

Health with a Chinese Twist

Balance, Harmony, and the Chinese Approach to Food

By: Dr. Dean Black, Ph.D.

In broken English (which I've touched up and condensed considerably in the quotes that follow), my Chinese friend explained to me why we Americans aren't very healthy despite the billions we spend on health. "The problem," he said, "is your approach. You think you can become healthy merely by fighting being sick, but that's not the way life works."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Does fighting bad habits create good ones? Does fighting ugliness create beauty? Does fighting war create peace? Obviously not. And fighting illness doesn't create health."

I began to see his point. We spend those billions of dollars studying *diseases*, which we then take on as if they were enemies in a war. The Chinese, by tradition, walk a more peaceful path. They study *health*, and seek merely to create it. They don't see the body under siege, nor do they adopt a warlike state of mind. They understand that fighting illness and creating health are two entirely different activities. And in the long run, fighting illness doesn't work.

Why? Because there's a rule of life that says we can't create what we want by opposing what we've got. The spirit of opposition is not a creative spirit. Acts of opposition are not creative acts. The goal of healing is not to oppose, which comes from fear, but to *create*, which comes from hope.

And creating health, my Chinese friend taught me, is a matter of *balancing the body*. Where balance exists, ill health cannot exist. So we don't become healthy by naming diseases, or by worrying about them, or by battling against them, or by trying to *make* them go away, but by creating health and balance in their place. The Chinese have refined this creative balancing in to a fine and multifaceted art.

At the center of that art is the way of eating that I explain in this little book. I've been applying it personally for several years now. It's helped me become stronger, more slender, slower to complain, quicker to forgive, more alert able to work long hours when I have to, quicker to recover when I do, less prone to bad habits, and more prone to good ones. These are the consequences of balance. And at the center of the Chinese idea of balance is the theory *yin* and *yang*.

Balancing *Yin* and *Yang*

As my Chinese friend explained to me, *yin* is calm, quiet, and receptive, while *yang* is active, noisy, and expressive. There are reasons for this distinction between *yin* and *yang*, and reasons why we need them both.

Yang is active and expressive because it involves work, or spending energy. *Yin* is calm and receptive because it involves recovering from work, or restoring energy. Through *yang*, energy flows outward; through *yin*, it flows inward again.

We do this outward and inward flowing at all levels, from our conscious daily activities to the intricate operations of our cells. And at none of our many levels does energy flow inward only or outward only. It always flows both ways -- in *and* out, and we are healthiest when the two ways of flowing balance each other. Sustaining this balance *nutritionally* is what the Chinese approach to foods is designed to help us do.

Once this *yin/yang* idea settled into my head, I began to see it everywhere. I saw, for example, that a depressed person, in emotional terms, would be too calm, or too *yin*. An anxious person would be too active, or too *yang*. An emotionally healthy person would balance the two, being neither too calm nor too active, but somewhere in between.

As the father of nine children, I began to see myself making two opposite kinds of mistakes. Sometimes I'm too lenient; sometimes I'm too strict. These are also imbalances, the Chinese would say-cases of being parentally too *yin* and parentally too *yang*. And by the time we're grand-parents, *maybe* we learn to strike a balance. (Governments have the same problem, by the way. They must govern their citizens, yet they must also allow them to be free.)

Or suppose I'm too lazy. I am, as well, too *yin*. By the same token, my workaholic neighbor is imbalanced in the opposite direction-too *yang*. As neighbors, we may be balanced, but that doesn't seem to count. We must each achieve balance within ourselves.

Now isn't it possible that the same principle applies to our body-that we feel *physically* unwell when the functions that make up our physiology somehow operate outside their normal range, and that we may become physically *well* by adjusting them into balance again? The Chinese accept that point of view, and base their entire health philosophy on it.

