

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - Summer 2006

Welcome to the summer newsletter. Again, if you know someone who you feel would enjoy receiving this, please have them e-mail me to be added to the list.

In the past I've discussed the relationship of the seasons of the year to aspects of our health and well-being. I have also talked about the concepts of qi and blood in Chinese Medicine. There is more to cover along these lines which I will do in upcoming newsletters.

This time I thought it would be interesting and informative to briefly discuss the diagnostic process. In other words, when one initially visits a practitioner of Chinese Medicine, how is the diagnosis made (which obviously is essential for successful treatment) and what are the signs and signals that reveal what our system needs in order to achieve optimum balance.

As we have seen previously, Chinese Medicine is based on the paradigm that vital energy, known as "qi" (pronounced chee) flows throughout our entire being and nourishes our organ systems as well as our emotional and mental functions. Within each of us are major pathways called "meridians" through which this energy flows. Each meridian governs a particular organ and/or certain systemic functions. We experience health and well-being when our qi flows freely and smoothly in proper quantity and quality throughout our system. When the movement and distribution of this energy is impaired, imbalance results which may lead to illness. When we are healthy and resilient, slight imbalances many times correct themselves. When someone is unable to regain this balance, treatment is utilized to assist the natural pattern of health within the person to restore itself.

To determine what aspect of a person needs assistance, the practitioner needs to pay attention to a variety of factors. There are several diagnostic pillars in Chinese Medicine. Whenever a vital function or organ is impaired or imbalanced, our system gives off immediate signs which are perceptible to the skilled practitioner. Each organ and function is associated with a particular color which, when there is imbalance, shows up on the face, with certain sounds reflected in our voice, with odors emitted from the body, with specific emotions and mental preoccupations, with certain taste and food preferences, with a season of the year and a time of day, etc.

For example, if the spleen energy is imbalanced there may be a yellow tinge to the

facial color, a singing quality to the voice, a craving for sweets, possible digestive problems, maybe a tendency to worry or to lose focus easily, as well as possibly a preoccupation with meeting the needs of others to the neglect of one's own.

If the liver energy is the one in need, a greenish color may appear on the face, a rancid odor may be detected, there could be a tendency towards anger and frustration or possibly its opposite, the inability to experience the potency of anger when it is appropriate in standing up for oneself. Menstrual irregularity, headaches, hypertension, irritability, etc. all could stem from the liver. (I'm being simplistic here to make a point. These symptoms can also arise from imbalances in other organs and functions although their quality and manifestation would be different).

If the kidney energy is out of balance there could be excess fear, a bluish color on the face, a groaning sound to the voice, a desire for salty foods, low back pain, tendency to be cold if kidney yang is deficient and too warm if kidney yin is deficient.

Another central diagnostic tool is the taking of the Chinese pulses. In Western medicine, when a doctor feels your pulse he or she is basically measuring its rate and possible its strength. In Chinese Medicine there are at least six pulses on each wrist and each one corresponds to a certain meridian as well as to specific internal functions. There is a pulse related to the liver, the kidneys, the spleen, the heart, the small intestines, the stomach, the lungs, etc. There are many different qualities to discern on each pulse (classically there are 28). Some of these qualities feel slippery, weak, tense, deep, thin, feeble, pounding, superficial, irregular, rapid and slow to name a few. Each reveals something about the state of that particular function and what it needs to do its job optimally.

Another very useful tool is inspecting the tongue. Here also the tongue reveals information on various organs and functions in our body. Both the coating as well as the body of the tongue provide important signs as to our state of health. The coating tells more about the short term conditions of our system. For example, if we are catching a cold, have a temporary digestive upset or are suffering from an allergy attack, the tongue coating can change very quickly to mirror these situations.

The body of the tongue tells more about longer term conditions: such things as hot/cold, wet/dry, deficient/excess, external/internal. To illustrate this, if someone's tongue is red and dry, this indicates that there is too much heat in their

system which is evaporating the fluids. If their tongue is wet, pale and swollen this indicates that there is not sufficient metabolism or heat to warm the system and process the fluids. The presence of cracks, spots, various colors, the overall size and shape all play a part in tongue diagnosis.

The beauty of Chinese Medicine is that it treats the person, not just the symptoms. The symptoms and signs (tongue, pulse, color, sound, odor, emotion, etc) all point to certain patterns of disharmony that need to be addressed in treatment.

This view emphasizes that the largest possible perspective is what allows us to deeply understand illness in relation to the whole person.

The healing process is one of self responsibility, or responding to oneself. As we begin to understand how healing occurs, we take on a new relationship to our symptoms and illnesses. We start to see how they give us important messages as to where we are most vulnerable and provide in themselves the keys to moving beyond them in achieving well-being. We become more attuned to our needs and rhythms. We more clearly understand the internal and external factors (diet, exercise, environmental stress, attitudes, the quality of our relationships, fears, worries, etc) which contribute to our state of health. The symptoms of disease we experience are the way our system calls out to us to take note, to pay attention. In a way, we are all an open book if we can read the signals. Our imbalances are not our enemies. They are our guideposts. When embraced and listened to, they reveal the pathway to greater health and harmony.

So the next time you feel out of balance, whether it be a physical pain or symptom, an emotional disturbance, a mental preoccupation, a self critical judgement, a sense of spiritual doubt or emptiness, or whatever, remind yourself to invite these experiences into your full awareness, like inviting a guest into your living room to have a chat. Sit with them, be with them without judgment. Let your deeper knowing and intuition inform you as to what they are asking you to pay attention to. This is a practice that takes time to reveal its benefits and it is worth it. The process of listening to ourselves on every level, not avoiding or pushing away anything, gradually helps us to respond with insight and compassion to our deepest needs and to achieve our birthright of health.

Have a wonderful rest of the summer.

Bob

