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Thesis Paper – UHON-499

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Harmony and Health in The Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen

(The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine)

## Harmony and Health in The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine

Harmony is the essential characteristic of the Chinese philosophy of health.

Everything from the four seasons, to the elements, to the four points of the compass, to the human body, to heaven and earth all must remain harmonious with the Tao (the way of the universe/Chi) in order to maintain its existence. While some of the above things mentioned are believed to stay eternally balanced with the Tao (like heaven and earth) and to never run out of energy, mortal beings will eventually exhaust their supply of Chi, and once this happens they die from the loss of their vital force. To maintain life for as long as is humanly possible, the individual must learn to both find his/her place in, and also to follow the Tao as its harmony-seeking nature dictates.

Traditional Chinese medicine puts the philosophy of Chi into medical practice. According to the Nei Ching (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine), for each of the five seasons (summer is split into two) there is a corresponding natural element (metal, water, wood, fire, earth), and for each of these there is a corresponding body part (heart, lung, liver, spleen, kidneys), ad infinitum (Nei Ching, p.23). As all of the universe is believed to be connected, so is man connected to, and made up of, its' component parts. Man must seek replenishment of his vital forces by consuming food and water (earthly Chi), and by nurturing his spirit (heavenly Chi) to survive. Because man is a mortal being, despite replenishing it daily his body's supply of Chi is still destined to eventually run out, and when this happens death is inevitable. Sickness though, is a symptom of the individual's Chi being in an unbalanced state, and if this balance can be corrected the vital force will strengthen and life will continue.

Chi permeates everything that exists in the universe. It exists as a result of the combination of the two necessarily opposing, yet also complementary forces called yin and yang. Yin represents the darker side of life, standing for cold, rain, recklessness and turmoil amongst other things. Yang stands for peace, serenity, light and such, but within this element there also exists the concept of destruction (Nei Ching p.115). In the center of yang there beats a core of what is called the lesser yin, and in the center of yin there is the lesser yang. Neither of the two forces is considered superior to the other, and neither is thought to be good or bad because of its' nature. As stated earlier, problems and diseases are thought to occur whenever there is an imbalance between these forces in the individual, and steps are therefore taken by the physician to restore the patient's Chi, which when fixed automatically cures whatever the disease may be. Chi is a dynamic force, and it is believed to flow through the body along specific channels or meridians (as they are commonly referred to). Those who are knowledgeable of the art can learn to diagnose illness by observation of these meridians.

To restore and maintain a steady flow of Chi the individual must keep his/her body united with his/her soul (Nei Ching, p.97). The Nei Ching begins with the Yellow Emperor asking his divinely inspired teacher, T'ien Shih (also called Ch'I Po), how it was that in ancient times people lived to be over a hundred years old without becoming decrepit, and nowadays their bodies started failing at half that age. The sage replied that the reason this was happening was because people were no longer living in harmony with the Tao (trans. The Way, or The Path [to enlightenment]). He stated that the soul required restraint of the will and reduction of the desires of the body and those of the mind in

order to return to a balanced state, and this was possible through the exercise/practice of what he deemed as a virtuous life (Nei Ching, p.98).

Virtue, according to Ch'I Po, involves the individual following the Tao by exercising restraint against the temptations of the mind and the body. Recklessness, in the form of passions and cravings, he defined as devotion of all of one's attentions to the amusement of the mind for unnecessary or unimportant pursuits (e.g. excessive meditation, reading, etc.). For the body, recklessness would be defined as behaviors such as irregular sleeping schedules, excess consumption, or overindulgence in intoxicating substances (Nei Ching, p.98). These types of activities all exemplify a lack of ability to control the spirit, and since this is a departure from the Tao it dissipates the true essence of the individual (a.k.a. the vital life force/Chi) and causes premature degeneration of the body. While it is possible for the physician to cure specific diseases and illnesses that result from degeneration of the spirit/body, they are still suspect to return unless the individual regains his/her virtue. Rehabilitation with the Tao and change of lifestyle makes it possible to reverse this degeneration and to extend one's life and virility to its natural limits. These 'natural' limits mind you, would by today's standards arguably be considered supernatural.

