

Iffley Acupuncture Clinic



Website Content

Achieving Wellbeing 1

Food for thought

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Interest in human nutrition is growing rapidly; books and publications on diet and nutrition seem to be growing exponentially and nutritional supplements are increasingly abundant upon the chemist and supermarket shelves. Current affairs and chat shows entertain newfound gurus of nutrition and a seeming endless array of weight reduction and health diets appear in popular TV shows and magazines.

Whilst some of the claims have scientific basis and may offer new insight into the biochemical interactions of food on human health, few appear to be truly founded on long-term observation and evaluation. The subsequent guidance is not rooted in a reliable and consistent source and as such, it cannot always be depended on. Health education that has been deemed factual and promoted widely, frequently becomes obsolete in the light of new findings. The promotion of newfound information is subsequently impressed upon the population without redress or reflection upon the methods that give rise to the inconsistencies. Conversely, valuable knowledge is often ignored because it has not been deemed scientific and our health service practitioners frequently disregard information that is based on empirical, longitudinal and epidemiological evidence.

This is not to say that we should ignore current research nor incorporate newfound knowledge into our diet, but rather, consider these with a degree of reservation and perhaps give greater credence to knowledge that proves valuable over a longer time span. Chinese Dietary Therapy as an integral branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine TCM, has over two millennia of rich experience from which to draw its findings. It is empirical in nature and based upon the observations and experiences of generations of TCM practitioners and their patients.

Underpinning the practice of TCM Dietary Therapy is recognition that appropriate absorption and utilisation of foods, their nutrients and energy, is dependent upon the healthy functioning of the digestive system. A healthy digestive system in turn, is not

only the product of the foods that we eat, but of equal importance; the preparation, timing and manner in which we consume them.

To make more sense of this, we need to explore some of the principles that underpin Chinese medicine. Without a little discussion it might prove difficult for the reader to make sense of recommendations; a little like receiving advice without any rationale or reason for it. These principles might seem relatively simple at first and yet they form the basis for a profound understanding of human health and nature. More importantly perhaps, they provide a route for acquiring internal harmony and an equally harmonious relationship with the food that we eat and, the external world.

Some essential background

TCM is based on the theory of Yin and Yang, a philosophy that maintains that the natural world is composed of complementary opposites. In humans, we might regard structure, blood and body fluids, (and their constituents), as being “Yin”. Whilst function, transformation, heat and energy, are viewed as Yang qualities. Yin therefore can be seen to pertain to tangible substances, whilst Yang, to the activities that take place within and because of them. Therefore, Yin and Yang are seen to complement and depend on each other; Yin can provide the physical basis for activity, whilst Yang animates and maintains healthy Yin. Conversely, an excess or deficiency of one will exert an adverse influence on the other, giving rise to imbalance and ill health.

The Organs according to Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Before we proceed further, it should be made clear that confusion can arise when we attempt to accept the literal translation of the terms used in Chinese medicine; these literal equivalents frequently give rise to misunderstanding. For example, the use of the word ‘organ/s’ has been used as a translation of the Chinese term, “Zang Fu”. Yet when we look at the functions of these so-called Zang-Fu, we find that there are few direct functional equivalents to the organs that we learn about in biological sciences. This is because the foundations of TCM are fundamentally different from a modern, biological model and the product then, of their historical context. The terminology was

developed long before the advent of modern biological sciences and when assigning specific biological/biochemical function to a given organ was not actually possible. I ask therefore that whilst you read the information below, you try not to put too great a literal interpretation of the listed organs. They will in turn be allocated a capital letter to differentiate them from their western equivalents.

The Spleen.

In Chinese medicine, digestive processes are largely considered to be the function of the Spleen (Pi) and reference therefore might frequently refer to this Zang. In TCM the Spleen's primary function is to assist the Stomach in the 'transportation and transformation' (T&T) of food and fluid. It is said to be responsible for converting food into usable substances, namely Qi (energy) and Xue (blood). If our diet, eating habits and lifestyle are inappropriate, then the process of transportation and transformation is undermined and ill health may ensue.

In addition so called, 'External Pathogenic Factors' can adversely affect the same processes. Either prolonged or short-term exposure to one or more of these influences, can result in the undermining of otherwise healthy biological processes or in fact, penetrate the body and in turn give rise to symptoms that might equally be associated with the aforementioned transportation and transformation.

The causes of disease.

I include here some discussion about aetiology (the causes of disease) according to Chinese medicine because later we will be trying show how the adverse influence of environmental conditions can to some extent be moderated by the choice of food that we consume.

