Volume 14, No. 4
Winter 2004-2005
$5.00

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The Journal of Traditional Eastern Health & Fitness

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ENERGETICS OF FOOD

From a Classical Chinese Medicine Perspective

BY HAOSHENG ZHANG L.AC.

According to Chinese medical theory, Qi is the fundamental substance for maintaining life. Everything in the universe is produced by its movement and changes. There are two sources of Qi present in human beings: prenatal essence and postnatal essence. The former is inherited from one's parents and is of a fixed quantity. The latter, postnatal essence includes the clear Qi that is inhaled by the Lung and grain Qi that is transformed by the Spleen. It is, theoretically, unlimited. The Spleen and Stomach are called "the resource of postnatal essence" in Chinese medicine as they play a central role in forming the body's Qi. Our diet thus becomes an important focus for attaining and maintaining health.

Chinese Medicine concepts of health and disease are relative. Health is when "Yin flourishes smoothly and Yang is vivified steadily" in the body: The function of the Zang-fu organ system and meridians are normal, qi and blood, body fluids and essence are sufficient, yin and yang are in balance. In other words, health implies that Qi is sufficient and in constant smooth movement. When these functions become abnormal and balance is lost, such that "Yin and Yang are in disharmony", disease will occur.

In Chinese medicine, the basic therapeutic principle for treating diseases is to reduce any excess and reinforce deficiency to restore a harmonious state. We can use food to achieve this end. That is why in Chinese medicine history, many Chinese medicine doctors emphasized first treating the diseases with food, and then using herbal medicine.

To understand how food affects our health, we need to understand the energetics of food. This paper will explore the energetics of food from a Classical Chinese Medicine perspective, analyzing how different properties of food affect the body.

THE ENERGETICS OF FOOD

Since food contains the energy form heaven and earth, so the energetics of food can be

analyzed by its natures and flavors. The nature of a food reflects its Heavenly properties while its flavor reflects Earthly characteristics. (These natures and flavors are also important aspects in Chinese herbal medicine.)



THE NATURE OF FOOD

The nature of food also called the "Four Qi" of food and is derived from Yin-Yang theory. A food's nature is determined according to the actions and effects it has upon the human body. All food is classified as being cool, cold, warm, or hot.

In general, foods of cold or cool natures have opposite properties from foods with warm or hot natures. A cold-natured food is different from a cool-natured food only in degree. Likewise, warm and hot-natured foods differ in their intensity.

Cool and cold-natured foods belong to the Yin. They are therefore used to treat Yang or heat syndromes. On the other hand, warm and hot-natured foods belong to the Yang, and are used for Yin or cold syndromes.

Most cool or cold foods have effects such

Warm, Hot	Neutral	Cool, Cold
Chinese Chive, Green Onion, Garlic, Onion, Chili pepper, Cilantro, Mustard, Fennel, Fennel seed, Pumpkin, Oyster Mushroom	Carrot, Cabbage, Potato, Sweet potato, Yam, Fungi: Wood-ear (black), Tremella (white wood ear), Shitaki mushroom	Radish, Turnip, Chinese cabbage, Celery, Spinach, Water spinach, Tomato, Yuxing Cao/ Houttuynia, Bamboo shoots, Taro, Lotus root, Eggplant, Gourd, Winter melon, Cucumber, Luffa, Bitter melon, Mushroom, Seaweeds: kelp, Laver, Agar
Kumquat, Litchi, Cherry, Longan fruit, Coconut, Hawthorn fruit, Berry	Tangerine, Peach, Apricot, Pomegranate, Figs, Grape, Red bay berry, Dates, Mulberry	
Sweet rice/Glutinous rice, Sorghum, Pine nut, Chest nut, Walnut, Almond	Rice, Corn, Black soy, Soy bean, Red bean/ kidney bean, Long bean, Pea, Fava bean, Zucchini, Oats, Sesame, Lotus seed, Ginkgo nut, Peanut, Sweet almond, Torreya nut, Fig, Sunflower seed	Tofu, Soybean sprout, Sprouts, Bitter greens,
Chicken, Chicken liver, Lamb, Beef, Mussel, Shrimp, Sea Cucumber		Pear, Orange, Grape fruit, Persimmon, Plum, Loquat, Apple, Banana, Pineapple, Water melon, Sugarcane, Water chestnut, Kiwi, Mango, Lemon, Rosehip, Chinese olive, Mume plum,
Cheese, Goat milk		
Brown sugar, Maltose, Alcohol, Cinnamon, Pepper (white and black), Galangal, Cayenne, Basil	Chicken eggs, Chicken blood, Black-boned Chicken, Quail, Quail eggs, Duck, Goose, Pigeon, Pigeon eggs, Pork, Fish, Oyster, Shark, Cuttlefish, Turtle	Wheat, Barley, Buckwheat, Non-glutinous rice, Mung bean
Coffee, Chocolate	White sugar, Vinegar, Soy paste, Soy sauce, Salt,	Cow milk, Yogurt, Duck eggs, Duck blood, Rabbit, Frog's meat, Crab, Clam, Green tea

Table 1. Examples of the Natures of Different Foods.