Examples of those who had succeeded in achieving oneness with the Tao in the past, and their resulting abilities, were presented to show the potential power of the art in the Nei Ching. High status and mystical abilities were attributed to these individuals, but their existence was probably considered to be more of an ancient legend than a reality (The Yellow Emperor himself was said to have physically ascended to heaven after he attained perfection through the Tao). Though superficially extravagant and mystical, their

description does go a long way towards describing the all-encompassing unity of the Tao.

The most powerful and ancient of these persons were the so-called Spiritual Men:

“ They mastered the universe and controlled Yin and Yang (the two principles in nature). They breathed the essence of life, they were independent in preserving their spirit, and their muscles and flesh remained unchanged. Therefore they could enjoy a long life, just as there is no end for Heaven and Earth.” (Nei Ching, p.101)

After the Spiritual men came the Sapients. The Sapients preserved their virtue, upheld the Tao, and lived in harmony with the seasons:

“They departed from this world and retired from mundane affairs; they saved their energies, and preserved their spirits completely. They roamed and traveled all over the universe and could see and hear beyond the eight distant places. By all these means they increased their life and strengthened it; and at last they attained the position of the Spiritual Man.” (Nei Ching, p.101)

The Sapients were succeeded by the Sages. From here forward the abilities of the men have been reduced to the state where they are (to this day) still believed to be attainable. While it is logical to assume that a Sage can eventually become a Sapient through the Tao, the book does not speak of this:

“ The Sages attained harmony with Heaven and earth and followed closely the laws of the eight winds. They were able to adjust their desires to worldly affairs, and within their hearts there was neither hatred nor anger. They did not wish to separate their activities from the world; they could be indifferent to custom. They did not over-exert their minds by strenuous meditation. They were not concerned about anything, they regarded inner happiness and peace as fundamental, and contentment as highest achievement. Their bodies could never be harmed and their mental faculties never be

dissipated. Thus they could reach the age of one hundred years or more.” (Nei Ching, p.101)

The last successors of the group were called the Men of Excellent Virtue:

“..who followed the rules of the Universe and emulated the sun and the moon, and they also discovered the arrangement of the stars; they could foresee (the workings of) Yin and Yang and obey them; and they could distinguish the four seasons. They followed the ancient times and tried to maintain harmony with Tao. (In doing so) they increased their age toward a long life.” (Nei Ching, p.101-102)

Harmony with the Tao involves one understanding the influence of one's environment, such as nature and its seasons, on the individual. It is believed that the four seasons contain atmospheres that affect aspects of both the human spirit and body. As the seasons follow their eternal cycle of generation and degeneration the same force that makes this happen also produces different states within the individual. Each season makes it beneficial for one to engage in certain activities, and detrimental to engage in others. Activities that conflict with the forces of nature (the eternal Tao) are believed to cause injury to the individual because they are disharmonious with it. A disharmonious act disturbs the flow of Chi along the meridians of the body, causing either a blockage, an excessive flow, or a reduced flow of the energy. These disturbances can manifest themselves as emotional problems, ailments, injuries, diseases, degeneration, and ultimately (if left untreated) death. Each season represents a different aspect of the Tao, and as such also suggests a path for the individual to take in order to maintain harmony with it.

Spring is believed to be “.. the period of the beginning and development (of life)” (Nei Ching, p.102), where the individual is advised to focus his/her attention and

activities on promoting such things. While activities that develop the “characteristics” of spring will bring the individual good health in this theory, those who disobey the rules of spring are believed to be susceptible to diseases and injury of their liver. Spring represents birth and the idea of rebirth in nature’s cycle. Every mortal life must have a beginning that involves nurturing and nourishment, so it is believed that the natural association of this fact with springtime is suggestive of how we too should act towards others and ourselves during this season.