The rich history of TCM has secured for its practitioners a body of knowledge that helps them assess the underlying causes or Aetiology of disease. One method is to simply assign according to three main categories, namely, 'internal', 'external' and finally, so-called 'miscellaneous' causes of disease. The first category is associated

with the influence of the mind and emotion in generating internal imbalance and disharmony. (Please see PDF documents relating to these conditions on the Achieving wellbeing web page). In the second category, (also called 'external pathogenic factors'), we are able to evaluate the influence of the external environment on our constitution. In this category the Chinese have found that there is a clear correlation between the adverse influence of environmental factors such as wind, cold, damp, dryness and heat, on internal equilibrium.

Finally, 'miscellaneous causes' are those associated with hereditary and acquired constitution, workload and conditions, excessive exercise or lack of it, excessive or inappropriate sexual activity, **inappropriate diet and eating habits**, trauma, parasitic infection, wrong treatment which includes medicines, and finally, recreational drugs.

The reader then, is asked not to try and make direct comparisons, but rather to entertain or accept a different model. It might be better to think of the Zang Fu more as 'processes', rather than organs that are normally defined by anatomical and physiological activity. External Pathogenic Factors might be viewed as adverse influences that can undermine the functioning of the Zang Fu and their respective channels, and also the integrity of the body and its' parts.

A healthy digestive system is a fundamental requirement for healthy absorption.

Whilst a diet that balanced with vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats and carbohydrates is more likely to achieve health than a one that is deficient, it will not necessarily do so if the conditions into which they are ingested are already malfunctioning. Similarly the means and conditions in which they are ingested will also determine the outcome.

Transforming Health by creating the right conditions....

Why

The Chinese place far greater emphasis on the timing and manner in which we consume our food, than do modern western nutritionists or dieticians. They recognise

that the healthy functioning of the organs and their capacity to Transform and Transport, is dependent upon the provision of appropriate conditions to potentiate this function. Even modern science has shown that appetite and digestion are habitual in nature; the body learning to expect an input from the food we eat, normally at regular intervals. An increase in saliva in the mouth can be detected and blood flow to the stomach occurs in preparation for the digestive processes. However modern lifestyle and pressure exerted on us from the media and the workplace, means that the average person is unlikely to consume their food at regular and more appropriate times. Rather, people eat their food when time becomes available, and frequently in the midst of other and often stressful activities (e.g. working lunches and whilst travelling etc). In addition, consumption takes place in environments that are not conducive to healthy digestion. The food industry seems content to portray through its advertising, that it is a normal and healthy to eat our food away from the relative peace and calm of the dining or kitchen table. The promotion of pre-prepared and take-away meals, fast and junk food, means that many people have also lost touch with the joy of food preparation. They no longer benefit from encountering the experience of seeing, tasting and smelling the ingredients that they might use, and which might otherwise serve to stimulate appetite and the digestive process.

Thus food is often eaten in a way that disrupts healthy digestion and loss of regularity serves to undermine good and habitual digestive function. This means that food is frequently consumed when an individual is neither hungry nor in need, and or, when the digestive system is ill prepared. Conversely, appetite and digestive process may be disrupted by a failure to eat when the body and digestive system so requires. This in turn means that our digestive system begin to operate in inappropriate ways; either becoming hyperactive or conversely under active. Both conditions however, serve not only undermine healthy digestive processes in its capacity to absorb and utilise the nutrients we require, but in turn, the health of the whole person.

When

Firstly we need make time for eating. This means planning and organising our day so that we have adequate time for preparation and consumption. Time also to eat in

relaxed and comfortable way and with ample provision for some quiet digestion; not withdrawing an important blood supply away from the stomach into other physical activity.

Traditional Chinese Medicine recommends that we leave some space between rising in the morning and eating breakfast; time enough for a sleeping body to begin to function appropriately and be prepared for food intake. In ideal circumstances some form of exercise might prove more beneficial but if this is not possible, then carrying out one's normal ablutions and preparations for the day before eating will suffice. The danger here of course is that we leave breakfast until we are running late, and then it is either missed or eaten on the go. Neither of which, serves to enhance our wellbeing. We need therefore to make time if we are to achieve success.

Finally, eating late at night when our Spleen is tired will result not only in its further depletion but also weight gain and ill health. The reason why we feel tired at the end of a busy day is because function is diminishing and it is time for subsequent quiescence and an opportunity to replenish the reserves that are now deficient. Whilst eating goes some way in achieving this, the process of digestion itself requires energy expenditure. Just as placing too much wood (especially wet wood) onto the embers of a dying fire, results in the extinction of a flame, food input into the fading spleen will serve to quench it's fire and function, rather than fuel it.

Balancing ancient wisdom with a modern lifestyle.

