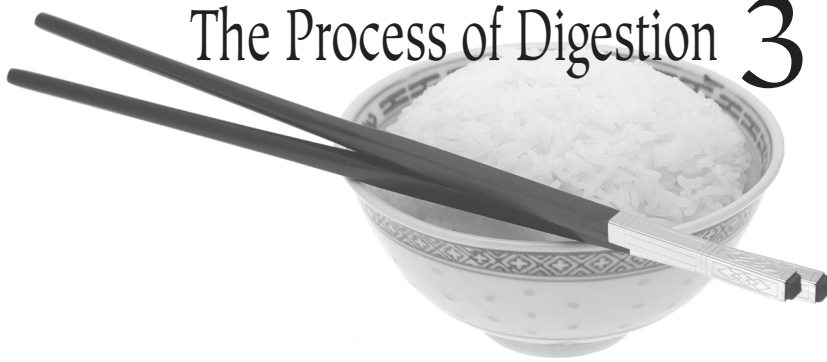


## The Process of Digestion 3



In Chinese, the digestive system is called the *xiao hua xi tong*. The words *xi tong* (系统) simply mean system, but the words *xiao* (消) and *hua* (化) are more pregnant with meaning. *Xiao* means to disperse and *hua* means to transform. In Chinese medicine, digestion equals the dispersion of pure substances to be retained and impure substances to be excreted after these have undergone transformation. Therefore, the digestive tract is called the *xiao hua dao* (消化道) or pathway of dispersion and transformation. In Chinese medicine, we mostly describe the process of digestion in terms of the functions of the Chinese spleen and stomach. Once one understands the functions of the spleen (*pi*, 脾) and stomach (*wei*, 胃) according to Chinese medical theory, Chinese dietary theory becomes very clear and logical.

### Three Burners (*san jiao*, 三焦)

The spleen and stomach are a yin-yang pair. The stomach is one of the six bowels (*liu fu*, 六腑) and is relatively yang. The spleen is one of the five viscera (*wu zang*, 五脏) and is relatively yin. The stomach's function is to receive food and liquids and to “decompose and cook” these. In Chinese medicine, the stomach is likened to a pot on a stove. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all physiological transformations in Chinese medicine

are warm transformations. The trunk of the body is seen as three alchemical retorts called *jiao* (焦) or burners. There is an upper burner containing the heart and lungs, a middle burner containing the spleen and stomach, and a lower burner containing the kidneys, intestines, liver, and reproductive organs.

## The Stomach as a Pot

The stomach is the pot of the middle burner and the spleen is both the fire under this pot and the distillation mechanism to which this pot is attached. Just as a mash rots and ripens in a pot, so foods and liquids decompose and are cooked within the stomach.<sup>1</sup> In Chinese medical terms, this means that, as foods and liquids decompose and are

*The stomach is the pot of the middle burner and the spleen is both the fire under this pot and the distillation mechanism to which this pot is attached.*

cooked, the pure or clear (*qing*, 清) and impure or turbid (*zhuo*, 浊) parts of these foods and liquids are separated. It is then the spleen's function to distill or drive upward the purest parts of foods and liquids, the so-called finest essence of liquids and foods (*qing wei zhi yin shi*, 精微之饮食), sending the pure part of foods up to the lungs and the pure part of liquids up to the heart. The pure part of foods, called the *five flavors* (*wu wei*, 五味) becomes the basis for the creation of qi within the lungs. The pure part of

liquids becomes the basis for the creation of blood within the heart. The sending up of the pure part of the foods and liquids by the spleen is called the *upbearing of the clear* (*sheng qing*, 升清) and is the Chinese medical spleen's main function.<sup>2</sup>

The stomach then sends down the impure or turbid part of foods to be further transformed by the large intestine, and the impure parts of liquids to be further transformed by the small intestine. In Chinese medicine, the large intestine's function is to reabsorb the pure part of the impure foods or solids. This becomes the postnatal or latter heaven fuel for kidney yang or the life-gate fire. The small intestine's function is to reabsorb the pure part of the impure parts of liquids. This is transformed into the body's thick liquids (*ye*, 液), such as cerebrospinal and intra-articular fluids, and nourishes postnatal kidney yin. The large

<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, the word for decompose is *fu* (腐) which literally means to rot or putrify. The word *shu* (熟) means to cook and also to ripen. Therefore, some English language texts on Chinese medicine talk about the stomach's "rottening and ripening." However, such a translation obscures the simile of the stomach being likened to a fermentation tun or vat.

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese medical concept of the organs is quite different in most cases from the biomedical concept of the same English name. Therefore, the Chinese medical spleen should not be seen as identical to the spleen we all learned about in high school biology. For a more complete discussion of these differences and their medical implications, see Ted Kaptchuk's *The Web That Has No Weaver*.

intestine conducts the impure of the impure solids down and out of the body as feces. The small intestine conducts the impure of the impure liquids to the bladder from whence they are excreted as urine. This sending down of the impure part of foods and liquids initiated by the stomach is called the *downbearing of the turbid* (*jiang zhuo*, 降浊).