As you can see, the Chinese *yin/yang* concept is nothing more than the simple principle Goldilocks talked about. Goldilocks discerned three distinct categories of porridge based entirely on the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. Papa Bear's porridge was too *yang*. Mama Bear's porridge was too *yin*, and Baby Bear's porridge was midway between the extremes, with *yin* neatly balancing *yang*. Health is the bliss of Baby Bear's porridge the bliss of being *just right*.

The Science of Self-Organization

People who think that the Chinese approach to health is simple quackery will probably be delighted that I chose to illustrate its key principle with a fairy tale. “How appropriate,” they might say. Actually, I could illustrate it just as well with highly advanced principles of science—principles that earned Ilya Prigogine the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1977. Prigogine received the prize for explaining the principle of *self-organization*.

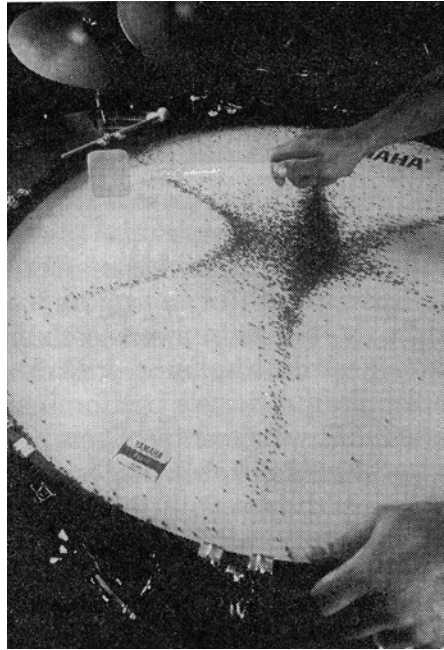


Figure 1, for example, illustrates self-organization. It shows what happens when you scatter gravel on the head of a base drum and strike the drumhead with a mallet.

As Prigogine points out, the pattern that's formed is self-organized. The information that forms it doesn't exist in the mallet, in the gravel, or in the drumhead. In fact, it doesn't really exist anywhere—except for a brief instant within a particular *combination of circumstances*, all of which can be adjusted up or down in the *yin/yang* sense. If any of those circumstances (the tautness of the drumhead, the size of the gravel, the strength of the mallet's blow) slips beyond the boundaries of moderation and balance to some more extreme position, the pattern will change or disappear.

Prigogine won the Nobel Prize for developing the technical aspects of this principle -- for identifying its various elements, deriving the mathematics to handle them, relating them to previous scientific developments, and so on, but the heart of the principle is just as simple as it seems. Here, slightly simplified, is how Prigogine describes it:

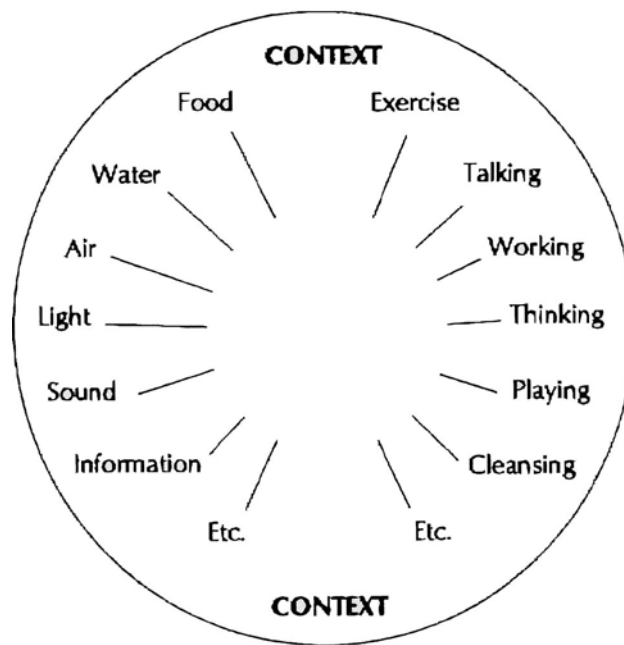
Order appears to be a compromise between two antagonists [which the Chinese call yin and yang]. Disturbing the delicate balance between these antagonists leads to an erratic state, on the one hand, or, on the other, a fossil like

state. Self-organized order, therefore, appears to be limited on opposite sides by two different kinds of disorder.¹

The erratic state is too *yang*; the fossil like state is too *yin*. The state that falls between them is health.

