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MYTH AND MEANING IN CHINESE MEDICINE

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All medical systems reflect the underlying beliefs and assumptions about life inherent in the culture in which they are formulated. The ways of knowing in ancient China focused on understanding the movements of dao as represented externally in the universe and internally in human beings. Chinese medicine, likewise, focuses on movements that reflect internally that which is observed externally.

Specifically, acupuncture meridians and points reflect the way in which the Chinese saw, in ancient times, the macrocosm of the universe mapped onto the microcosm of the body. This map illustrates the functional relationships which maintain the integrity of the human being. Just as the Yijing (I-Ching) is a tool to guide our intuition to an understanding of the dao's implicit movement in the world, knowledge of the imagery of the acupuncture points gives us access to the ways in which the dao is striving to express itself through each individual, and the ways in which that effort is blocked, resulting in imbalance and ill health.

In order to truly appreciate the function of the acupuncture points, it is helpful to understand how the Chinese thought about their world at the time when the collection of acupuncture therapeutics was codified as standard medical practice. Since the early Chinese conception of the universe is well reflected in their mythology, by understanding this mythology (shenhua, spirit talk) the spirits of the points come alive and talk to us. This article explores one of the fundamental myths of Chinese culture, and relates it to the spirit of the acupuncture point Governor Vessel-20. In so doing, it also reveals the inner tradition of healing in Chinese medicine.

DAO AS CHAOS: THE GREAT FLOOD

The Dao De Jing characterizes the dao as a vast whirlpool constantly moving away from and returning to its source in the process of its own self-becoming (1). Chapter 25 of the Dao De Jing calls the fundamental nature of dao chaotic. The sage, in aligning himself with

the dao, steers by the torch of chaos and doubt (2). In his book Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History, Lagerwey says (3):
"If chaos is eternal, the order introduced into chaos of the universe has an end, as it has a beginning. This is because, slowly, names given cease to fit; political systems invented in simpler times cease to function; old irrigation ditches get choked up with new vegetation; the waters of chaos begin to mount."

As the Dao De Jing says (4), "the great dao floods over." The dao is likened to a river whose waters are constantly rising and the Dao De Jing is a survival manual informing us that, through the cultivation of virtue [the de in the title] (5), we may channel the flood and avoid being inundated by it. Hence, Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) states: "Though flood waters pile up high to the sky, he [the sage] will not drown (6)."

Controlling the floods was a continual problem for the early Chinese (as it remains so today). The imagery and theme of a brother and sister surviving a great flood to land on Kunlun mountain, there giving birth incestuously to the human race, is pervasive in early Chinese mythology. The flood itself represents the dao's efforts to assert its original, spontaneous nature. The flood does so in human society, where it (spontaneity) has been civilized, thus to wipe the slate clean for a new beginning.

This drama of building and civilizing, followed by destruction, is played out eternally as humans lose their original natures of self-becoming (see: The Spirit of Chinese medicine: the return to original nature), and seek to control the ensuing chaos.

THE MYTH OF GUN AND YÜ

The theme of the epic flood is well represented in the myth of Gun and Yü which, I believe, lays the foundation for understanding the inner tradition of healing in Chinese medicine. As the story goes, during the time of Emperor Yao (during the legendary period), the overflowing waters reached up to the sky. Yao enlisted Gun, the great grandson of Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor), to control the flooding (7). Gun set about building dams—to hold back the waters—out of rich earth which he stole from Huangdi. The dams, however,

continually collapsed under the weight of the flood waters. For his neglect of orders in failing to control the floods, Gun was executed by Huangdi's heavenly executioner, Zhurong, the spirit of fire, on Feather Mountain (8). Finally, Gun fell into feather abyss, becoming its spirit in the form of a tortoise.

Gun's son, Yü, was then appointed the task of controlling the floods in Gun's place. Yü worked devotedly for thirteen years cutting ditches and tunneling through mountains to provide a way (dao, as in the title of Dao De Jing) for the water from the rivers to be channeled to the sea. Here, the sea is that great abyss (taiyuan), which, like the dao, can receive all things without being filled, yet is never depleted though its waters are used constantly. The acupuncture point Lung-9 is named taiyuan because it is the meeting point of the vessels, where the qi is plentiful and deep like an abyss (9).

