

Tongue Assessment for Western Herbalists: A Primer

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Introduction

Traditional assessment methods, such as reading the tongue, face or pulse, are invaluable doorways to the inner terrain, giving us clues about qualities such as moisture and heat, as well as tension, tissue integrity and overall vitality. We can also gain entry into the psychoemotional world of the client, allowing insight into a person's beliefs and perceptions, as held in and expressed through the body. Assessing the tongue is especially useful for understanding the state of digestion, but also serves as a microcosmic mirror of all of the organs, as well as a person's integrated function.

My approach to tongue assessment is rooted in my knowledge of Chinese medicine, though I have also learned tongue assessment from an Ayurvedic perspective. While these traditions diverge in a few areas, the overall findings when using either are the same. My task in teaching Western herbalists has been to find reasonable translations for the most valuable concepts used in these intact traditional medical systems. Fortunately, this is easier than I suspected. Assessing the qualities of moisture, temperature, movement, tone, nourishment, and vitality are the key concerns of any and all medicines rooted in natural cosmology. The languages and origin stories may differ, but the concept is the same: in disease, as in health, we reflect nature.

So, in order to utilize tongue assessment successfully as a key tool in my Western herbal practice, I have utilized conceptual scaffolding provided by Chinese medicine and built on that using language and interpretations which harmonize with my practice methods and resonate most easily with my clients. My hope is that other Western herbalists will find this overview accessible and conceptually familiar, and that tongue assessment is available as a dynamic, effective tool for anyone who feels drawn to use it.

Theory

There are eight basic aspects of the tongue to assess, including a miscellaneous category:

- Shape (and to a certain degree, size), especially width and vertical thickness
- Color
- Coat (presence, thickness, color, rootedness)
- Moisture
- Cracks
- Marks (spots, swollen papillae)
- Tension / Presentation (stiff, limp, trembling, deviated, forceful)
- Miscellaneous: Sublingual vein condition

We can describe a healthy tongue with these categories in mind. The tongue should be proportionate to the mouth, meaning it is neither short or narrow, nor wide enough that it presses against the teeth (which would cause tell-tale indentations). Tongue size and shape generally indicate the state of fluids in the body, as well as overall nourishment and vitality. A healthy tongue is generally pink in color, indicating that it is well-perfused with blood. It should have a thin, rooted (not easily scraped off), white coat and be moderately moist. The coat reflects oral and digestive health overall, while moisture reflects the state of fluids in the body and the oral mucus membrane's health, specifically. Ideally, there are no cracks or other prominent markings on the surface of the tongue, suggesting there is adequate bodily moisture and general tissue nourishment and health. A healthy tongue appears supple and flexible when presented and moves only a little (vs. seeming to tremble uncontrollably), all suggesting moderate neuromuscular tone. And lastly, sublingual veins should appear unremarkable (instead of purple or ropey, which would indicate stagnation of blood).

To ease understanding of non-healthy tongue presentations, I've created a set of charts, below, which include the qualities we observe in the tongue in each of the eight categories and a very simple (*very simple*) summary of what each presentation can indicate. This is the starting place. I recommend that folks begin by simply memorizing or at least becoming familiar these first two columns. Once folks are familiar and have looked at lots and lots of tongues, then it's time to apply our knowledge.

To save space here, I've attached two more columns to the first, which address the second stage of applying the assessment, which is discussed after the charts. You'll see some goals for addressing what the tongue suggests and then some actions that might be appropriate and a few herbs to consider when we see a particular presentation. While you can obviously see all of the information at one glance, I recommend doing a great deal of observing and recording what you see (column #1) before worrying about what it means (#2) and certainly before trying to connect herbs (#3 and 4) to those meanings. Take it slow and steady—it will come in time.

Note: I've done my best to use language and concepts familiar to Western herbalists. Those familiar with Chinese medicine will recognize my translations, along with the places where it is challenging to make the leap. One such place is in the concept of Blood, which has no proper equivalent in Western herbalism, as commonly practiced, at least. I think of Blood as both the physical blood, and also the nutritive property or carrying capacity of the person. It warms and moistens, carries oxygen and is a product of quality food and strong digestive function. So, if we say a person is Blood deficient, we are at once saying they are likely not eating enough quality food or that what they are eating is not being well assimilated and then that their tissue is therefore poorly nourished and so cellular and organ function is diminished. These will be pale, tired, chilly folks in general. Otherwise, I'm hopeful that the language here is clear and relevant to the Western practitioner.