Adjusting *Yin* and *Yang* in the Body

So how do we adjust *yin* and *yang* in the body? As Prigogine points out, self-organized patterns are sustained by *flowing energy*. The energy in the porridge bowls was heat. The energy in the drumhead was supplied by the mallet. To adjust the body's self-organized patterns, then, we look mainly to the energies that sustain them-to see where those energies come from, where they go, and how we might adjust them.



As Figure 2 shows, the flowing energies that sustain the body come from its context- the circumstances and conditions that surround it.

We interact with our context in various and sundry ways. We are sustained, for example, by food, water, air, light, sound, information, and so on. These things come into us, they are transformed within us, and they leave us again in the form of exercise, talking, working, thinking, playing, cleansing of wastes, and so on.

All of these things-both inflowing and outflowing – are *adjustable*. And as we adjust them, we also adjust the body -- in the direction of illness or health.

¹ Gregoire Nicolis and Ilya Prigogine, *Exploring Complexity: An Introduction* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1989, 170-71.

For thousands of years now, the Chinese have studied these sorts of simple adjustments, and in very practical ways. They've experimented with the various adjustments and noticed which of them produce patterns of health and which produce patterns of illness. And they've become very sophisticated in the process. Where we've studied perhaps a few hundred food plants, for example, the Chinese have studied tens of thousands. Even ordinary peasant Chinese know the properties of virtually every edible plant in their neighborhood.² This depth of knowledge shows how deeply the Chinese respect food as one of the adjusters of *yin/yang* balance in the body.

The Five Basic Functions

In dealing with these tens of thousands of edible plants, the Chinese have organized them in a very interesting way. They've categorized them according to the *function* of the body that they affect. Put another way, they categorize their foods according to *which parts of the body they nourish*.

Notice how this differs from our own approach. We categorize foods by what they are, not what they do. We label them with words like “vegetables” and “meats,” or describe them in terms of the elements they contain—vitamins, proteins, carbohydrates, and so on. This descriptive approach to foods defines the seven basic food groups I learned as a child as well as the simplified four basic food groups that my children learn today.

The Chinese, in contrast, don't so much care what foods *are* as what they *do*. And they define what foods do by observing which of the body's various processes, or functions, they nourish. But their list of the body's various processes, or functions, they nourish. But their list of the body's functions is quite unlike ours. They define *five major functions of the body*, which they view, in essence, as nutritional “targets.”

The Chinese label the five major functions with most unusual names. They call them (1) wood, (2) fire, (3) earth, (4) metal, and (5) water. They use those names as metaphors—as concrete object lessons, in essence, that represent particular qualities of the body, particular things that it does, or particular ways that it behaves.

The Chinese describe the five functions in very complex detail. Each includes a related tissue group, a related sense organ, a related emotion, a network of channels for directing energy flow, and so on.³ For our purposes, however, we can illustrate the five functions with these summary statements taken from *the Essentials of Chinese Medicine*, written by Dr. Liu Yanchi of the Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine and published in English by Columbia University Press:

² K. C. Chang, “Introduction,” in K. C. Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 9.

³ Yanchi Liu, *The essential Book of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Volume 1: Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 73.

