

The Role of Taoist Spirituality in Chinese Medicine, Part One: The Gate of All Wonders

By Matthew Bauer, LAc

The beautiful, holistic, "microcosm within the macrocosm" view of nature so central to Chinese medicine is widely recognized as being inspired by early Taoist thought. Yet for many reasons, despite the fundamental role Taoist thinking played in the development of Chinese medical theories, little emphasis has been placed on the study of Taoism in most modern Chinese medicine training programs.

In this series of articles, I will touch on some of what I have learned in my nearly 30 years of studying and practicing Taoist philosophy and spirituality in the hopes that this might be of interest to others. A good place to start is to consider how the ancient Chinese viewed their relationship to their surroundings.

The name "China" is believed to have come from "Chin" (*Qin*), the name of the state whose emperor first unified China after conquering the fighting independent states bringing an end to the Warring States period (423-221 BCE). Before that term began to be applied to that region, the Chinese referred to their homeland as the "Middle Land" or the "Central Territory." Many historians believe the ancient Chinese used this term because they thought their land was the center of the earth. While some Chinese may have thought this way, an understanding of Taoist philosophy suggests something far more profound and with ramifications for the practice of Chinese medicine.

Both oral folk legends and the Taoist classics have many references to a mysterious middle ground, a place or state of being "in between" one reality and another. This concept was known by several different names, including "divine door," "heavenly gate," "mystical pass," "divine pivot," etc. The last line of the first chapter of Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching*, for example, ends with a reference to the "Gate of All Wonders."

Although differently named,

Nothingness (spiritual realm) and Beingness (material realm) are one indivisible whole.

This truth is so subtle.

As the ultimate subtlety, it is the Gate of All Wonders.

(From *The Complete Works of Lao Tzu* by Hua-Ching Ni)

When you consider that gates and doors are passageways connecting one thing to another, it's obvious this concept is not concerned with establishing a geographic middle, but rather with pointing toward the potential for mystical transformations. The traditional names of dozens of acupuncture points have terms that reflect this very concept, such as Life Gate (GV 4), Jade Pivot (CV 21), Stone Pass (KI 18) and the somewhat redundant Pass Gate (ST 22). What types of transformations were being alluded to with this terminology, and how does this concept relate to the practice of acupuncture?

Early Taoists believed their prehistoric ancestors possessed a good balance between their physical and spiritual natures, but this was lost as people began overemphasizing the physical aspects of life. When this happened, those who maintained or restored their natural balance tried to help others by developing holistic (yin/yang) philosophies and different arts and sciences that could address such imbalances. In essence, these practices had a dual role, first serving material needs such as health or self-defense, while providing those who mastered these skills the potential for reconnecting with their spiritual natures. To accomplish this, one must discover and then pass through the most mystical of all doors - those that connect the temporal, physical world with the eternal, spiritual realm. The transformation from a partial material being into a whole materially and spiritually balanced being (a.k.a. "integral being") can only take place when the physical (*jing*), subtle energetic (*qi*) and spiritual essences (*shen*) are perfectly balanced.

An important consideration in the effort to balance this sacred triad is to harmonize one's internal environment with one's external environment. People are a product of their environment; their environment can serve as a gate leading to the spiritual realm. Taoist legends tell of countless generations of ancient masters who spiritualized their beings after harmonizing themselves with the *qi* of the high mountains or deep forests in the Chinese heartland. It was the recognition that one's surrounding environment plays an important role in achieving oneself spiritually that deeply grounded the ancient Chinese to their surroundings and inspired them to refer to their place of birth as the Middle Land.

Without going out your door,

You can know the ways of the world.

Without looking through your window,

You can see the way of Heaven.

The farther you go, the less you know.

*Thus, an integral being knows without going,
sees without looking, and accomplishes without doing.*

(Chapter 47 of the Tao Teh Ching, from *The Complete Works of Lao Tzu* by Hua-Ching Ni)

While all the Taoist holistic arts and sciences originally were designed with such spiritual breakthroughs as their ultimate goal, over time the appreciation of the spiritual aspects of these practices gradually eroded. This erosion had been taking place for many generations before TCM, and a spiritually neutered, standardized version of the ancient healing arts emerged in the former Middle Land.

Today the acceptance of acupuncture is growing at an exponential rate, and the hope of many of its supporters to see this practice become part of mainstream medicine seems a foregone conclusion. What is much less certain, however, is whether modern acupuncturists will continue to have the opportunity to learn the skills used to find the pivotal doors to healing also can be applied in the search for the Gate of All Wonders.

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