

Attuning with Spring – Spring Chronobiology

By Bill Wright, L.Ac., DNBAO
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Good dietary and lifestyle practices are essential to assure a long, healthy, and vital life. Long before the Chinese developed their understanding of physiology, they studied many natural influences on farming and health throughout each yearly cycle; the legacy of this study comes to us as a complete system for maintaining balance through our diets, our movement (balance of exercise/rest) and attuning with the seasons, aka. chronobiology. Balance comes from eating a variety of foods, including grains, vegetables, meats, fruits and dairy, each in moderation. There aren't good or bad foods (except maybe hydrogenated, and trans fats). Too much of a healthy food is unhealthy. You can overdo it on broccoli or brown rice. Sugars aren't unhealthy. Too much or very refined sugar is. Meat (organic) isn't unhealthy. Too much meat is. If you have one bite of chocolate, you haven't sinned. You can have your cake and eat it too, in *moderation*. If your diet is balanced, your habits flexible, and your inclinations moderate, you have little to worry about. There is a natural inclination available to us towards staying balanced with the changing seasons, and adjusting our diets harmoniously with changing seasonal phases.

The first phase of each year begins in spring and is related to budding, new growth, and new birth. Most aspects of existence; including the viscera (our internal organs), related tissues in the body, vitality, nature, virtue, utility, color, flavors, senses, and emotions, are viewed by Chinese Medicine (CM) in terms of the five-phase concordances and relationships¹. We are currently enjoying the Wood phase of spring, and it is easy to see and feel that we are entering a new and different phase or seasonal shift. This has an effect on many aspects of our health and well being.

We can learn to follow the natural order of things to create more vitality and well being and preserve our health. The importance of harmony or balance is perhaps the fundamental premise of Chinese medicine. As stated above the flavors of foods have important relationships with the five phases and therefore with certain physiological functions within our bodies. The five flavors of food and herbs are consumed to ensure a balanced diet, to maintain health, and to treat illness, and are chosen with what is consistent with the prevailing season or seasonal phase. The flavors have particular benefits, produce certain physiological responses, and enhance the activities of the internal organs.

Some of the wood phase concordances are the spring season, the sour flavor, its internal organs are the liver and gallbladder, its color is green, and related emotions are anger, irritability, depression, as well as patience. To harmonize with the qualities of this season it is traditionally a time to start to lighten our diets and cleanse our bodies from the last seasonal phase (winter-water phase) of heavier foods, holiday party foods, etc... There are some simple things we can do in our own kitchens to promote harmony with the wood phase and spring season.

The diet should be the lightest of the year and contain foods which emphasize the yang, ascending, and expansive qualities of spring: young plants, fresh greens, sprouts, and wheat or other cereal grasses. Salty foods such as soy sauce, miso, and sodium-rich meats all have a strong sinking quality and are best limited during springtime. Too many heavy foods clog the

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liver and can lead to imbalances in our digestion and emotions of anger, frustration, and depression.

For the majority of people living in temperate climates, including most of the US and Europe, cooked food is necessary to maintain climatic and digestive balance, along with some raw foods which are more appropriate for springtime. In the spring, food is best cooked for a shorter time but at higher temperatures; in this way the food is not a thoroughly cooked, especially the inner part of the food. If oil is used in spring cooking, a quick high-temperature sauté method is appropriate, such as wok cooking. When cooking with water, light steaming or minimal simmering is ideal².

The expansive, rising quality of sweet and pungent-flavored foods, and green colored foods are a means of creating a personal spring within. For this effect, one can use a little honey in mint tea, nettles leaf (*Urtica dioica*) and oat straw (*Avena sativa*) make a healing spring tonic tea – mix one ounce of each in a quart mason jar, pour boiling hot water over dried herbs before bed, in the morning strain, reheat and drink through the day. Steamed leafy greens should be emphasized in meals. The pungent cooking herbs: basil, fennel, marjoram, rosemary, caraway, dill, bay leaf, are desirable at this time. Most of the complex carbohydrates such as grains, legumes, and seeds have a primarily sweet flavor which increases with sprouting. Young beets, carrots, and other sweet starchy vegetables, thinned from the spring garden, provide a refreshing sweet flavor. A simple cleanse for the gall bladder consists of eating one to two raw red radishes between meals, drinking five cups of chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*) tea each day over a three week period. Also, consuming five teaspoons of fresh, cold-pressed flax oil over food at one meal each day, (or this amount at two daily meals; this dosage can vary proportionally according to weight, a 160-pound person needs about five teaspoons). Flax oil should be taken six days a week for two months³.

These simple yet subtly profound actions have a harmonizing and balancing effect on our bodies, and psyches. Spring is a new beginning, the time of the year to rise early with the sun and take brisk walks which are yang activities, reflecting the ascending and active nature of spring. The sight of the green color of tender young plants nourishes the soul through the eyes, so the appetite for food decreases and the body naturally cleanses itself, not only of food residues, but of excessive desire and the accompanying emotions of dissatisfaction, impatience, and anger as well. The metaphorical membrane over the eyes and mind disappears, and vision becomes clearer. Things are seen anew⁴.

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¹ Kendall, Donald E. “Dao of Chinese Medicine, Understanding An Ancient Healing Art”. Oxford University Press, 2002.

² Pitchford, Paul. “Healing With Whole Foods: Oriental Traditions and Modern Nutrition.” North Atlantic Books, 1993, First Edition, p.278.

³ Pitchford, Paul. “Healing With Whole Foods: Oriental Traditions and Modern Nutrition.” North Atlantic Books, 1993, First Edition, p277.

⁴ Pitchford, Paul. “Healing With Whole Foods: Oriental Traditions and Modern Nutrition.” North Atlantic Books, 1993, First Edition, pp.276-277.