Shape of Tongue Body

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Narrow and/or Small	<u>Deficiency</u> of fluids, Blood (i.e. dryness)	<u>Nourish, Moisten</u> Improve digestion (which will enhance Blood quality) Increase fat and water intake, as well as minerals for electrolyte balance	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, mineral-rich tonic burdock, artichoke, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia (<i>Rehmannia glutinosa</i>), dong quai (<i>Angelica sinensis</i>), nettle, seaweeds
Medium	Health		
Wide (side to side)	<u>Excess</u> moisture (lymphatic stagnation, edema, mucus)	<u>Move, transform, drain</u> eliminate pathogenic moisture via digestive stimulation, lymph (and blood) movement, and opening channels of elimination	circulatory stimulant, lymphatic, alterative, pungent/aromatic, diuretic prickly ash, angelica, ginger, cardamom, cleavers, dandelion leaf and root, gotu kola, triphala
Thick (vertically enlarged)	<u>Excess</u> heat	<u>Cool, Release</u> Reduce inflammation and enhance liver clearance Address w/relevant infections, if any	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic; immune-stimulant? self-heal, yarrow, Baikal skullcap (<i>Scutellaria baicalensis</i>), dan shen (<i>Salvia miltiorrhiza</i>), raw rehmannia

Color of Tongue Body

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Pale	<u>Deficiency</u> of Blood (possibly including anemia or simply	<u>Warm, Move, Spark</u> Build blood quality Increase circulation to periphery	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, circulatory stimulant, adaptogenic, thyrotropic

	suggesting malnourishment) Coldness Lack of vitality	Nourish by improving digestion Increase vitality via endocrine processes	mugwort, cardamom, tulsi, astragalus, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia, dong quai, guggul (<i>Commiphora mukul</i>), seaweeds
Pink	Health		
Red	<u>Excess heat</u> **Can also be heat from dryness, aka “deficiency heat”; look for signs of deficiency, such as lack of coat	<u>Cool, Release</u> Reduce inflammation and enhance liver clearance **deficiency heat should be cooled, but also nourished and moistened	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic, lymphatic or alterative self-heal, yarrow, Baikal skullcap, dan shen, turmeric, raw rehmannia
Dark Red	Severe <u>excess heat</u> Possibly accompanied by <u>Blood stagnation</u>	<u>Cool, Release, Move</u> Goals are the same as above, but with concern for deeper organ and tissue damage Increase circulation, possibly thin blood	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic, circulatory stimulant, lymphatic or alterative Baikal skullcap, dan shen, guggul, reishi, ginkgo, barberry, corydalis, motherwort, hawthorn, blueberry
Purple	<u>Blood stagnation</u>	<u>Move</u> Increase blood circulation, possibly thin blood Sometimes releasing tension is also necessary here	circulatory stimulant, smooth muscle relaxant? gotu kola, ginkgo, horse chestnut, cinnamon, turmeric, dan shen, guggul, ginger, cayenne, yarrow, mugwort, white peony, motherwort
Blue-Purple	<u>Blood stagnation</u> with or because of <u>cold</u>	<u>Warm, Move</u> Increase blood circulation Enhance vitality via endocrine and digestive processes	circulatory stimulant, aromatic bitter, adaptogenic, thyrotropic mugwort, cardamom, tulsi, schisandra, ashwagandha, angelica, guggul, turmeric, ginger
Lavender	<u>Blood stagnation</u> with or because of <u>deficiency</u> (could be lack of Blood, warmth or vitality)	<u>Nourish first, then Move</u> Nourish via digestive enhancement, building blood, and via endocrine support Increase blood circulation Sometimes releasing tension is also necessary here	aromatic bitter, Blood builder, mineral-rich tonic, circulatory stimulant, anti-spasmodic, nervine relaxant, adaptogenic damiana, angelica, lavender, cardamom, mugwort, white peony, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia, dong quai, nettle
Blue	<u>Cold</u>	<u>Warm, Move</u> Increase circulation Enhance metabolic function Improve digestion to nourish tissue	circulatory stimulant, digestive, stimulating adaptogenic, thyrotropic rosemary, prickly ash, cinnamon, schisandra, ashwagandha, guggul

Thickness of Tongue Coat

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Absent (completely missing or in patches, e.g.	<u>Deficient</u> moisture and digestive insufficiency	Improve digestive capacity via stimulation of digestive secretions and regulation of enteric nervous function Nourish with sweet,	bitter (pure or aromatic), nervine, prebiotic, “Spleen tonic” (<i>Chinese assimilative organ</i>)

