

# THE DAO OF TCM: WHEN LAOZI AND ZHUANGZI MEET *HUANGDI NEIJING* 醫道同源：當老莊遇見黃帝 內經

*Many of us have read Laozi's ancient text, the Dao De Jing, and even more of us have experienced the benefits of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Yet how many knew that the philosophy and medical theory could combine to form a powerful, energizing formula for healthy living? Tsai Biming brings Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Huangdi Neijing together into a conversation on holistic approaches to modern life.*

Many people in Europe and America have long been familiar with the ancient Chinese sage Laozi and the philosophy of the *Dao De Jing*. Even more of us have experienced the benefits of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) through herbal treatments, acupuncture, traditional massage, and more. But how many know that when Daoist philosophy and the ancient science of traditional medicine come together, they form a powerful, energizing formula for holistic living?

Tsai Biming's four-part treatise on the power of Daoist thought and TCM puts us in direct conversation with ancient sages, as Tsai unravels the rich metaphors of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* and illuminates their relevance to contemporary life. Why do people today expend all their energy on achieving success, yet never seem to find satisfaction? Why do we know so much about advancement, yet nothing about happiness?

Tsai's four-part book provides inspiring answers to questions like these. Part I examines the nature of ambition, finding guidelines in Daoist texts for those of us looking to keep both our dreams and our bodies healthy. Parts II and III lay out the many differences between



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mainstream values and the values of traditional Chinese medicine and life philosophy, while Part IV gives us a key to navigating those discrepancies by illuminating “the use of uselessness”, the secret at the heart of Daoism.

A long-time adherent of traditional Chinese medicine, Professor Tsai Biming brings her expertise in Chinese philosophy to bear in a way that reveals the undying relevance of ancient texts as well as the true coherence between Daoism and traditional Chinese medicine.

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# THE DAO OF TCM: WHEN LAOZI AND ZHUANGZI MEET *HUANGDI NEIJING*

By Tsai Biming

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## Chapter 1: Dream of Being a Bird, Soaring to the Sky

Have you set your goals for flight?

“The Grand Master Teacher” chapter of *Zhuangzi* says: “You dream of being a bird, soaring to the sky.” When you dream of being a bird, you will want to fly high into the heavens. Let me explain the goals of the humongous bird Peng, as well as the medium-sized and small birds in the *Zhuangzi*. A human life is like the soaring of a bird, full of yearning for ideals and worldly desires, as well as temptations of all stripes.... Have you already set goals for your flight?

### Birds Fly High, Fish Swim Deep

*Moreover, you dream of being a bird,  
soaring to the sky;  
or that you are a fish,  
diving into the deep.  
– Zhuangzi, “The Grand Master Teacher”*

If you are a bird, you want to fly high into the sky. But if you are a fish, you want to conceal yourself in the deepest parts of the ocean. What about humans? You might say, “Man moves upwards; water flows downwards.” But upwards to what places? And when we exert incredible effort to move upwards, are we truly going to high places?

### Whither the Flight of Peng?

*In the Northern Darkness there is a fish  
Whose name is Kun –  
I know not how many li in size.  
It changes into a bird named Peng,  
Whose back is –  
I know not how many li in extent.  
When this bird rouses itself and flies,  
its wings are like clouds draping the sky.  
When the sea heaves,  
This bird prepares to remove to the Southern Darkness.  
The Southern Darkness is the Pool of Heaven.  
– Zhuangzi, “Carefree Roaming”*

Peng is an enormous bird in *Zhuangzi* that wants to fly to the farthest reaches of the sky. Its point of departure is the Northern Darkness (*bei ming*), while its destination is the Southern Darkness (*nan ming*). What does this character *ming* (darkness) mean exactly? If you look at ancient Chinese oracle bone script or bronze inscriptions, the character for *ming* looks like a person holding an object covered by a piece of cloth with both hands. This is what *ming* is.

Since it is not clear what could be inside the object, the character *ming* came to mean, by extension, “unable to be seen clearly.” From this we might infer that Peng wants to fly from incredible distances – so unfathomably far north that one cannot see it – to the most remote place many hundreds of thousands of miles away, so unfathomably far south that one cannot see it. The endpoint of its flight is incredibly far away and difficult to reach; its objective and ambition are just as lofty.

### **How Peng Succeeds: Natural Advantages**

While Peng’s destination is extremely far away, its ambition is similarly expansive. How does the bird accomplish this feat of flying? Let’s see how “Carefree Roaming” explains it.

*I know not how many li in size Kun is.  
I know not how many li in extent Peng is.  
Its back is like Mount Tai,  
while its wings are like clouds draping the sky.*

Do you see now? *Zhuangzi* is pointing out a rather brutal reality: natural-born advantages exist. Peng’s body is very long, maybe even several thousand miles long. It is so big that no single person is able to see its entirety. One could say that it represents an extremity of the concept of size. *Zhuangzi* goes on to suggest that the creature is also several thousand miles wide, if not wider. To give another metaphor, *Zhuangzi* says its back is as majestic as Mount Tai, and its outspread wings are like a curtain of clouds draping from the sky. How enormous this bird must be! Thus, *Zhuangzi* begins his tale of Peng and its grand tour with a description of its natural advantages.

