

# DIET AS A DOORWAY TO CHANGE

By Andrew Serman

We don't need to live in illness. Illness, pain, disharmony and dysfunction—these can be alarms to wake us, to inspire us to change. Tomorrow, when we wake up, we can set our feet on the floor in a new direction, learning, preparing, and beginning action for real change, like walking through a door to reclaim your real being. Here we are not talking about a slightly better version of where you are, with illness intact and symptoms more controlled; we are talking about real change.

But there are innumerable reasons not to change. Improving health is uncommon in our culture; we are taught a terrible untruth that life is good while we're carefree and young but after that it's steadily and inexorably downhill. This myth is so strong that it can be self-fulfilling. Others cling to illness as if it's a belief system, like a religion. At some point in our lives, it's time to look within and see what beliefs are holding us back. It runs in the family. I've always been like this. There's no cure for what I have. I've tried everything (which is usually only about two or maybe three "things").

In general, the many personal experiences of resistance fall into three types, often playing in combination: denial, compulsion, and rejection.

Denial says, "There's no problem here, I eat like everybody else. My grandfather lived until 78 and he ate anything he wanted! That proves that it's all the same, and besides, I don't want to be one of those food freaks who watches every little thing. Anyhow, everything is okay in moderation, right?"

Compulsion says, "I try to make some changes, but life isn't worth living without my chocolate! And I read in the paper that coffee is good for you, and wine, and I don't believe there's anything wrong with sugar, it's been around forever and it's a natural plant! I try to cut down on fried things, but they're so good, and I'm supposed to stay away from a few things because of my heart, but I LOVE them, and they make me happy..."

Rejection says, "This is all nonsense, nothing can improve anything, don't spend time on self-care, just see your doctor once a year and when you get sick. I'm tired of people telling me what to do, and everyone tells me something different anyway. I know what my body wants. I don't need to listen to anyone. And there are no studies that prove change is possible. This is all nonsense!"

Our diets affirm who we are. The overall energetics of our diet exert powerful influences upon us, conveyed through taste, intrinsic thermostatic and directional characteristics of the foods, and cooking methods. Our food choices confirm our identities and inner comforts. This is neither good nor bad, but if we have chronic illness or simply feel stuck in life, maintaining our current diet will hold us in place. Our dietary habits are strong pillars of continuity, for better or otherwise. This provides an invaluable opportunity. If we are not fully well, we can change direction by changing diet. Making small changes can improve us in comfortable ways, but when chronic complaints hold us in a rut, like a car with its wheels off the road, we need strong measures, we need

enough force to jump out of the ditch. We need to make clear and profound changes. Without meaningful dietary change, neither Western nor Asian medical treatments can offer anywhere near their fullest possible benefits.

A powerful way to structure change is by honestly looking at how we are doing on the three fundamental levels of health as described by classical Chinese medicine: the levels of constitutional health status (*yuan qi*), nutritive or digestive health status (*ying qi*) and active-defensive health status (which includes immune competence, or *wei qi*). These are three internal pillars upon which our lives depend. With a clear assessment of our individual health status of the three levels of qi we can sensibly enact change with diet, exercise, and any other healing modality.

Let's look first to the deepest level of health, the constitutional or *yuan qi* level. This level of health governs bone health, the status of marrow, and therefore crucial components of blood and brain integrity, hormonal harmony, reproductive health and the stability of our internal genetic replication. The *yuan qi* level of health extends all over the body but is anchored in the lower belly and is governed by the energetics of the kidneys.

To enact real change at this deepest level of health is to truly commit to our essential existence. All aspects of health ultimately rely upon the pillar of *yuan qi*. We can be born with strong or fragile constitutional health, but what is more important is what we do with this inheritance. Like the endowment of an institution, it can be well-tended or squandered.

What damages our constitutional health, our *yuan qi* level, is fatigue and over-taxation. Sleep and truly restorative leisure is essential; anything that interferes here will tax the *yuan qi* system (think of overtaxing the adrenal glands). It may be exciting, but if we are familiar with the idea that we can be tired in ways that even sleep doesn't resolve, then we know constitutional qi taxation. Things that overtax our constitutional health status include too much caffeine, too much sugar, too much sexual activity, too much work (including hyper-fueled ambition), stress and fear, experiences of trauma, and drug use (recreational or pharmaceutical).

