

# The Myth of Deficiency

If some is good, more is better. Bigger, Faster, Newer, Stronger. America has a voracious appetite for goods and services, and modern economic activity produces a vast array of them to give our personalities a constant flow of stimulating experiences. Both physical and experiential interactions with the outside world generate internal transactions. These transactions then yield influences that are:

- Integrated into postnatal *qi* – *qi* and blood, which are the ability to interact with the environment and the capacity to experience that process
- Released or expelled – back to the environment
- Unresolved and suspended – within the being

The first two products of internalizing and digesting inputs are well recognized, as they represent the conscious mind's naïve perception of life process. Individuals choose to internalize physical and experiential inputs (*ying*), and that simple act commits the embodied spirit's resources to respond. Some inputs are simply rejected immediately upon being taken in, which disrupts the stomach's key role of internalizing both experiential and physical inputs. Most are digested, with the support of the individual's *jing* (essential) *qi*, and the unused byproducts are expelled as waste.

The third option displaces the individual's unresolved reactions to experience into the physical body, where they accumulate beyond conscious awareness. The classical tradition of *Neijing (Inner Classic)* includes the theory of five sets of channels and vessels to differentiate and therapeutically address this notion that incipient pathogenic factors accumulate over time. Modern Chinese medical theory is based on the direct relationship between the primary channels and the *zangfu*. Thus, it focuses on balancing current manifestations, rather than rooting out and expelling stagnations when they are still "dormant."

Each individual's ability to transact with the outside world is based upon their life experience eliciting *yuan* (source) *qi* to emanate from the unified essential being (*jing*) through the Five Phases (*wuxing*):

Wood – moves up and out from *Mingmen* (Life Gate, Du 4) via the back-*shu* points to nourish the *zangfu* and channels

Fire – spreads the spark of awareness (*shen*) to the sense organs, which allows them to receive experiential inputs

Earth – internalizes both physical and experiential inputs, so they can be digested then consolidates the result of internal process into the individual’s embodiment; descends the *gu* (valley) *qi*

Metal – descends *kong qi* (empty *qi* – air) into the lungs, so that the embodied spirit can interact with it; *yuan qi* “grasps” lung *qi* by causing it to descend into the cavity, where the embodied spirit can interact with it.

Water – secures the foundation of individual life by polarizing to the world; extends the chaos of being to another generation through producing and secreting sexual fluids

The embodied spirit’s most essential functions in life consist of moving out into the world with awareness to choose physical and experiential influences to internalize. Those internalized influences are then digested and marked with the present moment by breathing into them to generate postnatal *qi* (*qi* and blood). “Surplus” post-natal *qi* supports the individual’s *jing*-essence in generating sexual fluids, so individuals can bond with each other to create a next generation.

Modern Chinese medicine (TCM) considers *qi* and blood to be the key factors of post-natal *qi*. We are taught to evaluate their deficiencies and excesses associated with various *zangfu* as a central part of the diagnostic process, as though the amounts of these vital humors had any meaning without respect to their flow. Of course, we know the clinical “rule” that in order to tonify *qi* or blood, one must also circulate that humor, yet that insight hasn’t prevented clinical thinking from degenerating into treatment strategies that simply balance excesses and deficiencies.

Since each individual life depends on constant transactions with the environment, we would do well to turn the classification of clinical manifestations into a much more subtle inquiry because:

- Excesses develop when the embodied spirit fails to release to the exterior
- Deficiencies appear when some pathogenic stagnation (excess) consumes *qi* and/or blood in the interior, and eventually detracts from the embodied spirit’s ability to generate them

Indeed, there are many common excesses that masquerade as deficiencies:

1. The *Shang Han Lun* teaches that when **external cold (excess) penetrates to the *taiyin* “stage,”** the clinical manifestation looks **like our modern theory’s spleen *qi/yang* deficiency.**

**2. *Sanjiao* (triple warmer) excess looks like spleen and/or lung *qi* deficiency, and possibly kidney *qi* deficiency,** though it is actually a damp-heat accumulation.

The individual's *jing* (essence) is stored in the kidneys, which polarize into *yin* and *yang* to activate their moving *qi* (*dong qi*). This *dong qi* moves outward as *yuan qi* to nourish the core vital functions delineated above. The dissemination of *yuan qi* is regulated by the *sanjiao* (triple warmer) mechanism, which guards the individual's survival. When the *sanjiao* mechanism disseminates *yuan qi* too quickly, the embodied spirit expresses exhaustion, which forces the individual to refrain from such profligate spending. (for more on this, see my April '06 essay "Is this Excess or Deficiency?")

**3. Deflecting *yuan qi* to the interior to support dormancy can look like several *qi* and/or blood deficiencies,** all of which arise from excess accumulations.

