

Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Dynastic Chart	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. Dao and Qi	9
2. Yin-Yang and the Five Phases	19
3. Visions of the Body	31
4. Understanding the Mind	41
5. The Meridian System	51
6. Methods of Diagnosis	63
7. Acupuncture	75
8. Forms of Massage	87
9. Medicine in China Today	97
10. Other East Asian Countries	107
11. Acupuncture in America	117
12. Fengshui	127
13. Food Cures and Diets	137
14. The Chinese Pharmacopoeia	149
15. Sexual Practices	161
16. Breathing and Healing Exercises	171
17. Qigong	181
18. Taiji Quan and Martial Arts	191
19. Meditation	203
20. From Internal Alchemy to Healing Dao	213
Conclusion	223
Index	229

Introduction

For over 2,000 years, the Chinese have been experts at maintaining health and extending longevity. Their methods, documented in ancient manuscripts, medical textbooks, and self-cultivation manuals, form a multi-layered yet integrated system of personalized health care that is of increasing value in the West as our population ages and technology increases the speed and stresses of our life.

In the past thirty years, since Richard Nixon first went to China and acupuncture became known to the general Western public, Chinese methods of health enhancement have made great inroads in Western societies. There are now thousands of professionally trained acupuncture, herbal, and massage practitioners, joined by an ever increasing number of Fengshui, taiqi quan, and qigong masters. About three-quarters of the American population report that they have at least tried some form of complementary, often Chinese, health practice, and the overall trend is toward further increase and growing popularity. This is partly due to the rise in the cost of hospitals and HMOs, but more importantly it is in response to the perceived lack of Western biomedicine. As Manfred Porkert already noted in 1988:

Science has prolonged our lives, but the ideal of health still remains elusive. Numerous “new” diseases have rise to take the place of old ones that doctors have learned to deal with and medical science has thoroughly investigated, and against them Western medicine is powerless—or there is not all that much that can be done. (*Chinese Medicine*, 16)

In addition to AIDS, SARS, and new forms of cancer and the flu which plague modern humanity, more people than ever before suffer from chronic ailments, degenerative conditions, allergies, stress-induced syndromes, or psychosomatic diseases. For example, numerous of Americans are in chronic pain, and two-thirds of all employees suffer from some kind of pain condition. They take over billions of Aspirin every year. Also, over half of the population is overweight or obese, and one-

fifth suffers from hypertension. Innumerable people have trouble sleeping and continuously take drugs to keep themselves functioning. Many are plagued by anxiety and depression, taking millions of pounds of stimulants, anti-anxiety drugs, and ACE inhibitors every year.

All too often patients see their physicians with a set of symptoms that do not easily yield to standard classifications, receive some remedies that help for a while or to some extent, then are left again with their condition. The patients, tired and ailing, will seek a second opinion, make the rounds of the specialists, but may well end up with a fresh disappointment to add to their original troubles. Often, as John Abramson points out, they are given “expensive drugs when lifestyle changes would be far more effective at protecting health” and have to undergo “tests and consultations that are very unlikely to lead to better outcomes” (*Overdo\$ed America*, 53). Even more disturbing, medical errors and iatrogenic diseases are the third leading cause of death in the U.S., undermining what little confidence patients might have left.

It is thus not surprising that patients seek an integrated approach to health, a methodology that takes their whole being, lifestyle, and social situation into account and that promises long-term relief and a high quality of health. Many turn to Chinese modalities, choosing among different techniques offered—from acupuncture, herbs, and massages through Fengshui, diets, healing exercises, and meditations to qigong and taiqi quan. All part of the greater Chinese health effort, they share the same underlying worldview, expressed in various theoretical concepts: Dao, the fundamental way of the universe that determines all existence; *qi*, the cosmic vital force or energy that pervades life and determines the functioning of the human body and mind; yin-yang, the two complementary aspects of Dao that alternate in their interaction to create the rhythms of nature and the body; and the five phases, the basis of an extensive correspondence system at the root of diagnosis and treatment.