“peeled” or “geographic” tongues)		building herbs	artichoke, gentian, citrus, chamomile, mugwort, wood betony (<i>Stachys officinalis</i>), monarda, burdock, codonopsis (<i>Codonopsis pilosula</i>), licorice
Thin	Health		
Thick (on all or part of tongue)	<u>Excess</u> moisture, food stagnation; generally some kind of pathogenic condition involving “excess”	<u>Move, transform, drain</u> eliminate pathogenic moisture via digestive stimulation, lymph (and blood) movement, and opening channels of elimination May also require cooling, if heat is involved	circulatory stimulant, lymphatic, alterative, pungent/aromatic, diuretic, anti-inflammatory prickly ash, calendula, iris, self-heal, red clover, elecampane, ginger, cardamom, triphala

Color of Tongue Coat (all or part)

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Transparent White	Health		
White	<u>Cold</u>	<u>Warm, Move</u> Increase circulation Enhance metabolic function Improve digestion to nourish tissue	circulatory stimulant, digestive, stimulating adaptogenic, thyrotropic rosemary, prickly ash, cinnamon, schisandra, ashwagandha, guggul
Yellow	<u>Heat</u>	<u>Cool, Release</u> Reduce inflammation and enhance liver clearance Address infection, if relevant	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic, lymphatic or alterative, immune stimulant self-heal, Baikal skullcap, dan shen, turmeric, raw rehmannia, echinacea, boneset
Gray	Either heat or cold, <u>moving deeper</u> into the body	<u>Stimulate, Expel</u> Enhance immunity Increase circulation Stimulate vital force via endocrine function	Immune stimulant/modulant/tonic (as appropriate), circulatory stimulant/diaphoretic, adaptogenic Baptisia, poke, echinacea, boneset, cat’s claw, eleuthero, medicinal mushrooms, astragalus, schisandra, prickly ash, ginger
Brown/Black	<u>Extreme</u> heat or cold, <u>deep</u> in body, as in severe fever, infection, chronic disease	<u>Stimulate, Expel</u> <i>As above</i>	<i>As above</i> <i>*This may be a referral situation if the person has not yet sought primary care</i>

Rootedness of Tongue Coat

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Rooted	Health	(coat appears to grow from the tongue, is stable and not easily scraped off)	
Unrooted	<u>Deficient</u> digestive strength	<u>Kindle Digestive Fire</u> Improve digestive capacity via stimulation of digestive secretions and regulation of enteric nervous function Nourish with sweet, building herbs	bitter (pure or aromatic), nervine, prebiotic, “Spleen tonic” artichoke, gentian, citrus, chamomile, mugwort, wood betony, monarda, burdock, codonopsis, licorice

Moistness of Tongue

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Moist	Health		
Glossy (excessively shiny or wet)	<u>Cold</u>	<u>Warm, Move</u> Increase circulation Enhance metabolic function Improve digestion to nourish tissue	circulatory stimulant, digestive, stimulating adaptogenic, thyrotropic rosemary, prickly ash, cinnamon, schisandra, ashwagandha, guggul
Dry	<u>Dryness</u> (sometimes caused by heat), digestive insufficiency	<u>Moisten, Kindle Digestive Fire, Possibly Cool</u> Improve digestive capacity via stimulation of digestive secretions and regulation of enteric nervous function Increase fat and water intake, as well as minerals for electrolyte balance Nourish with sweet, building herbs	bitter (pure or aromatic), nervine, prebiotic, mineral-rich tonic, "Spleen tonic" artichoke, gentian, citrus, chamomile, mugwort, wood betony, monarda, burdock, codonopsis, licorice, ashwagandha, nettle, seaweeds