In addition to those outward (*yang*) movements of *yuan qi* associated with the *wuxing*, it moves inward (*yin*) to deflect unresolved stagnations away from the primary channels into the *luo* or divergent channels, where they are embedded in physical humors. This process gives the individual the opportunity to maintain "unfinished business" in dormancy to either:

- Find the time, energy, or willingness to resolve them
- Continue living with them, until the embodied spirit can no longer generate sufficient postnatal *qi* to sustain dormancy

When individuals don't find adequate resolutions for their conflicts in life, they embody and accumulate them. People frequently internalize either physical or experiential influences to create experiences they want and avoid discomfort and difficult emotional/spiritual process. Of course, these attempts to avoid pain are ultimately hopeless, but that practical evaluation doesn't prevent many frenetic attempts to realize it.

Individuals internalize influences beyond those needed to sustain life in order to suspend current process by redirecting focus to new input. This strategy works temporarily by redirecting *yuan* (source) *qi* away from current struggle by deploying it to support the individual's process of digesting new input. In modern TCM, we refer to this intrinsic process as "Kidney *yang* supports Spleen *yang*."

The process of digesting new inputs "de-polarizes" current blocks by withdrawing *yang* from them, and storing the residue. In my last column (Feb. '09), I discussed the common use of "comfort foods" to deflect *yuan qi* away from their current awareness (fire) and into the physical digestion of food (earth). Yet, the "new" inputs need not be physical. Indeed, distracting the embodied spirit with its voracious appetite for satisfying sensory

experiences is more insidious than using comfort food, because it doesn't generate visible accumulation around the *daimai* (belt vessel).

Regardless of whether “new” inputs are physical or experiential, this basic strategy sacrifices some *yuan* (source) *qi* to suspend and store the unresolved conflict or struggle. The embodied spirit then “spends” more *yuan qi* to digest the new input. In the case of new physical input, it is generally digested directly into “excess” humors, which are then used to suspend the “old” unresolved issue. New experiential input distracts conscious attention away from unresolved struggle, which then drifts into denial – physically expressed as de-vitalized *jing* in the form of phlegm.

4. Healing is a fundamental change of direction. **While the embodied spirit is gathering postnatal *qi* to effect fundamental transformation** by breaking through its “pattern lock,” the clinical manifestation **often looks like spleen and/or lung *qi* deficiency.**

5. Once the embodied spirit has successfully negotiated the transformation(s) of healing, **the process of expelling unresolved pathogenic factors can look like:**

- **spleen *qi* deficiency**, when releasing or expelling damp in response to heat
- **kidney *qi/yin* deficiency**, when releasing or expelling heat in response to damp

6. Many individuals don't take the opportunity to resolve accumulating stagnations before they emerge in overt expression as progressive or degenerative pathologies. While functional in the short term, the embodied spirit's strategy of suspending and storing unresolved pathogenic factors eventually breaks down and they overflow from the embodied spirit's “storage reservoirs” and emerge back in the primary channels. These declines in health **appear from the outside as deficiencies of *qi*, blood, *yin*, and/or *yang* of various *zangfu***, even though this loss of dormancy occurs because the stagnations have accumulated beyond the embodied spirit's capacity to suspend them.

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Many patients among all these categories can tolerate tonics, and using them is a common strategy. Indeed, modern clinical theory indicates their use in any case of *apparent* deficiency. Yet, where there are accumulated stagnations held in dormancy, taking *qi* and blood tonics (absent other substantial influences) can only enhance the individual's capacity to suspend pathogenic factors.

Stimulating the fundamental transformations of profound healing requires more sophisticated formulation than simply balancing manifestations. Effective therapies suggest to the embodied spirit ways out of its habituated traps, rather than temporarily suppressing symptoms. They ask the embodied spirit to transform in some fundamental way, which allows it to release/expel previously suspended pathogenic factors.

While modern western medicine accentuates technologically enhanced perception and measurement of clinical signs, and modern Chinese medicine focuses more on careful classification of symptoms, they both seek to manage and “balance” expression to minimize the individual’s adverse experience. In their own ways, each evaluates both current circumstances and future risks in determining treatment strategies, and both are fatalistic about the basic life trajectory of accumulation.

Our consumption-based economy depends upon the propensity of most personalities to seek new inputs, rather than concentrating on completing internal process. It stimulates and facilitates our endless quest for (external) stimuli to generate “new” desired experiences that deflect *yuan qi* away from uncomfortable or difficult (previous) experience, which has not been fulfilled. Health is not a consumer good; so, why would many people think healing could be? It is an object of cultivation, an adventure, and a challenge; and it can’t be passively consumed!

Many practitioners and policy makers think that our society needs more (external) economic activity to pay for health care for the populace, and/or a radically different way of distributing it. Perhaps instead, we need to transform health care. Rather than disempowering patients with passive care, we need to explore ways to foster and stimulate the transformations of healing. Living in the healing path expands life and helps people accept limitations and death when their time comes. We need not invest all our hope in heroic rescues.