	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Pungent	Salty
Organ system	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lung	Kidney
Yin / Yang	Yin	Yin	Yang	Yang	Yin
Actions	*astringe Qi, blood, body fluids and essence; *stop discharges such spontaneous sweating, asthma, cough, diarrhea, bleeding, emission, frequent urination, incontinence, enuresis, or vaginal discharge *also generate fluids in the body *promote appetite	*clear heat, purge fire *descend (direct energy downwards) *dry dampness *purge the bowel	*tonify Qi, blood, essence, body fluids, and Zang-Fu organ systems *moderate tension, relax spasms and stop pain *harmonize the middle burner (Spleen & Stomach), harmonize other foods and herbs *relieve the toxicity of other foods and herbs	*disperse external pathogens *induce sweating *move Qi and blood; transform dampness and phlegm	*soften hardness and dissipate nodules *drain downward to purge
Examples	tomato, lemon, lime, mume, pomegranate	bitter melon, bitter greens	date, honey, malt sugar	garlic, ginger, chili pepper, cinnamon	seaweed

Table 2. A Brief Summary of the Five Flavors

as clearing heat, purging fire, removing toxic substances, nourishing Yin fluids, tranquilizing the Heart, and calming the Liver. Warm or hot foods can disperse cold, warm the body, and tonify Yang Qi. Examples of such foods are listed in Table 1.

In general, fresh fruits tend to possess a cool or cold nature, while dried fruits and nuts are warm or hot. Foods are heated by smoking, roasting, or deep-frying. Boiling and steaming are cooling to foods.

Eating too much cool or cold food may damage the Yang Qi or increase accumulations. An excess of warm or hot foods can damage the Yin fluids and create dryness, or it may increase heat or fire in the body. So for people with heat, or a fire constitution, or yin deficiency constitution, it would be better not to eat too much warm or hot food. People with cold accumulation, or a yang qi deficiency constitution, should not eat too much cool or cold food.

THE FLAVOR OF FOOD

The flavor of food refers to its five flavors (*Wu Wei*): sour, bitter, sweet or bland, pungent, and salty. Each of these flavors has an organ system affinity and general actions, which are illustrated in Table 2. Further discussion of the five flavors follows the table.

Sour (Suan)

Sour flavors are associated with Wood and the Liver organ system. The sour flavor is used for its binding properties. Sour things are astringent and stabilizing. They are used to treat any kind of "leakage," such as excessive sweating, incontinence, diarrhea, or leakage of essence such as spermatorrhea or chronic vaginal discharge. Sour flavor may also be used to stop bleeding, and it is used in cases of menorrhagia and metorrhagia.

Sour goes to the liver and helps to tonify it; that is why in clinic the patient with liver disorders may crave tomato sauce. The liver helps the spleen's function as well, so sour helps digestion. This is why apple cider vinegar is so helpful for people with poor digestion. Too much sourness, however, is bad for the Spleen and Stomach, because Wood over controls Earth. It is wise to restrain from using too much sour

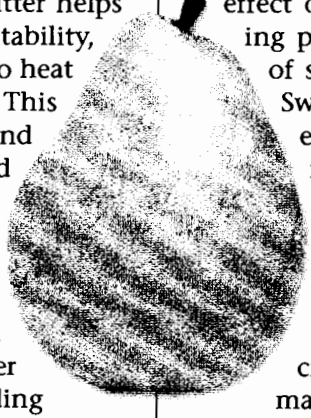
food if Spleen or Stomach problems exist Also use caution with sour flavors in acute conditions. If an external pathogen is present, sour can astringe or "lock" it into the body.

Interestingly, the sour flavor can generate fluids as well as astringe fluids. If one is dehydrated, a sour plum can be very refreshing as it causes the mouth to secrete more saliva. Thus, sourness can help those with a Yin or body fluid deficiency

The astringent flavor *(Se)* is related to sour. It also astringes essence in the body, but it does not generate fluids. Examples of foods with an astringent flavor are persimmons and cranberries.

Bitter (Ku)

Bitter flavors are associated with Fire and the Heart organ system. Bitter clears heat. If too much fire is flaring in the body, bitter helps clear and descend it. A sense of irritability, anxiousness, or restlessness is due to heat or fire disturbing the Heart Shen. This flaring up of fire also causes nausea and vomiting. Bitter can clear the heat and purge pathogenic Fire. Foods such as bitter melon and bitter greens can help to clear heat in the body.



Bitter flavor helps to direct energy downward. Perhaps this downward energy is why people swallow bitter medicines so quickly! The descending energy of bitter flavor can help the Fu organs to move and empty, and thus it improves the appetite and bowel movement. That is why bitters are a good digestive tonic. In some cases of constipation, bitterness may be used to move the bowel, such as in the use of coffee for example. Its descending energy can also help control uprising Lung qi, or direct Stomach qi downward, and therefore stop coughing and wheezing, as well as nausea and vomiting. Bitter provides a descending energy to help calm the Liver too, as in conditions caused by uprising of Liver energy, such as Liver yang rising, or Liver heat or fire flare up. This also helps explain why coffee can help the patient with migraine headache.

