

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - Dec, 2006

Welcome! As I've mentioned before, if you would like friends or family members to receive this, please feel free to forward it or have them or send me their e-mail address so I can add them to the list of recipients.

In the last few newsletters I've discussed the roles of Qi (chee) and Blood in Chinese Medicine as well as an over view of the diagnostic process. In thinking about this issue, I want to speak about the role of proper breathing in maintaining health and well being. It is a central part of Chinese Medicine as well as many other forms of healthcare.

I encourage all of you to practice what I will describe as "natural breathing." For those of you already doing so, I know you are reaping the benefits of improved health.

According to Chinese Medicine, our qi is nourished by the food we eat, the air we breathe and the impressions we take in. We receive the "pure qi from the heavens" with every breath. Breathing deeply and fully in a relaxed way infuses our system with abundant energy.

What I am referring to as "natural breathing" is also called abdominal breathing, or diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is a domed shaped muscle that attaches to the bottom of the rib cage. When we inhale it contracts down and out, drawing air into our lungs via the negative pressure.. When we exhale, the diaphragm returns to its original position, pushing the air out. Breathing "naturally" means the diaphragm is fully engaged. This expansive movement of the diaphragm massages our internal organs

If you watch a baby breathing while lying on its back, what moves? Only his or her abdomen. Their little bellies are rhythmically and unrestrictedly moving up and down. We all began breathing that way. However, as we grow older, due to a variety of factors including stress as well as lack of proper instruction, we start to restrict our breathing to the upper part of our lungs (chest breathing), essentially cutting ourselves off from our "gut" and from one of our major sources of energy. Interestingly, studies show that the cells that have the most capacity to absorb oxygen are in the lower lobes of the lungs. Also the acid/base metabolism of the blood is regulated through the breath by the oxygen/carbon dioxide exchange.

Abdominal or natural breathing is emphasized in the martial arts and dance, since this establishes a low center of gravity which is essential for balance and being grounded. Singers learn to breathe from the diaphragm to fully access the power of their voice. Meditation can more readily be accomplished when we are breathing in this way.

The following is a simple method for practicing natural breathing:

1. Sit comfortably in a chair so your back is fairly straight and relaxed. You want to be

sitting upright but not in a tense way.

2. Close your eyes and simply notice what moves when you breathe (your shoulders, chest,

belly, etc.) This reveals your current breathing habits.

3. Now let your belly be relaxed and rounded (in the West we tend to suck in our stomachs)

4. Breathe through your nose as you inhale, allowing the lungs to fill from the bottom up. This means that the abdomen fills first, gently expanding as if you were pouring water into the lungs. As you exhale also through your nose allow the belly to relax back in. When breathing like this in a relaxed way, the upper part of the lungs move only slightly if at all.

5. If you are having some difficulty shifting from upper chest breathing to the abdomen, try

putting your hand on your chest and applying some pressure as you inhale as a reminder

that the upper part of the lungs hardly need to move on the inhalation.

6. Feel as if the “breath is breathing you.” It happens without effort.

7. Once you feel you are able to do this successfully, practice it in different positions, i.e. lying down, standing, walking, etc. It is very helpful in relaxing one for sleep. The goal is to develop this pattern so it becomes your normal way of breathing.

8. To deepen the experience, we can gradually extend the length of our breath when sitting quietly. This moves it into the realm of deep relaxation and meditation.

9. To do this, first count how long it takes for your inhalation and exhalation. Most people take 18-22 breaths per minute which is roughly 3 seconds per complete breath.

Whatever your breath rate is, let's say 2 seconds for the inhale and 2 seconds for the exhale, practice slowing it down. For several days count to 3 for each inhale and 3 for each exhale. When you can do this comfortably, extend it to 4 seconds. When this becomes comfortable, then extend it to 5 seconds. This would mean taking one complete breath every 10 seconds, or 6 breaths per minute. I guarantee that if you can in a relaxed way breathe for 10 minutes at the rate of 6 breaths per minute, you will be in an altered state of calm and relaxation. With extended practice it is even possible to take 3 breaths per minute in a completely comfortable way.

Natural breathing is a wonderful tool for stress reduction. When stressed, many times our breathing is shallow or hurried or we are panting like a dog. At that moment if we can consciously practice natural breathing, it can alter our experience and change our emotional state. Breathing naturally is foundational for optimum health, emotional balance and mental acuity and calm

Happy Holidays and happy practicing.

Bob