Cracks on Tongue Body

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Cracks	Deficiency of Blood or fluids	<u>Nourish, Moisten</u> Improve digestion (which will enhance Blood quality) Increase fat and water intake, as well as minerals for electrolyte balance	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, mineral-rich tonic burdock, artichoke, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia, dong quai, nettle, seaweeds
Cracks with redness	<u>Deficiency of Blood or fluids with heat</u>	<u>Moisten, Kindle Digestive Fire, Possibly Cool</u> Improve digestion (which will enhance Blood quality) Increase fat and water intake, as well as minerals for electrolyte balance Reduce inflammation	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, mineral-rich tonic, anti-inflammatory artichoke, chamomile, burdock, raw rehmannia, red peony, dan shen, licorice, marshmallow, oat tops
Cracks with paleness	<u>Blood deficiency</u>	<u>Warm, Move, Spark</u> Build blood quality Increase circulation to periphery Nourish by improving digestion Increase vitality via endocrine processes	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, circulatory stimulant, adaptogenic, thyrotropic mugwort, cardamom, tulsi, astragalus, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia, dong quai, guggul, seaweeds
Cracks on sides (appear as deep teeth marks or "fish gills")	<u>Pathogenic moisture</u>	<u>Move, transform, drain</u> eliminate pathogenic moisture via digestive stimulation, lymph (and blood) movement, and opening channels of elimination May also require cooling, if inflammation is involved	circulatory stimulant, lymphatic, alterative, pungent/aromatic, diuretic, anti-inflammatory prickly ash, calendula, iris, self-heal, red clover, elecampane, ginger, cardamom, triphala

**The central "crack" in many tongues is called the sulcus. It does not necessarily indicate dryness, but when deep or raw, it can mean there is severe digestive insufficiency, sometimes accompanied by dryness (if deep or "feathered" in appearance) or heat (if red). A more prominent sulcus in the center of the tongue is especially indicative of digestive weakness, while a sulcus that stretches all the way to the tip, sometimes even appearing to bisect or pinch the tip of the tongue, can indicate that digestive issues are*

affecting the heart and mind (e.g. emotions, cognition). If curved or broken, the sulcus can also relate to spinal injury or congenital differences, or sometimes to psychological trauma.

Marks

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions, Herbs to Consider
Dots, spots, Prickles (raised tongue papillae) with redness	<u>Heat or stagnation</u>	<u>Cool, Release, Move</u> Reduce inflammation and enhance liver clearance Address possible infection Increase circulation <i>Can</i> mean chronic inflammation	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic, circulatory stimulant, lymphatic or alterative baikal skullcap, dan shen, guggul, reishi, ginkgo, goldenrod, hawthorn, calendula, self-heal, nettle
Dots, spots, prickles with purple or brown or blackness	<u>Blood stagnation</u>	<u>Move</u> Increase blood circulation, possibly thin blood Sometimes releasing tension is also necessary here	circulatory stimulant, smooth muscle relaxant? gotu kola, ginkgo, horse chestnut, cinnamon, turmeric, dan shen, guggul, ginger, cayenne, yarrow, mugwort, white peony, motherwort

Presentation of Tongue

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions to Apply (with herbs to consider)
Relaxed, yet firm	Health		
Stiff	<u>Spasm, tension</u> (aka Wind)	<u>Relax, Soothe</u> Reduce neuromuscular tension via central and peripheral input Reduce perception of stress	Nervine, antispasmodic, digestive, adaptogenic, possibly anti-inflammatory Skullcap, wood betony, kava, cramp bark, blue vervain, motherwort, lemon balm, chamomile, anemone, ashwagandha
Limp	<u>Deficiency</u> of Blood, moisture or vitality	<u>Warm, Move, Spark</u> Build blood quality Increase circulation to periphery Nourish by improving digestion Increase vitality via endocrine processes Increase fat and water intake, as well as minerals for electrolyte balance	digestive (bitter/aromatic), Blood builder, circulatory stimulant, adaptogenic, thyrotropic mugwort, cardamom, tulsi, astragalus, ashwagandha, cooked rehmannia, dong quai, shatavari (<i>Asparagus racemosus</i>), guggul, nettle, oat tops, seaweeds
Trembling	Spasm, <u>high neuromuscular tension</u> , can be psychoemotional Also sometimes generally <u>deficient vitality</u>	<u>Relax, Soothe</u> Reduce neuromuscular tension via central and peripheral input Possibly nourish, esp. nervous tissue Reduce perception of stress	Nervine, antispasmodic, digestive, adaptogenic, possibly anti-inflammatory Skullcap, wood betony, kava, lemon balm, cramp bark, oat tops, linden, peppermint, ashwagandha, rose, anemone
Deviated (points notably right or left)	Spasm or other <u>neuromuscular tension</u> concern; can be psychoemotional	<u>Relax, Soothe</u> <i>As above</i> *If severe, deviation is a strong sign for referral to a neurologist	<i>As above</i>

consistently)			
Forceful extension	Often indicates <u>excess</u> heat	<u>Cool, Release, Relax</u> Reduce inflammation and enhance liver clearance Relax tension, if relevant Address infection, if relevant	anti-inflammatory, bitter/hepatic, diaphoretic, lymphatic or alterative, immune stimulant, anti-spasmodic self-heal, Baikal skullcap, dan shen, turmeric, raw rehmannia, echinacea, boneset, blue vervain, hops

