

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - February 2009

Welcome to the first Chinese Medicine Newsletter of 2009. Over the past few years I have covered many aspects of Chinese Medicine in terms of theory, diagnostics and treatment. I've elaborated on the cycles of the seasons and how those natural cycles are reflected in our system. Past newsletters are available on my website if you want to access them. (www.acupuncturefamilyhealth.com)

I have also discussed some life enhancement practices, such as “natural” breathing. This time I would like to touch on the practice of meditation, since it can be a valuable tool for enhancing health and well-being. Meditation is a vast topic. My purpose here is to give some basic information on a simple yet profound technique that can be easily integrated in one's daily life if so desired.

Some of you may be experienced meditators, while others may have never attempted it. I hope this will be useful to you wherever you are in terms of your familiarity with this subject.

Fundamentally, meditation is a pathway to understanding the nature of our minds. Through its application we can cultivate a more balanced, centered, calm and creative presence. Ultimately, it is about freedom, an internal freedom that is incredibly responsive, compassionate and unencumbered. It reflects the stillness of a deep lake, yet is completely alive and vital.

Meditation is a way to connect with the “context” out of which our experience arises, instead of focusing on the “content,” as many therapies so necessarily and wonderfully do. In other words, to use an analogy I've used before, the essence of our mind (or the context of our experience) is like the clear, unfathomable sky; open, vast, unlimited. The clouds that drift through are like the content; all our various thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences. They come and go, just like the weather. The sky is unaffected by the weather, it always remains itself, just like the natural state of our minds is not affected by the emotional and mental weather that is always passing through.

We have erroneously become identified with our internal content. Much of the time we believe that we are our thoughts or feelings, or at least it feels that way. Yet when they pass, we are still there. The same awareness that witnesses that entire display come and go does not itself disappear. What is that awareness that always remains? It is our natural condition, the pristine awareness where, in a

sense, nothing ever happens, yet within which our entire world unfolds. It is the context within which all arises and disappears. Meditation is the cultivation of that awareness. An awareness that is always available. We move away from that knowing by falsely identifying with all the “content” of our lives.

We spend so much of our day enmeshed in the content. As a result, we are usually either craving certain experiences or avoiding others. If we are honest with ourselves, most of our avoidance mechanism is mostly about not wanting to “feel” certain feelings. If we explore how we make our daily choices, much is centered around seeking comfortable experiences and avoiding uncomfortable ones. By developing the capacity to touch upon that timeless quality within that is unblemished by whatever experiences we have, we become more free, less reactive and more able to respond effectively.

Meditation is a tool for assisting us in not resisting our experience. In acupuncture we talk about unblocking energy so it flows freely. Resistance creates blockages which undermine our health. When we resist what is occurring, our energy tends to stagnate. When identified with our expansive, open and sky-like mind, we come to learn that there is no thought, feeling, sensation or experience that needs to be resisted. The only power these have over us is the power that we invest in them. Thus, we cultivate an attitude of welcoming and receptivity. This is not about becoming more disconnected and removed. On the contrary, we become more attuned, present and available to respond with courage, grace, compassion and balance.

In the beginning, it is useful to use a focal point to help relax and still the mind. In this case it will be the awareness of our breathing. Sit in a relaxed position, back straight but relaxed. Practice natural, abdominal breathing, letting the belly expand on the inhale and relax on the exhale. Let the breathing be delicate and unstrained. When our mind wanders and we become aware that we have been taken away by some thoughts and/or feelings, gently refocus on the breath and relax. We are not trying to hold our attention on the breath, but simply using it as a reminder to come back to a relaxed, alert awareness.

Initially you can begin this practice with the eyes closed since it helps to block out sensory distractions. The pitfall here, however, is that we can drift into feeling drowsy and unfocused, or simply get carried away by our train of thoughts due to lack of attentiveness. We are not trying to cultivate a dull, dreamy state. There is nothing wrong with that on occasion, although it is not meditation. On the contrary, with this meditation there is an alertness and brightness. We are aware of

everything that is going on. We are an alive witness to what unfolds.

For this reason, once you have been able to somewhat stabilize this relaxed, alert state with your eyes closed, it is useful to practice with the eyes open , gently resting your sight (but not intensely focusing) on an area slightly forward and down about 5-10 feet in front of you. This simultaneously prevents falling into drowsiness while at the same time enhancing the capacity to remain present, relaxed, alert and open in the midst of our daily perceptions. Don't close off to any perceptions; sounds, sights, sensations, etc. Incorporate them all in the field of your meditation. Notice their arising and fading. This is practice for living. When stress suddenly arrives at our doorstep, at that moment we most likely will not have time to stop, find a quiet place to sit down, close our eyes and meditate. Slowly, step by step, we are training our everyday awareness to become more and more familiar with the vastness and freedom within so our responses emerge more spontaneously from this field of presence.

Start by practicing for short periods of time, 5-10 minutes. If you try to meditate and feel particularly agitated or fatigued, come back to it another time when you are more relaxed and/or awake. Also, this is not about accomplishing something. It is about letting go into openness. If it feels strained, you are trying too hard. It is a balance between no effort and yet remaining alert and present.

This is a lifelong journey. Relax. Don't rush the process or be anxious for results. As we continue to practice, like a sublime nectar or subtle fragrance, we are gradually suffused with the benefits.

I am thinking about offering a day long meditation workshop to go deeper into this practice. Let me know if it is something you might be interested in.

Enjoy the stillness in the few remaining weeks of winter.

Bob Shapero