Bitter flavor is dry. It can dry out dampness and phlegm in the body. If a person has phlegm or dampness, bitter flavors may help. However, overuse of bitter can damage the Spleen and Stomach, and also is contraindicated for those with a deficiency of Yin, essence, or blood. Again, we can use the example of An example of coffee. Moderate use may be helpful for those with a damp condition – after a large meal, coffee will help empty the Fu organs. However, if there is no dampness or phlegm, a bitter food such as coffee can dry out the essence. Too much coffee can also cause an excess downwards movement, or diarrhea.

Fire controls Metal. In case of Lung problems a person should avoid eating too many bitter things.

Sweet / Bland (Gan)

Sweet flavors are associated with Earth and the Heart organ system. Sweet flavor has the effect of tonifying. Of course this tonifying property refers to the natural flavor of sweetness, not artificial sweeteners. Sweet foods tonify qi, blood, yin fluids, essence, and yang, and may be used for almost any kind of deficiency. Some women crave sweet things during menses because this flavor helps to build the blood.

Sweet flavors moderate tension and stop spasms and pain, especially cramping pain. Such tension or pain may be felt at the emotional and spiritual levels as well as the level of the physical body. This is why people under stress will often crave sweets. Insomnia and other mental/emotional conditions respond well to sweet flavors, as do abdominal and menstrual cramps. Sweet foods can calm the Liver when it tense up.

The sweet flavor is good for the middle burner and helps harmonize the body. It also harmonizes the effects and tastes of other foods and herbs. Substances with strong flavors, harsh actions, or even toxicity, may be moderated by adding something sweet.

Dan means bland or tasteless. This flavor is associated with sweet because bland foods go to the Spleen. Its major action is to drain water and to gradually leech dampness away. Bland foods can cause fluid loss, especially if there is not an excess of dampness.

An excess of sweet foods creates stagnation and accumulation in the Spleen and Stomach. Sweets are sticky and cloying, which encourages stagnation. This in turn produces dampness and phlegm. Those who eat too many sweets tend to have a buildup of mucus. Essence and energy cannot be produced due to the stagnation. In searching for energy, A person eat sugary food, which gives a temporary lift, or even hyperactivity. Then the sugar causes increased damp and phlegm accumulation and even more energy blockage, creating a vicious cycle.

Sweet foods are healthy are as long as their intake is kept to a moderate level. Those with Kidney problems should not eat too many sweet things, as this will cause Earth to overact upon Water.

Pungent (Xin)

Pungent flavors are associated with Metal and the Lung organ system. The pungent flavor can disperse. It helps disperse external pathogens by inducing sweating, thereby giving evil qi a route of exit from the body. That is why pungent flavored food can help the patient with common cold or flu, such as in the dispersing benefit of a cup of ginger tea or peppermint tea.

Pungent flavor can move. It moves the Qi, the blood and the body fluids. In conditions of qi stagnation, blood stasis, as well as damp or phlegm accumulation, pungent flavored food help to move the energy and eliminate the stagnation and accumulations. Red wine, for example, promotes the blood circulation, decreasing the risk of heart disease. (also garlic)

Pungent flavor can open. It helps to open orifices, as in unblocking the nasal passage, so as to help sinus congestion.

Because of these properties, the pungent flavor also acts to dry. Care must be taken to avoid depleting the body fluids with pungent foods. In the case of a Qi, Yin, or blood deficiency, moving and drying—the actions of pungency—are usually very cautions to use.

Since Metal controls Wood, avoid the overuse of pungent flavors in liver disease.

Salty (Xian)

Salty flavors are associated with Water and the Kidney organ system. Salt comes from the ocean. It holds water and acts to dissolve things—it is the universal solvent. A major action of the salty flavor is dissipating accumulations or nodules and softening hardness. For example: carbuncles, fibroids, tumors, and neoplasms all shrink in response to this flavor.

The salty flavor also goes to and helps tonify the Kidney.

Saltiness can also purge the bowel to have bowel movement and rid the body of fluid accumulation.

However, too much saltiness is not good for the Heart. This is based on the Five Element theory where Water controls Fire.

A BALANCED DIET

Food and drink are the fundamental materials of our existence and health. The human body acquires nourishment through normal digestion and absorption. In this way, growth, development, and physiological functioning proceed smoothly. To maintain life and health humans must explore the energetics of food in preserving health and preventing and treating disease. A basic understanding of the properties of food is the easiest way to maintain a good health.

An improper or irregular diet or overindulgence in certain foods will cause harm to the body and even disease. It is also important to avoid overeating or starvation. A balanced diet is of utmost importance in maintaining health and preventing disease. In general, a balanced diet includes each of the four natures and five flavors, regular meals, proper preparation, and regulation of foods in accordance with the four seasons. □

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