



HERBAL MEDICINE

Into Perception: The Five Tastes Plus One (Pt. 1)

Judyth Shamosh, PhD | DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- When we say an herb has a heating taste, it means the *effect* of that herb is heating. It does not mean the herb actually imparts heat to the body.
- As long as one can accurately *taste* (a chemical reaction) an herb, one can know how to use it and apply it effectively.
- The five tastes plus one, or the six tastes, are made up of different combinations of the fundamental five phases that impart the therapeutic properties of herbs (and foods), allowing us to use herbal medicine more effectively and safely.

“The universe does not seem to exist without a perceiver of that universe.”

- Fred Alan Wolf, physicist¹

Taste stimulates our nervous system by the chemical reactions that begin with our tongue. When we say an herb has a heating taste, it means the *effect* of that herb is heating. It does not mean the herb actually imparts heat to the body.

From a scientific point of view, our nervous systems contain sensory neurons, called nociceptors, that respond to different types of stimuli by sending nerve signals to the spinal cord and/or brain. Different types of stimulation of a nociceptor will lead to different responses, such as the sensation of heat.²

The ancients of Eastern medicines did not have direct knowledge of nociceptors or the molecules that produce the six tastes, but they had acute insight from experience into the reactions that the tastes produced. For example, knowledge of the chemical makeup of cayenne pepper is not

necessary to know that it conveys a sense of heat to the taste buds, can produce a burning sensation, dry your mouth, and create inflammation or a sensation of heat.

As long as one can accurately *taste* (a chemical reaction) an herb, one can know how to use it and apply it effectively. Taste is, most likely, the way ancient herbal medicines were discovered and used. Taste and smell are probably how our animals know what herbs to eat when their bodies need some medicinal help.

The five tastes plus one, or the six tastes, are made up of different combinations of the fundamental five phases that impart the therapeutic properties of herbs (and foods), allowing us to use herbal medicine more effectively and safely.

The Six Tastes

Chinese medicine addresses five tastes, while ayurveda has classified six tastes. Both modalities have interesting and enlightening differences and similarities that will be discussed herein.

The detailed information about the six tastes comes to us from ayurveda, which predates Chinese medicine. The properties of the six tastes transmit the actions of the primary five phases into the body that are necessary to maintain health. It is why ayurveda advocates eating all six tastes at every meal.

Some of Chinese medicine's five tastes are the same as in ayurveda and others are slightly different in the proportions and combinations of the five phases. The tastes of sweet, salty and sour are the same. The bitter taste is slightly altered. The additional tastes are aromatic, acrid and bland, which can be correlated with other tastes in ayurveda.

The five phases, when combined differently, convey the six tastes: sweet, sour, salty, pungent-aromatic, bitter-acrid, and astringent-bland. In other words, when combining the five phases in six different combinations, the result is the transmission of the attributes of the five phases that stimulate the nervous system, producing the experience and medicinal effects of the six tastes.

Sweet Taste

The sweet taste and its qualities are generated from the combination of the phases of earth and water that together, are nutrient laden to promote growth and build cellular structure. They have smooth and soothing qualities, but are heavy and dampening.

We call sweet foods comfort foods because of their soothing and smoothing qualities. The sweet taste is necessary as it provides nourishment for our bodies, in the form of nutrients from the earth phase, to maintain our bodily structures such as bones and cellular structures. The water phase provides moisture for our bodies. Sweet is also cooling, which is why we prefer to eat more fruit in the summertime.

Foods that are considered sweet do not actually need to have the sugary-sweet taste. Animal-based products are especially sweet due to their excessive protein and high caloric content of the earth phase.

Herbs that are sweet have a cooling and moistening effect. They tonify *yin* to reduce heat and inflammation, and counter *yin* deficiency. Sweet herbs are especially important since acupuncture cannot tonify *yin*.

Sour Taste

The sour taste is made up of earth and fire phases, and impart their qualities of dryness and heat. From the earth phase, we have the nutrient quality that gives us growth, but also dryness and the cold quality to moderate the heat of the fire phase.

Combining the earth and fire phases improves metabolism and digestive ability since these functions are dependent on the heat of transformation. With increased metabolism comes an increase in *qi*/energy supported by the nutrient quality of the earth phase. In addition, the fire and earth phases impart a drying action that can eliminate mucus or damp quality in the body.

Herbs that are sour dry dampness, with an additional warming quality. Sour is different than astringent, which has a cooler property.

Salty Taste

Fire and water phases make-up the salty taste. Combining the attributes of fire and water imparts heat from the fire phase to help digestion and moisture from the water phase that has a softening and cooling effect.

Herbs that are salty can be used to calm the nervous system when there is wind, cold or dryness present.

Author's Note: In Part 2 of this article, I will discuss pungent-aromatic, bitter-acrid, and astringent-bland tastes and the qualities they can impart through herbal therapy.

References

1. Goswami A. Quoted in *The Self-Aware Universe*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1993: p. xiv.
2. Green B. "Why Is It That Eating Spicy, 'Hot' Food Causes the Same Physical Reactions as Does Physical Heat (Burning and Sweating, for Instance)?" *Scientific American*, Oct. 21, 1999.

APRIL 2024