

*The following is taken from a talk given by Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée at the Pacific Symposium in November 2002. It draws on the early non-medical texts to explain the Chinese concepts of the heart, the spirits and the emotions.*

To be human is to be self-conscious and self-aware. One consequence of self-consciousness and self-awareness is confusion and fear, and each civilisation has addressed this fundamental human problem by developing its own system to facilitate human life and ensure a feeling of security within an often hostile universe. Early animism, ancestral worship, and the various levels of understanding of Heaven, are part of the attempt by the Chinese to create their own system.

Before the Christian era, the Chinese built a vision of the universe where every phenomenon is related to every other phenomenon as part of the gigantic web of cosmic life. This is generally called the system of correspondences, and is widely used in theories of medicine. Independently and correlatively, the theory of *qi* was developed. *Qi* 氣 is behind any form, any phenomenon, any manifestation – and determines the quality and characteristics of every form, phenomenon and manifestation. *Qi* is what links together phenomena of analogous qualities or activities. *Qi* is within each form of life to provide all kinds of activities; it is potentiality becoming life, providing the transformations at work in any living being. Everything that occurs at any level within a human being is dependent on *qi*, whether it is physical, physiological, psychological or mental. Health, disease and treatment are all a matter of *qi*.

In nature, *qi* is acting regularly, as if following an order. This natural order is seen everywhere. One of the best and most traditional examples being the four seasons, sometimes referred to as ‘the four *qi*’, which represent the alternation as well as the composition of *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are not exactly two types of *qi*. They are rather the *qi* moving through various phases, according to time and circumstance. Hence the *qi* - expressed as *yin* and *yang* - expands and contracts during the four seasons, provoking various reactions and determining all the aspects and cycles of life. There may appear to be irregularities in the course of the seasons – some particular *qi* or wind may not be in quite the right place at the right time, but basically the system works and spring inevitably follows winter, as autumn follows summer.

In the few centuries before the Christian era, the evolving notion of *qi* supported the elaboration of the system known as the five elements, agents or phases. This is a way to classify all living beings and phenomena, and all kinds of qualities and cycles, and put them into a precise relationship, in order to present their interplay and establish a pattern of their mutual influence and their alternation or succession.

So what makes the *qi* act with such regularity? What makes the *qi* of each season alternate at a particular time? What makes the *qi* appropriate to each of the five elements/phases act according to its own type, wherever and whenever it is appropriate?

From a certain point of view, the spirits (*shen* 神) could be seen as the power of change, making sure that the *qi* is acting at the right place, and in the appropriate way. For instance, there is a spirit of the water element, making sure that the *qi* expressing the mode of activity proper to the water element is working correctly; there is a spirit of the river, making sure that the river flows as it is supposed to and so on. These powers, these spirits, are deities, souls of the dead... and certainly they also become, at least for the scholar, representative of Heaven, as Heaven is the natural order of life.

“Perceiving the way of change and transformation is how one perceives the spirits” (Yijing)

The universe is seen as a self-regulated and self-regulating system. Its regulations may seem to be in rhythms and cycles expressed through the theories of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements. This organisation is the pattern for any being or phenomena, including the human being. All capacities, activities, movements, transformations, affinities... are *qi* regulated through this system.

But it seems that within the human being this movement of *qi* goes wrong. It moves in the wrong direction, it gets blocked, knotted, dissipated and finally it works against life. And this is not merely the result of a flaw, a defect in the constitution or due to inescapable circumstances, but disturbance of the *qi* may come from wrong behaviour, bad diet, careless exposure to cold, and even exhausting use of the sensorial or intellectual abilities.

So how can a human being act against life in such a way? We will not go into the origins of evil! But obviously within the human being there is a tendency for the life giving or life maintaining *qi* to operate against life.

And here we come to the heart. The heart is the very centre of life in the human being, and the very centre of the self. It is a collection of all perceptions, sensations, information, memories, knowledge, tendencies, ideas, thoughts, desires and emotions. It is the whole of the emotional life, but also the mind, the psychology, the intelligence... In Chinese thought, the heart is 'myself', it is 'me'.

