Physis is to maintain the body's many healing processes during our state of health, and to activate and support them when we are suffering from a disease.

Another important difference between Tibb and conventional medicine is that the former's therapy employs Physis in eliminating or neutralising the toxins that have led to disharmony in the body, and so on to ill-health. These toxins include alien substances present in the food and drink we consume, pollutants in the air we breathe, and in the water we imbibe. It also includes the alien, new-to-nature chemicals we ingest as drugs, food additives, and residual antibiotics. Toxic chemicals which arise from our digestive process, especially during abnormal eating and behaviour, also belong here.

Stimulating Physis

Self-healing may also be achieved through deliberately applied psychological mechanisms. These approaches may improve the person's psychological and physical situation. Research confirms that this can be achieved through numerous mechanisms, including relaxation, breathing exercises, fitness exercises, and imagery. Physis can also be encouraged in several other ways; by applying different forms of physical and mental therapies.

Tibb's practical support for Physis takes several forms. First, there are herbal medicines which are given to assist Physis in dealing with ailments where Physis alone is waging a losing war, and self-healing is not working. A group of herbs known as *adaptogens* produce a robust defence against stress, and help normalise the body's metabolism, so restoring homeostasis. Such herbs include turmeric, blackseed, ginger and garlic.

Second, there are recommended changes to a person's diet and other features of lifestyle which also support Physis.

Third, there are a number of therapies, such as therapeutic cupping, aromatherapy and acupuncture, which are known to encourage Physis. For stress-derived disorders, meditation and similar techniques are valuable.

Tibb adopts an holistic approach to treatment. Treatment therefore takes a multi-factorial approach, as it is unlikely that one remedy will be effective, for the reasons mentioned previously. Options are various combinations of herbal medicine, regular fasting, massage, dietotherapy, and therapeutic cupping. This approach is not only more likely to remove troublesome symptoms, but also to deal with the underlying cause of the disorder.

Physis and the immune system An important part of Physis is *the immune system*. This distinguishes *self* from *non-self*, and protects us from the latter by an exquisite range of defence mechanisms. The body's immune system was designed to recognise and kill foreign invaders such as parasites, bacteria and viruses. It also has the exquisite ability to seek out and kill renegade cancer cells that arise in our bodies due to the malign effects of toxins, chemicals and radiation. This happens all the time without our realising it. We live in a hostile environment, surrounded continuously by a wide range of microbes and organic matter, some of which can give rise to diseases. Internally, cancers are being formed regularly, often triggered by radiation.

Physis and Lifestyle

There is mounting evidence that reasonable changes to a person's dysfunctional lifestyle, such as eating healthier food and getting physical exercise which is appropriate for a person's age and temperament may be enough to prevent the onset of certain chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cancer, and may be effective forms of treatment.

Chronic diseases result largely from a complex interaction of our constitutional or genetic makeup, our lifestyle and personal habits, and the environment we live in. A magic pill or other 'miracle cure' just isn't going to cure the disease – we need a permanent lifestyle approach, supported by specific measures such as herbal remedies, fasting and dietotherapy. The unalterable proviso is that they must work to support Physis, not against it.

The Lifestyle Factors are one of the major platforms of Tibb philosophy.

The major ones are listed in the table below:

The major Tibb Lifestyle Factors

- *Environment, air and breathing*
- *The food and drink we consume*
- *Our physical activity and rest habits*
- *Our sleep quality and wakefulness*
- *The state of our mind and emotions*
- *Efficiency of our waste and toxin excretion*

“Each patient carries his own doctor inside. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to go to work” [Albert Schweitzer]

A patient’s diet may not be appropriate for the presenting ailment, or he or she may not be getting enough exercise, or there may be a problematic build-up of toxins or body waste. These can be corrected by agreed changes to the patient’s lifestyle. Generally speaking, many chronic disorders of lifestyle respond positively to a better diet, regular physical activity, refreshing sleep, emotional harmony, and more effective excretion of natural waste.

Physis and other natural healing paradigms

The concept of Physis as a way of describing our natural, internal vitality and innate defensive mechanisms is not unique to Tibb. It is a feature of several natural healing systems, known under different names. In the early days, Hippocrates described it as *Vis Medicatrix Nature*. In the Orient, it is known as *Chi Energy* in Chinese Medicine, and as *Prana* in Ayurvedic Medicine. In the West, it is termed the *Life Force* in Homeopathy, *Nature* in Naturopathy, and variously referred to as the *Vital Force*, *Divine Wisdom*, *Mother Nature* and the *Hierarchical Principle* in other complementary medical paradigms. In the realms of conventional psychiatry self-healing goes variously under the names of *Orgone Energy*, *Animal Magnetism* and *Odic Force*, and in quantum physics the concept of Physis appears as *Zero Point Field*.

Physis and drugs

Conventional, synthetic drugs act to either stimulate or depress certain biochemical and physiological functions within the body. The drug may act *systemically* upon all cells within a person’s body, as with chemotherapy; alternatively, the drug may take effect *locally* in certain cells or special tissues, or on the complete organ. Furthermore, the drug may exert its action on the surface of the cell, or on membranes or structures within the cell. It may also act to inhibit a key enzyme in a biochemical cascade within an organ which is essential for regulatory or metabolic performance.

One problem which arises is whether the action of the drug interferes with the body’s natural ability for self-healing. There is mounting evidence that antibiotics depress the immune system, an important component of Physis. The various agents used in chemotherapy have long been associated with severe depression of the immune system, leaving the cancer sufferer open to infection from pathogenic microbes.

Summary

Physis is our vital force, the general governor of our body. It is the driving force which maintains equilibrium or harmony within our body. In doing so, it allows all cells, the tissues they form, and the internal organ systems to function properly. It is self-healing, self-repairing and self-maintaining. It regulates body energy; how and when it is formed, how it is distributed, and how and where it is stored. This is a critical function in maintaining internal harmony, as energy is the origin of movement and rest. Physis is the driver behind homeostasis. It comes into play to heal the body when it is sick, restore it when it is convalescing and assist it to develop and thrive when supplied with suitable nutrition. As the regulator for homeostasis, it is essentially the human's 'inborn intelligence of health'. The various systems in the body – the circulatory, respiratory, digestive, communication, and immune systems, etc. – have their own internal organisation. However, they do not work in complete isolation, but are each connected to the other systems in order to function effectively and efficiently. They are each aware of the activities and problems of the others. In our bodies, Physis has the innate ability to orchestrate all these inter-connected systems, a phenomenon known as *homeostasis*.

In the event of disease (or even when the body fails to reach its ideal state), Physis acts to correct imbalances and disharmony. One important feature is that it operates in all dimensions of health – in the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and, arguably, the social. Tibb regards disease as the result of a disturbance to this harmony over time. Tibb treatment therefore aims to support and enhance the inner healing properties of Physis. This is contrary to much of conventional or modern therapy, which often opposes or diminishes the beneficial effects of Physis. Tibb achieves this directly by herbal therapy, dietotherapy, and hands-on treatment such as massage, various exercises, and therapeutic cupping.

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