Imagine the many kinds of success there are in this world of ours. Look at basketball star Yao Ming. If he were not built like that, do you think he would be able to join the NBA? If he were my height – 1.6 meters or so – I seriously doubt he would be as successful. Filmmaker Ang Lee is another example: he must have been born with a special talent for telling stories and observing different lives. It is not just the bird flying thousands of miles to distant lands that requires natural advantages. A successful person also truly needs to possess some inborn talent.

## How Peng Succeeds: Hard Work and Determination

Besides those inborn talents, what else was required for the great bird Peng to succeed? It is exactly what many people told us when we were growing up: hard work and determination. First, let us look at Peng's efforts: "this bird rouses (*nu*) itself and flies" – it pushes itself to fly at all costs. Commonly associated with anger, the character *nu* denoted as "rouses" here actually signifies exertion or hard work.

Chinese characters have evolved from simple to complex. In Zhuangzi's day, the character *nu* here could signify either anger or exertion and hard work. "This bird rouses itself and flies" does not require an explanation. I trust that everyone understands what it means to rouse oneself and fly, for those moments on the road of life when one needs to give one's all.

Willpower, meanwhile, is the force behind sustained effort. Zhuangzi uses the phrase "nothing to obstruct (*yao*) or arrest (*e*) its course" to describe Peng's flight. The word *yao* here refers to *yaoshou*, or early death, while *e* means to terminate. The feat of the bird's southerly flight will certainly not terminate, demonstrating that its willpower is almighty indeed.

Now we have seen that the success of Peng comes not only from natural advantages, but also incredible effort and a strong will. On the topic of strength of will, some people may be thinking: *Are we truly discussing the Zhuangzi?* Somehow this discussion feels a bit different from those people usually have about the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

## The Unceasing Effort and Continual Progress of Daoists

Haven't you had a certain impression of the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi since childhood? It seems that most people associate these names with idleness and lackluster reading or working. I do not know how this misconception came about, because as soon as you start reading the Daoist classics, you will realize what nonsense those impressions are.

Look here: didn't Zhuangzi say it himself? The great bird Peng exerted great effort to fly, and with a shocking strength of will. You might be thinking, *Really? Isn't that just a single passage?* To support my interpretation, I am now going to explain to you the unceasing effort and continual progress of Daoism.

*By considering virtue to be in accordance,  
It is meant they went along with those who had feet to the hills,  
and yet men really thought that they had made earnest effort.  
– Zhuangzi, "The Grand Master Teacher"*

Those of you who are familiar with the *Dao De Jing* may know that the concept of *De* (often translated as "virtue" or "power") in Daoism differs from that in Confucianism. I will come back to this later. For now, I am talking about the phrase "by considering virtue to be in accordance."

So, what kind of moral ladder is used by a Daoist, or a follower of Zhuangzi, who abides by the definition of virtue in Daoism and attains progress one level at a time?

Scholarship on the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* defines *De* broadly as your mental strength. This includes the capacity to perceive and express, one's ability to recover the spirit from chaos, sorrow, and anger back to normalcy, as well as the capability to relax very quickly, even when you feel stiff all over. The *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* exercise these physical and mental capacities of ours; this is ultimately what we are learning about in this chapter.

"Considering virtue to be in accordance, it is meant they went along with those who had feet to the hills." Zhuangzi is telling us here that attaining virtue is not really difficult! You just need to follow a single person. What kind of person would that be? You need to walk alongside a person who has feet. To where? You might expect Zhuangzi to say: to Huangshan, Mount Tai, Mount Everest... but no. Follow that person with feet to a little hill, Zhuangzi says. If you want to practice the virtuous behavior prescribed within the *Dao De Jing* or *Zhuangzi*, it is just that simple.

But how do others look upon you when you do manage to behave in this way? "And yet men really thought that they had made earnest effort." People might say, "You're so diligent! How do you manage to do all this?" Dear friends, you must be feeling perplexed to read all this. How could people think you need diligence to do something so simple?

When I was undergoing treatment for cancer, I often exercised in my hospital ward because I was committed to recovering. When I came out alive, people around me marveled at how someone with stage 3 cancer and a nine-centimeter-wide tumor could have the tumor disappear and serum index return to normal without surgery.

"How did you live through that?" they asked. "What's your secret?"

At first, I would answer each of them individually, but then I thought I might as well write my methods down, so I wrote a book called *A Guide to Acupressure*. Some of my friends also began to do these exercises. I remember overhearing a conversation between two of them:

"Hey, how many times did you work out yesterday?"

"Twice."

"Amazing! How do you manage to do it twice?"

With one full exercise circuit requiring forty-five minutes, my second friend found it incredible that my first friend could persevere for ninety minutes to complete the circuit twice. But doesn't each of us look at our phones and use our computers for at least ninety minutes each day? Why is it so rare and impressive then, for someone to exercise for that length of time?