Miscellaneous

Quality	Indication	Goal	Possible Actions to Apply (with herbs to consider)
Engorged, Purple or Blue Sublingual veins	<u>Blood stagnation</u>	<u>Move</u> Increase blood circulation, possibly thin blood Sometimes releasing tension is also necessary here	circulatory stimulant, smooth muscle relaxant? gotu kola, ginkgo, horse chestnut, cinnamon, turmeric, dan shen, guggul, ginger, cayenne, yarrow, mugwort, white peony, motherwort
Tooth marks, indentations or ripples on sides of tongue <i>*often on a wide tongue, but common on narrow tongues, too</i>	<u>Poor assimilation</u>	<u>Kindle Digestive Fire</u> Improve digestive capacity via stimulation of digestive secretions and regulation of enteric nervous function Enhance elimination Reduce digestive inflammation and/or dysbiosis Nourish with sweet, building herbs	bitter (pure or aromatic), nervine, prebiotic, aperient, "Spleen tonic", anti-inflammatory artichoke, gentian, citrus, chamomile, mugwort, wood betony, anise hyssop (<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>), monarda, burdock, codonopsis, licorice, ashwagandha, shatavari, marshmallow

While it is generally agreed that the tongue is most reflective of digestive health, there are numerous maps available which also overlay the organs of the entire body on the surface of the tongue, similar to a foot reflexology map. These are sometimes extremely useful in providing new, organ-specific information to add to the above indications relevant to the whole body. Most often, however, using a map simply confirms information derived from other methods of information gathering (e.g. interview, pulse). So, because the information to be gained is sometimes only moderately novel and memorizing the maps can be difficult or distracting for folks just getting comfortable with the process, I tend to underemphasize memorizing the location of organs on the tongue. Instead, I highlight a simplified map which divides the tongue into thirds, which roughly correlate to the Chinese concept of the three "burning spaces", or *jiao*. I synthesize the organ locations into macro functions and place them in these three areas (with thanks to Kevin Spelman, who first outlined this for me). This map reads like this:

First third (beginning at tip): **Feeling, Circulation, Respiration** (head, heart, psyche, lungs)

Middle third: Digestion, Transformation/Detoxification (stomach, spleen, pancreas, small intestine, liver, gallbladder)

Rear third: Regeneration, Reproduction, Elimination (adrenals, reproductive organs, kidneys, large intestine)

The primary application for learning the functions associated with these three areas is when there is a significant difference in the appearance of the tongue in one of the three locations. Otherwise, it's fine to set this piece aside until it's needed.

Practice

The best way to learn to assess tongues is through practice, particularly alongside an experienced practitioner. It is quite helpful to have someone confirm your assessment in the moment. It is even easier than learning pulse in this regard, because you and your mentor are assessing the exact same thing at the exact same moment, so there is less opportunity for conditions to change between assessments. The next best way to learn is through looking at pictures of tongues that have been assessed by others. There are a number of books that do this well, which are listed in the resources section. Lastly, you can learn quite a bit about the meaning of tongue presentations from your clients in a sort of reverse discovery process. By this I mean that you will have many folks, including yourself, with known symptoms, diagnoses and functional tendencies which will be reflected in some way in the tongue. You can learn about tongue assessment by starting with the “answer” and working backwards to understand which features might have pointed you in the right direction. For example, you could note the appearance of the tongues of a number of people with peripheral edema. In time, you will begin to see similarities and perhaps identify key indicators that you correlate with edema. No matter how you gather your knowledge—from a mentor, books or “on-the-job”, working with your clients, your family and yourself—the key is repetition and consistency.

In fact, through teaching tongue assessment for many years, I've found that getting the basic process down to an almost monotonous rhythm is actually the best foundation. This means having an orderly method of observation which you apply consistently, such that you're sure you've considered each aspect of the tongue, and having a uniform method of recording your observations. I find that drawing is especially helpful in capturing impressions, with descriptive words to augment what I draw. Primarily visual recording can bypass the initial desire to make sense of what we see and can help us capture as much raw data as possible.