In writing this I am aware that many readers will be saying to themselves, “there's no way that I can put this sort of schedule into my lifestyle, I'm just too busy”, or something similar along these lines. The recommendation then is to do as much as you can to achieve the best conditions for yourself. This may mean if needs must, that there actually has to be some adjustment to lifestyle. Or it may be valuable to make one significant change, for example, not eating late at night or finding a quiet space to eat lunch. If work demands that you attend working lunches, it might actually be appropriate to eat lightly and only eat foods that you know are relatively easy to digest. The important thing to remember, is that whilst very few of us will be able to create ideal conditions, most of us are capable of initiating some positive change.

How to eat

Cool, calm and collected.

Just as physical and mental activity whilst eating can adversely influence digestive processes, so too do excesses or preponderances of emotion at this time. Not only do emotional excesses and upsets adversely influence appetite and digestion itself, they also undermine the experience of eating and an appreciation of colour, flavour and texture. All of which can serve to bring a sense of joy to eating and an increase an awareness of how these qualities influence our health and wellbeing.

Emotional excesses and instability in ones everyday life can also adversely influence our digestive systems. Thus a preponderance of a given emotion outside of normal eating time will serve to undermine healthy functioning of the Zang Fu by overbearing and subsequently undermining healthy functioning.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, emotional strain arising from pensiveness and worry can undermine the 'Transformation of Transportation' function of the Spleen. If a person has a tendency to think too much and is unable release their mind from overactive thinking, then a subsequent depletion of Spleen Qi will ensue. Similarly, excessive use of the mind through study and academic learning can also weaken Spleen function.

Unnecessary and excessive worry also exerts a negative influence. All of these mental-emotional components serve to cause a stagnation of qi that in turn will undermine Spleen function. The impact of emotion on the Spleen is greatly increased if in addition, a person's diet is irregular or inappropriate.

How much?

The amount of food that we eat will also have impact on digestive and general health. It is also a difficult issue to address in a culture where availability is by and large abundant, and where an excessive intake of inappropriate food is causing a significant increase in obesity and in turn the prevalence of conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. In contrast the expectations of a society that is

preoccupied by image has in turn created subgroups in the population who subject themselves to dieting regimes that have given rise to deficiencies and ill-health.

This situation is utter madness and one, which with some degree of intelligence and clear intention, can quite easily be addressed. If we subject ourselves to erratic eating patterns, either consume excessively or insufficiently, then we will suffer the consequences. Conversely, if we eat regularly and in the right amounts and according to our constitutions, then we will enjoy good health and avoid pit falls of wrong eating. The amount of food we eat therefore, should depend on what we are eating and when we are eating it.

The Chinese have a general 'rule of thumb'; 'breakfast like a prince, lunch like a king and supper like a pauper'. The implication of this firstly, is that is important to eat regularly and secondly, to eat different amounts at different times. Eating like "a prince" suggests that a moderate intake is appropriate at breakfast. To 'lunch like a king' suggests that our food intake at lunchtime should be more abundant. To "Supper like a pauper" implies that our intake in the evening should be comparatively small.

I believe that this last condition is probably the most difficult to implement in a modern society, where people are active throughout the day and struggle to find quality time in which to prepare and eat a healthy and substantial lunch. Let alone find the ideal conditions in which to eat. It has also been suggested by some in the profession, that there should be gap of four hours between the last evening meal and retiring to bed. I would also suggest that the majority of people are unlikely to achieve this condition because of the aforementioned reasons. It would however seem sensible to try and eat earlier in the evening and to try and leave a couple of hours between consumption and sleep. Whilst it is important to give time for the digestive process to occur in an unhindered and focussed manner, it can also be valuable to take some form of gentle activity or exercise thereafter. This will help in burning up some of those excess calories and support the movement of food through the alimentary canal.

Finally, Sat Chen Hon a contemporary Chinese doctor practicing in the United States reported that his teacher in China was once asked by a patient, “Doctor, what is the perfect diet?” The doctor responded by saying, “NOT VERY MUCH”. Obviously this statement is not applicable to everyone, but when taking into consideration the relative excesses of modern society, it is probably relevant for the majority.

Summary

Much of the information discussed in this essay is really common sense. Sadly society seems to be moving at such a pace that people find themselves running around like ‘headless chickens’. We are caught up in an ever-increasing pace of life that has lost touch with the basic principles of living. We have become subject to ‘greed’ and no longer recognise what we actually ‘need’. We are so busy trying to secure the next thing that we are unable to recognise that we have not given ourselves time to enjoy what is in front of us. Modern eating patterns reflect this phenomenon. To elicit change we must slow down and take time to consider how we can live more harmoniously within our world; time to reflect on how our habits affect our wellbeing. Some are detrimental and others enhance and secure health and greater happiness. It is not sufficient to ensure that we ingest the right amount of proteins, carbohydrates, fats and vitamins. It is however essential that we consume them in a sensible, considered and harmonious manner.