

Chinese Medicine Newsletter – Spring 2011

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Welcome to the spring 2011 newsletter. Past newsletters can be found under “patient resources” on my website at www.acupuncturefamilyhealth.com. Today I want to briefly touch on the topic of how to relate to ourselves in a wholesome and skillful way in the midst of illness.

Much of Chinese Medicine is based on the philosophy of Taoism. The popular saying “Go with the flow” comes directly from Taoist thought, which is the Chinese philosophy of non resistance. This perspective recognizes that optimum health and well being is facilitated by aligning ourselves with the natural flow and harmony of nature. Resisting or opposing the “flow” of life results in imbalance and suffering.

As practitioners of Chinese medicine, we are trained to assess the flow of energy in a person’s system. Acupuncture and herbs are one way of promoting the flow of energy to areas where it is either deficient or blocked and restricted, thus restoring ease, strength and resilience. T’ai chi, qigong, yoga, etc. are also ways to balance and open our energy.

What are some additional ways we can cultivate a relaxed, open, healing attitude that strengthens us in the face of adversity? The Taoist philosophy of non-resistance can be of help here. This applies to all areas of our lives. For purposes of illustration, let’s briefly explore one aspect, mainly how we relate to illness.

All of us want to feel that we are healthy and vital. How do we respond, however, when we do become ill or even face a significant health crisis?

When we become ill, it is not unusual for us to resist this state of affairs. None of us wants to have our health compromised. Yet, at times, we find that the reality is that we are ill. This could be anything from suffering from a minor cold to discovering that we have a serious disease. Healing from illness is greatly enhanced by allowing our bodies, emotions and mind to relax and unwind. When we resist the fact that we are sick, this, in itself, is an activity that can impede the movement towards balance and recovery.

Notice how our mind and emotions respond when we are ill. Do we have any internal dialogues and stories that are self denigrating, such as berating ourselves for getting sick in the first place? Do we have a belief that we should not be sick? It is one thing to allow illness to inform us of unhealthy lifestyle patterns that need realigning. It is another to condemn ourselves for being sick. Many times we can feel ashamed if we become ill. We may feel that we have failed ourselves in some way. This dysfunctional programming is adding resistance and suffering to the fact that our health is challenged at the moment. Where did we learn, for example, that we are not supposed to ever get sick?

Clearly, if we neglect or abuse ourselves in terms of lifestyle choices, we may suffer the consequences. Even if this is the case, self flagellation is a form of self abuse that does not encourage a healthy internal environment for healing.

Many take assiduous care of their health and yet we all know of people who practice this level of self care and still succumb to illness, as we ourselves well can. Obviously many factors over and above lifestyle choices, such as heredity, environment, etc., play important roles in the overall state of our health. Some of these are within our control, others are not. Sometimes we feel that being sick means

that we are defective in some way. Feeling shame, guilt, anger, despair, frustration, terror, etc., can arise in the face of significant illness. When we allow these reactions to proliferate unchecked and unexamined, we are burdening our system which much more than the sickness itself.

So what would it look like to relate in a wholesome way to ourselves in the face of illness? For starters, simply accept the fact that we are sick. Notice any story lines that engender stress, contraction, fear, anger, disappointment, etc. Simply allow them to be there. Avoid judging them or believing them. Be interested in them, like a scientist exploring a new domain. What do they reveal to us about ourselves? Do we have unrealistic expectations that being healthy means never being sick? Do we catastrophize our situation, imagining the worst and experiencing the emotional trauma that can accompany such scenarios?

What is happening in our bodies when we resist the current state of affairs? Is our breathing shallow or restrained? Where do we notice tension in our body? Are there recurrent emotions and thoughts, such as excessive worry or perhaps frustration that habitually arise in times like this, thus exacerbating our state?

If we open to the situation, as scary as it may be, we are encouraging a state of flow, not restricting nor resisting what is happening. It is perfectly okay to feel scared, angry or any other emotion. If we wholeheartedly embrace these feelings and thoughts, not trying to push them away nor letting ourselves get carried away by them, they then have room to transform and release by themselves. In this welcoming mood, insight can emerge that sheds light on how we restrict our aliveness. Thus, illness, whether relatively minor and non-threatening or quite serious, can serve as a beacon to find what is deeper and more profound in us. When we allow our experience to be as it is, without either resisting it or identifying with or exaggerating it, we open to a richer understanding of ourselves and others.

In our culture we are conditioned to “fight” disease. By encouraging not resisting I am not suggesting being outwardly passive in the face of illness. We need to be proactive in dealing with whatever we are facing. But I am suggesting not fighting with our internal process. Practice fully accepting what is happening. With this attitude we can explore our circumstance with more compassion and wisdom. We can locate that core in us that is always whole and united, whether we are sick or healthy, happy or sad, old or young. We cultivate the capacity to be with our experience in a way that allows the preciousness and sacredness of every moment to be more fully recognized and embodied. Then it matters less what state or condition we find ourselves in, for all are workable. All can be seen as doorways to that underlying reality, the essence of our being that is ever present in the midst of any circumstance.

Enjoy the emerging spring.
Bob