The decision to enact real change at the *yuan qi* or constitutional level starts with adopting a sleep practice, that is, respecting sleep as a foundation of all health (in particular, for hormonal rebalancing). Choose from the following list to strongly support your own *yuan qi* health status:

- ♦ Take a caffeine hiatus. Reducing to a small amount per day is useful, but a full cessation of caffeine, for perhaps several months, sends a clear message of renewal to the deepest level of personal health.
- ♦ Rest when tired. Use weekends or vacations to begin intentionally resetting sleep habits. Timing of sleep is significant; eight hours from 10pm-6am is the most restorative for *yuan qi* and constitutional hormones, whereas eight hours from 2-10am is intrinsically less restorative. Less sleep is, of course, less supportive at a deep level.

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♦ Take a sugar hiatus. Reduction is good, but all sugar (and alcohol) taxes the adrenal glands (along with the interconnected hormonal glands in the body such as pancreas, thyroid, etc.) To send a strong message of renewal to the constitution, eliminate sugar and other sweets entirely for several months, then permit only small amounts back in the diet.

♦ Avoid squandering sexual energy. Romantic love and physical embrace is one of the profound joys of humanity, but many relate to sex in a negative or obsessive way. Seeing this clearly is a crucial component of protecting the *yuan* qi treasure.

♦ Avoid eating much when exhausted. Eat to replenish, but not too much.

♦ Hydrate with water, wet, cooked foods such as breakfast porridges, soups, and stews, and include healthy oils such as olive oil, butter, avocado oil, sesame oil, seafood and cold-water fish that are high in oils, etc.

♦ Include foods that have a natural affinity for the kidneys and *yuan* qi, including nuts and seeds (especially walnuts, chestnuts, sesame seeds, etc.), mushrooms, seaweeds, beans (lentils, black beans, azuki beans, black-eyed peas, etc.), eggs, shellfish and high-fat fish (including salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, anchovies, black cod, and so forth), duck, and pork (not bacon, it's too processed). Pick from that list and other *yuan* qi level foods; no need to have any you don't like, or what doesn't digest well for you due to weaknesses of the other two levels of qi.

While deep improvements at the *yuan* qi or constitutional level begin with a real commitment to rest what is overtaxed with focus on the kidneys, the decision to enact real change at the *ying* qi or nutritive/digestive level starts with adopting a dietary practice; that is, respecting digestion as the foundation of all good health, and understanding that everything we eat needs to be processed by digestive organs that have finite capacities for energy and secretions. Overwhelming digestion can't lead to anything but the degenerative illnesses that are so common today. Since the energy to run digestion ultimately comes from the *yuan* qi level, when we commit to change at both the *yuan* qi and *ying* qi levels we are supporting ourselves on two of the three fundamental pillars of our health. And since all food comes from farms and the complex interconnectedness of the modern economy, by committing to good food practices we send clear signals that gradually benefit society overall.

When we skip meals we are asking our bodies to function without incoming energy. We won't lose weight this way; our bodies will feel stressed and shift into preservation mode, and most people overeat at the next meal when they do have it, whether lunch or dinner. If we skip meals, we are functioning on stress hormones (often amplified by caffeine). All this further taxes the lower burner, that is, the *yuan* qi level and the associated organs (kidneys, reproductive system, adrenals, bones, etc.) But if we eat simple and appropriate meals, a wondrous process takes place: our *yuan* qi and kidneys send enough energy to the organs of digestion to get going on that meal. Digestion breaks down the foods, sorting and separating what we need from what is needed by the microbiome in our gut, then our mid gut transforms and transports nourishment up to the chest and over to the liver for further development and transpor-

tation, and the energy released not only nourishes our bodies in metabolism and substance but the kidneys and lower burner receive back the energy they spent in beginning the digestive process. In this way, we live on new energy from foods we eat rather than tapping our reserves without replenishment.

Choose from the following to begin supporting your health at the *ying* qi/nutritive or digestive level:

♦ Avoid overeating.

♦ Eat warm, cooked food.

♦ Look at the food in front of you and ask yourself the question: Can my digestion really handle this well? If you're digging in anyway, refer to the first point—avoid overeating. Just have some of it, share the rest or save it for later.

♦ Eat dynamic foods, that is, foods that have clear directionalities: vegetables of different types including root vegetables and dark leafy greens.

♦ Use spices wisely to promote movement rather than just to intensify taste sensation.

♦ Eat varied grains, including some whole grains.