The heart reacts to any event, situation, circumstance, stimulation. And, as we see in Lao zi chapter 55, "The heart activates the *qi*."

It is said that the heart is responsible for the correctness or for any distortion in the course of the *qi*. And that is dependent on the way that the heart (or the way that each individual) is able to follow the natural order or to deviate from it.

The natural order is given to each individual at the beginning of life as the 'proper nature'. This proper nature is necessarily part of the great cosmic movement of life, and is in conformity with the maintenance of life. This does not necessarily mean that there is no flaw or defect in the genetic inheritance – but this would be considered as part of the human transmission, an alteration due to human behaviour through an ancestral lineage possibly going back several generations. Neither does it mean that there will be no disturbance during pregnancy and the early stages of life, which may affect the way that the heart is able to develop. But it does mean that there is always the possibility for each individual to access the natural order of life within themselves. To follow this natural order is the only way not to dissipate or waste vitality. When the *qi* is operating correctly and harmoniously, then the essences (*jing* 精, the material matrix, the pure vitality) are rich and abundant. Being so, the interplay of *qi* and essences works most efficiently, which means that all the vital functions are working well. This perfect functioning is seen as the presence of the spirits. Thus the term 'vital spirits' is expressed in Chinese by *jing shen* 精神, essences/spirits.

So what is it that goes wrong with human heart, with the *qi* and consequently with the essences and the vital spirits? Because the human being is capable of self-consciousness, there is the self, the 'I', the heart reacts with this self-consciousness, which gives us more than just the ability to perceive, it gives us the possibility of self-knowledge. Not only do I perceive, but I know that I perceive. I know that I am, and therefore I know that one day I will be no longer. This consciousness, which makes us human, also destabilizes a kind of natural functioning, and we are no longer able to act instinctively, unconsciously.

Therefore, in response to stimulation and events, the heart reacts with exaggeration, defensiveness, fear, excitement. And it is human destiny – the task of each human being – to put the heart back in harmony with the natural order. This is our daily practice, to apply oneself to giving back to the heart the ability to react appropriately, without the need for excitement or exaggeration, fear or blockage.

“By nature, humans possess blood and *qi* and a heart that allows knowledge. Grief as well as joy, elation and anger do not exist permanently within. They are reactions to the incitement of external things. It is then that the art of the heart intervenes.” (Liji - Yueji)

The reactions of the heart depend on the inner disposition – tendencies, ideas, emotions, etc which are within the heart. It is common experience that we do not react the same way to the same words coming from someone we like and someone we do not like. If we are full of elation and joy, we will not be affected in the same way as when we are sad, defensive or angry. So it is what is inside the heart, what is in the mind (whether or not we know that it is there) that affects all our reactions.

Tendencies, which may be natural, become desires. Desires are harmless if they are the pure expression of life trying to find what is necessary for its own expression, but are harmful when they work against one's own nature. They may even be natural desires – but they are harmful if they become exaggerated; to want too much, or with too much intensity.

We cannot be without emotions. But we need to know that emotions, because they are always exaggerated, disturb the innermost aspects of our being, which are the movements and activities of life as operated by the *qi*. Furthermore, our ability to know, to think, even to perceive, is all the activity of the heart. So, if any emotion is held in the heart, not only does it disturb the movement of the *qi*, but it also alters our ability to perceive, to know, to judge, to feel and to react appropriately.

If the emotion is violent, it may be obvious to others (and even, later, to ourselves) that our mind was disturbed, that we were literally ‘out of our mind’. But if a prejudice, a dislike, is built gradually and imperceptibly, the damage is even more serious, because we have lost even the ability to know or perceive that we are ‘out of our mind’.

The ‘art of the heart’ is to empty the heart everyday. To reduce what does not appear to be the natural expression of our lives, to diminish the needs - the materialistic needs, but also the psychological needs, the desires and a personal will. To take inspiration from the natural order experienced in the four seasons, and also in the wisdom of the past generations, as experienced for example within the ancient rites and rituals. To act in such a way that the inner disposition becomes more and more aligned with the natural order, the thought as well as the behaviour and actions. When the heart is able to take in all that is presented in openness, knowledge is able to become wisdom, the kind of wisdom which is nothing other than to know how to nourish life.