So we can see that in Chinese medicine, digestion is spoken of as the separation of the clear and turbid. This separation is dependent upon the *qi hua* (气化) or qi-transformation of the middle burner or spleen-stomach and upon the spleen qi's ability to move or transport foods and fluids. Hence, Chinese spleen function is summed up in the two words *yun* (运, movement) and *hua* (化, transformation). Since movement implies dispersion, the concept of movement and transformation is simply an older, more traditional way of describing the digestive system's dispersion and transformation.

The analogy of the cooking pot introduced above is very important. It is said in Chinese that the stomach has an aversion to dryness (*wei e zao*, 胃恶燥). In other words, stomach function is dependent upon the creation of a mash or soup in its cauldron or pot. It is also said in Chinese that the spleen fears dampness (*pi e shi*, 脾恶湿). Since spleen function is likened to a fire under a pot distilling the essence from the mash held in the stomach, it is easy to understand that too much water or dampness can douse or damage this fire.

Using this analogy, it is both simple and crucial to understand that, according to Chinese medicine, the digestive process consists of first creating a 100° F soup in the stomach,<sup>3</sup> remembering that body temperature is 98.6° F. Whatever facilitates the creation of such a 100° soup in the stomach benefits digestion, and whatever impedes or impairs the creation of a 100° soup in the stomach impedes or impairs digestion. This is basically true even from a Western medical perspective. Most of the insights and principles of Chinese dietary theory and therapy are logical extensions of this commonsense and irrefutable truth.

## The Implications of This Process

### Cooked vs. uncooked foods

First of all, Chinese medical teachings suggest that most people, most of the time, should mostly eat cooked food. Cooking is predigestion on the outside of the body to make food more easily digestible on the inside. By cooking foods in a pot on the outside of the

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<sup>3</sup> Or 38°C

body, one can initiate and facilitate the stomach's decomposition and cooking in its pot on the inside of the body. Chilled (*leng*, 冷) and uncooked (*sheng*, 生) foods require much more energy to transform them into warm soup within the pot of the stomach. Since it takes energy or qi to create this warmth and transformation, the net profit from this transformation is less. On the other hand, if one eats cooked foods at room temperature at least or warm at best, less spleen qi is spent in the process of digestion. This means that the net profit of digestion, i.e., qi or energy, is greater.

As you may have already thought, the idea that eating cooked food is more nutritious than uncooked food flies in the face of some current schools of Western nutritional belief. Because enzymes and vitamins are destroyed by cooking, some people think it is healthier to eat mostly raw, uncooked foods. This makes apparent sense only as long as one confuses gross income with net profit. When laboratory scientists measure the relative amounts of cooked and raw foods, they are not taking into account these nutrients' post-digestive absorption. However, here let's be clear that what we are talking about cooking is primarily grains, beans, and meats. In Chinese medicine, we think that vegetables should only be lightly cooked and fruits may be eaten uncooked if desired. More specifics about cooking will be discussed later.

*Let's say that a raw carrot has 100 units of a certain vitamin or nutrient and that a cooked carrot of the same size has only 80 units of that same nutrient. At first glance, it appears that eating the raw carrot is healthier since one would, theoretically, get more of that nutrient that way. However, no one absorbs 100% of any available nutrient in a given food. Because the vitamins and enzymes of a carrot are largely locked in hard-to-digest cellulose packets, when one eats this raw carrot, they may actually only absorb 50% of the available nutrient. The rest is excreted in the feces. But when one eats the cooked carrot, because the cooking has already begun the breakdown of the cellulose walls, one may absorb 65% of the available nutrient. In this case, even though the cooked carrot had less of this nutrient to begin with, net absorption is greater. The body's economy runs on net, not gross nutrient value. It is as simple as that. [Of course, we are talking about light cooking, and not reducing everything to an overcooked, lifeless mush.]*

This is why soups and stews are so nourishing. These are the foods we feed infants and those who are recuperating from illness. The more a food is like 100° soup, the easier it is for the body to digest and absorb its nutrients. The spleen and stomach expend less qi,

and, therefore, the net gain in qi is greater. This is also why chewing food thoroughly before swallowing is so important. The more one chews, the more the food is macerated and mixed with liquids, in other words, the more it begins to look like soup or stew.

