

The Earth Element Within Us

Neil Gumenick, MAc, LAc, Dipl. Ac.

The Stomach, known as "the Official of rotting and ripening food and drink," with its paired Official, the Spleen, represents the Earth Element within us. In the cycle of the seasons, Earth is associated with late summer — a time when growth has reached completion. The harvest is abundant, the fruits ripe, round, sweet, and ready to be picked. What had been once a seed has come to fruition. The Earth generously provides the nourishment we need to live and thrive.

The Officials of Earth within us receive the food, make it into a proper digestive mixture, and transport its essence to fuel every organ, function, and system. No organ or physical or non-physical process could occur if it were deprived of nourishment.

Professor J.R. Worsley likened the Stomach Official to a bakery. It receives the various ingredients and, if blended and baked properly, will make a delicious cake. If the amounts are incorrect or the mixture is poorly blended or baked, the cake will be unappetizing, indigestible, and be of essentially no value.

The Physical Level

The Stomach is a hollow, crescent shaped dilation of the gastrointestinal tract, located on the left side of the upper abdomen. It connects to the esophagus above and the small intestine below. The stomach secretes acid and enzymes that digest food. The muscles of the stomach contract and relax, churning food to enhance digestion.

It is in the Stomach that the major part of digestion occurs. The average human stomach will comfortably hold about one liter (about 4.2 cups) of food. It's because of the action of this organ that the food and drink we consume is broken down (rotted and ripened) into a proper mixture so that its nutrients can be absorbed by the Small Intestine.

To maximize the efficacy of digestion, it is generally best to eat primarily that which grows locally — in the environment in which we live, and in the season in which it grows. The hours of 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. are the maximum period of activity of the Stomach, and are the best times to take in and digest a meal. It is also important that the process of digestion begins in the mouth, so to chew food well and mix it with saliva ensures that the food is best prepared for the job of the Stomach Official.

If this organ falls sick and is unable to process food, there may be weakness, fatigue, nausea, overeating or loss of appetite, abdominal pain, bloating, gas, peptic ulcer, constipation, diarrhea, and all manner of digestive symptoms. If the Stomach's natural action of sending food and drink downward to the small intestine fails, the direction may turn upward, producing belching and vomiting. It must be remembered, however, that the presence of such symptoms may not necessarily point to a diagnosis of Earth as the patient's primary elemental imbalance, known as the *Causative Factor* (CF).

Once a primary imbalance is present (and it is present from birth), its imbalance will disrupt the

functioning of every organ and function in the entire system. In *Classical Five-Element Acupuncture*, diagnosis of Earth as the CF and the subsequent focus of treatment on the stomach and spleen meridians will depend entirely on a sensory diagnosis of the patient's odor: fragrant, color: yellow, sound of the voice: singing, and emotion: sympathy.

The Mental Level

The Stomach is responsible for receiving and digesting nourishment on every level: body, mind, and spirit. We do not exist on physical food alone. We are also constantly digesting our internal and external impressions — "mental food," including all that we see (including what we read), hear, smell, and feel.

In English vernacular, we speak of "digesting ideas" and "devouring books." We speak of "hunger for knowledge" and "appetite for life," or contrarily being "unable to stomach" something, or being made to feel "sick." If confronted by a sufficiently repulsive image, we may become nauseous or even vomit.

If the Stomach Official falls sick, we may be unable to "digest" at the level of the mind. We may feel mentally stuffed, stagnant, bloated, and incapable of taking in even one thing more. We may have difficulty in receiving, integrating, and understanding ideas; we may avoid certain ideas entirely; we may churn thoughts and concepts over and over. We may become obsessed with certain ideas — never digesting or making use of any of them. In some Chinese medical texts, this aspect of mind is called "overthinking."

We may have difficulty concentrating; we may require information delivered in only very small, bite sized chunks. Overeating is often an outlet of compensation for lack of mental peace and satisfaction. When the Stomach Official is healthy, we can digest all experience and convert its experience into wisdom. Further, we can live with the certainty and security of having a good harvest of information and knowledge contained in our storehouse of memory.

