

The Fire Element through heaven's eyes

Lonny Jarrett considers the Fire Element and some of its associations – love, sex and compassion – from the absolute perspective of consciousness itself



Much of what we have had to say about the Fire Element as Western practitioners of Chinese medicine these last 36 years has been greatly influenced by post-modern

values.¹ We have come to understand our medicine through a humanistic, psychological perspective emphasising the feeling and emotional dimensions of our experience. We have considered the Fire Element from the very personal perspective of the ego's fears and desires. Importance has been placed on how patients feel about being wounded, victimised, traumatised, and betrayed in life. Such 'shocks' have been recognised to 'compromise boundaries', impact the functional relationship between the heart, lungs, and kidneys, and injure the circulatory system. As practitioners we endeavour to help patients 'heal' from their wounds in order once again to feel safe to experience joy, trust, and love. We have tailored a medicine to treat the ego structures of the 'sensitive self' under the auspices of the 'spiritual practice of medicine'.

It is important to consider that the Fire Element is the presence of heaven within us. It is through our own hearts that we are one with the heart of heaven. As there is only one North Star, one sun, one emperor, and one heart, there is only one fire in this universe.

Awakening to this absolute fire beyond the individuated self-sense, reveals that the very relative personal realm where we experience such a compelling relationship to our history of perceived trauma, is an illusion. When we awaken to fire as consciousness, we discover that best part of ourselves that is rooted in, and ever arising from, emptiness. Here we have never been wounded, are already whole, and cannot relate to needing more time to heal at the level of the heart, mind, and spirit. We discover that the presence and demand of goodness, positivity, and creativity within us is absolute, entirely impersonal, and just waiting for us to get onboard.

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From this perspective we discover that all of our fears and desires are insignificant compared to our purpose (*ming*: destiny) and potential (*jing*). We renounce needing any more time to overcome our past and set about creating the future, fuelled by a ceaseless, and selfless, passion. And we find out just how small our conceptions have been regarding notions of love, intimacy, trust, compassion, boundaries, control, surrender, mind, spirit, connection, and any other attribute of the

Fire Element one might care to mention. After all, these are newly emergent properties of consciousness in the context of a nearly 15 billion year developmental stream.

Here, I'll consider the Fire Element, and some of its associations – love, sex and compassion – from the absolute perspective of heaven, or consciousness itself. Sure it's outrageous, and perhaps a bit presumptuous, but why not stretch a bit and try?

Fire, Water, consciousness and the void

The Fire and Water Elements are emblematic of the dual poles of heaven and earth within us. As the sun rises out of the ocean, consciousness arises out of the infinite void to propel creation forward. The will of no-thing, to manifest some-thing, is the creative impulse and consciousness (*shen*) itself. It is interesting to contemplate, 'When something came from nothing, was that a "YES!", a "no", or a "maybe"?'. If it was a "YES!" who was it that said yes? If indeed it was I, then I am responsible for the whole thing.

The renunciation of victimisation and the acceptance of a responsibility that is of cosmic proportion, is a manifestation of an enlightened heart. Only a practitioner who strives to embrace this virtue will cultivate the gravity to awaken the hearts of others. Awakening is the experience of consciousness as the motivating force of universal development, realising itself through us, and as us. The impulse that motivates all seekers is only ever searching for itself. When we apply intention to the contemplation



of consciousness the explosion of fire is instantaneous. Imagine the sun rising out of the ocean to experience an infinite draw to its source in the depths while simultaneously recognising itself as the will that initiated and sustains the entire creation that it is perceiving.

If we look at creation (becoming) through the eyes of emptiness (being) we awaken to the perennial revelation that the universe is an illusion, a thin veil stretched over an infinite, timeless, sea. But, if we look at emptiness (water) through the eyes of consciousness (fire) as the creative impulse, we awaken to discover the call of our own infinite potential. Nothing could be more attractive to consciousness

then its own immanent potential! The primacy of consciousness is revealed in unseeded meditation when we renounce all relationship to the content and quality of our experience, liberating consciousness from our conditioned minds. Hence, meditation is about ‘no relationship’.