*Hearing of the Dao,*

*the superior scholar diligently puts it into practice.*

*Hearing of the Dao,*

*the mediocre scholar treats it as now here and now lost.*

*Hearing of the Dao,*

*the inferior scholar laughs a great laugh at it.*

*Without the laugh,*

*the Dao would not be worthy of being what it is.*  
*Thus, the sayings go:*  
*The clear Dao looks murky;*  
*The advancing Dao looks like retreating;*  
*The even Dao looks rocky;*  
*Superior virtue looks like a valley;*  
*The sheerest white seems sullied;*  
*Expansive virtue seems insufficient;*  
*Vigorous virtue seems indolent;*  
*A true character seems inconsistent;*  
*Great squareness has no corners;*  
*Great achievements come late;*  
*Great sound is barely audible;*  
*Great phenomenon has no form;*  
*The Dao is hidden and has no name.*  
*The Dao alone excels in giving and enabling.*  
– *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 41 (Tr. N.Y. Chen)

We are talking about the unceasing effort and continual progress of Daoists. The mental and physical standards practiced by Zhuangzi come naturally but may appear to others as the result of incredible diligence. Let us look more closely at what the *Dao De Jing* says:

*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the superior scholar diligently puts it into practice.*  
*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the mediocre scholar treats it as now here and now lost.*  
*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the inferior scholar laughs a great laugh at it.*  
*Without the laugh,*  
*the Dao would not be worthy of being what it is.*

What is a “scholar”? The “four occupations” defined in ancient times include among them the “scholar,” that is, a learned person or intellectual. This is also a laudatory title for men in Chinese history who achieved peerless moral character or wisdom. It can also describe a person who possesses a certain kind of artistry.

We can define a “superior scholar” as a learned person or intellectual of the highest caliber. The *Dao De Jing* says: the intellectuals of the loftiest standing, of the highest caliber and top rank, when they hear of the Dao or have an opportunity to come in contact with it, “diligently puts it into practice.” They will strenuously and vigorously commit all their waking hours to practicing and progressing through the Dao. These people are hard to come by.



Meanwhile, on the second level are lesser intellectuals who, when encountering precious principles, “treat it as now here and now lost.” It is like they hear some but not all of it – in one ear and out the other – and do not seriously put the Dao into practice. I must admit that my younger self was also among those whom Laozi described as “mediocre” scholars, particularly in the realm of certain projects or subjects.

But there is an even lower level, “the inferior scholars” who “laugh a great laugh at it.” The intellectual of the lowest class will simply laugh in your face if you try to describe the Dao to him. “Without the laugh, the Dao would not be worthy of what it is.” There are many things in life, actually, that become very meaningful if you put them into practice well. If a person finds them laughable, it is simply because they are at a time in their lives when they cannot see the meaning or importance of this kind of learning to them.

I was a night owl when I was young. When people told me to go to bed earlier, the most they would get out of me was a self-conscious smile. I would think: they had no idea how wonderfully peaceful the nighttime was. Only on such fine and peaceful nights could a person make the most of their time. Thinking back on that attitude now dismays me, because it eventually led me down into a frightful world that was a constant battle with death. But since I had no desire to understand the purpose of going to bed and rising early according to the solar cycle, I paid it little attention, and even found it laughable.

Here again we have introduced the Daoist concepts of unceasing effort and continuous progress. How about that? Has this first lecture already changed your views of Laozi and Zhuangzi? When you encounter people on the road of life who seem to be endlessly vigorous and positive, it is highly likely that they are followers of Laozi and Zhuangzi. This kind of unceasing effort and continual progress are not meant to make you do more or work harder in external pursuits, but rather maintain focus on cultivating serenity and the capacity to relax your body. Before you get acclimated and it starts to feel natural, calmness of the spirit and relaxation of the tendons require constant attention in a clear-headed state of mind. Only through concentration will you be able to cultivate this good habit, day by day.

## **Daoist Willpower!**

In this next unit, our focus will be on Daoist willpower. How can a person be so diligent? So hard-working? What sustains his diligence and hard work? What allows him to persist down the path of self-cultivation? That would be willpower. Chapter 33 of the *Dao De Jing* says:

*One who knows others is clever;  
One who knows oneself is enlightened.  
One who overcomes others is forceful;  
One who overcomes oneself is mighty.  
One who is content with his lot is rich;*

*One who takes strong action has willpower.  
One who does not lose his foundation long endures;  
One who dies, yet does not perish, has longevity.*  
– *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 33 (Tr. N.Y. Chen)

At the beginning of Chapter 33, Laozi talks about “one who knows others” and “one who knows oneself.” Being able to see other people clearly is a type of cleverness or intelligence, but someone who sees oneself clearly can be said to possess the upgraded version of insight into humankind!

Next up are “one who overcomes others” and “one who overcomes oneself.” We all like to win, whether against one other person or against multitudes. But no such victory compares to conquering oneself, beating your former “me.”

Let us continue onward. There is a comparison between “one who is content with his lot” and “one who takes strong action.” According to the principles of self-cultivation, a person who knows how to be satisfied with his lot derives this satisfaction not from the material, but from spiritual temperance. Of course, we could call this person wealthy; because he is not greedy, he thinks himself wealthy. But it still seems he is not vigorous enough. If he continues to seek the Dao, elevating his spirit and strengthening his physique, he’ll be able to persist no matter how lonely he becomes, in which case he truly becomes “one who takes strong action.” This is even more difficult to achieve and thus even more praiseworthy.