- The *wood* function “governs the smooth flow of *Chi*.”⁴ (The *Chi* is the “life force”-the source of the body’s resilience, of adaptability.)
- The *fire* function “controls the life processes of the human body, coordinating the activities of all other organs.”⁵
- The *earth* function “controls digestion.”⁶
- The *metal* function is “responsible for respiration.”⁷
- The *water* function (not surprisingly) “regulates the water in the body.”⁸

In summary, the five functions cover the body’s resilience, its coordination, and it’s processing of food, water, and air. If the body handles these five functions well, the Chinese say, everything else more or less falls into line. These are the five *basic* functions of the body, with everything else playing a subordinate role.

The Two Basic Cycles

To complete our picture, we must now understand that the five functions are connected within two looping cycles of energy flow. Figure 3 shows the two cycles.

The outer cycle has plus signs labeling the arrows. That’s because each turn of the cycle *increases* the strength of the functions. This is called the *promotion cycle*.

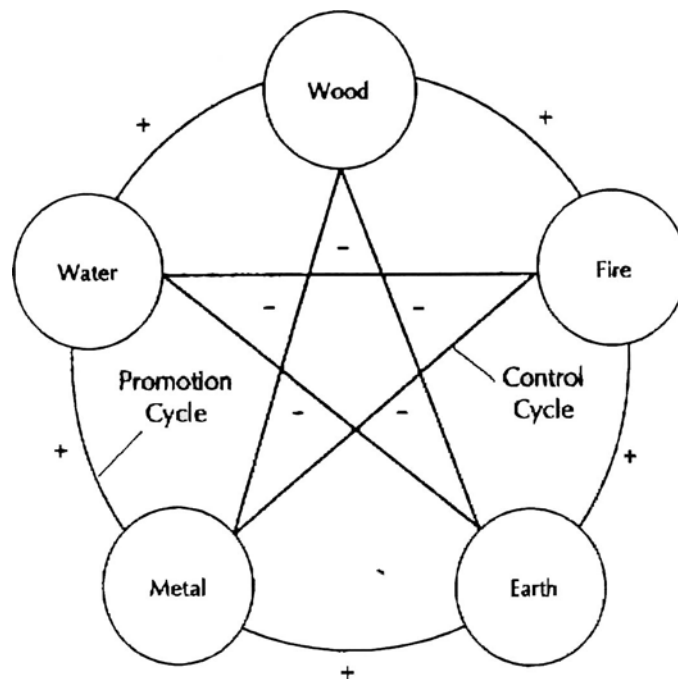


Figure 3. The Chinese five-element theory, interrelating five basic functions of the body.

⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁸ Ibid., 83.

The inner cycle has minus signs labeling the arrows. This is because each turn of the cycle *decreases* the strength of the functions. This is called the *control cycle*.

The two cycles correspond to *yin* and *yang*, and they alternate. Through their alternating, the strength of the functions continually waxes and wanes around a constant middle point. When something pushes the body away from that middle point, the functions compensate in a resilient and adaptive way-to draw it back to the center again. In our terms, this drawing back to the center is called *homeostasis*. It is the body's means of keeping itself stable in the face of things that would otherwise disturb it.⁹

The Seven Categories of Food

It is within this picture, then, that the Chinese categorize their foods, and the number of categories is therefore seven. Five categories correspond to the five basic functions-wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Two categories correspond to the two basic cycles-promotion (*yang*) and control (*yin*). Taken together, the seven categories of food nourish seven basic systems-the seven basic governors of the body's control of itself.

The Chinese have developed this perspective and these categories through many centuries of experience. They have seen the world through *yin* and *yang* and the theory of five elements for nearly as long as they have existed, and they have eaten their foods and observed the consequences of their eating with that order in mind. Such enduring and consistent experience gives richness to this perspective that we can scarcely imagine.

And that rich experience seems to show this: When we human beings eat in a balanced fashion from all seven categories, we nourish our basic body processes, which consequently operate in a balanced and harmonious way. When we neglect one or more of these categories, we fail to nourish one or more of our basic body processes, which consequently fail to carry their load. Processes that don't carry their load necessarily disturb the system of checks and balances that keeps all of the processes operating at their proper level, and those processes therefore slip out of balance and begin to operate at levels that are too high (too *yang*) or too low (too *yin*). When that happens, we suffer the chronic unwellness that has become so common today.

