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FINE TUNING THE ENGINE OF THE MARTIAL ARTIST

UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANS - THE STOMACH AND SPLEEN

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IN THIS FOUR PART series, we'll be looking at 10 of the primary organs of the body according to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and what you can do to improve their health and function. Why is this important for the martial artist? Simple, if the organs of your car aren't working how far and fast do you think you can go? Not very far I'm afraid, and the same is true of the body. The organs of the body are the engines that drive the martial artist – without the optimal running of these internal systems you cannot perform optimally as a martial artist.

As a minor example: according to TCM if your liver is stagnated or deficient then you may suffer from a constrained or low blood volume which will, in turn, inevitably lead to problems with the muscles, including but not limited to cramping, weakness, increased length of recovery times, poor reaction times, a higher risk of injury in terms of pulled muscles, strains and DOMS. Liver stagnation can also affect your vision, balance, headaches and fatigue. So there is a relatively simple way to test and restore to optimal function – in which case, and among other things you'll be faster, more fluid and resistant to injury.

Practicing martial arts and perfecting technique is only half the battle. To truly be a great martial artist one must develop and balance the body both internally and externally. I'll leave it to you to perform the external manifestation through rigorous training and self-discipline while this guide will give you pointers and tips on how to improve the internal function.

The martial and healing arts have long been hand-in-hand. Many arts focus on the development of 'qi' or 'ki', the essentially life force energy that provides you with longer life and near superhuman levels of strength and physical prowess. This is done in both external and internal forms and trains the body and massages the organs through the contraction and flexion of our muscles combined with breathing exercises which pumps vital blood and lymphatic fluid to every organ and nourishes the body for total health. If you practice any of these energy-based arts you may find this series helps to elucidate and clarify many of the more difficult to grasp elements of that training and support many of those practices.

Other martial arts choose to be less traditional in their outlook choosing to specialise and focus on sports, self defence and other goal orientated outcomes. If that's the case, this series will undoubtedly help you in supplementing your training. I would encourage you to apply this information to your daily life and training, practice the exercises and self treatments listed to improve efficiency and overall total health, reduce injury and aid recovery if it does occur. In order to fully understand the nature and role of the organs it's important to have an understanding of the philosophical background in which they're viewed. This ultimately comes back to the most famous of Eastern concepts - yin and yang.

The sunny side of the hill

Yin and yang are familiar terms with these terms, but haven't been educated as to what they mean. Yin and yang is nothing more than a concept that explains highlights contrast. Everyone is familiar with the concept of opposites and in TCM this is the fundamental basis of all understanding. Yin literally means the shady side of a hill, and yang the sunny side. In TCM these terms were expanded to show the varying contrast between all things. For instance yin is water, yang is fire. Yin is dark, yang is bright. Yin is mental, emotional, yang physical. Yin is passive, yang is active. But perhaps the greatest contrast, yin is female and yang is male. Humans have always understood the nature of their world through contrast (night and day) and our perception of physical reality are grounded in such concepts. Yin and yang is the simple terms of Chinese Medicine that allows the human body and it's relative health. This can be summed up in the following passage taken from 'Guarding The Three Treasures' by Daniel Reid. "In philosophy, the Great Principle of Yin and Yang provides the measure which determines all values and qualities. 'Hot' (yang) has no degree without 'cold' (yin) to contrast it. 'Good' (yang) has no significance without the concept of 'bad' (yin) as a counterpoint. Beauty without 'ugliness' to compare it remains invisible."

Despite the seemingly complexity of TCM and the nature of disharmony and imbalances of the body, it can always be reduced to this simple equation: you either have too much or too little of something. And thus the treatment is also relatively simple. Decrease what you have too much of and increase what you have too little of until balance has been achieved.

Inter-relation of the organs

Yin and yang represent the relationship between all parts of the body. In TCM the organs need to be in harmony to function correctly in the body. All organs are related and work in harmony to maintain the health of the body. For example, the liver helps to break down food and convert it into energy, the heart helps to pump blood throughout the body, the lungs help to regulate the body's fluids, and the kidneys help to filter waste products from the blood. These organs work together to maintain the body's overall health and well-being.