In the last part, Laozi raises the example of “One who does not lose his foundation long endures” – a person who strives in their role and “long endures.” But if this person becomes “someone who dies, yet does not perish” – their body gone but for whom the Dao still exists, the spirit made immortal, and their life’s work enduring – then we can say they truly have longevity.

The following phrase is the key point of this chapter: “One who takes strong action has willpower.” According to various annotations over the centuries, the “strong” in “taking strong action” refers to “diligent practice.” Some people say this means you should set out with great vigor to do something that you think is good. Whether it is a happy labor or an incredible exertion, one becomes conscious of a grandiose feeling like, “In spite of innumerable foes I charge ahead.”

In Text A and Text B of the *Dao De Jing* from the Mawangdui Silk Texts, this phrase reads: “One who takes strong action has willpower indeed.” This version is interesting. It says that if you get to know those who can diligently move ahead in this world, you will realize that their persistence comes from incredible willpower deep in their heart. It further highlights the critical importance of willpower to Daoist practitioners in their struggle for success.

## The Unceasing Effort and Continual Progress of Medical Practitioners

What about doctors? Don't doctors also make unceasing efforts and continual progress? Let's take a look at this passage:

*The people of high antiquity, those who knew the Way,  
they modeled their behavior after yin and yang,  
and they complied with the arts and the calculations.  
Their eating and drinking were moderate.  
Their rising and resting had regularity.  
They did not tax themselves with meaningless work.*

*Hence,  
they were able to keep physical appearance and spirit together,  
and to exhaust the years allotted by heaven.  
Their life span exceeded one hundred years before they departed.*  
–*Huangdi Neijing*, “Discourse on the True Qi Endowed by Heaven in High Antiquity”

We often say, “Did you know?” “I know.” We seem to use the word “know” (*zhidao*) a bit too casually. This word actually has a very deep philosophy to it. Everything has its own principle; to “know” is to truly understand this principle (*dao*).

In Chinese philosophy, especially from the Warring States period, every school abides by different principles (*dao* is here translated as “principles”). *Huangdi Neijing* is China's first medical treatise and the principles it describes are, of course, principles of medical practitioners. *Huangdi Neijing* talks about “the people of high antiquity, those who knew the Way.” How were people in ancient times able to embody the principles of medical practitioners? “They modeled their behavior after yin and yang.”

In life, there are many things that we have to coordinate with the external environment, abiding by the law of yin and yang. Traditional Chinese medicine considers yin and yang, two types of qi, to appear as changes in “temperature” corresponding to heat, cold, warmth, coolness, and so on. But we cannot say that temperature and qi are the same thing because “cold, summer heat, warmth and coolness” are simply “the abundant or weak operation” of qi.

That is to say, only the “movements” of yin and yang are responsible for temperature change and the transformation of various phenomena. Natural qi arises from the circulation of four seasons and produce changes of temperature in cycles of transformation. In turn, they affect and restrict the movement of the qi within human bodies. According to *Huangdi Neijing*, the natural qi “experienced in people” include six other types of qi besides yin and yang. Due to their prevalence and cycles of prosperity and decline, these six natural qi of wind, cold, heat, moisture,

dryness, and fire are often associated with regularity or timeliness. As such, they became a rather distinctive “temporal medical science” in traditional Chinese culture.

What is the law of yin and yang? Simply put, it is the cycle of the sun. For example, if you practice traditional martial arts, your teachers may let you know when the best time to train would be. Practitioners of Shaolin or other external styles may say that you must never train at noon if your movements are not completely accurate, otherwise, you risk provoking an intense adverse reaction. But if your movements and routines are very precise, training at noon could actually intensify the effects of your practice.

This is the solar cycle of a single day. But imagine training during the hottest time of the year, when one hour of practice is equivalent to many hours in the wintertime. I cherish this time of year the most. When to practice then? The golden hours between eleven a.m. and one p.m. are most certainly included. This is because the reserve and proliferation of essential qi within human bodies comes primarily from food and water, which transform within the body into proper qi.

*Huangdi Neijing* differentiates the “water and grain qi” that bolsters our internal qi into two dispositional categories: the “essential qi of water and grain” and “the fierce qi of water and grain.” Wang Bing offers the following annotation of “fierce qi” in comparison to the “essence qi” of water and grain: “Fierce qi is qi of drifting abundance. Because this qi of drifting abundance is fast and unrestrained, it cannot enter the vessels.” Essentially the qi of water and grain either has this innate fierceness or not; but it is the fierce qi that is unable to enter our meridians.

Why do differences in the disposition of qi ultimately result in this kind of divergence? The Wenyan commentary on *qián*, the first hexagram in the *Book of Changes*, reads: “Similar tones resonate together; things of similar qi seek out one another.” For the ancients, it was common knowledge that “Similar tones resonate together.” Thus, the essence qi and fierce qi of water and grain each rely on their own dispositions for their different behaviors: the essence qi of water and grain’s ability to operate harmoniously in the five *zang* organs, transport to the six *fu* organs, and enter our meridians also allows it to freely circulate through meridians, perforate the five *zang* organs, connect the six *fu* organs, and become the “essential substance” called constructive qi that can enrich and sustain the five *zang* organs deep inside the body.