### **Chilled & cold foods & liquids**

As a corollary of this, if we drink or eat chilled, cold, or frozen foods or drink iced liquids with our meals, we are only impeding the warm transformation of digestion. Cold obviously negates heat, and water puts out fire. This does not mean that such food and liquids are never digested, but it does mean that often they are not digested well. In Chinese medicine, if the spleen and stomach fail to adequately transport and transform foods and liquids, a sludge tends to accumulate just as it might in an incompletely combusting automobile engine. This sludge is called stagnant food (*shi zhi*, 食滯) and dampness and turbidity (*shi zhuo*, 湿浊) in Chinese medicine. And what of the Western habit of having a cold drink with our meal? On the one hand, the coldness of chilled drinks damages the spleen, making it vacuous and weak; on the other hand, the stomach becomes hot and hyperactive trying to deal with this cold material it suddenly finds itself having to decompose and cook.

As much as the previous paragraph may make it sound that way, please note that Chinese medicine is not saying that no one should ever eat or drink chilled, cold, iced, or frozen drinks or foods. In general, Chinese medicine does not speak in such universal terms. Everything in Chinese medicine depends on the individual's constitution and environment. Some people are born with very exuberant yang qi. Such people can eat and drink more chilled and frozen things and get away with it. Others have weaker spleens and stomachs which are more easily damaged by eating and drinking chilled and frozen foods and liquids. So one's tendency to such damage is highly individual and no one size fits all.<sup>4</sup>

### **Dampness & phlegm**

And what happens next? If the solid portions of food are jam-packed into the stomach or their digestion is impaired by cold and chilled foods and liquids or if too many hard-to-digest foods are eaten, stagnant food may accumulate in the stomach. The stomach tries all the harder to burn these off and becomes like a car stuck in overdrive. It becomes

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<sup>4</sup> Chinese medicine always seeks to restore balance or moderation to individual patients at specific moments in time. Therefore, there are few if any absolutes in Chinese medicine.

hotter in an attempt to burn off the accumulation. This often results in the stomach becoming chronically overheated. This, in turn, causes the stomach to register hunger which, in Chinese medicine, is a sensation of the stomach's heat and emptiness. This hunger results in eating more and more and a vicious cycle is created. Overeating begets stagnant food which begets stomach heat which reinforces overeating. Does this sound familiar? It is a sad description of today's Western diet.

A similar problem affects the spleen. If the liquid portions of food and drink jam the transporting and transforming functions of the spleen, what is called the qi mechanism or **qi ji** (气机) in Chinese, these may accumulate as dampness (**shi**, 湿). This plethora of water fluids inhibits the spleen qi's warm transforming function in the same way that water inhibits or douses fire. Over time, this accumulated dampness may mix with stagnant food and congeal into phlegm (**tan**, 痰) which further gums up the entire system and retards the flow of qi and blood throughout the body.

As I said above, one person's digestion burns hotter than another's. Those with a robust constitution and strong life-gate fire tend to have a strong digestion. These people can often eat more in general and more chilled, frozen, hard-to-digest foods without seeming problems. Likewise, everyone's metabolism runs at different temperatures throughout the year. During the summer when it is hot outside, we generally can eat cooler foods and should drink more chilled liquids. However, even then, we should remember that *everything* that goes down our gullet must be turned into 100° soup before it can be digested and assimilated.

*Many Westerners are shocked to think that cold and frozen foods are inherently unhealthy since they have become such a ubiquitous part of our contemporary diet. However, chilled, cold, and frozen foods and liquids are a relatively recent phenomenon. They are dependent upon refrigeration in the marketplace, refrigeration during transportation, and refrigeration in the home. Such mass access to refrigeration is largely a post-World War II occurrence. That means that, in temperate zones, people have only had widespread access to such foods and drinks for less than 70 years. Seventy years is not even a blink on the human evolutionary scale.*

### **Post-digestive temperature**

Let me point out that in Chinese medicine an important distinction is made between the

cold physical temperature of a food or drink and a food or drink's post-digestive temperature. Post-digestive temperature refers to a particular food or drink's net effect on the body's thermostat. Some foods, even when cooked, are physiologically cool and tend to lower the body's temperature either systemically or in a certain organ or part. Chinese medicine categorizes every food as either cold, cool, level (*i.e.*, balanced or neutral), warm, or hot. This is called the food's *nature* (*xing*, 性). Most foods are cool, level, or warm and, in general, we should mostly eat level and warm foods since our body itself is warm. Life is warm. During the winter or in colder climes, it is important to eat warmer foods, but during the summer we can and should eat cooler foods. However, this mostly refers to the post-digestive temperature of a food.

**Here is an example:** *If you eat ice cream in the summer, your body is temporarily cooled by the ingestion of such a frozen food; however, its response is to increase the heat of digestion in order to deal with this cold insult. Interestingly, it is a common custom in tropical countries to eat hot foods in hot weather since the body is then provoked to sweat as an attempt to cool itself down. In China, mung bean soup and tofu are eaten in the summer because both these foods tend to cool a person down post-digestively. If we are going to eat cold and frozen foods and drink iced, chilled liquids, it is best that these be taken between meals when they will not impede and retard the digestion of other foods.*

The table on the next page shows the post-digestion temperatures or natures of a number of commonly eaten foods and spices. You can see that most foods fall into the warm, neutral, and cool categories; far fewer are either hot or cold.

