

# METAPHORS FOR HEALTH CARE, WEST AND EAST: THE MECHANIC AND THE GARDENER

*Contrasting metaphors for health care—the mechanic and the gardener—emerge from the very different philosophies underlying Western and Eastern culture. It matters whether we see ourselves as gardens or machines, our health care practitioners as mechanics or gardeners. Authors Harriet Beinfield and Efrem Korngold (Between Heaven and Earth) and Lawrence LeShan (The Mechanic and the Gardener) consider the consequences of the two metaphors in these excerpts from their books.\**

## The Self as a Machine, The Self as a Garden

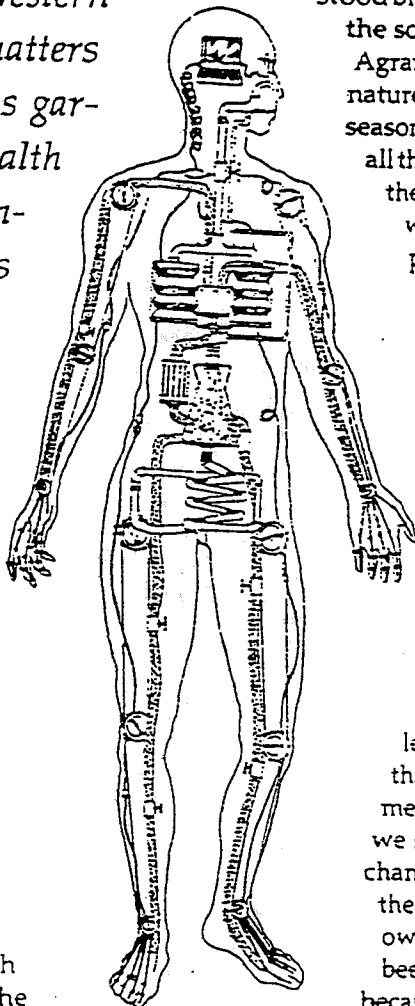
In the seventeenth century, the French mathematician Descartes ushered in the Western scientific revolution. His introduction of analytic, reductive reasoning formed the basis of a new philosophy of science, which became the philosophy of modern medicine as well. . . .

Within this worldview, nature and humans are machines governed by mechanical laws: systems that do work, tools of production. Western medicine, correspondingly, is the study of how the human machine works. When people are like machines, doctors become like mechanics. The mechanic occasionally performs routine maintenance but mostly intervenes to execute emergency repairs. He plunges into the working parts, replacing the non-functioning elements,

and puts the machine back into working order. It follows that the doctor as mechanic fixes the broken body-machine. . . . Within the Eastern worldview, the human being is a microcosm of Nature, a smaller universe. . . . health is understood broadly, defining the whole being within the social and natural order. . . .

Agrarian cultures experienced power through nature and aspired to be in harmony with the seasons, rhythms, and patterns that connected all things with each other. Within this reality, the world was like a garden. The garden was nature—the living earth, the human person, the biosphere, the circle of all life.

When people are like gardens, then doctors are like gardeners. The role of the Chinese doctor is to cultivate life. (*Between Heaven and Earth*)



## The Health Care Practitioner— Mechanic or Gardener?

When we go to a physician with a problem, we have very much the same attitude that we have when we bring our car to a mechanic. 'It's slow to start in the morning,' we say. 'Please fix it.' We expect the mechanic to do something physically, not to tell the car that it must change its attitude, its owner, or that it is an Oldsmobile and has been living its life as if it were a Buick just because Buicks were the admired cars this year. We do not expect the mechanic to tell us that the car has the ability to fix itself and that we have to find out what is blocking this ability. If he cannot fix the car, we call him an incompetent and find another mechanic who will.

When we approach a physician in the same way—and, being a creature of the same culture, the physician has the same attitudes and expectations that we have—we force him to 'do something' about the problem. The result is that the patient generally leaves the office medicated, frequently overmedicated, sometimes with completely unnecessary surgical procedures scheduled. And all because we regard ourselves as a machine

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to be fixed rather than an organism to be gardened.

A gardener has quite a different attitude. If something is wrong with the development of a plant, the gardener will examine the total environment in which the plant exists and to which it is responding.

Should [the physician]... be primarily a mechanic and repair the ill body, or should he be primarily a gardener and help the body grow past disease and toward health?

It would be foolish to argue that the physician should be completely one or the other. Both roles are clearly necessary.... The question of emphasis, however, is extremely important. (*The Mechanic and the Gardener*)

## Becoming a Gardener to Our Own Lives

The course of our everyday lives requires that we balance the interior process of nurturing the self (*Yin*) with being engaged in the exterior work of the world (*Yang*). Our activity in the world fosters our productivity, then we retreat from the business of the day each evening to relax, rest, and sleep in order to accumulate and replenish our store of *Qi* for the day to follow.

Our contemporary culture encourages constant, often frenetic, activity. People are so consumed with their productivity that they often neglect allowing enough time for the self to be replenished. To overwork, overexercise, overparty, and overengage in the act of love is to overindulge in *Yang*, which leads to burnout of *Yin*. The body cannot for

long tolerate consuming more than is replaced. The consequences of this may be muscle, joint, bone, heart, or kidney problems perhaps as serious and sudden as a heart attack.

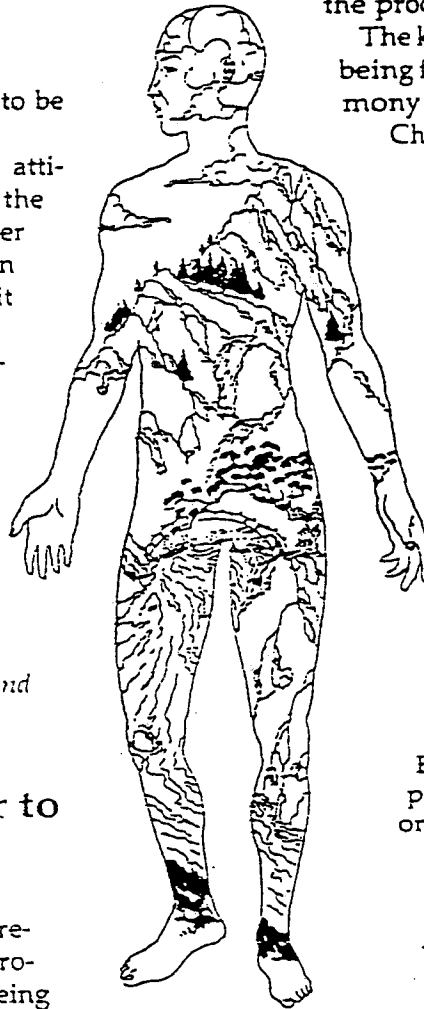
On the other hand, to be preoccupied with matters of internal health and overly focused on nourishing and protecting the delicate interior of the body could mean an overemphasis on the *Yin* phase of accumulation. A collector who keeps acquiring more and more goods that have potential value is so busy amassing and storing that he has no time or energy left to put his hidden treasures to use in the productive life of the world. . . .

The key is to achieve balance, which means being flexible, diverse, moderate, and in harmony with your own rhythms and needs.

Chinese medicine makes use of acupuncture, herbs, diet, physical exercise, massage, mental discipline, and the modification of life-style habits as forms of therapy to reestablish the rhythmic swing of the *Yin-Yang* pendulum. (*Between Heaven and Earth*)

*\*Between Heaven and Earth, A Guide to Chinese Medicine, by Harriet Beinfield and Efreim Korngold. New York: Ballantine Books, 1991. The Mechanic and the Gardener, by Lawrence LeShan. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982.*

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