The immune system is a term many people use freely, but often without an understanding of the multiple levels on which the body's system of defense actually works. We think that if we take some extra Vitamin C and zinc, our immune systems will be fine. But today we face a widespread crisis of immunity, including cancer and autoimmune illnesses, as well as the epidemics of Lyme disease and MRSA staphylococcal infections that permeate our hospitals and are now emerging in many local communities. Only by recognizing and working intelligently with the body's natural systems do we have an opportunity to overcome these challenges.

The function of the human immune system is to defend and protect us. The word 'defense' brings to mind national agencies like the Defense Department, which seeks to keep terrorists out of the country. 'Protection' brings to mind the safeguarding of our homes and our children. Likewise, our bodies have an immune system to defend us from microbes and other toxic agents that permeate our environment, seeking to do us harm, while protecting our bodies and all those who depend on us to remain healthy.

But before we delve deeper into how the immune system works, it's important to ask ourselves, what are we protecting with our immune systems? Are we just a collection of cells and tissues and organs? Do we seek merely to insulate ourselves from pain and discomfort? Or do we seek to defend our highest purpose in life? The immune system exists to protect the integrity of our physical bodies so that we can have the strength and endurance to become the creative and purposeful individuals we were intended to be.

This is a significant issue because it plays into a central paradox of the human nervous system: the more we are on guard, the weaker we become. More specifically stated, the more we are in sympathetic or fight-or-flight mode, the less oxygen and nutrients are received by our cells, weakening them; the weaker our cells become, the less able they are to defend themselves. So
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while it is important to remain alert and observant, it is equally important to remain inwardly calm, and to act from the positive principle in life. This is a quality that often takes years to learn.

Yet, often, children have it. They enjoy life and have fun with an attitude of relaxation while remaining basically healthy. Unless they have inherited a weakness in their immune systems, or had it weakened by events and traumas in early life (especially by overmedication and poor-quality food), children illustrate the concept that on the job that rightly belongs to the intelligence of the immune system itself. We prescribe antibiotics like candy to any child or adult with a fever, not realizing that one course of antibiotics can disrupt the delicate balance of immune-enhancing cells in our small intestines for up to a year. The idea here is that rather than attacking, our task is to strengthen the immune system to do its job.

One of the ways we can do this is by eating foods that support healthy gut and immune function. We speak of such approaches as the Mediterranean Diet, but the practitioner may need to suggest a diet that is more suited to a person’s temperament, or to his/her constitution, or to the illness at hand. In general, eating many vegetables, some fruits, good proteins, good fats, and avoiding refined carbohydrates and transfats is a good start to a healthy immune system. This often requires a change of habitual patterns.

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There are also many specific nutrients, herbs, and remedies, either homeopathic or anthroposophical, that have a wonderful strengthening effect on the immune system. For example, most people benefit from what are called adaptogenic herbs, which strengthen the neuroendocrine balance that is so important to a healthy immune system. This includes such herbs as _eleutherooccus_ or Siberian ginseng, as well as others such as _astragalus_ and Japanese knotweed. Additionally, there are nutrients such as vitamin C, _lactobacillus acidophilus_ (which helps to maintain healthy intestinal function), good amino acids, good fats (coconut oil, olive oil, and eggs), key minerals (magnesium, zinc, selenium, and iodine, for example) from organic food sources and supplements as needed, and protein from healthy animal sources (free-range chicken, northern non-farmed fish, non-denatured whey protein, and fermented soy, when tolerated.) Constitutional homeopathic and anthroposophical remedies are helpful, as are mistletoe therapies from anthroposophical pharmacies, which have been well-researched and are clinically proven to boost vital immune markers. This is a small but important list of how we can add specifics to our daily lives that will keep our immune systems strong.

We can also strengthen our immune system by getting enough sleep and exposure to the sun, and by engaging in a healthy lifestyle in which we choose to love, laugh and maintain a relaxed attitude. Having a healthy immune system is as much about changing our consciousness and strengthening our basic approach to life, as it is about specific foods and supplements.

Our immune systems may be thought of as the biological mechanism by which we track and discern what is of ourselves, and what is not, in much the same way infants learn gradually to distinguish what is ‘me’ and what is ‘not me.’ This is an important element of a healthy life. Yet many of us today lack this ability on an energetic level, bombarded as we are from many...
directions with antihuman efforts to confuse this healthy radar system. Every time we permit someone to invade our boundaries and take over our thinking, whether it be from abusive relationships or television advertising, our capacity to protect this critical boundary is weakened. The physical counterpart of this barrage also often takes place daily through devitalized foods, which weaken the capacity of our intestines to act as a membrane that permits supportive nutrients to enter our bodies while blocking the absorption of damaging heavy metals and chemicals.

When we’re overrun and overstressed by these ‘invasions’ on both a personal and physical level, the end result is an epidemic of cancer and other chronic illnesses due to hidden infections. Our immune systems have become so weak that they permit what are called stealth microorganisms to do great damage to our bodies without being detected by immune cells. Cancer cells often learn how to create chemicals that actually disrupt healthy immune function, growing at our expense.

A vital part of having a healthy immune system, then, is having the will to reclaim our lives as our own. We live in a society where many pervasive influences attempt to hijack our freedom to think clearly, to feel authentically, and to take actions for the betterment of ourselves and others. Having a healthy immune system means being willing to protect our boundaries, while at the same time ensuring those boundaries remain semi-permeable, rather than rigid. This is of vital importance in strengthening the body’s ability to discern between what is friendly and what is not.

This quality of discernment requires years of training, and for that reason it’s important to cultivate it both in ourselves and in our children. If we can relax enough to allow our children to experience the acute illnesses of childhood, for example, instead of vaccinating against them, their immune systems will be strengthened in response. Likewise, if we teach our young people how to discern between experiences of truth and illusion (one of the psychological functions of fairy tales) then we will have adults who can distinguish helpful from harmful without chronic anxiety or fear.

Through a combination of healthy foods, good sleep, exercise, and taking care of our digestion, as well as through the cultivation of joy, laughter and healthy relationships, we all have the power to strengthen our own immune systems. These are the actions, attitudes and lifestyle decisions that will help us out of a sympathetic fight-or-flight, fear-based state, in which our immune systems are suppressed, and into what is called a parasympathetic state, in which our organs and tissues can regenerate and rebuild from the effects of daily tissue breakdown.

In conclusion, we must strive to support a healthy immune system in ourselves and in others, and to work together in this effort. It is imperative in these stressful times, in which we are confronted by so many threats, both real and imagined, to maintain a relaxed and fearless vigilance that protects what we revere the most: healthy bodies that support a healthy mind and spirit, committed to action for the benefit of all.