Due to the fierceness, speed, and buoyancy of its disposition, the fierce qi of water and grain can also circulate through the interstice structures of human skin, spreading to the fascia and voids of the five *zang* organs inside the flesh. Its primary function is to protect and defend the surface of the body, preventing external, hostile qi from entering into the body. Protective qi guards the surface of every person’s body during the day and happens to be strongest at noon when sunlight is the brightest. To put it another way: once night falls, protective qi is collected into the interior, so one should rest rather than go out and fool around. Staying up and fooling around too vigorously late into the night is of great detriment to one’s biological fluid. As biological fluid is wasted, every part of the body will lack moisture. Dryness of the eyes, tongue, intestinal tract, or other areas may thus lead to deficiency in biological fluid.

So, if your eyes are already very dry, it means the parts of your body that require moisture are lacking. Please bear in mind this passage from *Huangdi Neijing*: “They modeled their behavior

after yin and yang, and they complied with the arts and the calculations. Their eating and drinking were moderate.”

Eating and drinking in moderation here means to have self-control and practice moderation in our consumption of food. Because everything has its hot, cold, warm, and cool properties, certain foods are suitable for eating in different seasons, just like different constitutions are better suited to different temperatures. Traditional medical practitioners considered “the body” to be a complete and integrated space. The five zang organs are hidden deep inside, while *shu* acupoints are present on the exterior. The qi acupoints on the skin are named after internal organs, clearly demonstrating the belief in a communicative network existing between the internal organs and the surface of the skin.

In other words, the organs deep within the body, from inside to out, communicate with the external world’s wind, heat, moisture, dryness, cold, and other natural qi primarily through acupoints on the body’s exterior. The food and drink that enter the body combine with the “true qi” we are born with, transforming into protective qi and constructive qi, filling the entire body. Protective qi defends and fortifies the body’s exterior, while constructive qi nourishes the internal organs from within.

TCM physicians traditionally have understood food or medicine holistically, never removing grain, fruits, vegetables, birds and beasts, or medicinal materials from their spatiotemporal contexts, and never excluding the influence of temperature, moisture, pressure, wind speed, and other conditions for a purely qualitative analysis. Instead, traditional medicine has always employed an awareness of the principles of “togetherness” or “no separation,” resolutely maintaining the connection between food or medicine and the cycles of the cosmos. Doctors gauge the nature and efficacy of foodstuffs or herbal medicines according to the environments that generated them, the processes by which they are prepared, and their stimulative or depressive effects on the body.

Let us use medicated leaven (*shenqu*) as an example. This is a common medicinal material that supports digestion, best brewed between the fifth day of the fifth lunar month and the sixth day of sixth lunar month because the qi flow, phlegm reduction, and digestive support of medicated leaven come from its medical property of “yang transpiration.”

The fifth day of the fifth lunar month is the Dragon Boat Festival, the time of year when the summer’s yang energy is at its height; the sixth day of the sixth lunar month is the Tiankuang Festival, right after the springtime “plum rains” fall in the Zhejiang region (when the local custom is to expose books to the sun), another peak moment for yang energy. Making medicated leaven between these two days of yang energy is precisely intended to boost its properties of “yang transpiration” and increase its efficacy to support digestion and reducing phlegm.

You can see how much importance traditional doctors placed on the influence of seasons and solar terms on medicine. In similar fashion, the interior and exterior, hot and cold, emptiness and physicality, yin and yang, and other such physical aspects of a person’s body are the same as any blade of grass or tree in nature. Besides one’s inborn constitution, the body is also deeply influenced by one’s spatiotemporal environment and nurtured dietary habits.

The reason traditional doctors would prescribe completely different medicines or foodstuffs based on one's constitution and symptoms is this: the ingestion of herbal medicines can move the body towards neutrality through the coherence and complementarity of yin and yang. For instance, doctors believed that a person's qi is yang and blood is yin, thus they explained qi's ability to produce blood through the saying "yang is inborn, yin is cultivated." So, if a person used up too much blood in their body, a doctor would prescribe herbal ingredients abundant in yang qi for treatment and promote the proliferation of blood by supplementing qi, thereby curing deficiencies this way.

Thus, doctors align their practice with nature, using appropriate food and medical material to regulate the body while prescribing work and rest in accordance with the solar cycle. Traditional medicine and Western nutrition as we know them now are both fields of study with incredibly long lineages. Recent fads like the ketogenic diet – eating high fat, moderate protein, and very few carbohydrates – result in rapid weight loss because they throw one's dietary intake out of balance. But why shed the pounds this way when it destabilizes your spleen and stomach?