The spleen

The spleen is a vital organ in Chinese Medicine, it plays a role in the production and regulation of blood, and also helps to remove old and damaged red blood cells from the body. The spleen is also responsible for the production of white blood cells, which are essential for the body's immune system.

YIN

Spine

Liver

YANG

Stomach

Kidneys

Blood

Blood

The organ of adaptation

The spleen is one of the primary organs in TCM, and it is responsible for adapting to various stresses such as physical, emotional, and mental stresses. The spleen helps to regulate the body's immune system, which is important for maintaining health and preventing disease.

The spleen is also responsible for the production of white blood cells, which help to fight off infections and disease. In addition, the spleen helps to regulate the body's blood pressure and help to maintain the body's overall balance.

In TCM, the spleen is often referred to as the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the body. This is because the spleen is thought to be the source of our vital energy, or 'qi', which is essential for all of our bodily functions. The spleen is also considered to be the 'root' of our emotions, and is therefore important for maintaining our mental and emotional well-being.

Are you eating your words?

The spleen plays an important role in our ability to process and absorb nutrients from food. It helps to digest proteins, carbohydrates, and fats, and to extract nutrients from them. The spleen also helps to regulate the amount of blood that is circulating in the body, and it helps to maintain the body's normal blood pressure.

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Are you eating your words?
SELF MASSAGE GUIDE FOR THE SPLEEN

MASSAGE EACH point in a clockwise direction three times a day for 30 seconds, alternating each side of the body. So for instance, in the morning do all the SPLEENs (i.e. the right side) and so on. If your spleen and stomach are weak, many of these points will be tender to the touch.

Feeling those thinking about more insidious applications, offering your opponent a sweet drink or sugary snack before a competition bout will make those points weak and tender on the body. As a result, a strike to any of these will drop them very quickly. However, that would be cheating, wouldn’t it?

SPL1EN 6 (figure 1) - located just off the edge bone about three inches or three finger widths above the high point of the ankle on the inside of the leg.

SPL1EN 10 (figure 2) - located about four and a half inches from the middle of your head, roughly around the hairline at the corner of the forehead.

STOMACH 41 (figure 3) - found on the midpoint of the ankle crease. You should find a small depression formed by two tendons; the point is located there.

SPL1EN 9 (figure 4) - located on the inside of the leg just in the depression below the knee.

STOMACH 10 (figure 5) - located about four finger widths down from the kneecap, on the outside of the leg, just off the shinbone. This point is also excellent for boosting energy levels. If you feel fatigued or tired during a competition, you can use this point to give you a much needed boost - it’s known as the ‘three mile point’ in Chinese and is often used by Olympic athletes to improve endurance.

OLYMPIC REFLEX POINT (figure 6) - an extremely useful point located just on the edge of the ribs. Tapping and rubbing this point balances the digestive organs of the body, supports the immune system, raises one’s energy levels and balances the blood chemistry of the body. I recommend stimulating this point before and after any meal.

martial artist where fast thinking and analysis of an opponent’s performance can be the deciding factor of victory or defeat.

While this may seem very odd, it’s not too strange once you get used to the idea. For instance, how often can be drawn between the digestive processes and thought is what you are doing now – reading. As you read each sentence you have to adapt to the writing style and the words I use (food) and process them as sentences and ideas you recognise (digestion) and thus understand what is written (nutritional substance and value).

If it still seems strange, you’ll find the idea is unconvincingly recognised with many phrases and common statements reflecting on the connection between two seemingly unrelated things. If you get hungry, for instance, how often have you heard someone say: “This book is hard to digest” or “there’s food for thought” or “I need to chew over this”. New techniques and new ideas are mentally stuck trying to learn a new technique, kata or sequence of movements, may the problem isn’t with your head . . . it’s with your digestion.

Butterflies in the stomach?

And the brain-body connection doesn’t stop there. Ask yourself how you feel after you’ve eaten anything because food has a pronounced effect on our mental and emotional state. For example, overeating makes many people sluggish, tired and lethargic, not really surprising as your spleen and stomach is slowed down by the excess food it has to work through and process.

