

Beyond *Yin* and *yang* –

The Individual and Cosmic Dimension of the Spirit

Introduction

Our discussion today is based on the research for my second dissertation in the field of history of medicine. Since I got my high school degree I got stuck to Plato and his concept of the ideas and the soul (*psyche*). I was asking “what exactly is the soul” respectively the psyche, “where does it come from and what happens to her, when we die”? After studying Sinology and Western Philosophy I finally came to Chinese Medicine and decided to ask the question again, but in terms of comparing chinese with western thinking.¹ The idea was, that the medical understanding of the concept of mind is an manifestation of the philosophical understanding, both - in the Occident and in China. As in the body-mind discussion of the western world the term *psyche* plays a central role, in chinese thinking the most prominent term is *shen* 神, “spirit”. One of the most characteristic qualities of *shen* is his cosmic dimension. So our discussion today focuses on the question in which way this cosmic dimension of the spirit can improve medical understanding.

Shen extends beyond *yin* and *yang*

(*Yijing*, *Xici shang* 5)

This quote from both the *Yijing* (易經) and the *Huangdi Neijing* (黃帝內經) already suggests a cosmic dimension of the spirit, the potentiality of which, in its original form, is not subject to (any) polarity. In Chinese medicine, the function of the spirit has been reduced all too often to its guiding and dominating influence on the individual. Daoistic texts reveal however a much more comprehensive understanding.

¹ “Light of the Mind and Perception of the Soul: The Medical Notion of the Psyche as an Expression of Philosophical Thought: China and the Occident.” VAS Verlag, Frankfurt 2006.

Especially the *Zhuangzi* (莊子) and the *Daodejing* (道德經) – show that the spirit acts on the individual and, at the same time, has always reached beyond the individual. We will see, that its close association to the emptiness (*xu* 虛), the undifferentiated (*wu* 無), the practice of *wuwei* (無為) and finally to the *dao* 道 itself makes it a cosmic power which not only provides a connecting link between man and the cosmos but also endows every human being with cosmic potential and leads to a healthy and long life.

Dao and Shen

The *dao* 道 manifests itself as a alternation of all kind of opposites/polarities and as an endless ongoing process. At the same time the *dao* 道 also expresses the underlying unity of all polarities.

From this oneness creating function of the *dao* all the characteristic functions of the cosmic and human conditions emerge. It shows itself particularly in the spirit (*shen*):

Those that of old got the ONE. The sky got the ONE and by this became clear. The Earth got the ONE and by this became steady. The spirit got the ONE and by this obtained his effective power. The valleys got the ONE and by this became full, the thousands of things got the ONE and by this came to life. The princes and kings got the ONE and made the world upright by this. (*Daodejing* 39)

The *dao*, by virtue of its *quality* to create oneness (*yi* 一), endows both beings and things with an individual character – with clarity, in the case of heaven, and with strength, in the case of earth. *Shen* (神) – the spirit, which, for the purpose of this text, is primarily the cosmic spirit – boasts of a “spiritual potency” (*ling* 靈) and/or “spiritual effectiveness”.

This is characterized by an extraordinary transformative capacity and takes place in the realm of the invisible.

In the *Zhuangzi* it is just due to this virtue of *shen* 神, to get the once lost oneness with nature back - as in the story of butcher Ding, where the spirit returns to the *dao* 道 itself:

What I love is the *dao*, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now – now I go at it by spirit and don't look at it with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and my spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural constitution (of the animal), strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. (*Zhuangzi* 3/1)

Due to Dings's capability to direct the knife in the blank space between joints, muscles and tendons, the edge never gets blunt, because his spirit guides the knives motions. Please note, that Butcher Ding's spirit needs the emptiness (*xu* 虛) to be effective in the same way as the knife needs the hollow space. The capability of butcher Ding developed beginning with the sensual perception ("all I could see was the ox itself") over the awareness "that he no longer saw the whole ox" – (but the dissected) , to the capability to perceive the natural constitution (*tianli* 天理) of the ox with his own spirit. Due to the dynamic power of his spirit – which is in terms of Lao Zi the oneness creating spiritual effectiveness - butcher Ding gets connected to heaven respectively the *dao* itself. [So he is able to cut up the ox along the big hollows and his knife doesn't meet any resistance]. This capability of his spirit is for sure also an expression of non-interfering (*wuwei* 無為).