Why Drugs Miss the Point

This Chinese perspective casts new light on something medical doctors deal with every day- conditions where the body makes too much or too little of particular body chemicals. Doctors measure the levels of these chemicals with their blood and urine tests, and define illnesses by what they find. Diabetes, for example, is a case of the body making too little insulin. High blood pressure is a case of the body making excessive amounts of pressure-raising chemicals like angiotensin or rennin.

⁹ Ibid., 51.

When medical doctors observe these out-of-balance chemical levels, they adjust them directly. They give insulin to the diabetic and blocking, or inhibiting, drugs to the high blood pressure patient. In theory, this corrects the problem by bringing the chemical levels back to normal.

But the body's internal processes-the ones that make the chemicals haven't been adjusted at all. They operate just as they did before, with this exception: their out-of-balance condition actually gets worse because the body, relying on those homeostatic processes we mentioned, *compensates* for the drugs. Adding insulin causes the body to make less of it. Blocking a blood pressure chemical causes the body to make more of it.

Researchers once gave heart-attack patients a drug that breaks up blood clots. As a consequence, the patients began forming new clots faster than ever. Their bodies were compensating for the drug by making "markedly elevated" levels of a chemical that inhibits it. This ended up "tipping the balance in favor of [clot formation]"-the original problem. Now the researchers are looking for a drug that will "inhibit the inhibitor,"¹⁰ which the body will compensate for as well.

From the Chinese point of view, those too high and too low chemical levels just show that the body has gotten itself out of balance-that the processes that make the chemicals have been adjusted too low or too high by our mishandling those adjustable factors we mentioned earlier-mainly food. So the Chinese work on adjusting those adjustable factors-again, mainly food-in order to tease *yin* and *yang* back into balance again, which lets the chemical level stabilize on their own.

Regeneration vs. Substitution

This points out the fundamental difference between the Chinese food concept and Western medicine. Chinese healers seek to regenerate weak body functions by balancing them with foods, while medical doctors seek to replace them with chemical and mechanical substitutes.

Medicine's mechanical substitutes are easy to spot. An artificial heart clearly substitutes for the real one. A dialysis machine clearly substitutes for a real kidney. But drugs are just as obviously substitutes. Insulin shots substitute for a function of the pancreas. Antibiotics substitute for a function of the immune system. Cortisone substitutes for a function of the adrenal gland. And so on.

The problem with this substituting is that it does nothing to address the body's weakness. And in the long run, the body responds by becoming weaker still.

This is why the Chinese seek ultimately to regenerate body functions, not substitute for them. And they do this regenerating by adjusting (among other things) the food they eat. As Ilya Prigogine points out, this sort of adjusting lets us find the position

¹⁰ "Searching for the Better Clot-Buster," *Science News* 133 (April 9, 1988): 230.

of balance between two opposite extremes. When we do that to the body, what we find is *health*.

This isn't to say the Chinese never use the principle of substitution, because they do (with what they call medicinal herbs). But they use it temporarily, and only in times of emergency. Substituting has its uses, but it does not truly heal.

How to Apply the Principles

We may apply these principles in two ways. First, by preparing our daily meals according to the system I've just described. And second, by eating commercially available Chinese food-herb formulas as an adjunct to our daily diet.

Annemarie Colbin has written a cookbook called *The Natural Gourmet*. She explains the Chinese five-element system (or "five-phase theory," as she calls it), lists dozens of recipes, and categorizes each of them by which of the five elements it represents. The recipes are excellent. Annemarie operates the Natural Gourmet Cookery School in Manhattan, and she's distilled them from her own best efforts and the best efforts of her students over the past 17 years.¹¹

To apply this solution, however, you must learn to cook in a new way. In addition, the recipes necessarily use only a small number of the thousands of plats that skilled Chinese herbalists use, and the plants aren't processed and prepared according to the traditional methods, so they don't reach the status of true Chinese food-herb formulas, which are highly sophisticated and refined. And Annemarie does not include recipes for the two basic cycles-promotion and control-though she covers the five elements very well.

