



# Magical Bean of Dancing Goats

## Paul O'Brien

I can't tell you how delighted many of my patients are when I tell them they can enjoy their beloved morning coffee and it shall confer on to them innumerable health benefits. But it's true: Coffee may, in fact, be the secret to perfect health for many of us. Unfortunately, for others, it may be the bane of their existence. (See "Coded for Caffeine", elsewhere in this issue. –Ed.)

This brilliant bean is a paradox. It can help relieve the symptoms of many diseases (including weight gain – and yes, excess body fat is a disease state in traditional Chinese Medicine). Yet it can also make several other conditions worse.

According to legend, coffee first made its way into the world as the beverage of choice for millions on the plains of Ethiopia. Ancient Kadfi myth recounts that in Abyssinia a goat herder snoozing in the sun saw goats eating some odd red berries. Afterwards, the goats began dancing on their hind legs. Curious as to what power may have induced this, the goat-herder sampled

the berries himself and became rejuvenated in body and mind. He took the berries to his village and they became a staple of the people there.

Originally, coffee was brewed from the green centre of the red berries. Ever the medieval innovators, 13th century Arabs began to roast and grind the beans before brewing them, creating the coffee base we drink today. During this time, Arab doctors prescribed coffee to women to alleviate menstrual discomforts, perhaps because of caffeine's ability to enhance other painkillers. (Interestingly, today Western doctors prescribe the opposite.)

By the 15th and 16th centuries, farmers had planted coffee trees extensively in the region that is now modern Yemen. From there, the use of coffee beans spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and later to Turkey, India, and finally to China.

Once in China, it wasn't long before the bean was classified by its medicinal properties. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) developed a unique and simple method for categorizing everything – a method known as Five Element Theory. In this framework, each

person, plant, and thing can be broken into five basic constituents: earth, fire, wood, water and air. Each of these elements has associations with particular flavours and colours, and relationships to the functions of our organs and people's constitutions in general.

TCM views coffee as primarily derived from the wood element. The coffee bean itself is green, a colour that is associated with the liver and gallbladder. Now this is where things get interesting.

## LIVER ENERGY IMBALANCES

In the TCM system, the liver regulates the energy of our body and emotions. It is particularly susceptible to stress, anger and frustration. When the energy associated with the liver and gallbladder is constrained or tight, the energy of the entire body becomes depressed and lethargic. Coffee moves and frees the liver Qi (energy); thus coffee drinkers experience a strong sense of mental and physical vitality.

Liver energy imbalances can manifest as stagnation or deficiency.

In a case of liver Qi stagnation we often see signs of pain, chest distention, sighing, nausea, vomiting, poor

appetite, diarrhea, depression, moodiness, PMS, breast tenderness, and painful and/or irregular menstruation.

Many of these symptoms would also be present with liver blood stagnation (the liver stores blood so if it's stagnant in terms of energy it doesn't release blood), but would also include things such as abdominal pain, palpable masses in the abdomen, irregular and/or painful menstruation, possibly with dark clots, and physical evidence such as purple nails, purple lips or tongue.

shares many of the symptoms of liver fire blazing. In this case, we need to quickly purge and flush the liver, while stimulating the mind (*shen*) to focus better. Hence we drink coffee to try to sober up. Cool, huh?

While coffee is said to "dredge" the liver Qi, it does not soothe it. Those suffering from an imbalance of liver energy and those prone to IBS, migraines or eye problems should probably avoid coffee, as the increased energy and Qi movement can worsen these problems.

#### THE ROLE OF THE GALLBLADDER

While the liver nourishes the muscles, the gallbladder nourishes the sinews and connective tissues.

The gallbladder helps us digest things both literally and metaphorically. It secretes bile, a vital digestive enzyme. It also helps us make decisions, as we "digest" the thoughts in our mind.

The gallbladder also affects dreams in a similar manner to the heart. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the mind finds itself troubled when resting if the gallbladder is weak. Traditionally, says Chinese medicine, "When the gallbladder is deficient, one dreams of fights, trials, and suicide." This is why, according to TCM, highly stressed people suffer nervous breakdowns and commit suicide. By stimulating the gallbladder, coffee may help improve mental health.