### **Dampening foods**

Not only do foods have an inherent post-digestive temperature, but different foods also tend to generate more or less body fluids. Therefore, in Chinese medicine all foods can be described according to how *damp* they are, meaning dampening to the human system. Because the human body is damp (we are, after all, 55-60% water), most foods are somewhat damp and that is healthy. However, some foods are excessively dampening and, since it is the spleen which combats dampness, excessively damp foods tend to interfere with the spleen's function of moving and transforming.

Hot	Warm	Neutral	Cool	Cold
Dried ginger	Chicken	Chicken egg	Whole wheat	Seaweed
Cayenne pepper	Butter	Milk	Barley	Kelp
Jalapeno pepper	Shrimp	Pork	Millet	Watermelon
Black pepper	Ham	Beef	Mung bean	Banana
White pepper	Lamb	White rice	Soybean	Tea
Sweet basil	Glutinous rice	Rye	Tofu	Salt
Soybean oil	Walnut	Duck	Swiss chard	Clam
Cottonseed oil	Sunflower seed	String beans	Sesame oil	Crab
	Dill seed	Corn	Pear	
	Fennel seed	Peas	Lemon	
	Coconut	Peanuts	Alfalfa sprouts	
	Peach	Figs	Button mushrooms	
	Cherry	Pineapple	Spinach	
	Winter squash		Buckwheat	
	Leek			
	Onion			

An appropriate amount of dampness is considered yin in that it nourishes our substance. Let's look at how this is explained by the Chinese Five Phase Theory (*wu xing xue shuo*, 五行学说). Dampness is associated with the earth phase. Fertile earth is damp. The flavor of earth according to Chinese five phase correspondence theory is sweet. Thus, by extension, the sweet flavor is believed to be inherently dampening and also nutritive. In Chinese medical terms, the sweet flavor supplements the qi (our vital force) and blood (our bodily fluids).

When you look at a Chinese medical description of various foods, you are struck by the fact that almost all foods are somewhat sweet. This makes sense since we eat to supplement our qi and blood. All grains, most vegetables, and most meats eaten by humans are sweet no matter what other of the five flavors they may also be. This sweetness in the overwhelming majority of foods we humans regularly eat becomes evident the more one chews a food. For example, thoroughly chew a slice of whole grain bread or a mouthful of rice and notice how sweetness floods your mouth.

As I said above, a modicum of sweetness supplements the body's qi and blood. It is this flavor which gathers in the spleen and provides the spleen with its qi. However, excessive sweetness has just the opposite effect on the spleen. Instead of energizing the spleen, it overwhelms and weakens it. This is based on the Chinese idea that yang when extreme transforms into yin and *vice versa*. When the spleen becomes weak, it craves sweetness since that is the flavor which strengthens it when consumed in moderate amounts. However, if this craving is indulged with concentrated sweets such as sugar, this only further weakens the spleen and harms digestion. Thus, another pathological eating cycle is forged in many people. But please note that Chinese medicine does not typically speak in absolutes; whether a sweet food is good or bad for a particular person depends on that person's particular needs and weaknesses, as well as on the quantities of sweets eaten.

Let's go back to our discussion of dampness for a moment. The sweet flavor engenders dampness and the sweeter a food is the more dampening it is. According to Chinese medicine, this tendency is worsened when the sweet flavor is combined with sour. Therefore, Chinese medicine identifies a number of especially dampening foods. These include such sweet and sour foods as citrus fruits and juices and tomatoes, such concentrated sweets as sugar, molasses, and honey, and also highly nutritious foods such as wheat, dairy products, nuts, oils, and fats.

Highly nutritious foods have more flavor (*wei*, 味) than qi. In this context, qi means the light, airy, aromatic and yang part of a food, whereas *wei*, literally meaning taste, refers to a food's heavier, more substantial, more nourishing, yin aspects. All foods are a combination of qi and *wei*. Here again we see Chinese medicine's emphasis on balance. Highly nutritious foods, such as dairy products, meats, nuts, eggs, oils, and fats are strongly capable of supplementing the body's yin fluids and substances; however, in excess they generate a superabundance of body fluids which become pathologic dampness. Although this may appear to be a paradox, it has to do with healthy yin in excess becoming evil or pathological yin or dampness, phlegm and turbidity.

It is also easy to see that certain combinations are even worse than their individual constituents. Ice cream is a dietary disaster: It is too sweet, too creamy, and too cold. Ice cream is an extremely dampening food. Pizza is a combination of tomato sauce, cheese, and wheat. All of these foods tend to be dampening and this effect is made even worse if greasy additions, such as pepperoni and sausage, are added. The ubiquitous tomato sauce

of Western cooking bears a few more words: since it is the condensed nutritive substances of many tomatoes, it can be especially dampening.

