

1. The Concept of Qi

What is meant by Qi? The concept of Qi is based on the ancient Chinese initial understanding of natural phenomena. That is, Qi is the most basic substance of which the world is comprised. Everything in the universe results from the movements and changes of Qi. This concept was introduced into TCM and became one of its characteristics. After a comprehensive survey of the statements on Qi in TCM documents, we have come to the conclusion that the meaning of Qi in TCM has two aspects. One refers to the vital substances comprising the human body and maintaining its life activities, such as the Qi of water and food (food essence), the Qi of breathing (breathing nutrients) and so on. The other refers to the physiological functions of viscera and bowels, channels and collaterals, such as the Qi of the heart, the lung, the spleen and the stomach and so on. The Qi here referred to, is specifically the physiological functions of these viscera and bowels.

2. The Formation of Qi

The Qi in the human body is different in classification and formation. But, generally speaking, it has no more than two sources. One is the innate vital substance one inherits from one's parents before birth. The other is the food essence and fresh air one receives from air, water and food in the natural world. The materials obtained in the two ways above have to be processed and transformed by the viscera and bowels before becoming the Qi of the human body. The process for Qi to be formed is as follows The innate vital substance acted on by the kidney comes out of the gate of life (the portion between the two kidneys) and goes up to the middle warmer. There it combines with the food essence coming from the spleen and continues upwards until it combines with the fresh air inhaled by the lung. Finally it turns into Qi. It is easy to see from the above that the Qi of the human body is formed through the joint work of the kidney, the spleen, the stomach and the lung in combining the innate vital substance taken from one's parents, the food essence received from water and food, and the fresh air obtained from nature.

3. The Functions of Qi

Different kinds of Qi have different functions. Generally speaking, they can be summarized as follows:

1) Promoting Action

Qi is a sort of essence full of vitality. It can help activate the growth and development of the human body, promote the physiological functions of each viscus, bowel, channel, collateral, tissue and organ and speed up the formation and circulation of blood and the metabolism of body fluid as well. For

example, if the above functions are weakened as a result of the deficiency of Qi (vital energy), the following will occur: late and slow growth and development of the human body or senilism; weakened functions of viscera and bowels, channels and collaterals, tissues and other organs; insufficient blood formation or stagnation in blood vessels; and disturbance in the metabolism of body fluid.

2) Warming Action

Nan Jing (Classic on Medical Problems) says: "Qi has a warming action." Qi is the main source of the heat needed by the human body. The body keeps its constant temperature mainly through the warming action of its Qi. A deficiency of Qi can cause lowered body temperature, intolerance to cold and cold limbs.

3) Defending Action

The defending action of Qi is shown in two aspects. One is to guard the surface of the skin against the exopathogen. The other is to combat the invading exopathogen so as to ward it off. When the defending function of Qi is normal, the exopathogen has difficulty in invading the body, even though it may obtain entry, it is not certain to cause any disease. If it does cause a disease, this disease is easy to cure. When the defending function of Qi becomes weaker, when the ability of the human body to fight the exopathogen is lowered, the body is easily invaded and diseases are caused. And what is more, these diseases are hard to cure.

4) Consolidating and Governing Action

By "consolidating and governing action", we mean that Qi has the ability to command, control and consolidate the liquid substances and organs in the abdominal cavity. This is done by:

- a. Keeping blood flowing within, not extravasating out of; the vessels;
- b. Controlling and adjusting the secretion and excretion of sweat, urine and saliva, and preventing the body fluid from escaping;
- c. Consolidating and storing sperm and preventing emission and premature ejaculation;
- d. Consolidating the organs so as to prevent them from descending.

A decrease in the above functions of Qi may cause various kinds of hemorrhage, spontaneous perspiration, polyuria, salivation, spermatorrhea, premature ejaculation, prolapse of the stomach, kidney and uterus.

The consolidating and governing action and the promoting action of Qi oppose each other and yet also complement each other. On the one hand, Qi has the function of promoting the circulation of blood,

and the transportation and distribution of body fluid. On the other hand, it also has the function of controlling and adjusting the movement, secretion and excretion of liquid substances in the body. The coordination and balance of these two functions are essential for maintaining normal blood circulation and water metabolism within the body.

5) Promoting Metabolism and Transformation

"Qi hua" is a specific term in the science of TCM. It refers, in general, to various kinds of changes taking place in the body under the action of Qi. Specifically, it refers to the metabolism of fundamental substances, vital energy, blood and body fluid, and the transformations which can occur between them. For example, vital energy, blood and body fluid are formed in the following manner: ingested food is changed into food essence, and food essence is, in turn, transformed into vital energy, blood or body fluid, and these can then be changed into any one of the others according to the physiological need of the body. The waste from the eaten food and the products produced in the course of metabolism are changed, separately, into faeces, urine and sweat which are ready to be removed from the body. All these are the specific manifestations of the action of the activity of Qi. The dysfunction of Qi in performing its action will affect the whole metabolism of the body. That is to say, it will affect the digestion, absorption, transformation and transportation of food: the formation, movement and transformation of vital energy, blood and body fluid; and the excretion of faeces, urine and sweat; thus causing various symptoms associated with abnormal metabolism. In short, the process in which Qi performs its functions is the process in which the substances in the body are metabolized, and in which the substances and energy are transformed.

Although the above five functions of Qi are different, they enjoy close cooperation and mutual support.

4. The Movement of Qi

The various functions of Qi are all performed by its movement. TCM calls the movement of Qi as "functional activities of Qi". Different types of Qi move in different ways. Theoretically, however, we can put them in four basic ways: ascending, descending, exiting and entering. Ascending refers to the movement from below; descending, from above; exiting, from the interior; and entering from the exterior. These movements of Qi are vital to life. Once they stop, life comes to an end. They are not only seen in promoting and activating various kinds of physiological activities in the human body, but also seen in motivating the physiological activities of the viscera and bowels, channels and collaterals, tissues and other organs. For example, while the lung performs its function, exhaling is exiting, inhaling is entering, dispersing is ascending and keeping the inspired air flowing downward is descending.

Extracted from "Basic Theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine"