

Long Summer

The Dao of Integration

Dr Matthew Brewer

The fifth season is late summer or Indian summer. The Chinese call it Long Summer, *chang xia*. Its element is earth 土, *tu*; that which holds and contains everything. It is the bedrock that allows everything else to be. Its primary function is integration. By holding everything it allows all of the apparently separate things of existence to recognise their non-difference.

In the *Nei Jing*, the foundational text of Chinese medicine, Long Summer does not have the same status as the four seasons. It is not mentioned in chapter two which discusses the correct way to live in harmony with the seasons. It is only briefly mentioned in later chapters, where we are told 'the spleen rules Long Summer'.¹ How long it lasts is not mentioned either, though commentators usually give it about a month spanning the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. It is a time associated with heat and humidity (the end of summer) and with harvesting (the beginning of autumn).

In the body the spleen system is the earth element, along with the stomach. The spleen is responsible for the use of all post-natal qi in the body. It transforms everything that we eat and drink into qi and blood. It is considered key to manufacturing blood through its function of extracting the qi from food, which it then sends to other parts of the body where the blood is made. The process is fairly elaborate, but the basic point is made in Chapter 19, which says, 'the spleen ... is in the centre irrigating the four (organs) nearby'.²

The spleen also controls the blood by containing it in the blood vessels. This is the nature of the earth element, which holds and contains. If your spleen is very weak blood can leak out of the vessels. If the blood is deficient a Chinese doctor will often treat the spleen.

The holding aspect of the spleen can also be seen in its control of the *zheng qi* 正氣 or 'upright chi' - *zheng* is the same word as 'aligned/alignment' and 'correct' in Chinese. It holds the body and especially the internal organs in the right place. One aspect of *zheng qi* is the *wei qi* 衛氣, or defensive qi, which is the energetic side of our immune system. Stimulating, balancing and strengthening the *wei qi* is one of the main focuses of *Dragon & Tiger Qigong*.

The spleen is also responsible for clarity of thought and our ability to concentrate. When the spleen is weak our thinking is unclear and we worry; constantly running over the same thing in our minds. In this way mental and physical digestion are very closely linked. You will notice that it is much harder to think clearly after a large meal. When the spleen and stomach are digesting, the mind cannot, and vice versa. This is also why excess worry produces stomach ulcers.

There is an interesting passage in chapter 29 on why the spleen does not rule its own season:

¹ *Neijing* Chapter 22.

² *Neijing* Chapter 19.

The (Yellow) Emperor asked: The spleen does not rule a season why is this so?

Qibo answered: The spleen is that which is (of the) earth (element). (It) regulates from the centre constantly, according to the four seasons, strengthening the four internal organs, entrusted with each 18 day regulation, it does not need sole rulership of a season. The spleen is that which constantly manifests the jing 精 (essence) of the stomach and earth. Earth is that which gives birth to the ten thousand things and is modelled on Heaven and Earth. Thus above and below, the head and the foot, do not need to rule a season.³

The function of the spleen is so pervasive that its power is not limited to one season, just as the earth is the foundation of everything that is. It is the ground that enables the play of the four seasons. It gives everything life. Yet it is also said to rule Long Summer, the pause between the opening of summer and the closing of autumn. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction, it is more useful to see Long Summer as a time when it is easier to see the functioning of the earth element, which is always there in the background.

In our tradition, the neigong set that embodies the earth element is *xiān yún wán* 仙雲玩, *Immortals Cloud Playing* or *Gods Playing in the Clouds* as Bruce translates it. This is the oldest of the neigong sets, stretching far back beyond the historical record. This original set holds all of the others and is the only one that contains all sixteen elements of neigong.⁴ Its great ability is to integrate all of the neigong components that you have learned. This is the realm of the 16th element of neigong. Of course it is important to have some of the other neigong sets, such as *Energy Gates* and *Heaven and Earth*, working and integrated in their own right (the earth aspect of each of the other elements) before you seek to integrate each element with the other.

Chinese medicine considers slow, continuous movement to be particularly beneficial to the spleen. This is a good time then to practice Taiji. This is also why Taiji is of such benefit throughout the year. Like *Gods Playing in the Clouds*, it can contain everything. In Long Summer practising the form with our attention on central equilibrium (中定 *zhong ding*) is very much in tune with the season. Here we focus on stability and balance without emphasising either the opening of spring and summer or the closing of autumn and winter. In this way we can integrate and make the most of the practice that we have done over the last year.

This article was inspired by Bill Ryan's excellent Practice Tip: 'Late Summer Integration and Balance.' You can sign up to Bill's tips here: http://www.towardharmony.com/email_list/email_list_index.html.

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³ *Neijing* Chapter 29.

⁴ <http://www.taichi.uk.com/neigong>