Although expressed in a clear, unambiguous vocabulary, consistent in itself, free from internal contradictions, and applied with sophisticated techniques of observation and diagnosis, the vocabulary and concepts of Chinese health methods are quite alien to Western thinking. To be applied successfully, they require not only patient explanation but the willingness to give up prejudices and preconceptions and immerse oneself in a totally unfamiliar language. Still, opening oneself to this alternative understanding can be very rewarding. It may lead to a completely new

way of looking at the body and the world and enlarge one's spectrum of attainable health and personal realization.

It is the first task of this book to present the basic concepts underlying Chinese ways to health and long life in a simple and straightforward manner, placing them into a dynamic internal context and relating them to comparative Western ideas.

Armed with a good grip of the fundamentals, one can then venture to make sense of the many apparently unconnected methods that aim at different dimensions in the pursuit of health. Some, like acupuncture and massages, are administered to the patient by a trained professional and require nothing more than keeping an appointment and resting peacefully on the treatment table. Others, like diets, herbs, Fengshui, and sexual techniques involve methods that the patient can do for himself or herself in interaction with foodstuffs, the environment, and other people. To be effective, these methods need some self-control and a certain degree of discipline. Yet others are forms of meditation and self-cultivation, such as breathing, healing exercises, taiqi quan, qigong, and meditations. Undertaken by the patient in classes and private practice, they have to be followed over longer periods of time to bring about health and transformation. The book follows the different methods in this order, presenting first clinical, medical therapies, then ways of interactive *qi*-control, and last spiritual ways of self-cultivation.

All these methods have their own role in the larger Chinese health care system. As "to heal" means "to make whole," they all serve to transform human beings from simple discreet entities separate from the outside world into active participants in the triad of heaven, earth, and humanity. Chinese health methods not only cure and vitalize people's bodies and minds, but aim to join them harmoniously with the larger cosmos. Health accordingly does not just mean the absence of illness or symptoms, but is an integrated balance of physical well-being, personal happiness, good fortune, and harmony. Healing is less the direct, objective treatment of diseases than the gentle prodding of the body-mind to remember how to restore itself to perfect function.

Within this larger picture, treatments administered by a trained practitioner include mainly acupuncture and massage, but they are not homogeneous or formally standardized. Rather, in the course of history, they have developed into different forms and schools in China and were also transmitted to Vietnam, Korean, and Japan, where they took on various

local modalities. As a result, acupuncture needles vary in length and thickness, methods of insertion are manifold, diagnoses follow different principles, and the points of needling may not be the same. Massages, too, while using the same clinical system as acupuncture, may include greater or lesser degrees of muscular therapy and structural alignments, strong hands-on kneading of tissues or the distant *qi*-emission in a laying-on of hands.

Self-healing methods undertaken in interaction with the outside world and other people, second, range from the systematic guiding of *qi* in one's environment with the help of Fengshui through its regulation through food, diets, and herbs to its enhancement with sexual techniques. Here, too, a variety of schools and applications has grown both in China and through the transmission to other countries, so that, for example, diets can be as diverse as recommending an all-cooked or all-raw regimen, emphasizing the need for starches or insisting on the complete avoidance of grain.

Third, practitioners of self-cultivation can choose from breathing exercises, healing exercises, qigong, taiqi quan, and various forms of meditation. These techniques reach far into the religious dimension of Daoism with its plethora of exercises, visualizations, ecstatic excursions, internal alchemy, and other meditations. Their practice can lead to enhanced vigor and longevity, but these are considered secondary when compared to their primary goal, the attainment of enlightenment and spiritual immortality.

The Chinese health program, thus, is not limited to one set of methods or practices, nor does it stop at healing patients and improving their quality of life. Rather, it leads people to reach extended years and to attain transcendence through refining the body into a new, more potent spirit existence.