It is best to try to lose weight in a healthy manner that maintains proper functioning of the organs, promotes good digestion, and includes a nutritious diet along with exercise. I want to highlight and promote traditional Chinese medicine today because there are too many appalling fallacies available for public consumption. I have a friend who already suffered a bout of cancer. Sadly, his mother-in-law encourages him to drink ginger water every single day. But raw ginger disperses cold wind; if you drink too much of this each day without receiving cold wind, you will disperse too much, and your immune system will become weaker and weaker. No wonder his cancer soon relapsed.

You must also take care to sleep and rise on a regular schedule. Living in the modern age, it takes considerable effort to keep yourself from getting caught up in this world of mobile phones and video games. Self-control is a kind of effort; turning off and putting away your devices requires it. Later on, we'll get to how *Huangdi Neijing* instructs us to go to bed early and rise early in autumn; go to bed early and rise late in winter; and go to bed late and rise early in spring.

For those of you who like to stay up all night, do not misunderstand. "Late" in this context means to retire at sunset; going to bed at ten is already considered very late. What I want to convey is that, only by coordinating your sleep schedule and dietary habits with the natural law of yin and yang can you keep from wearing yourself out too much.

*Hence,*

*yin, yang, and the four seasons*

*constitute the end and beginning of the myriad beings;*

*they are the basis of death and life.*

*Opposing them results in catastrophe and harms life.*

*If one follows them, severe diseases will not emerge.*

*This is called "to achieve the Way."*

*As for the Way,  
the sages practice it;  
the foolish wear it as decoration.*

*If one follows yin and yang, then life results;  
if one opposes them, then death results.  
If one follows them, then order results;  
if one opposes them, then disorder results.  
To act contrary to what is appropriate, this is opposition.  
This is called inner obstruction.*

*Hence, when it is said,  
“the sages did not treat those already ill, but treated those not yet ill,  
they did not put in order what was already in disorder, but put in order what  
was not yet in disorder,”  
then this means just the same.*

*Now,  
when drugs are employed for therapy only after a disease has become fully  
developed,  
when attempts at restoring order are initiated only after disorder has fully  
developed,  
this is as if a well were dug when one is thirsty,  
and as if weapons were cast when the fight is on.  
Would this not be too late, too?*

*– Huangdi Neijing, “Comprehensive Discourse on Regulating the Spirit with the Qi  
of the Four Seasons”*

To put it simply, “achieving the Way” in traditional medicine – the Way (dao) practiced by the sages – is done by following yin and yang and the four seasons. The point most emphasized in traditional medicine is “not to treat those already ill, but to treat those not yet ill.” Yet how does one treat the “not yet ill”? By adhering to yin and yang and the four seasons.

Since our bodies exchange and circulate energy via the qi acupoints on our skin with the external qi of nature, one’s inner qi will also be influenced by the qi of one’s environment. So, we most certainly do not stand in opposition to nature, to heaven and earth, but rather act in concert and yield to it. No one wants to get sick, right? Abide by yin and yang and the four seasons and you will be alright.

As for “carrying out training during the coldest and hottest parts of the year,” the hottest time of year is indeed the best time to exercise. I did not practice this until after I got sick. Afterwards, I became delighted whenever spring came because that meant summer would be on its way.

“Isn’t it too hot to exercise in the summer?” you ask.

No. Even on the hottest day of the year, if you find a lakeside lined with trees where a nice breeze blows, you won’t feel hot. And if you practice this often, your body will change: you won’t freeze in the winter, nor sweat too much in the summer. You will naturally avoid the discomfort of feeling hot and sticky all over. Through my practice of tai chi, I can appreciate clear days as much as the cool, overcast summer days with no rain. Rainy days are my time for self-reflection: *Why did I waste time on Facebook instead of coming out half an hour earlier to practice tai chi? Let nature take its course; tomorrow I will make more of an effort.*

To let nature take its course means to submit to the natural rhythms of the sun, to submit to the clouds in the sky. It is not about following the bad habits of one’s own nature.

What I talked about above is to remind us that life must be lived in accordance with climate, season, night and day, and that we must watch out for our dietary habits. Spring, summer, fall, and winter, day and night, every moment of every hour, are you also paying heed to the unceasing efforts and continual progress of doctors?

## **Follow the Solar Cycle for an Active Physique**

As the relationship between human bodies and nature is not oppositional, but rather complementary, it is thus best for us to accord our work, rest, and physical activity with the cycle of the sun.

The “Discourse on the Eight Cardinal Turning Points and on Spirit Brilliance” of *Huangdi Neijing* says: “In piercing one should take heaven as law and the earth as rule. Combine them with ‘the luminaries of heaven.’” “The Comprehensive Discourse on the Five Regular Policies” says: “Nourish the patient and harmonize the organism. Rest and wait for the time of recovery.”

You must align with the weather.

Let us review a bit. In traditional medicine, the qi on the surface of the body that defends the exterior is called protective qi. This is what guards our proper qi. It is constructive qi (ying qi), also known as essential substance (rong qi), that allows our viscera to operate smoothly within the five zang organs and six fu organs.

