



The Heart: Selected Readings

TRANSLATED BY HEINER FRUEHAUF

The heart is the ruler of the five organ networks. It commands the movements of the four extremities, it circulates the qi and the blood, it roams the realms of the material and the immaterial, and it is in tune with the gateways of every action. Therefore, coveting to govern the flow of energy on earth without possessing a heart would be like aspiring to tune gongs and drums without ears, or like trying to read a piece of fancy literature without eyes.

[from the Daoist classic, *Contemplations by the Huainan Masters (Huainanzi)*, fl.110 B.C.E.]



The heart is the emperor of the human body. Its subordinate officers are in charge of the nine orifices and their related functions. As long as the heart remains on its rightful path, the nine orifices will follow along and function properly. If the heart's desires become abundant, however, the eyes will lose their sense of color, and the ears will lose their sense of sound. Thus it is said: "Keep your heart empty—this is the art of the heart through which the orifices can be mastered."

Deviation above will necessarily cause malfunction below. Do not race your heart like a horse, or you will exhaust its energy. Do not fly your heart like a bird, or you will injure its wings. Never frantically move things around just for the sake of seeing what will happen. If you move things around you dislocate them from their proper place. If you will be calm and patient, everything will come to you by itself.

The Dao is never far away, yet it may be hard to reach. It is within every one of us, yet it may be hard to grasp. If we stay clear of desires, the shen will enter its home. If we sweep away all impurities, the shen will stay with us. Human beings all crave intelligence and wisdom, but rarely do we try to understand what the source of their existence is. Alas, intelligence, intelligence—even if you jump over the ocean, it will not just sit there waiting for you! The seeker will be limping behind the one who is without desires. The sage does not seek anything, and thus naturally achieves the state of vacuous understanding.

[from the Taoist classic, *Guanzi*, prior to 200 B.C.E.]



The heart is the master of the body and the emperor of the organ networks. There is the structural heart made from blood and flesh: it has the shape of a closed lotus flower and is situated underneath the lung and above the liver. And there is the luminous heart of spirit—shen—which generates qi and blood and thus is the root of life. It is the source of all our bodily parts and functions, yet it does not manifest in obvious signs and colors. Just when you want to define it and say "here it is," it is gone; whenever you forget about it, however, it comes closer to you than ever. This is why it is called the "vacuous spirit." Despite its elusive nature, shen commands our body's

every action and every part. Material form and luminous shen must therefore be looked upon as an interdependent pair, and we have to understand that diseases of the structural heart are always caused by unbalanced emotions such as depression, anxiety, obsession, or sadness, which open up a pathway through which noxious pathogens can enter.

[from Li Ting, *A Primer of Medicine (Yixue Rumen)*, 1575]



The ancient book of definitions (*Neijing*) refers to the heart as the ruler of the human body, the seat of consciousness and intelligence. If we decide to nourish this crucial element in our daily practice, then our lives will be long, healthy, and secure. If the ruler's vision becomes distracted and unclear, however, the path will become congested, and severe harm to the material body will result. If we lead lives that are centered around distracting thoughts and activities, therefore, there will be harmful consequences.

The sage regards his/her body like a country: the heart is the ruler, and the jing (material yin essence) and the qi (immaterial yang function) are the citizens. If the heart does not abuse its superior position, if it remains centered and focused on the essential matters, the jing will flourish and the qi will be steady, noxious intruders will always be fought off, the dantian will be full with treasures, and every part of the body landscape will be light and at piece.

[from Li Yuheng, *Unfolding the Mat With Enlightening Words (Tuipeng Wuyu)*, Ming dynasty, approximately 16th century]



All of the twelve channel networks obey the orders of the heart. The heart, therefore, is the ruler of the organ networks. Its position is south, its season is summer, and its nature is fire. The heart thus represents the principle that is referred to as the body's imperial fire (jun huo). Its relationship to the other organs is hierarchical; not only do the twelve channel networks attune their respective qi (functions) to the directives of the heart, but they offer their entire jing (material essences) as tribute to nourish the heart.

