

Chinese Medicine Newsletter – 2010

“Most diseases are diseases of the heart”

Welcome to the Chinese Medicine Newsletter. In this article I want to briefly explore a pivotal notion that is discussed very early on in several Classical Chinese Medicine texts. It is stated that “most diseases are diseases of the heart.”

What does this mean? To help understand this, certain classical Chinese medical texts discuss the notion of “material” and “immaterial” causes of disease. The material includes all the physical and environmental influences that impact our health. This includes everything from the natural environment, such as weather conditions, environmental pollutants as well as the constant threat of viral and bacterial infectious diseases. It also includes the influence of diet, nutrition and exercise on our well-being. As one can see, many of these aspects are factors that originate outside of us. Even though in our culture these “material” components are seen as the major challenges to our health, the perspective of these Chinese medical texts is that these are easier diseases to treat than the “immaterial.” Why, because as we will see, the “immaterial” requires deep, ongoing personal transformation, whereas on the material level, for example, if the system is suffering from too much heat, cold, dampness, dryness, etc, we can treat it by applying the anecdote via acupuncture, herbs and diet. If the system is suffering from a warm disease, we treat by cooling; if an illness manifests excess dryness, we treat by moistening; if there are infectious agents, we treat by destroying or neutralizing the virus or bacteria.

So what are these “immaterial” aspects of disease that these Chinese medical texts say are the most difficult to treat? They are all the internal emotional, mental and spiritual stresses that so challenge our well-being. These are referred to as diseases of the heart. The use of the term “heart” here refers to the Confucian notion that the entire realm of human relations and interactions is the realm of the heart. Taoism more directly addresses human beings relationship to nature, whereas Confucius emphasized the aspect of our nature that is the result of our human interactions. This is the realm of our human environment, our society. As humans, are creatures of the natural world, as well as creatures of our constructed societal and cultural world.

Our heart and spirit are the realm of the “immaterial.” This includes our emotions, feelings, thoughts, aspirations, etc., this realm of the human psyche which so dramatically influences our state of well-being. The heart is considered the pivot point where our physical body and “our heavenly human nature” intersect.

It is said that human nature from the beginning intrinsically embodies the heavenly virtues. What are these Confucian virtues? They are compassion, propriety, integrity (faithfulness), righteousness (selflessness) and wisdom (born of humility). Why are they considered the most difficult aspect to heal? This is because we all suffer from some version of the five poisons that

block the natural experience and expression of these virtues. According to this model they are anger, hatred, blame, criticism and arrogance.

We could add several other “virtues” and “poisons” that we are familiar with from other Eastern as well as Western sources. The point is, however, that most of our imbalances are the result of our human nature gone astray due to distortions that are the result of our conditioning. This conditioning comes through our parents, peers and society, our human world. Thus, these “immaterial” causes are the most challenging to heal because they are the most deeply rooted and incidious.

One translation speaks of the “miasma” of emotional and mental turmoil that darken and dampen our joy, creativity, compassion, empathy, aliveness. These are the habit patterns that have formed in us as responses to life circumstances. At earlier times in our life time they may have been the best responses and coping capacities of which we were capable. However, now no longer appropriate or skillful, they have become burdensome, dysfunctional responses to life situations that require a much more healthy, balanced and effective capacity. These are the poisons that usurp the virtues, and thus challenge our health on every level.

Many of us are familiar with various strategies for helping to heal ourselves at this level, including acupuncture and herbal remedies, therapy, meditation, self reflection, journaling, yoga, 12 step programs, etc. Whatever paths we take, addressing these imbalances that are the most challenging to correct offers the most rewarding outcomes in terms of our current and long term health and well-being.

Western medicine is finally beginning to embrace the importance of the “immaterial” in the health and well-beings of individuals and our culture as a whole. We realize we can no longer treat ourselves mechanically like we do our cars. Focusing on just the material, our attempt to create optimum health will fall far short. From the Chinese Medicine perspective, no matter how much we master the “material” aspects of healing, it all collapses in the face of neglecting the crucial “immaterial” part of ourselves.

From a Chinese Medicine perspective, it is said that the superior physician heals the spirit. This is so because the spirit is the foundation of our well-being. Spirit here does not refer to particular religious beliefs or spiritual approaches to life. It refers to the Chinese notion that we, as human beings, are the mid-point between the heavens and the earth. The co-mingling of the heavenly and earthly energies is expressed in human society. This manifests through the heart of every individual.

Obviously, sometimes an ailment is only on the physical level and only requires treatment on that level. On the other hand, many of our seeming physical illnesses are reflections of dynamics on the level of the heart and spirit. What the ancient Chinese physicians proclaimed centuries ago is even more relevant today. The “realm of the heart” addressed by Confucius is the fulcrum where human destiny is shaped by how our lives embody or resist the clear

expression of the virtues of heaven. It is said that when the natural, inborn human virtues find their expression in our lives, we are manifesting the heavenly impulse on earth.

If we take the cultivation and embodiment of the “virtues” as our life’s purpose, then we are working at the most profound level to bring about our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. Thus, when we truly work at this level in ourselves, committing to embody the noblest virtues which are the natural inheritance of humanity, we not only heal ourselves, but our society and planet as well.