



SFTriClub Indoor Spinning

Golden Keys of Eastern Medicine for Modern Athletes

By Edith Chan, L.Ac.

We all want to be healthy. But what is health? To some, health simply means the lack of pain or disease. Actually, it is much more fascinating and beautiful than that. Health is an elegant balancing act, involving constant shifts back and forth to maintain dynamic equilibrium and resilience from disease factors. The internal and external forces acting on our health are complex beyond our comprehension. Our minds and bodies are subject to continual cycles of stress and recovery, hormonal changes, electrical and bio-magnetic activity, disease pathogens, environmental factors, emotional ups & downs, etc... And yet, most of us are healthy most of the time. How we accomplish this is nothing short of amazing!

As an athlete and practitioner of natural medicine, I find myself especially curious about how to leverage both Eastern and Western medicines to help athletes maintain balanced health and peak performance. In my explorations, I have learned that they each have strengths and weaknesses and can work together synergistically.

In the West, modern biomedicine provides detailed scientific understanding of diseases and the ability to deliver fast-acting results in relieving symptoms or saving lives via drugs or surgery. However, it does not offer a very good framework for comprehending health and preventing disease. On the other hand, Traditional Chinese Medicine did not have the benefits of the biochemical sciences or high-technology tools. Instead it is based on an understanding of health that stems from 5000 years' observation of how climate, environmental & pathogenic factors, diet, exercise, and emotional changes affect health and disease. The result is an elegant system of natural medicine emphasizing the holism of the human being and ways of maintaining harmonious balance and health.

Because of this perspective on holism and balance, Chinese Medicine is especially suited for providing answers in cases where modern biomedicine falls short (e.g. when an imbalance in the body is not severe enough to raise red flags in imaging or lab tests, yet patients are suffering from symptoms). In this way, the two approaches can complement one another beautifully!

As athletes interested in optimal health and peak performance, not just the "lack of disease", I think we have much to benefit from this kind of proven ancient wisdom. In the area of athletic training, the Martial Arts tradition also offers sophisticated insights that remain applicable today. Below are some of its most important insights as applied to the modern athlete.

I like to call these "The Golden Keys of Chinese Medicine" --

1) Balance Stress and Recovery, Activity and Rest.

This idea of balance and harmony is of such fundamental importance that it is the first chapter in virtually every textbook on Chinese medicine. It's the basic tenant underlying the overall approach of the medicine. As such, we dedicate a separate handout to discuss how we can apply this idea to optimize our health and athletic training.

(Please reference separate handout on "Balancing the Yin & Yang of Sports Training".)

2) Prevention is Key

In ancient times, Chinese family doctors were hired to keep the family healthy. If everybody stayed well and avoided illness, the doctor was considered a good one and would be paid generously. If any of the family members fell ill, the doctor would not be paid until the patient was healed. What a wonderful approach! This idea is also emphasized in one of the most important ancient medical texts, “Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Internal Medicine”, which we still study today. It states -- *“The inferior doctors are those who only treat serious disease. The mid-level doctors are those who treat diseases as they develop. Superior are the doctors who prevent disease altogether!”*

Because of this kind of philosophy, the Chinese became highly sophisticated at techniques for preventing disease via diet, exercise, meditation, and lifestyle choices, not just treating patients after illness has developed. It is strongly encouraged to take action at the earliest sign of imbalance, rather than waiting until illness or injury has fully developed.

3) Each Individual is Unique

While there are general guidelines for health maintenance and disease prevention, Chinese Medicine also emphasizes the fact that each person has a unique constitution, requiring different therapies to achieve optimal health. As athletes, I think we can all benefit from paying closer attention to how we each respond to our athletic training, to changes in diet/nutrition, etc... If we are truly committed to our health and athletic performance, then we must be flexible and listen to the body’s signals and finetune our sports training, diet, and lifestyle choices to be in alignment with optimal performance. Be aware of one-size-fit-all diets or training programs. Use those only as starting points or ideas to explore as you develop your own individualized program. Let’s respect the fact that each of us is unique, with a mind-body-spirit complex that is dynamic and ever-changing.

4) Training in Accordance to Seasonal & Climate Changes

The ancient Chinese were mainly farming people who lived in tune with the rhythm of nature. By adapting their lifestyles to climate and seasonal changes, they discovered they were able to live longer and healthier lives. In time, the Martial Arts masters also adopted these ideas and found that it improved athletic performance and prevented illness and injuries. Below are the basic principles:

In the spring, the earth’s energy expands, flowers blossom, and the human body’s energy also grows. This is the time to begin diligent fitness training. Stretch and strengthen the body. Give it the chance to become limber and strong. In the summer time, the earth energy flourishes and so too should our power and athletic performance. This is the best time for our fitness to reach a peak for competition. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids in hot weather. Allow the body to sweat and release extra heat.