The “Discourse on how the Generative Qi Communicates with Heaven” of *Huangdi Neijing* says: “The fact is, the yang qi, during daytime, it rules the exterior. At dawn, the qi of man emerges. At noon, the yang qi abounds. When the sun is in the West, the yang qi is already depleted. The qi gates close. Hence, in the evening there is collection and resistance. one must not disturb sinews and bones; one must not encounter fog and dew. If one’s behavior contradicts the requirements



of] these three periods of a day, one's physical appearance will experience distress and weakening."

This means that when the sun is at its peak during the day, our yang qi and protective qi are accordingly in full force, defending us at the surface of our bodies. As the sun sets, these qi weaken and withdraw into the interior of the body. The opening and closing of qi acupoints on the surface of the human body, as well as the abundance or weakness of yang qi, are deeply influenced by the rise, peak, and setting of the sun. Since our bodies are synchronized with day and night as such, our periods of work and rest must naturally follow the daily cycle of the sun.

Otherwise, if we "contradict ... these three periods" and don't live by the early, middle, and late solar periods of sunrise, noon, and sunset, our "physical appearance will experience distress and weakening." "Distress" means to be beset by improper qi. We live between heaven and earth and are influenced by external wind, heat, moisture, dryness, and cold. If our patterns of work are abnormal and our proper qi insufficient, wind, heat, moisture, dryness, and cold can very easily invade our bodies. As soon as this happens, our yang qi will suffer badly, and cause obstructions to the flow of qi and blood, along with headaches, neck stiffness, joint pain, and various other illnesses. Traditional Chinese medical treatments are simply about strengthening the body's vitality and dispelling pathogens to support and nourish proper qi. Naturally, you must not overlook the fact that periods of work and rest and physical activity must all follow the cycle of the sun.

## **Feel Your Pulse, Find Synchronicity with the Seasons**

As a city dweller, have you already forgotten that you exist amid spring, summer, fall, and winter? Our bodies not only correspond with day and night, they are also in step with the four seasons. In the following chapter, we will learn how to use our pulse to understand more about how our bodies synchronize with the seasons. First, we must learn how the qi in our bodies operates differently depending on the season. The "Discourse on Opposition and Compliance in Piercing in the Course of the Four Seasons" in *Huangdi Neijing* says:

*In spring the qi is in the meridian channels.*

*In summer the qi is in the luo connecting channels.*

*In late summer the qi is in the muscles and in the flesh.*

*In autumn the qi is in the skin.*

*In winter the qi is in the bones and in the marrow.*

*The "Discourse on the Jade Mechanism and the True Qi of the Zang organs" states:*

*Huang Di asked:*

*"In spring, the movement in the vessels resembles a string.*

*How can it be string-like?"*

*Qi Bo responded:*

*"In spring, the movement in the vessels is a liver movement.*

*The east is wood;*

*this is whereby the myriad beings come to life first.*

*Hence, when this qi comes, it is soft, weak, light, depleted, and smooth.*

*It is straight and extended.*

*Hence, it is called 'string-like.'*

*A movement contrary to this indicates disease."*

*Huang Di:*

*"Good!*

*In summer, the movement in the vessels resembles a hook.*

*How can it be hook-like?"*

*Qi Bo:*

*"In summer, the movement in the vessels is a heart movement.*

*The south is fire;*

*this is whereby the myriad beings abound and grow.*

*Hence, when this qi comes, it is abundant; when it leaves, it is weak.*

*Hence, it is called 'hook-like.'*

*A movement contrary to this indicates disease."*

*Huang Di:*

*"Good!*

*In autumn, the movement in the vessels is like something floating.*

*How can it be floating?"*

*Qi Bo:*

*"In autumn, the movement in the vessels is a lung movement.*

*The west is metal;*

*this is whereby the myriad beings are gathered after they have reached maturity.*

*Hence, when this qi comes, it is light, depleted, and floating.*

*It comes tense and leaves dispersed.*

*Hence, it is called 'floating.'*

*A movement contrary to this indicates disease."*

*Huang Di:*

*“Good!*

*In winter, the movement in the vessels is as if encamped.*

*How can it be encamped?”*

*Qi Bo:*

*“In winter, the movement in the vessels is a kidney movement.*

*The north is water;*

*this is whereby the myriad beings are brought together and stored.*

*Hence, this qi comes in the depth and is beating.*

*Hence, it is called ‘encamped.’*

*A movement contrary to this indicates disease.”*

When spring arrives, heavenly qi energizes and expands, the earth begins to open itself up, and nature’s frozen ground thaws, melting ice and letting water flow. Rivers that were frozen and stagnant in winter gradually become unblocked. Correspondingly, the meridians of the human body become unblocked like the rivers, so the qi of the body in spring is like the movement of water in rivers, flowing through the meridians.

Yang qi flourishes in summertime, and the qi in our meridians is rich, overflowing into branches closer to the interstitial structures near the skin, right in the tertiary network. The tertiary network receives nourishment from qi and blood, and the skin is likewise satiated. At the hottest peak of summer, the conduit vessels, network vessels, and tertiary network are all filled with qi and blood, which thus can overflow to the muscles.

In autumn, the climate begins to weaken and withdraw. The human body’s surface muscles become occluded and the qi acupoints on the skin also begin to weaken and tighten. As the winter cold intensifies, the myriad creatures become dormant. The qi of the human body, accordingly, retreats inward. Qi attaches to the marrow during this time and operates through the five zang organs.