At first glance these different dimensions seem to function on three entirely different levels of life. But from the Chinese perspective, healing, longevity, and immortality are three stages along the same continuum of the human body. The body consists of the cosmic vital energy of *qi*, which is only one but comes in two major forms: a basic primordial or prenatal *qi* that connects people to the cosmos; and a secondary, earthly or postnatal *qi* that is replenished by breathing, food, and human interaction, and helps the body survive in everyday life. Both forms of *qi* are necessary and interact constantly with each other, so that primordial *qi* is

lost as and when earthly *qi* is insufficient, and earthly *qi* becomes superfluous as and when primordial *qi* is complete—as is the case with the embryo in the womb. People, once born, start an interchange of the two dimensions of *qi* and soon begin to lose their primordial *qi* as they interact with the world through shallow breathing, improper nutrition, emotional outbursts, sensory overloads, and intellectual tensions.

Once people have lost a certain amount of primordial *qi* and thus the power of their original, true self, they get sick and encounter difficulties in life and an impairment of health that will gradually lead to decline and death. Healing, then, is the replenishing of *qi* with medical means such as acupuncture, massages, diets, and herbs, combined with an increased awareness of *qi*-patterns and conscious lifestyle choices. Having attained good health, some people may decide to increase their primordial *qi* to the level they had at birth or even above it. To do so, they follow the longevity techniques to control their *qi*-exchange with the environment and cultivate themselves. The practice ensures the realization of people's natural life expectancy and often leads to increased old age and vigor.

Spiritual immortality, the goal of Daoism, raises the practices to a yet higher level. To attain it, people have to transform all their *qi* into primordial *qi* and proceed to refine it to subtler levels. This finer *qi* will eventually turn into pure spirit, with which practitioners increasingly identify to become transcendent spirit-people. The path that leads there involves intensive meditation and trance training as well as more radical forms of diet and other longevity practices. Immortality implies the overcoming of the natural tendencies of the body and its transformation into a different kind of *qi*-constellation. The result is a bypassing of death, so that the end of the body has no impact on the continuation of the spirit-person. In addition, practitioners attain supersensory powers and eventually gain residence in wondrous otherworldly paradises.

The very same kinds of practices may be used on all three levels, albeit in different ways and with caution. Certain practices that are useful in healing may be superfluous in the attainment of longevity, while some applicable for immortality may even be harmful when healing is the main focus. Take breathing as an example. When healing or extending life, natural deep breathing is emphasized, with the diaphragm expanding on the inhalation. When moving on to immortality, however, reversed breathing is advised, which means that the diaphragm contracts on the in-breath. Undertaking this kind of reversed breathing too early or at the

wrong stage in one's practice can cause complications, from dizziness to disorientation or worse.

The same holds true in the case of sexual practices. In healing, sexual activity with a partner is encouraged in moderation, with both partners reaching regular climaxes. In longevity practice, sexual activity may still be performed with a partner, but ejaculation as a loss of *qi* is avoided and sexual stimulation is used to increase the positive flow of *qi* in the body. In immortality, finally, sexual practices are undertaken internally and without a partner. They serve the creation of an immortal embryo through the refinement of sexual energy into primordial *qi* and cosmic spirit. Going beyond nature, immortality practitioners are not interested in creating harmony and balance, but strive to overcome the natural tendencies of the body-mind and actively lessen or even relinquish earthly existence in favor of cosmic and heavenly states.

Encompassing this immense complexity and breadth, the Chinese vision of healing provides a clear set of answers to the urgent needs of modern Western patients. Unlike Western medicine, which has "scored its greatest successes when dealing not so much with human beings as with microorganisms at the lower end of the scale—namely, viruses and bacteria" (Porkert, *Chinese Medicine*, 55), Chinese medicine sees the larger picture of the human being in a cosmic and social context. It understands the essential unity and close correlation between body and mind, where Western doctors often still try to heal without taking emotions and thoughts into consideration. It deals with complex entities—the entire body, the person as a member of family and community—rather than with parts, such as livers, kidneys, or hearts. It is integrative, seeing the way different aspects work together, rather than reductionistic, trying to pinpoint the one single part that causes the disease or discomfort.