I therefore supplement my daily diet with commercially prepared food-herb formulas that precisely represent, in all its richness the complete system that I have described. That richness, in fact, becomes a sign of quality. As you seek formulas to apply this philosophy to your own health goals, keep in mind that any legitimate Chinese food-herb company will trace its origins to these long-standing Chinese traditions and will match its basic products to the five basic functions and the two basic cycles.

The ultimate solution, obviously, is to eat Chinese food-herb formulas as you also learn to balance your daily meals using the five-element recipes that Annemarie describes in her book this is what we are doing in our home.

¹¹ Annemarie Colbin, *The Natural Gourmet* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1989).

Making the Principles Work

Here is more specific counsel for applying this Chinese healing philosophy in your life:

Think in terms of the health you seek. This is the shift of focus I mentioned earlier. It is, in essence, a shift from fear to hope. We cannot honestly expect to be healthy if we operate from a despairing, disease-centered state of mind.

Feed the two basic cycles every day. The two basic cycles-promotion and control-represent *yin* and *yang* (working and recuperating, expending energy and recovering it) and form the foundation of homeostasis, the body's ability to stabilize itself.

Feed the five basic functions every day. The five basic functions cover the body's resilience, its coordination, and its processing of food, water and air. Feeding all five functions represents the Chinese concept of a "balanced diet." Over time, the body translates that dietary balance into the functional balance we call health.

Emphasize particular foods as you discern the need. This bit of counsel expresses the fact that most of us have become imbalanced over time, and we can rebalance ourselves most efficiently by feeding most generously the body's weaker systems. The difficulty comes in discerning which those weaker systems are.

Chinese healers do it by looking at things like complexion, hair texture, skin texture, voice quality, taste preferences, posture, and so on. These signs let them discern particular "patterns of imbalance" in the body, for which they then recommend particular patterns of eating. But we don't have the skill to do that, nor do most of us have a Chinese healer handy, so we have no choice but to discern our own needs by experimenting.

I've experimented with food-herb formulas in two different ways: (1) by following a system, and (2) by following my intuitions. I follow a system by emphasizing one of the five basic food categories (wood, fire, earth, metal, or water) for two weeks and noticing how my body responds. Then I switch to another of the categories for another two weeks and notice again how my body responds. I proceed in that fashion through the five basic systems, taking mental notes as I go, and learning by the changes I observe. (If I were truly systematic, by the way, I would take *written* notes.)

The first time I tried this, I didn't see anything because I was too anxious. I didn't know what I was supposed to see, and I was afraid I wouldn't do it right. I also tended to look for particular changes instead of simply *looking* which comes from a more peaceful and curious state of mind. After a while, however, I began to see patterns in my body's responses, and to understand the patterns of eating that met my particular needs.

As I've become more experienced, I've learned to follow my intuitions, which I'd do by noticing what interests me, or attracts me. If I feel like emphasizing the wood

formula, for example, I do it. I've been amazed to notice how strong my interests and attractions can become, and how accurate they seem to be. By following them, I've sometimes emphasized two foods at the same time, or occasionally even three. I don't know how these intuitions work, but I'm learning to trust them and appreciate them.

Even while I'm experimenting, I still feed the two cycles and the five systems every day. I experiment by building on that basic foundation-by eating more of particular formulas, without eliminating any of them.

And I experiment only when I'm feeling out of balance in some way. After all, if I'm feeling altogether balanced, I don't need to emphasize particular foods, and I wouldn't be able to notice anything useful anyway.