Now let us learn how to use our pulse to determine the state of qi within our body. Take your index finger and gently touch your face with it. Continue doing that, just lightly touching your skin. Touching it like this, the shape of your face should not change at all. This is called the “epidermal pulse.” If you can feel a pulse on your skin like this, that is the “superficial” pulse. Next, press your index finger a bit harder until the flesh of your face becomes slightly concave. Now you are putting pressure on your muscles; the pulse felt at this depth is called the “muscular pulse,” or the “middle” pulse. Now press your finger in with even more force until you can feel the bone structure underneath. The pulse you might feel here against your bone is what we call the “deep” pulse. Superficial, middle, and deep describe the pulse your finger picks up at different positions – on the skin, in the muscles, and against the bone – and thus we have named them as such.

Once you learn where to take your pulse and the amount of pressure to apply, we can talk about how to “find the *guan*.” Lift your right hand with your palm facing up. Then put your left hand underneath your right hand and trace your left middle finger around the base of your thumb

to the protruding bone beneath it on your right hand. We call this the radial malleolus. Once your left middle finger touches the radial malleolus and is properly positioned parallel to your wrist crease (do you all see the joint between your right palm and your forearm, with a crease at the wrist?), we'll use your middle fingertip to touch this place called the "right *guan*."

What does it mean to be positioned properly? When your left middle finger is in the correct place, the distance to your right wrist crease will be able to be covered by your left index finger. The position of your left index finger is called the "right radial artery pulse," while below your left middle finger, the place against your ring finger is called the "right chi." Once all three fingers are in place, move aside your thumb and ring finger and feel only your middle finger. Use your left middle finger to press gently against your right *guan* with the same lightness you used to touch the skin on your cheeks. Remember how this feels. Next, use a bit more force, like you did when you pressed into your facial muscles earlier. Finally, press even harder like you did when touching your bone in the previous exercise.

If you could feel something even while lightly touching the epidermal pulse, it might be because you just ate a full meal, you have what Chinese medicine calls fire qi in your gastrointestinal tract, or you are having digestive pains or discomfort at the moment. If you feel your pulse at the muscular level, this means your stomach qi is normal or you still have food in your stomach and are not hungry yet. If you can still feel your pulse at the deepest skeletal level, then you are probably someone who eats three meals a day, has a normal daily routine, or exercises regularly. Only this last kind of person will have a well-rooted pulse in their right *guan*.

Once you learn how to feel your pulse, you'll gradually be able to understand how it manifests throughout the changing seasons. You'll discover that you have a harder time locating the pulse when it's cold, and your pulse is like a stream flowing beneath rocks. Our bodies are influenced by this realm between heaven and earth like so.

Once you can detect your epidermal, muscular, and skeletal pulse, try going one step further and feeling how your pulse differs in spring, summer, fall, and winter. If you find it hard to understand, then let's use the four seasons as examples. Is there a stream or creek near your house? Have you noticed differences in its water level over the seasons? Go observe the stream and you'll notice that the water flows briskly in the summer. In the winter, because there's less water, the rocks are much more noticeable, right? There's very little water, the level so low that the rocks are revealed. If you can understand the influence of heaven and earth and the four seasons on rivers and streams, then naturally you should be able to understand their enormous influence on our human bodies.

The text avers that "the movement in the vessels resembles a string" in spring, but what exactly is a "string-like pulse"? If you've ever touched the strings of a lute or violin before, or even the strings of a toy, you will understand. Go feel the pulse of your most anxious friend, someone who often feels under great pressure, whose liver is probably not in great shape; their pulse will feel like a string. What of the "hook-like" pulse in summer? It comes in abundance and leaves weakly, seemingly vigorous at the outset, but then ends up rather powerless and light. This is

what is meant by “when this qi comes, it is abundant; when it leaves, it is weak,” what we call “flood pulse” or the “hook-like pulse” of summer.

By contrast, the “floating pulse of autumn” feels like touching a leaf: probe any further and it’s gone. This is the pulse you often find in autumn. The “encamped pulse of winter” is written with the character *ying*, which is presumed to be a phonetic loan word from the phrase “crystal clear” (*jingying titou*). It signifies inferior jade and indicates the pulse is like this type of stone, because you’re already searching deep below, close to the bone, so the pulse feels as hard as a stone.

As you come to understand your pulse, you’ll find that the body and the four seasons are intimately connected. Obviously, since the seasons have such enormous influence on our bodies, we must certainly act in concert with them and use different methods to take care of ourselves and improve our health.

I have described all of the above so everyone can learn about the unceasing efforts, perseverance, and continual progress of Daoists and medical practitioners. The first time a friend asks you what you’re reading, and you tell them *The Dao of TCM*, you might feel the need to adopt the tone and posture of a middle-aged or elderly person to convey this.

But if you have read up to here, you really know what this book is all about. If another friend asks you the same question, you might answer: “A book on philosophy and how to take care of your life!” Your voice will be lively, and you will be energized to share with them the positivity and enthusiasm of these medical and philosophical classics.