Summer is called the “period of luxurious growth” (Nei Ching, p.102), and during this time it is recommended that the individual not allow his/her mind to become angry. Emotions are considered to be tangible reflections of one’s state of Chi in this philosophy, and during the summer this emotion is considered particularly detrimental to the individual. Communication with others and the environment is one of the many suggestions that are emphasized for concentration on during this season. Incidentally, those who do not obey the laws of summer are believed to be susceptible to diseases and injury of the heart. In the human life cycle, summer would be comparable to late adolescence and early adulthood, when one should be concerned with developing his/her place in society, and becoming knowledgeable about one’s environment.

Fall is the “period of tranquility” (Nei Ching, p.103), and as its name suggests tranquility and moderation is the recommended attitude towards activities at this time, with disobedience resulting in injury to the lungs. Fall can be compared to the middle ages of adulthood; where one should learn to slow down one’s pace compared to one’s adolescent days.



Winter is “the period of closing and storing” (Nei Ching, p.103) and here the recommendations are virtually the opposite of summer and spring. For winter the individual is advised to suppress and conceal his/her wishes from others, and while it is suggested that people should go outside and experience the natural wonders of the other seasons, for winter it is recommended that the individual should avoid/escape the cold weather as much as possible. For men disobedience of the laws of winter brings about the very unpleasant injury of the kidneys... which in western medicine is more commonly known as the testicles. In the human life cycle winter represents the state of old age, where although one can still enjoy practically all of the benefits of life, caution should be taken to preserve one’s naturally diminishing life-force.

Another very important feature of this philosophy is the existence of the five elements; water, fire, metal, wood, and earth. They represent the physical subdivision of yin and yang, and as such all material bodies (animate and inanimate) are believed to be composed in part of each of these elements (Nei Ching, p.19). The five elements are thought to both vanquish and produce one another:

“Wood brought into contact with metal is felled; fire brought into contact with water is extinguished; earth brought into contact with wood is penetrated; metal brought into contact with fire is dissolved; water brought into contact with earth is halted.” “The sequence of creation is: metal creates water; water creates wood; wood creates fire; fire creates earth; earth creates metal.” (Introduction to The Nei Ching, p.19)

The five elements are also mystically attached to the seasons. Wood is believed to belong to the spring season, fire and earth belong to summer (which has two parts, Summer and Long Summer), metal belongs to fall, and water belongs to winter. As one season’s element begins to dissipate, the next season’s grows, and the following season’s

element is in temporary 'eclipse'. Each element has an active life cycle of nine months (Nei Ching, P.19-20).

The elements each have an association with the forces of yin and yang. Their qualities determine which energy force they possess:

“The water Element possesses the Yin quality of life at rest; energy which is in a floating state... Wood gives this potential state the Yang qualities of direction and growth; energy rising... Growth leads to self awareness, central to the fire element; energy expanding and reaching a peak... earth gives this awareness bodily form, balancing it with Yin; energy descending earthwards... Metal completes the cycle through exchanging the outworn for the new; energy gathering to be dispersed... Metal is yin in function because it acts as a stable meeting point. Each stage generates and is the 'mother' of the next, its 'child'.” – (Shiatsu (TCG), p.140-141)

The elements are also believed to exert an influence over humans if one of them happens to be predominant in one's system. Their spheres of influence include personality characteristics, mental ability, natural instincts, and physical ability. Each element is also associated with a particular time of day and state of activity.

Water is associated with night, rest, survival, fear, procreation, willpower, endurance, and constitutional strength. It is possible for a person to have too much water concentrated in their system, and it is believed that this condition is manifested by timid or insecure personality characteristics (Shiatsu, p.142). Water is considered a yin element.

Wood is associated with morning, initializing action, the ability to plan, control, assert, anger, evolution, hope, and vision. An excess of this element in one's system leads to an authoritative, organized, irritable personality (Shiatsu, p.142). Wood is considered a yang element.