In some ways, the order in which we observe the aspects of the tongue is unimportant, however sticking with the order I've laid out can be helpful for getting comfortable until the process becomes more implicit. Procedural memory is developed over time. Once observation and recording become second nature, you can allow yourself to observe and record in whatever way feels most natural and the aspects to pay attention to and in what order will fade to the background. You will begin to find that the associated possible indications for each quality will then begin to appear in your mind without great effort (if you've studied them!) and soon you will be synthesizing all of the indications into what will become your ultimate assessment.

From Observation to Assessment and Protocol Development

Obviously, the many characteristics laid out above don't exist in a vacuum, but are instead presented as a singular, unique, whole picture in each individual. Each person will exhibit combinations of qualities which then point our attention towards particular patterns of temperature, moisture, movement, etc. For example, a pale tongue can be modified by the quality of either thinness or wideness. A pale, *narrow* tongue is likely indicative of dryness, undernourishment (Blood deficiency) and general lack of vitality, while a pale, *wide* tongue is more likely indicative of cold and excess moisture with stagnant lymphatic circulation. Similarly, a thick, *white* coat indicates an active cold, damp condition, while a thick, *yellow* coat suggests a warm, damp condition.

Of course, there will always be those odd qualities that don't seem to fit with the rest of the picture. I suggest we take those as reminders that we humans are complex and cannot always be neatly categorized, even when using the nuanced patterns of nature. Sometimes more than one distinct pattern is present and

we cannot be sure how or if they fit together. In any case, the assessment process keeps us humble and reminds us also not to be overly certain in our conclusions. Another reality is that sometimes our powers of observation are simply not keen enough, the light is poor, the person's tongue dries out or becomes quivery from too much protruding, or perhaps our interpretive capacity is yet limited. This is what I consider "user error", vs. a comment on the value of the data to be gleaned. In the beginning, there is generally a lot of user error. In fact, after 20+ years of looking at tongues, I still run into characteristics for which more senior practitioners no doubt have special names and protocols, but about which I am ignorant. But, that's what keeps me curious, engaged and learning and I wish the same for you.

So, that's your pep talk to prevent discouragement if the pattern doesn't always reveal itself clearly. Just choose a path and walk down it for a bit, see how the other assessments fit in (pulse, face, gait, body type, temperament), along with the verbal information you gather through interview. Check all of that against your emotional impressions and body-sense, as well as your critical thinking skills. Then see if a safe and reasonably effective strategy can be developed. If so, try it out and reassess at follow up. Be sure to keep track of the other paths that could have been followed from your original data starting points. There's no shame in going back to the beginning after getting feedback that our initial protocol wasn't helpful; in fact, it's essential that we're willing and able to start over in that case. And, it is the raw data we've captured, along with first impressions, inspirations, and questions, which allows us to develop the *next* best assessment and protocol.

As you begin to see tongue assessment as the unique and valuable tool that it can be, your focus will turn to columns 3 and 4 of the charts above, where the protocol ideas are provided. Please keep in mind that the goals, actions and herbs you'll find there are meant only as a spring board to launch you in the right direction. This is just the barest of starting places. But, I have endeavored to provide some viable options for achieving successful outcomes in uncomplicated cases.

However, there are almost infinite possible nuances and variables which would alter the ideas I've suggested. I expect that folks will use their own judgment and experience to filter my recommendations, which are deliberately diverse in terms of temperature and moisture, in order to provide options for constitutionally varied individuals. My intention is to demonstrate a simple start-to-finish thought process for each tongue presentation knowing, of course, that complexity will arrive the moment we apply the system to a real person.

I feel certain I've neglected to include everything that is useful to know about tongue assessment, and some of this has been intentional in an effort to keep what can be a daunting subject more straightforward. My goal is to get you working with the tool and beginning to develop a kind of muscle memory, an easy rapport between your eyes and the small part of your mind that will hold the information presented here. I have kept it as uncomplicated as I can to help you achieve success and confidence quickly. Soon, no doubt, significant questions and awareness of the things not covered here will start to appear and your time to study further will have arrived. Until then, may this primer serve you well and may you remain curious and inspired.

References and Resources for further study

TCM Exam Study Guide for Tongue Diagnosis, Al Stone

Traditional Chinese Medicine Diagnosis, Yi Qiao and Al Stone

Pocket Atlas of Tongue Diagnosis, Claus Schnorrenberger and Beate Schnorrenberger

Atlas of Chinese Tongue Diagnosis, Barbara Kirschbaum