*... we should bear in mind that we would not eat 4-6 oranges in a single sitting nor every day. Yet, when we drink a glass of orange, tomato, apple or carrot juice, that is exactly what we are doing; we are drinking the nutritive essence of not one but a large quantity of fruits or vegetables.*

In the same way, drinking fruit juices can be very dampening. Fruit and vegetable juices are another relatively modern addition to the human diet. Prior to the advent of refrigeration, juices would turn into wine or vinegar within days. Therefore, when they were available in traditional societies, they were an infrequent treat. Now we have endless access to tropical fruits and juices thanks to refrigeration and interstate and intercontinental transportation. However, we should bear in mind that we would not eat 4-6 oranges in a single sitting nor every day. Yet, when we drink a glass of orange, tomato, apple or carrot juice, that is exactly what we are doing; we are drinking the nutritive essence of not one but a large quantity

of fruits or vegetables. This over nutrition typically results in the formation of pathogenic dampness and phlegm.

Meats, because they are so nutritious, or supplement qi and blood so much, also tend to be damp in the same way. The fatter and richer a meat is, the more it tends to generate dampness within the body. Amongst the common domestic mammalian meats, pork is the dampest with beef coming in second. Therefore, it is important not to eat too much meat and especially not greasy, fatty meats. Most people do fine on two ounces of meat 3-4 times per week.

On the other hand, eating only poultry and fish is not such a good idea either. As Chinese medicine is quick to point out, everything in this world has its good and bad points. Poultry and fish tend to be less dampening and phlegmatic, it is true, but chicken, turkey, and shellfish tend to be hot. If you eat only these meats, you run the risk of becoming overheated. I have seen this happen time and again in clinical practice. From a Western scientific point of view, we can also say that eating too much fish may result in mercury accumulation and toxicity and overeating commercial chicken may result in too much estrogen and exposure to salmonella food-poisoning. Chinese medicine sees human beings as omnivores and suggests that each of us should eat widely and diversely on the food chain.

**A list of strongly fluid-engendering, i.e., dampening, foods:**

Milk	Fatty meats
Butter	Sugar, molasses, honey, corn syrup
Eggs	Most fruits
Oils and seeds in general	Wheat
Nuts in general	Buckwheat

## **The Basic Healthy Diet According to Chinese Medicine**

Now that we have an understanding of the concepts, let's take a look at the basic principles of a healthy diet according to Chinese medicine.

### **1. Careful harmonization of the five flavors—bringing harmony to our food choices.**

Just as foods can have any of the five natures or temperatures, food can also have any of five flavors—sweet, sour, acrid, bitter, and salty. Many foods have two or more inherent flavors. For instance, many fruits are sweet and sour, such as apples and oranges. Coffee is sweet and bitter, while, tea is bitter and sweet, while wine is sweet, bitter, and acrid. The table on the next page shows foods exemplifying the five flavors when they occur singly in a particular food.

### **2. Clear, light, suitable food**

Clear, light, suitable food describes a diet which is mainly vegetarian. It is primarily comprised of grains, beans, vegetables, and fruits. Based on this injunction, one should eat only very small and infrequent quantities of meat, greasy, fatty foods, and alcohol. Li Dong-yuan of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368 CE), in his *Pi Wei Lun (Treatise on the Spleen & Stomach)*, says that spicy, hot foods injure and damage the original qi. Li Chan of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE), in *Yi Xue Ru Men (Entering the Gate of the Study of Medicine)*, says that one should also avoid fried, roasted, toasted, fermented, pickled in soy sauce, or hot-natured foods since these dry the blood. Ge Hong of the Eastern Jin dynasty (265-420 CE) said that a clear, light diet nourishes the stomach and eating less in general relieves the intestines.

Sweet	Sour	Acrid	Bitter	Salty
White rice	Lemon	Chicken egg	Rye	Seaweed
Glutinous rice		Milk	Alfalfa sprouts	Kelp
Wheat		Pork		Crab
Barley		Beef		Mussel
Shrimp		White rice		Ham
Milk		Rye		Salt
Butter		Duck		
Chicken egg		String beans		
Chicken		Corn		
Beef		Peas		
Lamb		Peanuts		
String beans		Figs		
Corn		Pineapple		
Peas Soybeans				
Tofu				
Peanuts				
Walnut				
Figs				
Cabbage				
Carrot				

### 3. Guarding against food cravings & addictions

Balance and moderation, as we've already noted, provide the foundation for a balanced diet. Chapter 63 of the *Ling Shu (Miraculous Pivot)* says that only a diet comprised of all five flavors—sweet, bitter, acrid, sour, and salty—can keep the bones straight, the sinews supple, the qi and blood flowing, the pores closed, and the functioning of the five major organs or viscera coordinated and balanced harmoniously. Conversely, persistent addiction to a certain flavor will lead to its accumulation within the body and, over the course of time, will result in loss of balance of the viscera and bowels.