Proceed at your body's pace. The body doesn't always work as fast as we'd like nor follow the sequence we prefer. I may be desperate to lose weight, for example, while my body patiently works on something else. If I insist emotionally that my body follow *my* pace and *my* preferred sequence, I may become anxious and end up getting in the way.

We should also expect to feel discomfort from time to time. Part of the body's *yin* cycle is cleansing, which can produce symptoms (like nausea and vomiting) that we generally associate with getting sick. Sometimes this happens when we proceed too quickly or emphasize particular foods too much. So be moderate and gentle, and if you experience discomfort, reduce the amounts you're eating and give your body time to adjust.

See your medical doctor if you need symptomatic relief. In general, symptoms are information, and we lose that information when we mask our symptoms with drugs. Even so, we sometimes need symptomatic relief, particularly when we face situations that threaten our life, make us unbearably uncomfortable, or leave us unable to cope. We shouldn't underestimate our abilities to cope, but neither should we hesitate to consult a physician when we become acutely ill, nor to use proven drugs when there's a clear need for them. Use drugs as little as possible, however, and don't ever stop eating as you should.

Adjust all the other context dimensions as well. In other words, work hard, play hard, think cheerful thoughts, drink plenty of pure water, breathe deeply the freshest air you can find, read good books, listen to good music, be honest, be gentle, speak kindly, do good, reverence God, and cherish the powers that heal.

Teaching the Principles to Others

I will conclude with a prediction. As you become healthier through these principles, you will also become a teacher. How do I know that? Because that's what happened to me. First, I became excited about the principles, and I *wanted* to talk about them. Second, when people saw how much I'd changed, they asked me to teach them. *They* wanted to become healthier as well.

So I predict that you will become a teacher, just as I have become a teacher, and I conclude, therefore, with these three items of advice:

Remember always that you are teaching a way of life. All that we've said about eating merely illustrates a more general and inspiring point: We become healthy as we live worthy of health. Wise eating practice in wise living. It's one thread in a tapestry, one flower in a garden, one voice in a chorus. In company with all of the other healing principles, wise eating gains its ultimate power from the whole that it's part of—a wise and balanced life.

Remember always that the way of life you are teaching has nothing to do with disease. People will tempt you to violate this principle. They'll ask you, quite emphatically, "But what do I do about my *disease*?" The answer, in essence or in fact, must always be this: Shift your focus. Disease plays no role in what we're doing here. We're creating, not opposing. So strip the fearful specter of disease from your mind and envision instead the health you wish to create. Nurture that vision until it inspires you to walk the path that will achieve it after all, we don't overdo the evils of our life by opposing them, but by looking beyond them—by seeking to see, and to do, and to be, *good*.

Remember always that we must all heal ourselves. People will expect you to give them the answers they seek, and this you cannot do. You can teach them concepts and principles, but the specifics of their path they must discover on their own. They will discover that path within their own body and mind as they nurture *for themselves* their own vision of health, as they discern *for themselves* the subtle effects of the foods, as they experience *for themselves* the surge of interest that is their intuition at work. If you succumb to the temptation to tell people what to do, you will unwittingly rob them of what may be the greatest healer of all—the passion of a *personal quest*.

You can support their quest, however, by giving them a copy of this little book. It will teach them the concepts and principles involved. But concepts and principles don't stand alone. They must be enlivened and empowered by a heartfelt spirit of curiosity, vision, and commitment, which words on paper can't easily express. That spirit, therefore, you will provide by your example, which is the greatest teacher of all.

About the Author **Dr. Dean Black, Ph.D.**

Dean Black spent much of his life writing and lecturing on topics related to health and successful living. He received a Ph. D. degree from Penn State University, and is listed in the book *American Men and Women of Science*. He's appeared on five continents before audiences as diverse as Fortune 500 corporations and foreign governments. He authored four books and more than two dozen booklets.

NOTE: Nothing in this booklet should be construed as advice for specific medical conditions, nor as a substitute for necessary medical care.