

Chinese Medicine Newsletter Spring 2006

Welcome! As with the winter newsletter, I'm including a copy of last years spring newsletter for those who did not receive it and as a refresher for those of you who did.

In the winter newsletter I discussed the concept of "qi" energy and some of the ways it functions in our system This time I want to talk about the concept of "blood" in Chinese Medicine, which differs somewhat from the standard western medical definition. Blood and qi are two of what's called "basic substances" in Chinese Medicine. Women tend to have more issues related to blood than men do because of the role menstruation plays in their physiology.

The function of blood is to nourish and moisten. It provides nourishment to our organs, muscles, ligaments, skin, hair, etc. Blood is more of a substance, in comparison to qi which is more energy. Thus blood is more yin, qi is more yang. Qi energy activates and transforms, blood nourishes and moistens. There are two main ways that blood can be imbalanced in our system. It can be deficient or stagnant. If it is deficient, our muscles can be tight and tense, lacking the proper lubrication. Our skin, hair and nails can be dry and brittle without the proper amount of blood available. Our complexion may be sallow, we could feel tired and weak. Feeling light headed can be a complaint from not enough blood getting to the head. Menstruation can be scanty or there could be amenorrhea (no period). Fertility can suffer if blood is deficient.

On an emotional level, blood allows one to feel substantial and comfortable in the world. Blood provides the internal "cushion" so we can absorb the blows of life. When there is sufficient blood, we feel relaxed and comfortable in our bodies and psyches, able to more easily handle daily stressors. We can more easily flow with the daily cycles of life. When this internal "cushion" is lacking, a person can feel emotionally brittle and overly challenged to deal with the discomfort that can occur in his or her everyday experience. Instead of stimulus being received with ease and grace, it can trigger tension and resistance. Contact with others, instead of being easy and self assured, can be intimidating.

Blood is connected with self esteem in Chinese Medicine. We can relax and feel comfortable with who we are when we feel substantial inside. Self worth is then experienced as automatic. It is a quality of being. In our culture we have been conditioned to believe that we have to achieve or gain something to establish our self worth. Instead of experiencing our innate wholeness and complete equality

with every human being, we've conditioned ourselves to look for our quality of being as an outcome of our "doing." What we have accomplished or accumulated becomes the measure our worth.

When someone suffers from "blood deficiency" they may not feel entitled to claim their "space" in the world. They may feel they do not deserve to. When this is corrected via treatment and life style changes, they are more empowered to stand up for themselves, to make necessary changes. This could be asking for a raise at work they have long deserved but have been too timid to request. It might be to finally leave an abusive relationship to which they have submitted themselves for years. It may be to have the self assurance to trust their instincts and abilities, when for too long they have disowned their talents.

Again, the other way blood can be imbalanced is when it becomes stagnant. A major cause of pain in Chinese Medicine is blood or qi getting stuck. When qi, which is energy, gets stuck, there can be pain and distension, but it moves around and is not so localized. It is more energetic and less physical. When blood, which is more substance, becomes stagnant, however, it is more physical. There can be sharp, stabbing, localized pain. The substance of our system congeals, so there can be tumors, growths or even certain types of cancer. The treatment in this case is to move the stagnation with acupuncture and possibly herbs. The tendency for this stuckness to happen in one's system shows up before there are actual physical manifestations. Clearly, it is easier to correct this preventively with treatment at this stage. Also, when someone has a growth or tumor removed surgically, such as fibroids, for example, the underlying energetic dynamic that led to this occurrence may still be operating. That is why it is important to check for and correct this imbalance so the condition does not re-occur.

On an emotional/mental level, a "stagnant blood syndrome" in someone can manifest as he or she feeling disconnected and dissociated from certain painful internal experiences. This sometimes can be the result of abuse and trauma, where something so deep in them got injured that they psychically cut off from it and have isolated that place in themselves, just like a physical tumor is isolated from the integrity of the rest of the body. When treating someone on this level, as they begin to experience the blood on the emotional level becoming unstuck and moving, they begin to feel more relaxed and comfortable in themselves. Then they can begin to "integrate" the difficult experiences, no longer needing to sever them from the rest of their psyche.

On a spiritual level, in Chinese Medicine, blood is seen as the embodiment of the

spirit in the material form (our body). It is said that when blood flows through the lungs and heart, where it is oxygenated, where it turns from blue to red, it is imprinted with the heavenly spirit received via the breath. At this exact moment it is said that our unique destiny is stamped and sealed in our being, i.e., the breath enlivening the blood. Maybe that is why in a variety of cultures blood is often central to sacred rituals, not only because it is essential to life, but because it is perceived as the embodiment of our essential connection to that which is holy. Some simple and practical reminders to nourish blood in one's system is to eat well, including blood nourishing foods such as dark green vegetables. In principle I am not at all opposed to vegetarianism, and for certain people it probably is the healthiest diet they could eat. However, there have been several times in my practice that I've had to advise vegetarians, women, in particular, who have "blood deficiency," to add some animal protein to their diet. If they are not amenable to this, there are herbs as well as acupuncture that can address the issue, although the proposed change in diet facilitates that happening more thoroughly.

Getting enough sleep supports blood production. In terms of preventing stagnant blood, "going with the flow" keeps our energy and blood moving. Resentment, anger and frustration over a long time can constrict the flow of energy and blood in our system. Suppressing uncomfortable experiences creates stagnation. Staying open to pain, on every level, without suppressing it and without exaggerating it helps keep qi and blood flowing.

And finally, we all need to allow ourselves to relax into the wisdom that knows that not only do we not need to do anything to enhance self esteem, but that, on the deepest level we cannot improve what is already whole and fulfilled. To live this awareness only requires letting go of the beliefs that there is something lacking in us. When we can accept everything that we are, in all the ways that we show up in life, then a calm descends that infuses us with acceptance and appreciation of our life journey.

Enjoy this beautiful time of year!
Bob Shapero