When engaging in study or extended periods of concentration, the body craves sweet food (a flavour that benefits the spleen). The same is true if we’re worried or nervous. Think of the last time you stepped on the floor for a competition or a grading – butterflies in your stomach and your thoughts tend to fly about too, from possibility to possibility. The stomach also becomes knotted and tense and the mind shuts down.

Then there’s the emotional component. Our ability to nurture and support ourselves, to have our needs met and to aid others in satisfying their own needs is the emotional role of the spleen. This isn’t surprising when we look at the strong connection to food and comfort. Many people, when they feel bad, eat to relieve that feeling. This isn’t healthy, and is a confusion of trying to satisfy us emotionally through satisfying our appetites, and martial artists are no exception to this rule.

Finding fluidity of movement

Granted it begins to make sense how nurturing our spleen would benefit our overall health and wellbeing, but can it directly improve our performance as martial artists?

The answer lies in physiological expression of the spleen. As we now know a function of the spleen is to support the body and the physiological expression of this is the fascia and soft tissues. Fascia is a continuous network of moist membrane that wraps our muscles (soft tissue) and connects the whole body, holding everything comfortable in place. It supports and contains the body and without it our muscles would have no tone and we'd collapse in a saggy heap, thus the physiological expression of the spleen supports and contains the whole body.

When the fascia and muscles of the body are relaxed and without tension and constriction the body can move easily and smoothly. Our limbs have a full and easy sense of motion and our organs are all supported and nurtured. When the spleen is healthy, the fascia attain this relaxed state and we are ‘at home’ in our bodies, capable of expressing ourselves fluidly through movement – the goal of the martial arts and the essence of perfect performance be it in competition or kata.

The spleen is a vital organ and system that needs to be in harmony with the whole body to provide total health, and as such is vital for our physical and mental function as martial artists. Superior spleen strength directly translates into superior martial capacity be it increased fluidity of movement, greater resistance to injury, or increased mental function and reaction time. So how can you help your spleen and thus help your performance?

Save your spleen

This question can be answered at any level where the spleen is manifest, in other words, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

From a physical perspective the spleen likes to stretch and relax. This is because stretching eases out congestion and tension in the muscles and soft tissues and brings balance and ease of movement to the limbs. Anything that affects the physical in this nature affects the spleen. So, after hard physical training it’s important and most beneficial if you take the time to practice some deep stretching and relaxation techniques. There are many martial arts that recognise the need for this balance between the tension of combat and the need to relax and stretch, so make sure you take advantage of that.

Supplementing your training with flexibility and relaxation work will also benefit you directly through increased range of motion, resistance to injury and, of course, greater range of motion, as well as increased speed of movement – nothing slows you down like tense muscles. And again these are all attributes and functions of the spleen. Yoga is particularly beneficial and often compliments martial arts training.

Of course, an excellent method for nurturing the spleen is through acupuncture (and in this feature I’ve detailed a self-massage guide you can practice to boost your overall energy and rebalance your spleen, thus improve your martial arts performance). While not as effective as an acupuncture needling session, regular practice of the self-massage can be great help. If you’d like to take your performance to another level I’d suggest you make an appointment for a free consultation in my practice. The details are at the end of this article.

From a dietary perspective the spleen can be treated using a number of foods, such as sweet apples, grapes, garlic, ginseng, honey, loquats, mandarin oranges, oats, pineapple, raspberries and a variety of spices. I recommend warm soups and stews. The body naturally breaks down all food and turns it into a warm soup or stew-like mixture from which it breaks things down further and transports nutrients and amino acids around the body.

You can dramatically aid your stomach and spleen by taking the work out of the process by having broken down your food for digestion already with warm soups and stews which is an excellent method of providing warm and comforting nutrition. I’d also avoid any raw or cold foods as this can have a stagnating effect on the digestive process and decrease overall energy and productivity. In addition things like dairy, sweets, sugar, fruit juice, ice cream, cold fluids, melon, pork and tofu should be avoided. You can also directly work on the spleen yourself by following my simple self-massage guide for the spleen, which is reproduced here.

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