

The Supporting Function

Working with Spleen Energy.

The essential meaning of Spleen in TCM is of supporting energy. It is our experience of being supported, of trusting the ground to hold us up, both metaphorically and physically. You could say that it is the core of our sense of self confidence and of our ability to trust.

I have written elsewhere¹ how this essential 'energy-definition' leads naturally, through our development as infants and children, to the traditional functions of the Chinese Spleen such as digestion, transformation and transportation. That is, how the energy manifests functionally in the body. Here I would like to focus on how we experience our internal support and how to work with someone who is temporarily unable to access this energy.

When we do feel supported from inside, our movement and sense of self is light and easy. So we are not held up by muscular effort. What holds us up is ultimately the ground, but to experience the upward thrust of the earth we have to let go of effort and relax onto our solidity. The head can rest on the flesh and bones of the neck, which in turn rests on the solidity of the thorax and so on down to the ground. This partially depends on skeletal posture, as is emphasised in the Alexander Technique, but a skeleton alone will not stand up and the solidity on which we can rest comes from the tonus of the flesh and internal organs.

This 'internal tonus' is, I believe, strongly related to how our needs are satisfied as infants. If a young baby is satisfied and comfortable her movement is effortless. If she is uncomfortable then the movement is full of effort, accompanied by grunts, pants and bunching of the muscles. Usually, in the latter case the tone of the extensor muscles is high and that of the flexor muscles is low, the back arches and the arms are pulled back. If, on the other hand, the baby is comfortable then extensor and flexor tone is balanced.

Thus an infant who regularly feels needy without being satisfied will develop the habit of using her muscles in effort rather than resting on her well fed insides. The sympathetic nerves are over-emphasized while the parasympathetic system is left in the dark. This means that the circulation to the organs and soft tissues is diminished and that they tend to shrivel and collapse.

Such a child is quite common in this culture of small families and work ethic and the sense of self develops a bias towards muscular activation. The sympathetic nervous system is continually stimulated and the mind is focused on doing rather than being. This shows in the adult as a posture which is held up by the back muscles and a level of mental anxiety, always actively thinking and planning rather than relaxing, trusting and letting go of worry.

We have just had a baby daughter and my hope for her is that in the first few months of her life we can give her a real sense of what it is like to be content. Later on it will be inevitable that she will want things that we can't or won't provide and then she will have to learn to either get them for herself or accept the lack. But if she has a secure basis of contentment, of trusting that her basic needs can be satisfied, then I believe that these disappointments will not be big traumas, and she will grow up a little through learning to deal with them. My experience has been that people who do not have this basic trust often grow up too fast to deal with adversity. Because of this, people often get locked into the state of having to do everything for themselves and are unable to trust intimacy or to delegate responsibility.

Both Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen² and practitioners of body centred psychotherapy such as Stanley Keleman³ and David Boadella⁴ have also researched and described in detail the postural and movement syndromes which develop from early stages of development having been missed. They describe how infant development is related to adult personality, to the general style of moving and how we relate to ourselves and to the ground through simply standing.

We have only been standing upright for a small fraction of our evolutionary history and still start off life crawling on all fours. So, originally and developmentally the front of the body relates to the ground while the back of the body relates to forward motion and intent to do something. In my opinion, this is why the Earth meridians (Spleen & Stomach) are found on the front and the Bladder meridian is found on the back, (since it's energy is of transmission of impulse). Our transition to verticality means that these ancient functions can get confused, that we use our back muscles to support ourselves rather than to move ourselves through space. This is one of the reasons why an inability to rest on our solidity, our inner flesh, is often reflected in an emptiness of the Earth meridians.

However, whatever the state of the meridians, the key point is that such a person is very much in his muscular system and is holding himself up with effort. Of course, the muscles are an integral part of our ability to stand upright, but I am talking about an overuse of their power, a contraction beyond the call of duty. Abdominal organ tone is generally low while extensor tone is high.

Holistically, the person is not resting on the solid ground of their being, they are trying to hold themselves up, trying to be different from who they are, not satisfied with what they've got and not trusting that other people could accept them as they are. Often people who are not contacting their Spleen energy identify relaxation and physical floppiness. They can't imagine standing up and moving while being relaxed so can only collapse to rest.

So how does one work with this in practice, how does one help the client to become aware of his internal means of support. Initially, I approach this work physically, helping the central nervous system's 'image' of the body to include the internal organ system. My approach involves physically or vocally finding the 'rhythm of the soft tissues'. Each organ and tissue has a resonant frequency which means that if you vibrate the whole body at that rhythm then that organ will move more than the others around it. This articulation stimulates the central nervous system to become sensorily 'aware' of that organ.

Once the nervous system embraces the soft tissues, a re-organisation of the circulation and autonomic motor systems can take place to increase the tonus of the organs and flesh. That is, more fluids are directed to the deep tissues. This creates an internal sense of the 'ground under the feet', the sense of physical solidity which allows for relaxation of the muscles. Sometimes it is not necessary to work so directly with the organs but only to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system through the still and deep touch known as 'tonifying touch' in Zen Shiatsu. Related techniques are used in Body-Mind Centering and Visceral Manipulation, which also work in more detail with the articulation of the organs and their active incorporation.

However, equally important is the relationship with the client. If I am trying to 'cure' them, to make them 'better', the energy of the relationship is the same as the energy of the disorder. This is such an important point it is worth labouring. Just as the physical aspect of Spleen imbalance means not being able to rest on one's internal solidity, the mental experience usually includes an inability to accept myself as I am.

A therapeutic relationship focussing on change and cure will only amplify this tendency. Therefore, I am especially careful to concentrate on helping the client to be aware of, to value and to accept themselves as they are instead of colluding with their desire to change.

One could say that all therapy involves transformation, but the change desired by someone who is insecure is usually projected outwards ('I wish I was in a relationship', 'I want to get rid of my back problem', 'I wish I was less fat', 'I want more energy'). The change that I support within this form of touch is more a development of awareness with a compassion for yourself, an understanding of why you became fat, damaged your back or are afraid of relationship. This allows the vulnerable part to feel supported and loved within you and allows for natural growth and healing. It allows true self-support to grow rather than relying on a therapist, parent-figure or illness to give you what you need.

For the form of touch associated with the Supporting Function (Spleen & Stomach), the keywords are focussing on being rather than doing, becoming aware of the underlying vulnerabilities rather than trying to cure the problems that are often compensatory reactions. In a wider sense, the role of the therapist is to be like the Ground. Being there for the client but not doing everything for them.

References

- 1 **BILL PALMER:** 'The Six Forms of Touch' 1987
- 2 **BONNIE BAINBRIDGE COHEN:** Sensing, Feeling & Action. 1993
- 3 **STANLEY KELEMANN:** See especially 'Emotional Anatomy'
- 4 **DAVID BOADELLA:** See 'Life Streams, an introduction to Biosynthesis'