Gun, in trying to directly suppress the flooding by blocking its expression, was unsuccessful. Likewise, by suppressing any symptom of the body, it, like the dao, will eventually express itself, breaking any barriers placed in its path. Only by opening the channels—and thereby assisting the patient in bringing life's energy through them—can treatment be successful. Zhaungzi informs (10):
In all things, the way does not want to be obstructed, for if there is obstruction, there is choking; if the choking does not cease, there is disorder; and disorder harms the life of all creatures....All things that have consciousness depend on breath. But if they do not get their fill of breath, it is not the fault of heaven. Heaven opens up the passages and supplies them day and night without stop. But man on the contrary blocks up the holes.

The myth of Gun and Yü thus serves as metaphor for several fundamental principles of Chinese medicine. In describing the way of heaven, the Dao De Jing states: "What has surplus is reduced, what is deficient is supplemented" (11). It is the same message that is given repeatedly in the Neijing Lingshu (Spiritual Pivot of the Inner Classic; ca. 100 B.C.). This notion is expressed nicely by Zhang Congzheng (12) in the Rumen Shihqin (ca. 1228):

[Physicians who] consider a supplementing for persons who have been affected by evil accumulations are followers of Gun, who drowned in the great flood [because he applied the wrong method].

DESTINY

The importance of channeling rather than suppressing is well-expressed in the Chinese word ming (destiny). According to Wieger (13), this character is a picture of a written order, with a seal of authority fixed upon it, and the mouth of heaven dictating to man his destiny between heaven and earth. Destiny is to be met, not overcome. Scholar Tang Qunyi defines ming as existing: "in the mutuality of heaven and man, i.e., in their mutual influence and response, their mutual giving and receiving." Mencius states: "What I command to myself is what heaven intended to command to me; thus, the heavenly ming is established through me. (14)" For Mencius "The way to understand heaven is through understanding one's own [original] nature, which, in turn, is known through the exhaustion or utmost devotion of one's heart; on the other hand, the way to serve heaven is to preserve one's heart within and nourish one's own [original] nature" (15). It is through acting as a vessel for the dao, and bringing the heart of heaven into the world, that one fulfills one's destiny. The Zuo Chuan warns that he who ignores his own destiny "probably will not return home again" (16). Gun, who ignored his destiny, died in Feather Abyss never to return home. Yü, the heart of commitment, returned to his home only after fulfilling his destiny and controlling the floods.

During the time Yü was busy channeling the waters:
Whenever he came to a famous mountain or a big swamp, he would summon its spirit and ask it concerning the deep structure of the mountains and rivers, about the kinds of precious stones, of birds, beasts, and reptiles found there, as well as concerning the customs of the people on all eight sides and the boundaries, soil quality, and size of the various states. He and Yi and Gui wrote all this down and called it The Classic of the Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing).
In his journeys, Yü becomes familiar with the "hundred demons," or spirits of the deep structures of the earth. Similarly, the acupuncturist must know intimately the nature of the spirit present in each acupuncture point. The meridians [mai] are the internal rivers of the

microcosm, each acupuncture point representing a specific aspect of being in the individual's inner kingdom.

THE GREAT MEETING

According to the myth, after taming the floods Yü became emperor and founded the Xia Dynasty (2205–1766 B.C.), during which time he dealt successfully with numerous floods. Yet, his greatest accomplishment was unification of a divided China (17):

After three years he examined the merit [of his ministers]; within five years his government was securely established. He went on tour of all under heaven, and when he came back to Great Yueh, he ascended Mount Mao in order to receive in audience his subjects from the four directions and to inspect the feudal lords of the Central Province. When Oppose-the-Wind arrived late, Yü beheaded him and displayed [his head] to the multitude in order to make clear that all under heaven belonged to him. Then he had a great assembly to decide how to rule the state. Inside, he praised the merit of [the text found on] Mount Cauldron [by means of which he had] stabilized the land; outside, he displayed the saintly virtue which made him a man after Heaven's heart. Then he changed the name of Mount Mao to the Mountain of the Assembly of Accounts.

