

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - Autumn 2005

Welcome to the autumn Chinese Medical Newsletter. As I discussed in previous writings, the cycle of the seasons offers opportunities to better understand ourselves in relation to the natural rhythms of life in order to experience harmony, health and well-being.

In previous newsletters I've discussed how, according to Chinese Medicine, we and nature are composed of the 5 Elements (fire, earth, metal, water and wood). These have correspondences with the seasons, emotions, colors, sounds, odors, organs and functions, etc. I've also talked about how these correspondences play an important role in assessing what a person needs in terms of acupuncture and herbal treatment. We have also seen how the cycle of the seasons reflects the flow of yin and yang.

To review the movement of the energy of the cycle of the seasons, the spring (wood) is the time of new birth, growth and expansion. This is the rising of the yang or activating energy. This reaches its peak in the height of summer, (fire) when all of life is in full expression and expansion. (The utmost yang)

As the late summer (earth) approaches, sometime around the beginning of August, it marks the very beginning of the yang retreating. This can be seen in trees as the energy begins to withdraw from the leaves in order to ripen the fruit. It is the beginning of the harvest, the time of bounty. As we move beyond the late summer to the fall, (metal) the yang is further diminished and with the yin becoming more prominent. Yin has a cooling, internalized quality, which balances the warming, activating, outward energy of the Yang.

In agrarian societies, this is when the harvest is stored to provide sustenance during the winter. For us, this season can be a time for going inside, taking stock, reflecting on the past year so we can sort out and integrate what is valuable and release that which is not necessary. Again, the element associated with the fall is metal (which also includes air) and the corresponding organs are the lungs and the colon. We receive what is essential for life (air) via the lungs and let go of the what is no longer useful, the waste, via the colon

The lungs, in Chinese Medicine, are said to receive “the pure chi from the heavens.” This alludes to the fact that we are always intimately connected to the essence of life through each and every breathe. The word for “breathing in” is “inspiration.” The breath connects us moment to moment to the source of inspiration. We all have had the experience of feeling the poignancy and aliveness of breathing the crisp, clean autumn air that seems to clear and cleanse our being.

The emotion associated with the fall and the metal element is grief. In a healthy person, grief is a natural response to loss and separation. When we become stuck in grief, however, whether it be in relation to the loss of a loved one, the perceived loss of opportunities, hopes, ideals, convictions, the sense of a lost childhood, or whatever, then we are no longer in balance. We can feel separate, isolated, bleak and without hope. It is in these moments that if we focus on the breath and just feel into the sense of beingness and aliveness, beyond the difficult feelings and thoughts that seem to overwhelm us, we can connect to a timeless awareness in which we identify with a larger reality, beyond the confinement and pain of our personal self with its stories and drama. This is not to downplay the challenge of coping with significant loss or a prolonged period of despair, but simply to remind us that it is possible to experience ourselves in an expanded way, that is broader, more encompassing and connected.

When we are in balance, we receive the gifts of each season with equanimity and grace. For example, just as the metal element is associated with the autumn in terms of the yearly cycle, it can also be understood, as with all the other elements, in relation to the cycle of a day or the cycle of a lifetime. Thus, the autumn of our lives, when we are elderly, can be a time of deep reflection and appreciation of all that has come before. It can be a time when we release striving, no longer identifying ourselves with our possessions or accomplishments and appreciate the unfolding of every moment and relax into the timeless present. “What if we are infirm or in pain?” one could object. “How can this be a time of presence, calm and acceptance?” Obviously, physical challenges, whether we’re young or old, can distort our ability to feel whole. Yet, with practice, even these can be times when we can break through to a different way of being.

This time of year it is common for me to specifically incorporate acupuncture treatments that balance the metal element . It helps strengthen and harmonize the

system with the season, particularly if someone's constitutional dynamic is centered in the lungs and colon.

The metal element also has to do with the part of us that is like a spiritual sword that only wants the truth. It cuts through the "bullshit," getting to the core, to that which is essential. Imagine yourself on a mountain top on an autumn morning. The view is expansive and unobstructed, the air purifying, the mind open like the blue sky. With this awareness ask yourself what is most important, most valuable, most relevant. What truths do you want to embody, what depths do you want to explore? Use this season as a time to reflect, to deepen. Find opportunities, even if just for short periods of time, to take a psychic break from the busyness and pressures of your life. Be like a tree that has finally released all its leaves for the year. Feel the pristine clarity of letting go, even for a moment, of all that has passed. Our "small mind" may feel this as emptiness and loss. Our "big mind" feels this as stillness, freedom and possibility.

Enjoy the season. Again, if you feel a friend might like to receive this, please e-mail me or have them do so.

Take care,
Bob