♦ Problems of constipation or urination must be addressed. These common issues engage with functions of the entire body: lungs, sinuses, digestion, liver and blood... all aspects of health are involved or implicated. Most problems can be solved by replacing refined and processed foods with more dynamic foods such as grains, green and root vegetables, seeds and nuts, legumes, foods of all flavors including vegetables with bitter notes, and effective hydration. A skilled dietary clinician can help with specific problems that don't resolve with general advice.

♦ Avoid fried foods, instant foods, and sugared foods except for very occasionally; don't have "occasions" every day or multiple times a day!

♦ Practice clear meals as needed (see *Welcoming Food, Book 1* for more explanation of clear meals). Basically, to allow digestion to rest while still nourishing yourself, pick one meal per day (more if needed) and have meals that digest very simply, fully, and in a timely manner. One technique to use is separating carbs from proteins. In other words, have a vegan lunch (with grain) followed by a protein dinner with meat, fish, or chicken (with no grain). This strongly eases the digestive process for both meals, allowing the digestive organs to rest and gradually recover. Remember, sugar and alcohol are carbs; avoid the fallacy that there is benefit in avoiding grains such as rice, millet, buckwheat, or polenta while still consuming concentrated carbs such as sugar, honey, wine, or other sugar sources. Honesty is a process; as our health energetics begin to improve it becomes easier and more enjoyable to fine tune our diet and improve further. Be gentle while also firm with yourself.

♦ Digestion does not like to be cold; avoid cold drinks, and, in order to improve digestion, avoid raw and cold foods.

♦ Digestion does not like heavy foods that sit within like a wet blanket, suppressing clear digestion. These foods very easily cause

dampness which leads to weight gain, lethargy (especially just after eating), inflammation, and the lack of mental clarity often called brain fog. It is very important that this dampness process is identified and reversed for true health to improve. The foods that most easily cause dampness are sugar, dairy, wheat (particularly modern wheat), and overeating in general. In practice, this includes regularly having a piece of cake or other baked good, or foods like pizza: these foods include all three common culprits of dampness (sugar, dairy, wheat). Look at your own diet for damp-causing habits.

- Inflammation naturally arises as the body tries to handle the dampness or cold/raw diet by stoking more heat. Sometimes digestive fire is low, sometimes too high. Excess digestive fire leads to inflammatory conditions (swellings, joint pain, general tissue degradation, tooth and gum decay, heart disease, etc.) It is important to know how to regulate digestive fire. The simplest way is to adjust the relative amounts of meats and greens. Reduce excess digestive fire by consuming less meat, less coffee and spicy foods, while increasing cooked leafy green vegetables and healthy grains.

- Digestion is complex. Although this general advice can take most people very far, more specificity can be provided by well-trained practitioners of Chinese medicine dietary therapy. The powerful, historically early method of working with the three levels of qi can be expanded to include organ systems with all the exquisite finesse of Chinese medicine. Personal diagnosis and individual dietary planning can be indispensable.

- Digestion is the centerpiece of all health. As we enact real change not only in the foods we choose but our digestive functioning, we are supporting the central pillar of longterm health and healing.

*Yuan qi* and *ying qi* are two of the three fundamentals of daily and lifelong health. The third pillar is the collection of functions called the *wei qi* level, which includes active-defensive health status. *Wei qi* is about survival. To survive, we need to be actively responsive to challenges in the world, including hunting/gathering, running so as to not be hunted or gathered, and immune integrity to ward off infectious agents that could cause illness if *wei qi* is deficient. So, *wei qi* includes muscles, tendons, alertness, and the infinitely complex immune capacity that welcomes the positive microbes of the world while effectively protecting from dangerous ones. *Wei qi* relies directly on good function of the *yuan qi* and *ying qi* levels. Particularly, the immune aspect of *wei qi* depends on sufficient hydration and sufficient rest. In the careful terminology of Chinese medicine, strengthening immunity requires nourishing *ying* and *tonifying qi*. Fluids and rest. That's what any doctor recommends for recovering from various types of flu or other airborne infection.

Attempts to stimulate immune capability with garlic pills or other stimulants eventually taxes and depletes resources of *yuan qi*, fluids, and immune protection. A better strategy is to support immunity by nourishing fluids with diet and genuinely improve rest. Fluids are provided by a hydration-improved diet and qi is provided by deeply resting our fatigues.