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When meditation ends, we open our eyes to discover ourselves in relationship to the entire universe that appears before us. Relationship requires continual responses, which are based on choices we make according to our values. Choices exist hierarchically on a continuum from selfish to selfless. The virtue *ziran* has been translated as ‘spontaneity’. It refers to our ability to act prior to mind (thought, feeling, history). Spontaneity manifests when we act from an unselfconscious passion, purely motivated to move things forward toward wholeness. Spontaneity is the natural expression of a liberated heart unconstrained by the fetters of the ego’s fears and desires. Spontaneity is not something we have to try to do (*wuwei*). Rather it is a virtue attained through the proper application of will (water) and interest (Fire) manifesting effortlessly through who we’ve actually become.

Spirit, mind, enlightenment

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| Ming | 命 | Destiny, orders, life |
| Ming | 明 | Enlightenment, illumination |
| Ming | 名 | Name |
| Ming | 冥 | Dark, profound, meditation, sleep, death, hell, confused |

The Fire Element is the manifestation of heaven, the impulse toward perfection, within us. It is through our own hearts that we have the capacity to recognise our union with heaven. Hence, the spiritual experience has often been discussed in terms of ‘light’, ‘fire’, and ‘burning’. The effect of staring into this fire can be likened to going blind from staring into the sun. Consider how the sun blanches a photograph over time to leave nothing but a pure white surface erasing all distinguishing characteristics of the individual.

Shen has been translated as both ‘spirit’ and ‘mind’. I prefer to translate *shen* as ‘consciousness’, the capacity to both perceive and initiate. One of the primary manifestations of *shen* is ‘interest’. The interest a person has to really live, right now, without excuses as evidenced by his or her quality of care and attention. *Shen* recognises no obstacles to its expression and illuminates all self deception. *Shen* is the ceaseless passion to manifest one’s highest potential for greater integrity, right now, not for one’s self, but for the expression of spirit, light, and consciousness.

When I use the term ‘mind’, I refer to our capacity to orient in time and space by storing and accessing memories. The mind is not inherent in consciousness (*shen*) but is an evolved mechanism emergent from the human nervous system. Mind can be conditioned by ego as the force that personalises all experience. What I call ‘mind’ is storing not just unadorned experience, but also our emotional and physiological responses, physical sensations, and our interpretations of events as seen through the lens of our culturally given value systems. To the degree that we place attention on the contents of the mind we become identified with it, seeing ourselves as the sum total of all we have experienced in the past. History becomes our reference point for relating to all new experience. So conditioned, we lose touch with the spontaneous (*ziran*) impulse to create the future and instead begin to protect the past. Attachment to the past creates cynicism about what is possible now and in the future. Cynicism is the chief poison of the heart.

Love

Love absolute requires everything from us. It illuminates just how much we are really willing to give, or not give, for the sake of our highest realisation. Through the perspective of absolute love, the pretence of our ego’s desire for self-serving ‘intimacy’ becomes clear. We discover that in heaven’s love there is nothing to be held onto, nothing for the self, and only a demand for clarity, integrity, and transparency for their own sake. What sense does the idea of any particular relationship



being unique make when seen from heaven’s perspective that we are already one? In higher states, when we take our attention off the fears and desires of the ego, we discover a selfless love that is universal, as impersonal as gravity, and that is attached to no-thing in particular. The authentic self is love and recognises no separation. It is the force of attraction that binds all into one.

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The ego, in order to maintain the illusion of separation, personalises our experience of love. We imagine that our feeling of love means something unique about us and the object of our affection. As we all know, ‘I love you’ can mean very many different things! Such personal ‘love’ is a manifestation of



In romantic relationships, we are able to maintain the illusion of perfection for a short while. Eventually, the filter stops working and circumstances illustrate the nature of our delusion in terms so clear that even we can't deny them. Then we say, 'My partner changed! I feel betrayed! I'm not safe!'. In the instant that a relationship is over, we can miraculously see all the evidence, that had always been present, revealing our 'special love' was far from perfect. We respond with an awesome sense of victimisation only to endeavour to 'learn' from the past, and pull ourselves together again for yet another try at the promise of perfection. From an absolute perspective, romantic love is the most obvious form of insanity that most of us have experienced. And yet the illusion of romantic love is one of the hardest for us to let go of – even though we know it's crazy!

'What does a relationship look like when freedom and integrity are the highest shared priorities and love is merely the reflection of those commitments?'