Dao and Wuwei

“Non-interference“ (*wuwei* 無為) reflects not only the Oneness creating quality of the *dao* (道) but is at the same time immediately connected to the Spirit itself:

If you strive to be the ruler of the world and interfere with it [deliberately] (*wei* 為), I do not see how you can succeed. The world is a spiritual (*shen* 神) thing and cannot be interfered with [deliberately]. Whenever you interfere [deliberately], you will destroy it [the world]; whenever you try to hold on to it, you will lose it.“ (*Daodejing* 29)

Government of the world, which is seen as a “spiritual thing“ , can only be achieved through *wuwei* (無為) whereas forceful or deliberate interference (*wei* 為) will lead to the opposite of the intended outcome. This is due to the “spiritual“ (*shen* 神) character of the world, which *detracts itself to any direct and deliberate interference*. In the present context *shen* (神) is not immediately related to man; it rather is a quality primarily characterizing the world as a whole - including man. However, characterizing the world as a “spiritual thing“ does not imply an ontological dualism dealing with the antagonism between the concepts of a spiritual and a material world. *Rather, categorizing the world as a “spiritual thing“ is attributable to the fact that the actual world is already perfect as it is*. Any external deliberate interference – even if it aims at (well-intended) improvement – is considered to be a disruption of the natural course of the *dao* (道), which will eventually destroy or hurt others.

If the ruler governs the world by *wuwei* (無為) he does not interfere with the hidden order of things. But this implies to be aware of the underlying unity of all polarities and to give up any artificial distinction as between “bad“ and “good“ or between “violating“ or non violating“. Only then it is possible to be really non violating - by virtue of *wuwei* (無為).

So *shen* in the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* needs on the one hand the emptiness (*xu* 虛) to develop its cosmic potential. On the other hand due to its capability to create oneness – in terms of his effective power (*ling*) - *shen* can only be influenced by non-interfering (*wuwei*), which means in an indirect manner.

Relation to Chinese Medicine

In this premises the daoist texts bear an immediate relation to Chinese medicine – in two respects: Just as the daoistic ruler governs his state through *wuwei* (無為), the spirit itself *does not directly interfere with* the individual. By virtue of its oneness creating capacity, it rather exerts a *regulating function* within the human organism; this function rises beyond the polarities and thus guides the natural or, in a medical sense, physical processes in an indirect manner without causing damage by its domination.

On the other hand, therapeutical measures should never interfere with the spirit in a direct but rather *in an indirect manner*.

The spirit, medically spoken, is in it's very existence within an organism, primarily defined as “extreme *yang*” and thus a manifestation of the supreme transformative capacity of man. But this does not mean, that it is immediately subject to polarity itself. Since *direct interference always occurs on the level of the polarities*, it disturbs rather than supports the unifying and regulating function of the spirit. Therefore the medical diagnosis also does not speak of the spirit in terms of the *bagang* (八剛 eight principles), which means emptiness or fullness and so on It rather says, that the “spirit is not rooted in the heart”. In the medical treatment of the spirit by acupuncture or phytotherapy the objective is equally to (re-) anchor the spirit in the heart. The medical treatment does so by working with the the *qi* (氣) or by treating the heart.

Anchoring the Spirit

In order to anchor the spirit in terms of *wuwei* first of all it is necessary to clean the heart, so that the spirit will settle down there:

The spirit independently exists. Its going and coming no one is able to contemplate. Lose it, and the mind is certain to be confused, obtain it, and the mind is certain to be well regulated. Respectfully keep clean its abode, and its vital essence will naturally come. (*Guanzi* 49/7)

In terms of Chinese medicine this kind of cleaning the heart may be done by acupuncture or Phytotherapy. Set aside severe mental diseases, *yangsheng* (養生) methods are generally much more suitable for such treatment – since rooting the spirit from inside by the individual itself is more effective and at the same time more appropriate than any other externally induced treatment. The objective, after all, is to achieve a serene state of mind, which, by turning to the *dao*, anchors the spirit in the heart.

