

SO WHAT'S A HEALTHY DIET?

by Oliver Cowmeadow

In this article, I want to present the approach of the Holistic Cooking & Nutrition School, which was founded in 2004.

So what is a healthy diet? This can seem a confusing question, as there are so many ideas on diet - around eating raw foods, eating fruit and vegetables five times a day, not eating high protein and carbohydrate foods together, eating for your blood type, and a plethora of different slimming diets. It can be tempting to give up trying to find a healthier diet with all these ideas, which often seems to contradict each other.

I first started thinking seriously about my food in 1980 when I started studying Oriental medicine, including macrobiotics and shiatsu. The Oriental approach to health and diet really appealed to me because it uses universal principles of how nature works to understand the detailed working of the human body and being. This seemed to give a good understanding of why we become ill and what we can do to cure illness and even more usefully, to prevent ourselves getting ill in the first place. I have spent the last 23 years exploring and applying these oriental health and dietary principles to myself and to many clients and students, as well as experimenting with many other approaches to diet. My conclusions are that this approach is extremely useful in guiding us as to 'what is a healthy diet', for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Oriental medicine has a rich understanding of how the body and mind work, using principles like yin and yang and the five elements to see how we function in health and in illness. Diet forms just one aspect of this understanding, mainly viewing foods in terms of their energetic qualities, such as contractive or expansive, warming or cooling, or containing more Fire energy or Water energy. Thus the particular affects of any food can be seen on our organs and bodily systems, as well as on our emotions, moods and thinking. This is in contrast to many popular dietary ideas based on only a single idea, such as drinking lots of water, eating foods raw, or eating more of a specific food or supplement. Basing your whole diet on only a single idea may have some specific benefit, but quite obviously cannot guide us as a whole as to what is a healthy diet.

A second reason I like the Oriental approach is that it sees balance as the way to health. We need a balance between activity and rest, work and play, times with friends and family and time on our own. Some physical activity is definitely healthy, but too much or too little can be detrimental. We can have too much or too little of almost anything. Dietary wise our recent cultural pattern has been to overeat animal fats and proteins, leading to a multitude of health problems such as heart disease, bowel and breast cancer. Our needs for protein and fat is quite small and is easily met with smaller amounts of less fatty animal foods such as fish and seafood. It may be healthy to be vegan for a while to allow the body to use up and discharge the excess fats in the body, however, being vegan for too long may lead to some deficiencies. It is all a matter of balance!

Beware of dietary plans that rigidly advise lots of one thing, for example, the present fad of drinking lots of water. Common sense tells us we can drink too little fluid, but also too much can be detrimental to health. In Oriental medicine, too much fluid can weaken the Kidney Energy. It is often said we should eat lots of fruit. Fruit has a watery, cooling and relaxing nature that can be useful in balancing someone who is hot and tense, but what if a person suffers from cold feelings inside, then eating lots of fruit is not such a good idea. The same is true of raw foods, which have a more cooling and opening affect on us. Some raw food is good for most people. If we eat a lot of heating, contractive foods such as eggs, cheese or meats, then lots of salad could provide a good balance. But what if we already feel cold, too open and emotionally vulnerable? Then it might be good to eat mainly cooked foods to give warmth and inner energy.

Another feature of the Oriental approach is its holistic approach, seeing how different foods affect us emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. This is way beyond anything that western nutrition currently tells us. For example, the Kidney Energy not only nourishes the healthy functioning of our physical kidneys but also gives us will, courage and direction. If we are feeling confused about our direction in life and lacking in motivation and will, it could be that our Kidney Energy is low. We could then choose foods to strengthen this function in ourselves, such as mineral rich soups, fish and seafood and dried seaweeds. And staying off coffee would be helpful too! Food is intimately related to our destiny and can either hinder or help the fulfilment of our life's purposes.

Human beings are all so different, with different life styles and different life aims, so naturally we need different diets. Beware of anyone saying that one diet is good for everyone. The diet may have been good for them and may help some people feel much better, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is good for you. In fact, because of our individual needs, any one diet that makes some people feel better will inevitably make others feel worse.

To find our ideal diets, we need a balance between listening to our own body's needs and having some simple means of assessing our health. On the first point, it is vital not to override our desires for foods, as we have an in-built system that leads us towards foods that have the nutrients or energetic qualities we need at a particular time. However, our desires also need to be informed by good guidance, so we learn to tell the difference between foods that truly do us good, and those which we have an unhealthy addiction to. In Oriental medicine, we can be informed by various methods of 'diagnosing' our state of health; these vary from looking at different areas of the face, eyes or hands that tell us about the physical condition of our internal organs, to more general assessment about our emotional and spiritual life. With this kind of approach, we can be continually learning more about our health and the adjustments we can make to our diet to keep increasing our health and wellbeing.

One final point. I believe our choice of diet is one of the fundamental elements of our human freedom. With a good understanding of diet, we can exercise our freedom to choose physical health, to create a sound basis for our emotional and mental health and for the realisation of our life goals.

