

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - January, 2006

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2006. At the end of this writing I am attaching the Winter 2005 newsletter for those of you who did not receive it last time. For those who have read it previously, hopefully it will be a welcome reminder of some of the ways to enhance the qualities in ourselves that resonate with the winter season.

Over the course of the next several newsletters, instead of writing about the seasons as I did the previous year, I want to briefly talk about some of the basic concepts that are applied in the diagnosis and treatment process in Chinese Medicine. These include what are called the vital substances: qi (or chi), blood, fluids, and essence as well as concepts such as yin/yang and shen (spirit).

Let's start with qi (pronounced chee). Qi is energy behind all the processes that happen in our system. It flows through the meridians and energizes our entire being. It is the energy that is contacted when acupuncture points are stimulated. It has several main functions, two of which are transportation/movement and transformation. Qi fuels transformation on all levels of our being. When we eat, it is the qi in our digestive system that begins to transform food into usable energy. Our emotions and mental processes are dependent on the movement of qi as well. It supplies the energy for our minds to transform from one thought to the next. Any activity requires qi, whether it be walking, breathing, speaking, thinking, dreaming, etc.

When our qi is "deficient," there may not be enough energy to perform some of the functions mentioned above. For example we may feel lethargic. This could possibly be due to our digestive qi being too weak to efficiently extract the nutrients from our food. As qi also supports our immune system, if it is weak we may be more susceptible to getting sick. Qi also allows us to be "interested" in life and to think creatively about possibilities. When it is deficient we may lack the mental and emotional energy to engage the world. We could feel unmotivated, bored and uninspired. Qi transforms thoughts and emotions so they so they don't linger and become worry and obsession. Just as water becomes stagnant and unusable when it does not move, untransformed mental and emotional baggage festers and pollutes our internal environment. Another example from nature is the need for a strong wind to move a stalled weather system. Accordingly, there needs to be strong qi to keep our internal processes moving and transforming. Besides being deficient, qi can also become blocked or stagnant. When our qi does

get “stuck” there can be symptoms on a physical, emotional, mental or spiritual level. Physically, this can mean pain, as pain syndromes in Chinese Medicine are many times the result of energy not moving. These can be anything from migratory pains, abdominal distention, cramping with the menstrual cycle, certain types of headaches, etc. Emotionally, qi that is stuck can manifest as irritability, frustration, certain types of depression, resentment and anger. Mentally and spiritually we can feel that life is a series of obstacles. Instead of moving gracefully through challenges, we can feel that people and situations are “getting in our way.” We find ourselves reactive and in opposition to whatever is happening. Instead of accepting reality as it shows up, we are butting our heads against it. This shows up in our pulse as a “tense” quality which suggests internal constraint and tension. Acupuncture attempts to unblock this stagnation so obstacles graciously remove themselves.

This is just a small introduction to qi energy. We’ll expand on this in future newsletters. I want to leave you with a few simple ways we can keep our qi strong and flowing freely. The quality of our qi begins with the food we eat. We all more or less know the proper foods to eat. However, in Chinese Medicine, it is just as important “how” we eat as it is “what” we eat. This is almost completely lost in Western dietary recommendations. Practice slowing down when eating, if you are not already. Place your spoon or fork down between bites. This helps counter the “shoveling” method of eating that we are so familiar with. Don’t eat while emotionally upset. Wait until it passes. Refrain from stressful conversations or ruminating about problems during meals. Avoid eating while standing or while being on the run. Sit down, if only for a few minutes, and concentrate on the act of eating. All these allow our system to more effectively assimilate the nourishment, providing a foundation for healthy qi.

The quality of our breathing is crucial for healthy qi. Many of us don’t utilize the lower portion of our lungs. If you’re not familiar with abdominal breathing, there are many books and resources to learn it. In all the martial arts, our vital energy center is recognized as being in the abdomen. This is where our power and strength come from. This is our “Sea of Chi.” Our bellies need to be relaxed so the lungs can fill from the bottom up. Practice this until it becomes second nature. It may take some time but it’s worth it. Then each breath will balance and strengthen our energy as well as provide a deep relaxation for our entire being.

I look forward to continuing this conversation.

Take care,

Bob