

Introduction

Spirit

OUR PATIENTS COME TO US BECAUSE THEY know, often unconsciously, that we offer something remarkable which they sorely need. They do not want a doctor who will diagnose their illnesses as mechanical or chemical malfunctions of the body; if they did they would be content with Western medicine. Instead they want someone to see their illnesses as part of who they are, part of their lives and part of the difficulties they face in managing what is demanded of them. And although they may not have the words with which to express this kind of view, their illnesses are often disturbances of the spirit which manifest eloquently in their bodies; so in order to help them they need someone who has the theory, the concepts and the techniques to treat the body and the spirit as one.

In this materialist culture, and faced with a patient in pain or with a distressing disability, it is all too easy for acupuncturists to forget this and to start to treat the headache, the irritable bowel or the eczema symptomatically. How

often, when taking a case history, does the practitioner look for disturbances not in the function of an organ but in its spirit? How often, when making an initial diagnosis, does the practitioner wonder about the state of the patient's Yi, or take time to investigate the strength of his or her Hun? And yet we know perfectly well that, as the Nei Jing puts it, 'In order to make acupuncture thorough and effective one must first cure the spirit.' Or, a more recent version of the old truth:

...at least in the medical tradition, Spirit is always considered to be embodied and have no independence from human life. The Chinese physician resists, both intellectually and clinically, a separation of human life into components or dichotomies; mind and body, mental and physical, soul and body, moral virtues and autonomic activities... (Kaptchuk 2000, p.66)

So to be mindful of the spirit of the organs is not some esoteric extra, of importance only to those few patients who tell you they are in existential turmoil or distress; on the contrary, an appreciation of the spirit of an organ will lead you to more accurate, more effective and more powerful treatments of the most common conditions. Indeed, as soon as you probe beneath the surface of a symptom, you quickly arrive at deep questions: Why acid reflux, for instance, when the patient's diet is exemplary and her life tranquil? Why profuse sweating only in the daytime and only on the head? Why does itching stop and start in different areas of the body at irregular intervals? And in order to answer these kind of questions the first step is to know the organs not simply as a list of functions or syndromes but as distinct aspects of the patient's spirit: one spirit with, say, twelve flavours or hues.

Traditionally, in Chinese medical thought, the spirit has five different qualities and each one is associated with an organ – Liver, Heart, Spleen, Lung and Kidney. However, in what follows I see each of these five aspects of spirit as being associated with one of the phases or elements, including both its Zang and its Fu. So, for example, I take the Yi to have aspects of both the Spleen and the Stomach, and believe that it will manifest somewhat differently depending on which of them is to the fore at any one time. Although this is not the conventional view, Ted Kaptchuk distinguishes, for example, the Yin and Yang Zhi: ‘The Yang will’s fear is paralyzing; the Yin will’s fear is agitating and seeks to run’ (Kaptchuk 2000, p.63).

The basic idea is familiar in pulse diagnosis. A practitioner may feel that the Stomach and Spleen pulses both have a slippery quality when compared with the others, and may also feel that the Spleen pulse is softer and more rounded than the Stomach. In other words, the patient’s Earth energy takes on the particular quality of the Stomach and the Spleen as it moves and flows through each of them, and any difference between them will be reflected in the pulses. I think it is much the same with the spirit.

And practitioners see the Yin and Yang aspects of the spirit in everyday practice. An old man comes for treatment because he is struggling to cope with the gradual and irreversible decline in his wife’s health. He may express his grief by wanting to be with her as much as possible, simply sitting quietly together for much of the day as she is hardly able to speak. Or his response may be to try to get her better; to rush about questioning her doctors, researching new drugs and arranging for some kind of complementary therapist to treat her each day. I don’t think it is fanciful to see these

behaviours, which I have seen in two patients, as contrasting expressions of the Po.

Some things are hard to describe: what potato tastes like, for example, or what the key of A major sounds like, or what the Yi feels like in a patient. This book tries to find a way round the difficulty by talking about the spirit of each organ not in analytical, rational, summarising language but through stories, one for each organ.

To speak of these things through stories is a very old way of describing the ineffable. If it can't be done directly then perhaps it can be done by a tale of its influence and effects. No story can be comprehensive or conclusive, and it can only be one person's interpretation of the spirit of an organ, but that doesn't matter. The point is not to try to be authoritative but to evoke your own view of that spirit and to leave you with a clearer and more practical view; one which, because you have come to it yourself, you will be able to use with confidence in the treatment room.

There's one other advantage in talking about the organs is this way – it is fun. The chapters are self-contained and can be read in any order you fancy, and you can enjoy a story and gain knowledge and insight without realising that is what is happening. For as you read you may become clear about something you have previously only half thought or half understood; or you might discover what you really think about an organ by disagreeing with its portrayal in the story. It wouldn't do as a way of learning about the functions of the organs but is the very best way of learning about their spirit – after all, the spirit never takes itself too seriously.