Foods that support *wei qi* include wet, cooked breakfasts (see my Golden Flower article Congee and the Importance of Wet Cooked Breakfasts, 2015), soups and stews (including chicken soup, famous for immune boosting), grains, greens, and moderate amounts of

protein. Fruits and nuts can support *wei qi*, as do moderate kitchen herbs and spices, eggs, mushrooms, and seaweeds. More important than adding special foods is avoiding food and drink that raise too much heat, lead to inflammation, deplete fluids, tax adrenals (see above), or lead to dampness (also see above). The way to support *wei qi*, including both moving energy and robust immunity, is simple: avoid taxing foods, support *ying qi* and *yuan qi* through appropriate foods, hydrate with water, healthy oils, and wet cooked foods, then rest well to alleviate adrenal exhaustion.

There is one more essential point needed to enact real change at this level, beyond the specifics of immunity and physical action included in the concept of *wei qi*. Just as *yuan qi* is anchored in the lower burner (but spreads influence to the entire body) and *ying qi* centers in the digestive organs of the mid belly (but also reaches throughout the body), *wei qi* is associated with the chest (even as it works with complex precision throughout the body). The chest is home to the heart and lungs. From a *wei qi* perspective, the chest opens to the senses of the head and our connection to the outside world. Beyond that, the chest is the locus of spirit in the body (even as what we call spirit or personal sacred consciousness connects with all aspects of our body and being). The essential pillar that is needed to complete our survey of enacting change has to do with spirit.

In order to open a doorway to genuine change, some kind of personal awakening is required. A personal revolution, rather than merely benign shifts that don't challenge individual status quo. To be sure, gradual change can improve our diet in targeted ways, for example, a bit less sugar, a bit less fried food, less alcohol, a few more vegetables. Small changes can add up to welcome improvement, but to walk away from an unsatisfactory situation a radical shift is required. To make a full-being shift, the most powerful method is to address the constitutional, nutritive, and active immune levels all at once. Find things to fast from, perhaps alcohol, sugar, meat, overly spiced meals, or refined foods, for at least a set period of time. Your body will read the signals and begin the necessary processes of cleansing, clarification, and renewal. To some this may feel restrictive and painful, as if the food police have delivered a dietary restraining order. Remember the three types of resistance mentioned above. With resistance in bloom, successful change will be difficult. Our efforts, then, are essentially preparatory. We work gradually, making helpful progress until we are ready to drop what holds us in place and walk through the doorway to a new diet, a new personal reality. For this, a personal awakening of some kind is needed. This jolt of new consciousness is not the goal, it is a beginning, an unfolding of opportunity that inspires sustained action. And nothing is more powerful to support sustained, real change than a clear and informed shift in our way of eating.

## RECIPES

To connect *yuan qi* with *ying qi*:

### **Brown Rice, Azuki Beans, Asparagus with Arame Seaweed and Shiitake Mushrooms**

1 cup organic brown rice

1 cup dried azuki beans (or pre-cooked canned azuki's)

1 cup dried arame (seaweed)

2 cups cremini mushrooms

1-2 bunches asparagus (or substitute other vegetable with stems)

Tamari

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Olive oil  
Sea Salt  
Sesame Seeds  
Scallion or chives for garnish

Purchase fresh-looking brown rice from shops that sell it often; brown rice can go stale or rancid if left too long on the shelf. Rinse in a pot and tip water away until water runs clear, about three times. Bring to a boil with new water, 1 measure rice to 1.5 measures water. Reduce to a simmer, cover with well-fitted lid. Cook for 40 minutes, turn off heat allowing it to rest for 10 minutes. Do not stir or fluff the rice. One cup raw rice serves four people. Brown rice in a pressure cooker or instant pot type device cooks in half that time or less, use the multigrain setting.

Purchase raw azuki beans or pre-cooked in a can (several companies do a very good job with cooked, canned, organic beans). If raw, sort for stones, then rinse. Bring azuki beans to a boil with 2 measures water, reduce to simmer, allow to cook for an hour or until tender. Do not salt the beans until they have cooked. If there is extra cooking water when they are done, this can be sipped in a cup (good for kidneys and bladder), or used in another dish. Whether cooking them yourself or using canned beans, azuki beans pair well with olive oil and tamari, or simply olive oil and a pinch of salt. One cup raw azuki beans easily serves four people.

