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Daoist Traditions Class of 2018

“Drink one cup of this decoction 3 times per day, preferably on an empty stomach.” Many are accustomed to these directions from their Chinese medicine practitioner, yet often this is not feasible. Modern lifestyles necessitate an herbal strategy that can be easily adapted to the pace of contemporary culture. The use of decoctions in herbal medicine is decreasing in popularity largely due to the fact that many prefer more convenient alternatives (i.e. teapills and granules) to accommodate busy schedules as well as travel. While these alternative methods are preferable to non-compliance, some clinicians lament the patient’s inability to have the full experience of the herbal formula including the aroma and flavor of the herbs, an important aspect in the healing process. To make these decoctions more relevant to modern lifestyles requires a two-part approach: 1) provide alternative preparation methods that require less of the patient’s time, and 2) incorporate decoctions, when appropriate, into dietary therapy and/or dishes for patients to offer a more flavorful alternative that will also provide variety.

The traditional method of decocting herbs is one that, for the uninitiated, may seem quite laborious. Even those well-acquainted with the process may find at times that it is time-consuming and requires planning. One way to help with this is to offer alternatives for the cooking of the herbs. Instructing patients to decoct the herbs in a crock-pot or slow-cooker allows the patient to engage in other activities without fear of forgetting the simmering herbs. Furthermore, it allows for the herbs to be decocted overnight. This may not be as appropriate in herbal formulas for more acute conditions that require a shorter cooking time or for those herbs that must be added at a specific time to achieve a certain action (i.e. da huang). However, for the majority of formulas, particularly those employed for tonification, this is fitting. Working within the parameters of patient schedules makes all the difference in incorporating herbal decoctions into patient agendas.

An ancient Chinese proverb states that he who takes medicine and neglects diet wastes the skills of the clinician. It is optimal then to combine the two, particularly in today’s culture that places such an emphasis on food and its enjoyment. More mild-

tasting formulas may be added to stock or broth during the cooking process along with meat, vegetables, and/or herbs and spices that will support the herbal strategy. This stock can then be used in a variety of dishes throughout the day to achieve the appropriate dosage. For example, the stock can be used for a morning congee, afternoon soup, and evening vegetable sauté. Decoctions may also be incorporated into dishes such as flavored and lightly sweetened gelatin or chia seed pudding, for example, in treating a patient with yin deficiency. An herbal formula, such as Bai Hu Tang, may be made into popsicles for the patient to slowly consume if there is a high fever with a very sore throat. A damp-draining formula such as Wu Ling San may be combined with grains and legumes with supporting actions to make savory pancakes that also work to support the Spleen. Any of these dishes can be made ahead of time for patients with a busy schedule.

Ease and variety are the two words that come to mind when contemplating how best to adapt herbal formulas to contemporary lifestyle. Providing alternatives to the traditional methods of preparation and consumption of herbal decoctions is paramount in garnering not only patient compliance but also continuity of this form of herbal medicine. Furthermore, this approach will not add additional stress for our patients, and may even decrease the amount of daily stress that they experience. This more fully supports their healing process and supports the beneficence strived for by clinicians. As Sun Si Miao advised, “The way of nurturing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure.”