#### THE FLOW OF QI

Qi, the body's energy source in Chinese medicine, flows throughout the organism. Ideally, it flows freely, in a natural order that supports our bodies' metabolic functions.

The direction of Qi's flow is important in TCM. For instance, stomach Qi flows downwards. Thus, food descends from the stomach into the small intestine. If, on the other hand, the Qi of the

# "Coffee is the cure for what ails ya!"

By contrast, a person suffering with a liver blood deficiency would be borderline or fully anemic, presenting with symptoms such as numbness in the extremities, tics, tremors, dizziness, blurred vision, floaters, insomnia, dry skin/hair, scanty or lack of menstruation. This is because there is simply not enough blood in the body to nourish the muscles and eyes.

The liver can also be affected by fire and cold. Cold sinks downwards, leading to painful, tender genital regions. Fire flicks upwards, leading to a condition called liver fire blazing: headache and migraine, irritability, explosive anger, dizziness, tinnitus, a bitter taste in the mouth, red face, red eyes, and dream-disturbed sleep. It's easy to see in an example like this why coffee would be a very bad idea!

However, many people temporarily induce such a state by adding large amounts of heat (fire) to the liver – it's called getting drunk and

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stomach moves upward (called rebellious Qi), we feel nauseous or vomit.

Liver Qi, when released, typically flows upward. Gallbladder Qi, in contrast, tends to move downward. By stimulating both liver and gallbladder, coffee thus promotes both an upward and downward action, which in healthy people is a balanced flow.

However, people with particular underlying health conditions will experience imbalanced flows when they consume coffee, or too much coffee. Coffee can reverse the natural flow of energy in the liver, causing it to release too much Yang Qi, which rises upwards to stimulate the heart, leading to insomnia. Coffee can also cause too much downward liver Qi, which leads to diarrhea.

Qi becomes constrained in a number of ways. The two most common are diet and emotion.

If we eat foods that prevent or slow the natural flow of Qi, such as heavy amounts of cold sweet food (e.g. ice cream), the body becomes slow due to the cold; the sweetness causes the formation of dampness and phlegm that can cause blockages in the flow of energy. This leads to stagnant accumulation and build up, like sediment in a river leading to a natural dam, or better still, fat on the human body (which

is characterized in TCM as physical phlegm and dampness; over-fat people often feel slow-moving and lethargic).

Stagnant Qi can also occur as a result of emotional stagnation, such as being stuck in a boring, frustrating job, or a loveless marriage in which one feels trapped. This emotional feeling of being trapped, caged, and/or restrained manifests physically starting with the liver. Affected people often lose their appetite, develop chronic pain and become depressed. Thus, in some cases, coffee temporarily cheers people up and gives them energy by freeing the liver Qi. This gift, of course, is only temporary.

## HEART, MIND, AND BLOOD

In traditional Chinese medicine, our mind (*shen*) is governed and housed in the heart and blood. According to the Five Elements Theory, the colour red indicates the heart. Though the unroasted coffee bean is green, the berry that surrounds it is red. Thus coffee is associated with both heart (the red aspect) and liver (green aspect). The red part of the coffee bean is responsible for the mental stimulation of the body. Excess coffee stokes the fire of the heart, thus inducing wakefulness and insomnia, reducing anxiety, and enhancing cognition. The

green liver element, in contrast, is associated with the physically purgative, diuretic nature of coffee.

Coffee opens the orifices and produces stimulating and focused mental activity. However, timing of food or medicine is important in TCM. When drunk too late, coffee can disrupt the *shen*.

Dose amount is also important. Too much of a substance can be as problematic as too little. While small amounts of coffee often have health benefits, the large quantities that many North Americans drink can lead to problems.

Coffee also has detoxifying properties according to TCM, which are signified by its bitter taste. It is said to clear "dampness", such as excess weight or water retention. Indeed, the caffeine in coffee can both suppress appetite and induce urination, as well as sweating.

On the other hand, coffee can be useful for individuals with suppressed energy levels, muddy thoughts, and a heavy body. It will release the body's energy, improve mental function and clarity and relieve water retention. It will rejuvenate the body and mind, returning those that take the magical bean to a state of exuberance and vitality.

Perhaps even enough to make a goat dance?