We see this same caution in other Chinese medical texts. Chapter 3 of the *Su Wen (Simple Questions)* says that too much sour causes liver qi repletion (fullness) with consequent spleen qi exhaustion. Too much salt taxes the qi of the large bones and withers the flesh

in addition to repressing heart qi. Too much sweet causes the heart qi to be full and stuffy, the facial color blackish, and the kidney qi not balanced. Too much bitter causes the spleen qi to lose its moisture and the stomach qi to become too broad or distended. And too much acrid or pungent causes the sinews to be slack and the vessels stopped up while the essence spirit (*jing shen*, 精神) or psyche suffers disaster.

In addition, guarding against partialities in food also means balancing foods of both hot and cold natures. As you remember, beyond the five flavors, each food has its own *nature*, its inherent temperature and that temperature's effect on the human body. Too much hot food damages the original qi and body fluids or yin. Too much cold food damages the spleen and stomach qi and damages the digestive ability.

#### 4. Select food suitable to treat the specific person

This principle refers to the fact that each person has an inherent or constitutional predisposition. Different schools within Chinese medicine have historically used different systems for defining various constitutional types, but here are the most common:

The first is the *wood-fire* person, characterized by mesomorphic to ectomorphic body types with medium to thin builds, tight, possibly stringy, angular, strong-willed and sometimes aggressive and/or nervous. Modern Chinese medicine suggests that wood-fire types should eat more moistening foods, such as fruits and vegetables, millet, beans, and eggs. On the other hand, they should avoid hot foods such as beef and lamb.

*Phlegm-damp* people tend to be overweight or endomorphic. Their flesh is typically atonic. According to Chinese medical theory, accumulation of phlegm and dampness is primarily due to weak spleen and stomach function. Therefore, phlegm-damp people should eat more light, easily digestible food such as cooked vegetables, along with bland tasting foods which seep dampness from the body by promoting urination. They should avoid foods which tend to generate increased body fluids, things such as greasy, fatty foods, milk and milk products.

*Yin vacuity* (deficient) persons are most often people who have entered middle age. In addition, ectomorphic or very thin, nervous people may be constitutionally yin vacuous from birth. It is said in Chinese, *nian si shi, yin zi ban* (年四十，阴自半). This means that by 40 years of age, the yin qi is automatically (reduced by) half, since the process of life

itself is the consumption and transformation of yin substance by yang activity and function. People with a yin vacuity constitution, whether from birth or due to aging, should eat light foods which nourish the yin by being easy to digest and thus being easily transformed into qi and blood. If there is abundant qi and blood then, while we sleep, that surplus is transformed into yin essence. Such light, easy to digest but nonetheless yin nourishing foods include fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, and bean products like tofu.

*Yang vacuity* (deficient) persons mostly refer to the truly elderly. As we enter the last decades of life, the life-gate fire begins to decline, metabolism slows and body warmth decreases. It is also possible for a person to be born with insufficient yang. People who are yang vacuous should eat more acrid, warm foods, such as fish, fowl, beef, lamb, ginger, and pepper. They should be careful, on the other hand, to avoid cold, raw or uncooked foods, cold drinks, and most fruits.

## **5. Set time, set amount—When and how much should we eat?**

### **Drink & eat according to time**

In contrast to the daily reality of our stressful Western culture, practitioners of Chinese medicine believe that eating at regular, fixed times each day is best. The human body functions according to circadian rhythms which are repeated daily; therefore, it is said that having meals at fixed times can keep the body free from suffering. Basically, we should eat like a prince at breakfast, eat like a merchant at lunch, and eat like a pauper at dinner. In other words, our meals should become smaller as the day progresses and that we should not eat too soon before bed. The elderly, because their digestive function is not as strong as it once was, should eat light, easily digested meals more often throughout the day.

*... even though we are advised to eat at fixed times each day, we should not eat if we are emotionally upset.*

However, there is a caveat: even though we are advised to eat at fixed times each day, we should not eat if we are emotionally upset.

If a person eats when upset, because the ascent and descent of qi is disordered at that time, the pure will not be separated from the turbid and food stagnation is apt to occur. It is better to eat later than usual after one has calmed down rather than eating on schedule when one is upset.

### **Avoid being starved or satiated but eat a suitable amount**

We all have experienced both of these extremes. We don't have—or don't make—the

time to eat a proper meal but grab something on the run or, when we finally do get something to eat, we overdo it. Each extreme is unhealthy. Failure to eat when hungry or to drink when thirsty results in exhaustion of the source of qi and blood. On the other hand, excess food injures the spleen and stomach impairing digestion. Chinese medicine describes five results from overeating. These include too frequent defecation, too frequent urination, disturbed sleep, obesity, and indigestion. Throughout history, most Chinese medical practitioners have suggested that a person should stop eating when you are 70% full. This allows room for good and thorough digestion to take place.