The heart, therefore, is the root of life, the seat of shen, the master of blood, the commander of the vessels. This elevated position is due to the omnipresence of shen: shen resides within qi, and qi resides within jing. Only the heart's jing is always abundant, enabling it to dispatch subordinate shens to the other four zang organs. Only the heart's qi is always abundant, enabling it to draw the jing of the body into the six fu organs. These are the major functions of the heart.

The heart is connected to the kidney. The classic states: "The heart resides in the vessels. It rules the kidney network, not via a controlling position in the restraining circle of relationship between the organ networks (where the kidney actually restrains the heart), but simply because it is the general master of all organ networks. Before the heart fire can harmoniously blend with the kidney water, however, the kidney water must be sufficient. Otherwise the heart fire will flare out of control, and all kinds of heart and kidney ailments will arise."

Due to this interdependent relationship between the heart and the kidney, there are two methods of nourishing and protecting the heart: First of all, there is the method of nourishing the heart qi directly, that is via its own channel network. This means: do not burden yourself with depressing thoughts, do not get anxious about future events that may never happen, do not dwell on things that are well in the past—all of these emotions dissipate the brightness of shen. If we overextend our heart we will harm its qi. If this happens, the heart jing will also suffer damage, and the shen, consequently, will lose its abode. If we take a look at the doctrines of Confucius—do not will, do not strive, do not be inflexible, do not be egotistical—and his student Mencius—do not be self-righteous,

do not expect things, do not force things—we see that the art of nourishing the heart had already been fully understood during the ancient times of Confucius and Mencius. Even though both masters never said much about medicine, they certainly understood how to nourish the heart.

Secondly, there is the option to foster the heart by nourishing its jing via the kidney network. This means: moderate your sex life and do not lust after women, otherwise your ministerial fire (xiang huo) will flare up and become unstable. If there is no protective maintenance of the kidney, the kidney jing will be harmed. If the kidney jing is harmed, then its qi will also suffer detrimental influences. Water, then, will be unable to restrain fire, yin will be unable to provide shelter to yang, and pathological water qi will enshroud the heart.

This is precisely what Master Xiangchuan meant when he said: “Jing can generate qi, and qi can generate shen; there is nothing greater than a healthy body brimming with ying (jing) and wei (qi)! A practitioner seeking to nourish life must first of all treasure his/her jing. If the jing is plentiful, there will be abundant qi; if qi is abundant, there will be abundant shen; and if shen is abundant, the body will be strong. Finally, if the body is strong, there will be no disease.” The master physician Zhu Danxi (1282-1358), moreover, wrote once: “The kidney is in charge of bracing and storing, the liver is in charge of harmonizing the flow. Both organ systems contain ministerial fire, and at their upper end they are linked to the heart. The heart emperor represents fire—once aroused, it flares up. If the heart’s imperial fire flares up, the ministerial fire will also flare and the jing will naturally wander astray. This shows us that jing is braced by the kidney and activated by the liver, and that leakage of jing is usually initiated by the heart. If one of these networks loses its equilibrium, the other parts will be affected, too.” What Xiangchuan and Danxi express so lucidly here stands representative for the collective warning that the ancient masters of heart nourishment have issued since times immemorial. In sum, if the heart is not properly nourished, it will fall ill; if the kidney is not properly nourished, the heart will also fall ill.

The heart, moreover, is said to be in charge of blood; and blood, that is jing. Under normal circumstances there is a natural surplus of heart qi, but in the unwonted event that jing is harmed and blood is lost, the heart will become deficient. If blood is plentiful, therefore, our shen will be bright, but if the blood becomes exhausted our will power will become weak and muddled. Any situation of excess fire in the body involves a deficiency of blood; and blood deficiency, in turn, diminishes the beneficial functions of fire.

Is it then that these internal excess and deficiency conditions of the heart bear similarities to external imbalances such as fire stagnation or fire pathogens that saturate the atmosphere during certain times of the sixty year cycle of cosmic energy circulation? Indeed, both external and internal imbalances of this nature have to be counteracted by restraining one’s jing to sustain the qi, and by nourishing one’s yin to solidify the shen.

[from Shen Jin’ao, *Dr. Shen’s Compendium of Honoring Life (Shen Shi Zunsheng Shu)*, 1773]