If love is more important than integrity then, under pressure, a relationship will have neither. If integrity is the priority, then neither person will have to be concerned about love. It is interesting to contemplate, 'What does a relationship look like when freedom and integrity are the highest shared priorities and love is merely the reflection of those commitments?'

desire and results in attachment. We attempt to take possession of others using love as a type of currency through which we manipulate and control. We become attached to others as the source of love seeking their warmth and affirmation. In time we feel victimised resenting the control we feel the other person has over us. Victimisation is antithetical to the virtue of propriety expressed by a liberated heart.

Two people 'in love' often appear as being lost in a bubble exclusive to only them. Romantic delusion is perhaps the clearest example of the ego at work as a filter, in this case suppressing all available information suggesting that we aren't actually going to get what we want from another person.

Sexuality

Traditionally, spiritual paths have taken one of two perspectives. Some traditions suggest one must renounce sexuality in order to give one's self entirely to god. Sexuality is seen as a lower impulse to be avoided as a distraction from the higher aspirations of the spiritual life. Some traditions have maintained that sex is a vehicle through which one can recognise non-duality and evolve spiritually. Neither perspective seems relevant in our present-day context.

From a practical standpoint, I have seen people hide out in both celibate and sexual practices and evidence no meaningful development.

From a heavenly perspective, sex is neutral. If we are already *one*, then what sense does it make that through sexuality we might become one? Perfect intimacy is possible with strangers with whom we share a felt sense of responsibility in undertaking a great task.

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I have noticed that sexual experience with another tends to make things rather more, and never less complicated. To the degree we are motivated by desire, sex tends to create attachment in a way that diminishes autonomy, creates dependence, and lessens intimacy. It is interesting to contemplate that, from heaven's perspective, our enjoyment of sex is neutral.

Compassion

'Without compassion, the truth can become unbearable. Without truth, compassion becomes both useless and meaningless. Compassion cannot heal what it seeks to hide.'

Reverend John Kirkley ²

If we look to pre-modern teachings for direction on how to live the spiritual realisation in the world, we are advised to cultivate compassion, a virtue frequently ascribed to the Fire Element. As healers, it is easy to identify with the value of compassion as we endeavor to alleviate suffering. Chinese medicine is a science of integrity whose purpose is to promote evolution from a relatively divided state to increasing states of wholeness. As practitioners of integral medicine we have to be very concerned about the relative balance of compassion and truth in our clinical practices.

I would not say truth and compassion are identical but, rather, are inextricably linked. They both have their source in the absolute and always emerge together as light. Such absolute light purifies us, literally burning away everything that is relative. Love absolute that shines with the radiance of compassion and truth is highly conditional. The sense of this conditionality is conveyed by the Chinese character *shu* meaning 'reciprocity' a virtue of the Earth Element associated with integrity in relationship. Only a person of character will have the integrity and courage to find compassion in hearing the truth about herself.

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It is easy to understand why the old teachings emphasised compassion in a world in which the average lifespan was 30 years old. It strikes me that the average practitioner and consumer of Chinese medicine in the West exists in an entirely different demographic than those who practised or partook of our medicine historically. We are the most fortunate people to have ever lived, having more options than royalty ever did. We have the most religious, social, financial, and political freedom, and the best nutrition and healthcare of any people in human history. In light of this fact, I wonder if facing the truth about ourselves for the sake of creating a more wholesome world might not be a more significant and compelling motivation for us than having compassion as a primary goal? This inquiry has everything to do with the Fire Element. Why? Because for us most fortunate, truth is far more potent for rectifying the heart than compassion which, for many, has become a narcotic and just another way to avoid facing what must be faced for the sake of moving ahead.

Unfortunately, notions of compassion are often confused with new age ideas of ‘unconditional love’ and non-judgment. While compassion is certainly a wonderful virtue to have for others, I find it an interesting

contemplation to consider what part of ourselves *wants* compassion from others? What kind of person thinks s/he deserves to be loved, or feels compelled to love, ‘no matter what’? Many practitioners hide out in the notion of ‘compassion’ to avoid confronting patients with their lack of integrity relative to their stated clinical goals. Such behaviour is always predicated on a lack of willingness to really confront one’s self. Correct use of the word ‘integral’, in regard to medicine, is always wholly implicating of one’s own integrity.

Notes and references

- ¹ For example, all truth is relative, the rejection of hierarchy, and the idea that our ‘individual’ minds create ‘reality’
- ² <http://revkirkley.blogspot.com/2006/07/necessary-compassion-inconvenient.html>

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