Fire is associated with noon, activity, self-identity, celebration, joy, love, consciousness, thought, and emotion. A predominance of fire in one's system leads to a sensitive, excitable, or emotionally changeable person (Shiatsu, p.142). Fire is considered to be a yang element.

Earth is associated with afternoon, decreasing activity, concentration, analytical ability, pensiveness, thought, logic, and the ability to listen and absorb. Predominance of earth energy makes one a worrisome, sympathetic listener (Shiatsu, p.142). Earth is an element of yin.

Metal is associated with evening, balanced activity and rest, boundaries, grief, the soul, vitality, and optimism. Melancholy is the personality trait shown in those predominated by this element (Shiatsu, p.142). Metal is an element of yin.

The points of the compass are also believed to be associated with the creation of the elements, they supposedly create the environments that produce the elements: East is considered to be the source of wind, wind being the creator of wood; South the creator of extreme heat, the heat producing fire; West is the source of scorched dryness, dryness creating metal; North was considered to be the source of extreme cold, cold creating water. The center of the compass was also considered to be a point in this philosophy, and it was believed to produce humidity. Interestingly enough this humidity does not produce the earth in the same manner as the other points produce their elements, but its function is limited to nourishing the earth, which has mysterious powers above and beyond the other elements (Nei Ching, p. 118-120).

There are two different types of Chi; Earthly Chi and Heavenly Chi. Earthly Chi exists as either one of, or a combination of the elements (as in our bodies, for example),

Heavenly Chi is immaterial, but exists in spiritual form and manifests itself in feelings such as peace or serenity. Yin is the force associated with Earthly Chi, yang is the force associated with Heavenly Chi. Anything that is alive and material contains both types of Chi, with physical injuries being a yin-related problem and emotional 'injuries' being yang-related. Problems with an individual could be solved using either type of Chi regardless of its source, but Heavenly Chi is considered the superior form of treatment between the two (albeit more difficult for the physician to practice and control, since it requires greater virtue and discipline) because it involves treatment of the spirit (which predominates the body). Both types of Chi can also be harnessed simultaneously to effect a cure to an illness, this of course being the best form of treatment for any problem.

As each season was believed to be the cause of specific injury to the body, the job of the physician was to find a way to cure these injuries by restoring the balance of Chi within their patients. One of the simpler (Earthly Chi) methods used was the prescription of flavored remedies: For spring's injuries to the liver it was believed that a sour flavor was created within the body that fueled the illness, to counteract this flavor a pungent remedy was administered; For summer's injuries to the heart a bitter flavor was considered the cause, the remedy for a bitterness-related injury was the administration of a salty flavor; Fall's injuries to the lungs were the result of an excess of the pungent flavor (notice that this was the remedy for spring's illness), to cure this problem a bitter remedy was used; Winter's injuries to the kidneys were the result of an excess of salt in the body, this was fixed by the ingestion of a sweet flavor. As summer was split into two parts for the ancient Chinese (half governed by the South, half governed by the center), there was also the possibility of injury occurring to the patient's stomach during this time;

this type of injury was the result of an excess of the sweet flavor, and its remedy was administration of a sour flavor (Nei Ching, p. 118-120).

The methodology behind the prescription of the flavors is the same as that of the vanquishing of the elements. The reasoning behind why these diseases developed is the same as that of the production of the elements, the influence of the points of the compass, and the powers of the different seasons. All of these negative circumstances were believed to ultimately be the result of an imbalance of Chi within the individual.

Modern attempts to define the concept make Chi analogous to bioelectricity (which western medicine knows to exist) in living organisms, and the magnetic properties that exist in inanimate objects (Chinese Qigong Massage, p.7). Although western medicine has rejected the notion of meridians along the human body, treatments using the traditional teachings of the Nei Ching have consistently demonstrated clinical effectiveness in the healing of a multitude of diseases and injuries (The Body, Self Cultivation, and Ki Energy, p.99). The theme of harmony is central to this philosophy, and the unity between its theories and practical applications has proven itself useful to those wishing to maintain good health for the past four thousand years in Chinese cultures.

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