The state of mind

In *Zhuangzi* (15/1) the term *xuwu tiantan* (虛無恬談) „empty and undifferentiated, imperturbable and peaceful“ denotes this serene state of mind and clean the heart.

Thereby *xuwu tiantan* (虛無恬談) are also qualities which in turn describe the *dao* (道) itself and its potency:

Imperturbable, peaceful, empty, undifferentiated and non interfering, this is the harmony of of heaven and earth and the substance from the *dao* and it's virtue. So it is said when the sage rests in them, there will be peaceful ease. If there is peaceful ease, he will be imperturbable. If there is peaceful ease and he is imperturbable, care and worry cannot get at him, noxious airs cannot assault him. Therefore his virtue is complete and his spirit unimpaired. (*Zhuangzi* 15/1)

The *Huangdi Neijing* uses the same term to describe the method of the sages in former times, who understood to preserve their life and their spirit:

If you are imperturbable, peaceful, empty and undifferentiated, the true *qi* (*zhenqi*) is following and the essence-spirit (*jingshen*) will remain inside.
How could diseases have a way to occur ? (*Suwen* 1)

An commentary notes to be imperturbable and peaceful means, inside the mind are no desires to be followed and outside you're not longing for fame or money. The emptiness (*xu* 虛) and the undifferentiated (無) cause mental tranquility and tolerance, which after all bring about a healthy and long life. Because these attributes are essential qualities of the *dao* 道 and the spirit at the same time, they must not be neglected under any circumstances. If the spirit has no possibility to remember his cosmic and nonindividual origin and to get connected to the emptiness and the undifferentiated, he will be lost in the world of differences/polarities with all the arising desires. And then the spirit for sure can not be anchored in the heart. Therefore to attain an imperturbable state of mind – what can be practised for instance by meditation techniques, *qigong* or *taijiquan* - should become the basis for every kind of medical treatment.

Interpreting daoistic texts from a medical perspective reveals the “two dimensions“ of the spirit:

On the one hand, it is a cosmic spirit, which “*hovers in its potentiality beyond yin and yang*“ permitting man an immediate connection to the *dao* (道). On the other hand, in a medical sense, *shen* (神) is defined in its *existing form within polarity as yang in yang* (陽). Thus it is a *supreme dynamic power*, without, however, being *subject to polarity itself*.

Rather, the spirit, whose transformative capacity generally lies within the realm of the invisible, is able to unfold its capacity to create oneness only within and through *wuwei* (無為).

Wholeness of the spirit

The individual human being can unfold the spirit's cosmic potential, which leads by the way to a healthy and long life, by taking full responsibility for his life. By turning oneself back to the *dao* and being oblivious to all around one, the individual spirit is able to become whole (*shen quan* 神全):

When a drunken man falls from a carriage, though the carriage may be going very fast, he won't be killed. He has bones and joints the same as other man, and yet he is not injured as they would be, because his spirit is whole. He didn't know he was riding, and he doesn't know he has fallen out. Life and death, alarm and terror do not enter his breast, and so he can bang against things without a fear of injury. If he can keep himself whole like this by means of wine, how much more can he keep himself whole by means of Heaven! The sage hides himself in Heaven - hence there is nothing that can do him harm (*Zhuangzi* 19/2.)

The wholeness of the spirit (*shen quan* 神全) within the individual is therefore nothing but an expression of the cosmic dimension of the spirit, [when the the individual spirit is joining to *dao* or heaven itself]. By hiding in heaven the individual is oblivious to all around one, and this makes him invulnerable. So to be oblivious to all around one is one more aspect of non interference (*wuwei*) with the natural course of the *dao*. And it is at the same time the characteristic quality of health itself.