

The swamp inside us

by Joel Whitehead

"No, I'm not really thirsty, but I try to drink lots of water," is something that I hear all the time. I look at their nails; they're pale. They are cold, bloated, and go to the toilet for a bowel movement three or four times a day. They often get stomach cramps before they go.

In Chinese medicine we call this a 'spleen deficient person with internal dampness'. These days it is one of the most prevalent conditions we see, but ironically few people consider it a problem until it is too late. To the Chinese practitioner the spleen is that organ that is supposed to take food from the stomach which has ground it, and send it upward for use in the body. In function it is more analogous to the pancreas of the modern day form of anatomical science. Anyway, it takes the essence of this food and sends it up to the lungs, which send it throughout the body mixed with the lung's air energy to form "Qi" or the basic energy of the body. This has a yang quality which is the moving and warming nature of the body's forces.

It also sends substance up to the Heart to help it make blood. We say that the blood needs the Qi to move and that without the blood, the Qi would not have matter or substance and could not be anchored, thereby having no worthwhile existence at all.

We perceive this spleen like a boiling pot that converts what is dynamic out of food and sends the rest downward to be further separated from its water; one part becoming fecal matter, the other part urine. By nature, it essentially must be warm and dry, as too much liquid would douse its fire and make it ineffective. If this happened it could not steam up the essence and what is necessary to give us vitality would descend in a cold sludge.

Whenever I'm dealing with such a patient, I find that their lives reflect a familiar pattern. Of course they don't come to see me about the signs of spleen Qi deficiency, because to them these signs seem so normal. They come in with complaints of low energy, weight gain, being cold, or aching in the joints. Most of the time I can see their condition even before I start to ask them questions.

I ask them about their bowel movements. "Good!" they say. " I go several times a day and it comes out very easily." We have the odd notion here that if it's not constipation, everything is A-okay. By delving further we come to find out that it is soft, fibrous, thin, and bordering on ongoing diarrhea. "How's your thirst?" I ask. "It's okay," they answer. "I'm not thirsty at all, but I try to drink 8 - 10 glasses of water a day." People become defensive because they know that too much thirst could indicate diabetes, called *polydipsia*. However, a good thirst should be well regarded. A total lack of thirst means that you don't want any because you already have dampness inside you. This is not very good, as inner dampness is one of the most stagnating of elements. Water travels with good energy down a babbling brook until it hits a pond in the stream and then everything stops.

It's what this 'stopping' leads to that should concern you. This is what I call the 'swamp'. Heaviness or feeling heavy is one of the main complaints. The limbs feel heavy and a related headache feels as if a tight band were compressing the head. Dampness is also usually synonymous with coldness; first because energy can't circulate well to keep us warm, and secondly because water is what we naturally use to cool anything. So when this person catches cold they are chilled. They have clear symptoms like a runny nose and watery eyes. They urinate more frequently when it's cold and the urine is clear like water. In advanced cases there is a recognizable rounded paleness in the person; as pale as snow or ice and as sluggish as it is when it melts.

Dampness is not very easy to get rid of. When dampness has stagnated for a long time and the stagnation increases, it may even turn to heat. At this stage we call it 'damp-heat'. These people get urinary infections, yeast infections, wicked headaches, nausea, and a characteristic "thirst without a desire to drink." This would mean that the mouth is dry all the time, but because of the residual dampness inside them already, they have no desire for any real amount of water.

While neither of these conditions are fatal in themselves, the problems that spring from these can be very serious and debilitating. For instance it, is often a pre-diabetic condition. Water buildup is a step away from phlegm buildup, and with a lowered immunity, could be an invitation to pneumonia. Most ongoing cases become anemic and often soon become predisposed to hypothyroid conditions. Many people who feel exhausted and yet have a problem with high blood pressure, started here. The list of possibilities are infinite, but you shouldn't wait for them to come to you, before you do something about the swamp lurking inside you.

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