During the fall, the earth’s energy begins to contract, and athletes are advised to gradually taper off training. Once winter arrives, plants become dormant and animals hibernate. We, too, should be more conserving of our energy. It is still beneficial to keep moving to prevent the body from getting too stiff or stagnant. But gentler activities such as Tai Chi or Yoga are preferred. Dress warmly to prevent wind and cold from damaging muscles and joints. Traditionally, this is the time when Martial Artists focus on skills and technique rather than strength or fitness. For triathletes, this kind of seasonal training pattern also works very well with the triathlon race schedule.

In San Francisco, our weather can be quite unpredictable. So besides observing seasonal changes, it is also important to fuel and dress appropriately for outdoor training in variable weather, and take long gentle warm-ups on colder days. On several occasions, I treated sports injuries such as ankles or knee strains/sprains that seemed especially stubborn, only to find that the athletes were exposing the injured joints to harsh windy/cold/damp elements during outdoor workouts, causing them to become stiff and painful. As soon as the athletes started dressing appropriately to keep joints warm and support good micro-circulation, the injuries healed quickly! It’s just good common sense!

5) Female Athletes – Sports Training & the Menstrual Cycle.

In addition to seasonal rhythms, a woman's body also goes through monthly rhythmic cycles. Chinese Medicine provides an elegant framework for appreciating these natural cyclical patterns. Although I have not come across any Chinese Medical literature specifically addressing female sports training, I believe the general advice on women's health and lifestyle are easily applied to athletes.

For the first few days after menstrual period, the woman's body is naturally more depleted. Energy is lower. Over the next 2 weeks, energy builds back up to normal levels. From ovulation through pre-menstrual week, there is a temporary surplus of hormones, Qi (energy), and blood flowing in the woman's body. This can cause her to be prone to problems of stagnation or congestion, i.e. swelling, aches and pains, irritability and moodiness, etc. Then the period arrives, and the cycle starts anew.

For female athletes, if it is possible to match athletic training to the monthly cycle, we may choose to take an easier week immediately following the menstrual period when we are naturally more depleted. On the other hand, during the pre-menstrual week, extra volume and intensity in our workouts may be more appropriate and even therapeutic. (Unless the woman is trying to conceive.) This takes advantage of the temporary surplus in Qi and Blood and also maintains movement and circulation to minimize body swelling or irritability symptoms. Of course, it is not always possible put training and racing schedules in sync with a woman's cycle. I simply offer these ideas for female readers to consider the possibility of matching training schedules with the monthly cycle.

6) Sexual /Reproductive Activity and Athletic Performance

In Chinese Medicine, sex is considered a natural and healthy activity. As with everything else, moderation is the key. Too little can result in illnesses relating to stagnancy or accumulation. Too much will deplete and exhaust the body. The ancient medical texts offered elaborate discussions including mathematical equations on how often men should ejaculate as he ages, and techniques for enjoying sexual activity without ejaculation and “depleting one's essence.” In modern times, we can giggle about these exact numerical prescriptions and techniques. But the idea of considering sexual activity in the context of one's health and sports performance is both interesting and important.

Chances are that everyone is a little different; best to listen to your body. If you feel prolonged fatigue/weakness after sex, or if your athletic performance is affected by having sex the night before a big workout or competition, then you may be having sex or ejaculating too frequently. Also, traditionally, it is said that the healing of bones, tendons, and ligaments require the same “essence” that is also the source of reproductive and sexual energy. Moderation in sex, along with all other activities, is considered important in helping sports injuries heal more quickly. It is worth noting that for women, sexual activity is not considered as depleting as excessively heavy menstruation, repeated pregnancies, or extended breast-feeding. These reproductive activities are said to require more of the women's “essence” and vital energy, and so may affect her long-term health and sports performance.

7) Balance, Quality, and Moderation in Diet

Without a doubt, diet and nutrition are powerful factors in maintaining health and preventing disease. As such, it deserves more detailed discussion with a separate set of handouts. Please stay tuned!

I hope you find these simple ideas to be both empowering and commonsensical. With careful observation, and by keeping a curious and open attitude, we can each become our own best doctor and coach. Because each person is unique, no one training/diet/lifestyle regiment will work for everybody. With a little trial-and-error, we can all gain the experience to become better at listening to the body, preventing illness or injuries, and achieving optimal health and peak performance!