Soak arame in hot water for ten minutes or so. Wash and slice mushrooms of your choice, cremini, for example. Add the mushrooms to a hot pan with a splash of olive oil. Allow them to soften, then lift the arame out of the water and add it to the pan. Add a splash of tamari. The dish is done as soon as the mushrooms are wilted and the flavors have come together. Options include adding a splash of mirin (sweet rice wine) and toasted sesame oil.

When the rice and beans are nearly done, wash enough asparagus so each person will have 4-6 spears. Trim off the tough ends, or break them where they seem to want to snap, an inch or two from the bottom. Cook in a pot over medium-high heat with a good splash of olive oil, a small splash of water, and a chef's pinch of sea salt. Cook until bright green and just tender; do not overcook.

Serve in a casual style: a scoop of brown rice, a scoop of seasoned azuki beans, a scoop of the arame with mushrooms, and a portion of asparagus spears. Garnish with slivered scallions or chives over the azuki beans and a generous sprinkle of sesame seeds over the arame and mushrooms.

If you like, make a homemade gomasio, it's delicious on this kind of dish and amplifies its *yuan qi* aspects. Heat 1 cup sesame seeds in a dry pan, shaking to manage toasting without burning. Add 1/2 to 1 teaspoon sea salt. Stir to roast over medium heat, 5-10 minutes. A beautiful toasted aroma will let you know you can move them to a bowl to cool (leaving them in the pan could burn the seeds from residual heat).

Grind the mixture coarsely in a mortar and pestle (or the wonderful Japanese version with grooves called a *suribachi*). Sprinkle gomasio over the rice and azuki beans. Gomasio will stay fresh on the table for a few days or in the refrigerator for a few weeks. Allow to cool before storing in an airtight glass container.

To connect *ying qi* with *wei qi*:

### Homemade Chicken & Rice Soup (from *Welcoming Food, Book 2*)

Chicken | 2 breasts with bones and 4 thighs  
Carrots | 6 medium, diced  
Leek | 2 medium, whites only, halved and sliced across the length into thin half rings  
Celery | 4 stalks, cut thinly  
Zucchini | 2, cut lengthwise, lengths cut lengthwise again, diced  
Bay leaf | 1  
Whole peppercorns | 1/2 Tbsp  
Turmeric | ground, 1 tsp  
Parsley | 1 bunch  
Scallions | 3 finely sliced  
Salt | 2-3 Tbsp, or to taste  
Long-grain white rice | 1 cup uncooked, or 2 cups cooked rice  
Water | enough to cover the chicken and about 3 inches more

In a large pot, brown the chicken in its skin, rendering some of the fat from the skin to the pot. (Use a splash of olive oil to get started if needed.) Remove the chicken, set aside, add the carrots, leeks, celery, zucchini, bay leaf, peppercorns, and turmeric, with a couple chef's pinches salt. Cook the vegetables and spices in the fat left in the pan for 4-5 minutes. (Save the scallions and parsley for the end.)

Add the chicken parts back into the pot. Cover with water about 3 inches over the top of the chicken and cook for 30 minutes.

With a slotted spoon, take out the chicken and vegetables and set them aside in a bowl. Discard the bay leaf.

Bring the broth to a boil, add the 1 cup raw rice, reduce heat to simmer, cover, cook for 20 minutes. If using already cooked rice, simply add it to the pot and bring just up to a boil, then proceed.

While the rice is cooking, remove the chicken meat from the bones and shred into large bits. It's best to include the chicken skin in the soup for the healthy oils the skin includes, but feel free to remove it, if you must, along with any fatty or unappealing bits. Allow the chicken pieces to be full bite-size.

When the rice is cooked, add back the vegetables and the shredded chicken. Add the scallions (finely sliced). Adjust for salt (it will need perhaps 2 tsp more). Different size pots, different heat control, and different varieties of rice could change the soup's thickness; add some boiled water to open the soup if necessary. Add the coarsely chopped parsley just before serving.

**Andrew Sterman** is the author of the two-volume: *Welcoming Food, Diet as Medicine for the Home Cook and Other Healers*. Both books are available for sale at [www.gfcherbs.com](http://www.gfcherbs.com). Andrew hosts a popular "Food Chat" twice monthly, live online (with replay anytime), with discussions of various aspects of the importance of diet and healing, with questions and case reviews. Visit Andrew at [andrewsterman.com/food](http://andrewsterman.com/food)