## 6. Proper balance in cooking

Proper balance in cooking is recommended for three reasons. Firstly, it ensures the preservation of essential nutrients. Secondly, it makes food more appetizing. Because qi and blood are created out of the finest essence of food and drink and the good health of the individual is dependent upon abundant qi and blood, Chinese medicine sees maintenance of a healthy appetite as a primary concern. Cooking foods generally releases their flavor and aroma, thus stimulating the appetite. Thirdly, cooking makes foods more easily digestible and it also benefits and protects the spleen and stomach.

### Proper cooking of main foods

Chinese medicine gives us many specific and helpful guidelines about the proper cooking of our foods.

**Zhu shi** (主食) literally means “ruling foods,” but more loosely it means the main or staple foods of our diet, rice and grains. In the Chinese medical classics, food is often referred to as **shui gu** (水谷), “water and grain”, which underlines the importance of grains to a healthy human diet. Equally important is the correct preparation of these grains, which includes: not throwing away their washing water, not overcooking them and not milling them too finely, thus losing their outer bran and nutrients. Interesting, isn't it, that the more enlightened tenets of contemporary Western thought are now reaching these same conclusions.

Once again, however, Chinese medicine carefully points out the exceptions to the rule. Rice and grains intended for babies, the elderly, or the infirm and chronically ill should be cooked longer and then macerated for easier digestion and absorption. For those who are infirm or have poor digestion, cooking grains with extra water for a longer time, turning them into a

gruel or congee called *shui fan* (水饭) or water rice in Chinese, is especially beneficial. There are numerous Chinese medicinal recipes using such gruel as their basis, and I have included some of them in this book.

As we have seen, Chinese medicine says that digestion is primarily the function of the spleen and stomach. The stomach is seen as a pot on a burner. The spleen provides the heat which distills and transforms the food and liquids in this pot into qi, blood, and useful body fluids. Digestion according to Chinese medicine is seen as a process of cooking and distillation. Cooking, milling, and macerating on the outside of the body makes internal digestion and absorption all the easier. However, there is a balance between overcooking and milling and thus losing useful nutrients, and cooking and milling sufficiently to enable proper assimilation and absorption. This balance does not remain the same in all persons

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at all times. Therefore, Chinese medical practitioners carefully advise each patient individually how much to cook and mill their foods. If a food has lots of nutrients locked in a hard-to-digest form, it is better to lose some of those nutrients through cooking and milling if what remains becomes more easily assimilated by our body.

### **Proper cooking of vegetables**

Vegetables should also not be overcooked. They should be eaten fresh and their skins should not be discarded unnecessarily. Here again, the issue is to cook them enough to be digestible but not so much as to destroy their flavor or nutritive value.

## **7. Balancing food in the four seasons**

One of the strong points of Chinese medical theory is its insistence that true health can only be achieved when the internal microcosm is in harmonious balance with the external macrocosm. Thus Chinese medical practitioners have long taught that a person must use different acupuncture points, different herbs, and different foods during the different seasons in order for the part, the individual, to remain in balance with the whole, the external cosmos.

Let's look at some specific examples. During the spring, it is advised that we eat more sweet than sour food so as to nourish the spleen. This is based on five phase theory. In addition, we should not overeat. This is based on the fact that the liver is associated with

spring and rules the free and unobstructed coursing and discharge of the qi and blood. If we overeat, this blocks the free flow of qi and thus can harm the liver, causing what Chinese doctors call the pattern of liver depression qi stagnation.

In the summer, the heart is replete and the kidneys are vacuous (or relatively empty). Therefore, we should eat light, easily digestible food and shun greasy, tough, hard-to-digest food which might aggravate fire and heat within the body. Rather, eat nutritious fruits and vegetables. In the heat of the day you can partake of drinks that are by nature cold, such as mung bean soup, but should not overdrink chilled liquids which can easily damage the spleen and stomach and damage the kidneys.

In the fall, we should continue avoiding overdrinking cold drinks and eating too many uncooked, chilled foods. Because the weather is hot and dry during this season (from early August to early November), we may feel thirsty and parched; however, indulging and assuaging this thirst with chilled drinks and frozen treats only damages the spleen and stomach yang qi.

Winter is a time of storage and repair. This is a time when supplementing, highly nutritious food can and should be taken. Such supplementing foods according to Chinese dietary therapy are beef, lamb, chicken, and duck. In addition, Chinese medical practitioners have traditionally felt that drinking a little wine or alcohol during the winter is beneficial.

### **Let Me Take a Moment to Summarize These Ideas**

The traditional wisdom of Chinese dietary theory tells us that most humans should mostly eat vegetables and grains, supplemented with small amounts of everything else. We should mostly eat cooked and warm food which is not too sweet, not too greasy or oily, and not too damp. In addition, we should eat moderately and chew well. Drinking a teacup of warm water or a warm beverage with meals facilitates the formation of that 100° soup we are hoping to attain; conversely, it's best to avoid those chilled, cold, and frozen drinks and foods that too often accompany a Western meal.

Amongst the grains, rice holds an especially healthy place. Because it promotes urination, it tends to leech off excessive dampness. Other grains, in comparison, tend to produce dampness as a by-product of their being so nutritious. This ability of rice to help eliminate dampness through urination becomes more important the more other dampening foods one eats.

In general, I would emphasize that most Americans do not eat enough vegetables. It is easy to load up on breads, grains, and cereals but not as easy to eat plenty of freshly cooked vegetables. Grains, like meat and dairy products, are highly nutritious but heavy and relatively more difficult to digest. If overeaten they can cause accumulation of dampness and phlegm. In Asia, Daoists and Buddhists interested in longevity emphasized vegetables over grains and even modern Chinese books on geriatrics counsel that more vegetables should be eaten. This is good advice for us here in the West.

### **A Special Note on Flavors & Spices**

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, the purest part of foods are the five flavors. These are sweet, salty, bitter, pungent, and sour. Chinese medicine also recognizes a sixth flavor called bland. Each of the five flavors corresponds to one of the five phases and, therefore, tends to accumulate and have an inordinate effect on one of the five viscera (or major organs of Chinese medicine). Just as overeating sweet injures the spleen, overeating salt injures the kidney, overeating sour injures the liver, and overeating spicy foods injures the lungs. I know of no one who overeats bitter food. A little bitter flavor is good for the heart and stomach. In general, although most food is sweet, one should eat a modicum of all the other flavors. Overeating any one flavor will tend to cause an imbalance in the organs and tissues associated with that flavor according to five phase correspondence.

Most spices are pungent or acrid and warm to hot. These spices aid digestion when eaten in moderate amounts. As discussed above, the digestive process is like an alchemical distillation. The middle burner fire of the spleen and stomach cooks and distills foods and liquids driving off their purest parts. To have good digestion means to have a healthy digestive fire. Moderate use of acrid or pungent, warm spices aids digestion by strengthening the middle burner fire.

That is why traditional cultures found the use of pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, mace, and cloves so salutary. These spices contain a high proportion of qi to wei or flavor and so help yang qi transform and distill yin substance, dampness, and fluids. On the other hand, when eaten to excess, such spices can cause overheating of the stomach and drying out of stomach fluids, and remember, the stomach does not like to be dry. Therefore, a moderate use of such spices is good for the spleen but their overuse is bad for the stomach and lungs.

## A Return to a More Traditional Diet

What this all adds up to is a diet very similar to the Pritikin diet or Macrobiotics. Both these dietary regimes suggest that the bulk of one's diet be composed of complex carbohydrates and vegetables and that one get plenty of fiber and less animal proteins, refined sugars, oils, and fats. This is very much the traditional diet of all people living in temperate climates the world round. This is also very much like what our great grandparents ate.

One hundred years ago, most people only ate meat once or twice a week. Mostly they ate grains and vegetables. Because they did not have refrigeration, they ate mostly what was in season and what could be stored in root cellars and through pickling, salting, and drying. One hundred years ago, sugar was too expensive for most people to afford more than a tiny bit per year. Likewise, oils and fats were relatively precious commodities and were not eaten in large quantities. Those oils which were available were pressed from flax, hemp, sesame seeds, or were derived from fish oil, lard, and butter. They were not the heavily hydrogenated tropical oils which are so frequently used in commercial food preparation today.

It was also a well-known fact of life 100 years ago that rich people who ate too well and exercised too little were more prone to chronic health problems than those who lived a more Spartan and rigorous life. If you look at the cartoons of the 18th and 19th centuries, you will frequently see the overweight nobleman with the enlarged and gouty toe. Likewise, the Chinese medical classics contain numerous stories of doctors treating rich patients by getting them to do some physical work and to eat simpler, less rich food. Gerontologists today have noted the fact that those ethnic groups who tend to produce a large proportion of centenarians, such as the Georgians, the Hunzakuts, and certain peoples in the Peruvian Andes, all eat a low animal protein, low fat, high fiber diet.

If you follow the above Chinese dietary guidelines, you will eat nutritiously and well. You will be supplemented by the food you eat and not unduly harmed by it. Such a moderate, commonsense diet is one of the four foundations of good health. This diet is more or less appropriate for most people living in a temperate climate. Patients suffering from specific diseases may require various individualized modifications of the above outlined regime. However, because,

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whether in sickness or health, the process of digestion is essentially the same, this is a healthy diet for the majority of people. In Chapter 5, I will discuss specific modifications for some of the most common groups of food imbalance in developed countries as described by Chinese medicine. Yet even these modifications are based on this same commonsense approach to food and eating.