As a result, Eastern practitioners are general physicians. You will not typically find a "cardiac acupuncturist" or an herbalist specializing only in ailments of the liver, although in China today some practitioners have begun to specialize along the lines of Western biomedicine. Eastern doctors see every patient as a living whole and try to understand the exhibited symptoms in a synchronistic fashion. Without giving up the notion of the cause of a disease, they see this cause not in the defect of one part or the other, but find it in the pattern of interaction among the parts. Even these, however, they do not view as mere parts, like the mechanistic understanding of the body that tends to push and prod and ends up replacing faulty sections with artificially created or "harvested" ones.

Instead, they understand each part of the body to be in constant exchange with all others and with everything else in society and the greater universe. All is in a state of dynamic flow, in an ongoing process.

Diagnosis accordingly is reached not so much with the help of machines but through human interaction and the observation of the patient as a whole and the appearance of his or her body in various critical areas, such as the tongue and the pulse. The subjective feelings of the patient are taken seriously into consideration – how often have you been told by a Western doctor that there is nothing wrong with you when you were clearly feeling out of sorts? What the doctor meant was that there was nothing *measurable* wrong with you, nothing he could detect on his numerical assays. The East Asian physician in contrast will place highest importance on your subjective feelings, measuring success less by the degree to which certain numbers on tests have “normalized” but by the amount of joy you are now able to experience. Quantity, without being totally disregarded, is placed secondary to quality; objective measuring gives way to subjective assessment.

Thus, the same symptom reported by two different people may lead to completely different diagnoses, since the patients’ dynamic *qi*-flow is so different. Treatment, moreover, is not limited to the elimination of symptoms, which may result in a tendency to overtreat and has the danger of creating new ailments or side-effects, but aims at the overall increase in bodily vigor and enjoyment of life.

One problem, of course, with this emphasis on subjectivity and the personal flow of *qi* is that it is much harder to have controlled experiments on the efficacy of treatments or even double-blind studies. The moment anyone is placed in a laboratory environment, his natural tendencies are altered, and results from studies under artificial conditions cannot tell much about the techniques employed. To observe people in their natural, social environment, on the other hand, might yield results, but in our culture this tends to be more the prerogative of sociologists and psychologists than medical professionals. Still, it may also be worth doing, since understanding Chinese medicine properly and bringing it into the American and European mainstream will increase the awareness of lifestyle issues and enhance emphasis on prevention.

A greater attention to Chinese healing in the West may encourage doctors and patients to include emotional, psychological, and spiritual factors into the medical equation and create treatments that do not change

symptoms but aim to restructure the underlying patterns. Instead of seeing illness as an alien force attacking an isolated entity such as a specific organ, people may come to understand it as a part of their reality that fulfills a certain function in their lives. Similarly, rather than considering pain as evil and suppress it with painkillers, they may see it as a signal of imbalance and the body's way of telling them that they need to make some changes to reconnect with themselves on a truer level.

Success can then be measured by the degree the patient is becoming responsible and balanced in his or her life and human interaction, finding not only health but happiness and good fortune. People may come to require more of themselves and their physicians in terms of well-being, no longer remaining content with getting through the day in the absence of symptoms. They may be empowered to understand their condition in holistic and dynamic terms, as part of a life-long process of learning and the unfolding of inherent potentials. Taking the initiative to find health, they may be motivated to make lasting changes in lifestyle and diet and commit to an exercise regimen that is appropriate for them and a joy to follow. Instead of tinkering with parts, they may work on themselves as a whole and aim at recovering their inherent perfection as part of heaven and earth, thus reaching out for the complete fullness of life.

Further Readings

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