



## Classical Acupuncture Methods of New York P.C.

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### *What Does It Mean To Be Healthy?*

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Health is an elusive concept. Often times, in Western Medicine, health is defined by the absence of disease, but as all of us have experienced there are many times when we will be unhealthy in our lifestyle or attitudes while not yet evidencing disease. Therein lies the difference between Western Medicine and Eastern Medicine. In Eastern Medicine the body is seen to operate around a force known as qi (pronounced “chi”) which is often rendered as “energy,” but this definition falls far short of the implication that this word has for us to understand the dynamic of health.

#### **Four Pillars**

Traditionally the rubric of East Asian medicine is divided into four “pillars” or avenues of approach in relation to therapeutic techniques. Acupuncture and moxibustion is the first of these approaches. Within this method of East Asian medicine the concept of qi is restricted to a circuitous flow which travels in predictable lines known as meridians and stopping at points on the surface of the body that can be stimulated with acupuncture needles or moxa, which is the herb *artemisia vulgaris*. Within this avenue of approach the internal organs, the spirits which are traditionally seen to inhabit the body, and the surface where the meridians run are seen to be conjoined in a dance of mutual correspondence. Understanding the signs of the surface one can diagnose the interior. Knowing the interior movements of qi one will be able to predict changes on the surface. One example of this is that liver problems will show in the quality of the nails. Knowing this it is easy to keep an eye of the state of one’s nails to monitor the health of the liver. However this is not the only view of qi.

In the second pillar, herbal medicine and diet therapy, qi is defined as flavor. But this is more than merely how something tastes. Flavors are considered traditionally to carry with them certain functions. Therefore the ingestion of specific flavors will change the body’s metabolic processes by altering this component of the person’s qi. In this regard the difference between food and medicine is a narrow one, yet the East Asian view is that herbs are “bad food.” This means that while you may eat the same foods every day and still get the same value from them, herbs will over time lose their effectiveness since the body develops a resistance to them. This requires higher doses over time to get the same effect or a cycling with other herbs to allow the body to be desensitized. This is perhaps the biggest drawback to self prescribing herbs since the appropriate herbs for the individual’s constitution usually require a trained specialist and the length of time

before the body resists the herb will vary from herb to herb. Yet from the personal health perspective it is possible to track the flavors that one craves to diagnose this component of one's qi. Sweet foods, for example, strengthen the spleen which in traditional medicine is the motive force of both digestion and cognition. When stressed the natural response is to crave sweets. However sweet foods are hard to digest and provide a short burst of energy which then leads to a low and a new craving for more. This cycle, if identified early, can easily be corrected before it is time to try to lose the spare tire.

Yet qi has further definitions in East Asian medicine. In the realm of physical manipulation, which is the third avenue of approach, qi is defined as your posture and your gait. The way that the individual holds herself and the way she moves is a major component of health, and this is an expression of her qi. We have all had the experience of tight shoulders or neck which was unsensed until someone massaged it. Here we can keep tabs on our health by judging how flexible or tense we are and how smoothly we move through our daily schedule. If by mid morning we need to take a break for our back to recover, then there is something impeding the maintenance of our health.

Finally, the last component of qi is the one embraced by the fourth pillar of East Asian medicine; qigong. The word qigong literally means "qi work." This is a blanket term to cover a battery of traditional practices ranging from stretches and postures, to seated meditations. However the common thread in all of these traditional practices is that the conception of qi is that it is the connection of the individual to the universe. This can be seen as spirituality or tranquillity, but it should be considered to be the most accessible aspect of qi to every individual. The feeling of warmth and contentment that comes in a loved one's embrace is the clearest example of this aspect of qi. Unfortunately it is this aspect of qi which we become most easily disconnected to from our daily stresses which make us feel alone and isolated. It is this loss of a sense of connection which we will feel most readily but be unable to pinpoint its origin. This is the component of health that we need to guard most previously since it will subtly influence every corner of our life as we allow ourselves to become disconnected and jaded with the world. Practice of any system of qigong should allow the individual to be uplifted and, as one of my teachers phrased it, "see the world in every moment as if it is the first time."

## Charting Ourselves

So how do we approach health? First we need to not define ourselves as healthy if we are without disease. Disease is a branch which has grown out of a root of disharmony. Rooting out our health requires us to examine our lives within the parameters of the concept of qi as expressed in the four pillars of East Asian medicine. Charting where we stand on each of the four pillars we can assess if the tableau of our health rests squarely on top of them or if they are unbalanced, does our health balance precariously like a building with a poor foundation? Explore these following questions and rate yourself.

### 1. Qi as linking the interior and exterior

Examine yourself from head to toe. Does your skin look vibrant? Are your eyes lively? Are your nails strong and healthy? Is your tongue coated?

Rate your observations on a scale totaling 1 to 10 (10 being best). Score \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Qi as flavor and function

Can you digest all flavors and types of food well? Are your stools regular and well formed? Do you eat on a regular schedule? Do you tolerate all foods without cravings? Is your intake independent of your stress level?

Rate your observations on a scale totaling 1 to 10 (10 being best). Score \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. Qi as gait and posture

Look at your self in a mirror. Are you balanced in bearing your weight between your legs or do you favor one leg over the other? Are your shoulders even or do you slouch? Are your muscles supple and flexible? Can you do your daily activities without fatigue?

Rate your observations on a scale totaling 1 to 10 (10 being best). Score \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. Qi as connection to the universe

Do you feel satisfied with your life? Do you think the world is a positive place? Do you think people are intrinsically good? Do you like to wake up and face the day? Can you see the divine all around you?

Rate your observations on a scale totaling 1 to 10 (10 being best). Score \_\_\_\_\_

## Scoring

Total your results. If you scored over thirty then you are probably considered healthy from the Western medical perspective. If you are between twenty and thirty then you may be tending toward some manifestation of disease. If below twenty then your state of health probably needs medical management.

However these guidelines are very general. What you should do is compare the four aspects of health as conceptualized in the East Asian model of qi and assess yourself as to how balanced you are. Perhaps you look great with a vibrant exterior, and impeccable posture, and an iron stomach, but you loathe the world. This may give you a passable composite score but your health is extremely poor. If there are major imbalances within the four pillars, then the time to correct them is before disease develops. I have often observed in my clinical practice that people devote more effort to preventative maintenance for their cars than for their health. Hopefully this little self test will allow you to understand your own state of health and correct any imbalances before they become manifested as disease.

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