Among his subjects, convened on top of Mount Mao, are the "hundred demons," pulling China in different directions. By bringing them together, Yü is able to bring spiritual unity to ancient China. Oppose-the-Wind is "not a loyal subject but a rebellious energy," one who will, like the stellar winds, "prevent the communication that is to occur during the ritual."

In the microcosm of the body, the acupuncture point Governor Vessel-20 (GV-20), located on the vertex of the head, is named the hundred meetings (baihui). The Dao Zang (Hidden Dao) states that the head is the meeting point of the hundred spirits (18). Governor-20, then, can be understood to be the place on top of the head (the head corresponding to Mount Mao) that the 100 spirits meet. The traditional function of GV-20 in draining wind from the head is reflected in the "beheading" of Oppose-the-Wind, the influence that threatens the integrity of the kingdom by opposing Yü's rule. For, it is Yü who establishes harmony by controlling the rising waters of chaos.

Wind in Chinese medicine is revealed by signs and/or symptoms that change location and severity quickly. Its general presentation is that of chaos and is exemplified by muscle spasms, seizures, fainting, violent outbursts of anger, or headaches. The point GV-20 can help restore control and marshal the patient's resources to quell the chaos.

Governor-20 is the point that aligns us with the polestar (19), to which "all the lesser stars do homage" (20) and it is Yü's virtue in being a man after heaven's heart that allows him to gain control of the kingdom. It is his power of intention in visualizing the spirits that allows him to summon and transform them into one body, an assembly (hui) of all under heaven. Yü's intimate knowledge of the spirits of the rivers and mountains (maili: veins of the earth) enabled him to draw the waters off (out of the southeastern "door of the earth") and out to the abyss of the sea (21).

The medical implications of the myth are captured in Chinese characters and speech. The character zhi, meaning "to set in order," is used in medical literature with the meaning "to heal" or "to treat." The name of emperor Yü is a homophone for the modern character yu, which is a picture of a boat over that for heart meaning "to heal." Another homophone is found in the character yu meaning "to meet."

Lagerwey points out the similarity between the function of the priest in Daoist ritual and that of Yü in taming the floods and uniting the empire. What Yü did for ancient China in controlling the floods and uniting the kingdom, the traditional acupuncturist, in much the same role as the Daoist priest, does for each patient. By learning intimately the nature of the spirits living in the internal structures of the patient's being, and channeling off the excess and supplementing the deficiencies, traditional acupuncture is able to maintain and restore harmony in the kingdom of the Body/Mind/Spirit.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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5 The character de is translated as virtue and has three key components. The first is a picture of a man walking and implies movement or action. The second means “perfectly right” and suggests that a thing scrutinized by the eye from all directions, has shown no deviation. The last component denotes the heart. It may be interpreted to mean that the virtuous man’s behavior perfectly reflects his heart which, under scrutiny, shows no deviation. Chen (ibid, p.184) defines de as: “The original endowment of nature prior to moral distinctions and conscious effort.”

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16 T’ang, Chun-I, (1962), The T’ien Ming [Heavenly Ordinance] in Pre-Ch’in China, Philosophy and Culture: East and West 1962; 11, p 208.

17 Lagerway J, Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History, 1987 Macmillan, NY, p.160.

18 Ibid. p.151

19 Ellis A, Wiseman N, and Boss K, Grasping the Wind, 1989 Paradigm Publications, MA, p.344.

20 The pole star, di, is the heart of heaven as the emperor, di, is the heart of the nation. The pole star is the center of the universe and the governor vessel is the meridian which centers the functions of the body/mind/spirit to the axis of heaven. Chan, Wing-Tsit, p.22.—Most notable of these stars is the great dipper which is the giant spoon circling around the polestar churning us along through the whirlpool of life. The big dipper is the central administration of heaven in which live the primordial gods of fundamental destiny (See Anderson, P., The Method of Holding the Three Ones, 1989 Curzon Press, Great Britain, p.61). The alchemical texts refer to the process of being distanced from one's original nature [de], which leads to illness, as "going along". Restoration of original nature is referred to as "reversing the course of the dipper's handle."

21 Lagerway J, Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History, 1987 Macmillan, NY, p.11.