With a healthy Stomach, the mind's need to worry and obsess disappears. Once wisdom has been gleaned from experience, we simply know. We have, in a sense, brought the experience to "harvest." The lessons have been learned. We can then safely store the knowledge in memory, knowing that it will be there when needed. We can then leave the past in the past and be fully present to the next moment with innocence, spontaneity and a genuine appetite for life.

The Spirit Level

At the spirit level, a healthy Stomach Official provides a sense of security, groundedness, centeredness, satisfaction, and connection to Mother Earth, the archetypical great provider. We can feel at home anywhere, as we are able to derive nourishment from all experience. We can feel the abundance a child feels at the breast or in the arms of its mother. The earth is truly perceived as sacred, and is seen through eyes of gratitude. A harvest can be perceived in everything.

Consider the miracle of life itself, the fact that we are breathing, that our hearts are beating, that we can see, taste, smell, hear, and feel, that we have to capacity to love. Our spirit is nourished by the beauty of the rising and setting sun, the night sky filled with stars, flowers blooming, birds singing, lakes, rivers, oceans, mountains, deserts, plants that provide us with food and medicine, animals of all sorts, family, friends, to name a few.

When we perceive fullness and plentitude within and without, we feel a natural inclination to share of our abundance, knowing that our inner spiritual harvest is divine, secure, and cannot be diminished. There is a sense of wanting to be of help and service to others. This is the natural and

healthy expression of sympathy, the emotional correspondence of Earth, which arises from inner abundance. We have enough — more than enough — and we desire to share.

When with a sick friend, for example, the bringing of comfort and sympathy is appropriate. We can sympathize because, as human beings, the same experience is potentially within us. Being able to digest and integrate anything, we can sympathize with anyone. Through the arc of empathy, we know what it feels like to be ill or hurt. Similarly, when we are sick or hurting, we want to know that someone cares and understands. Most of us do not desire to be left alone and deprived in such a state. Yet, we do not want to be smothered in excess sympathy.

In a state of imbalance, we may feel continually needy, and tend to project the figure of the absent mother on virtually everyone we meet. "Feed me, care for me, understand me," can become an internal refrain, feeling perpetually starved, deprived, and hungry. The vocal quality takes on a continual tone of appeal, which we call "singing." We yearn for nourishment at any level, but the craving for it from sources outside ourselves never fulfills our perceived inner emptiness for long.

Even in the presence of genuine sympathy, we may still feel alone and misunderstood. Like gorging on a huge meal, we are satiated for a while, but are soon hungry again. Worry of not having enough tends to make us greedy, selfish, and ungenerous. In the other extreme, the Earth imbalanced patient may be so distrustful of the motives of others that expressions of sympathy are flatly rejected.

Some Earth imbalanced patients turn to express sympathy to others at their own expense. They become exhausted martyrs, caring for everyone else's needs to the point of smothering, while caring little for themselves. In these contexts, we can see how points on the Stomach meridian can fill the perceived void, assist in "digestion" and bring experience to fruition. Every point has a part to play in the balancing and harmonizing of this Official. A few examples include:

ST 4 Earth Granary, ST 9 People Welcome, ST 14 Storehouse, ST 20 Receiving Fullness, ST 23 Great Oneness, ST 25 Heavenly Pivot, and ST 40 Abundant Splendor.

The Questions

The following questions are useful for self-observation and can be appropriately modified to inquire as to the state of a patient's Stomach Official. While any symptom can come from a primary imbalance in any element, as imbalance spreads from one element to the next, if you suspect a problem in a patient's Earth Element, specifically with the stomach official, here are some questions to consider in assessing its state:

1. How were you taught to care for yourself?
2. When have you overeaten to the point of pain?
3. When have you starved yourself?
4. What is your favorite food?
5. When have you been smothered with sympathy?
6. When have you tried to fix everyone's problems?
7. When have you felt, "I can't give anymore!"
8. When have you ignored someone's plea for help?
9. How have you used food as an outlet for stress?
10. When have you felt that you were surrounded by abundance?

JUNE 2017

