

Autumn

The Dao of Gathering

收之道

Dr Matthew Brewer

The three months of autumn are called containment and balance.
Heavenly qi is quick, earthly qi is bright.
Early to bed, early to rise: all participate with the rooster.
Make that which is of the heart-mind peaceful and tranquil
in order to weaken the punishment of autumn.
Gather and collect the spirit and the qi.
Make the autumn qi balanced.
Do not direct that which is of the heart-mind outwards.
Make the lung qi pure.
This is the autumnal compliance of qi
and the cultivation of the Dao of gathering.
To oppose these principles injures the lungs.
(Consequently) winter will bring diarrhoea
(and) there will be little to offer one's storehouse.¹

In autumn the predominant element is metal, 金 (*jin*). The two systems in the body that are most strongly activated at this time are the lungs and the large intestine. Both organs have the function of gathering in what is essential and of letting go of what is not needed. In the cycle of the five elements, metal is traditionally the first, as much as any circle can have a beginning or end.

After the growing and lengthening out of summer (the element of fire), and the centring and integration of long summer, or Indian summer (the element of earth) it is now time to soften and draw our energy back in.

This is the best time to get back on track and to lay the foundations of our health for the next year. The way to do this is not to start dieting or running ten miles a day, as these are spring and summer activities; though even in summer it is better to walk. Rather, as the *Neijing* tells us, it is time to still our hearts and minds and to gather and collect the spirit and the qi. This is the appropriate yin response to this yin season. Just as the trees are drawing in and letting go of their leaves, it is time for us to let go of what we

1. *Neijing* Chapter 2.

have been carrying around all year, which is no longer of any use to us.

Breathing is a very powerful way to let go of our tension, whether it is physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. It is one of the primary cycles of yin and yang in the body. Having inhaled we must let go of it before we can take any more in.

Just five minutes spent focusing on the breath each day — ‘making the lung qi pure’ — can have an extraordinary effect on your health and peace of mind through autumn and winter. Those who have learned longevity breathing are very well equipped to make the most of this time of year. But even if you haven’t yet learned the full method, just sitting and focusing on your breath can make a big difference. Ideally keep your chest relatively still and allow your belly to move with the breath (out on the inhale and relaxing back in on the exhale), keeping the breath as smooth and quiet as possible with no stopping between the in and out breaths. Chapter 5 of *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body* explains the method of longevity breathing in detail.²

Dragon & Tiger Qigong is also a very good way to strengthen and support the lungs. One of the primary references of ‘dragon’ in the name of the set is to the health of the lungs, because, as everyone knows, dragons are creatures of the air. Hence the potency of the dragon movements for the lungs.

The lungs are responsible for the distribution of the protective *wei qi* 衛氣 around the body. The stronger the lungs the better our immune system and general vitality.

The organ that is most responsible for letting go of what cannot be used in the food we eat is the large intestine. In Chinese medicine this organ is closely related to our ability to discriminate between that which nourishes us and should be kept, and that which does not and should be discarded. This faculty works on all levels: the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

Just as there is yin and yang in everything, autumn is not just about letting go of what we no longer need or what is holding us back. It is also about gathering in that which nourishes and strengthens us. In England apples and pears now hang on the trees. The crops that grew through the spring and summer are being harvested and stored for the winter. These two sides, letting go and gathering, must be balanced.

While in hotter places, such as Bermuda, autumn is not quite so apparent, the very beginnings of the cooler, dryer weather of November can occasionally be detected as the days shorten.

The very beginning of something is the best time to prepare for the coming change. It makes the transition easier. This accords with the Daoist principle of doing what is easy before it becomes difficult. *Laozi* 63 says, ‘chart the difficult when it is easy, act on the great when it is tiny’. While chapter 64 advises us to, ‘act when something has not yet come to be, regulate when it is not yet disordered’.³

In the same vein the *Neijing*, later in the same chapter as our Autumn passage says:

The sage does not treat those who are already sick,
but treats the not yet sick,

2. B.K Frantzis, *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2006), ISBN 1-58394-146-0.
3. See also *Laozi* 52, ‘To see the small is called discernment / enlightenment’. It is the hallmark of the wise.

does not treat those who are already disordered,
but treats the not yet disordered.

The person who is already sick and then takes medicine,
or who is already disordered and then seeks treatment,
is comparable to one who is thirsty and then digs a well,
or one who forges weapons only after the war has begun.
Are not these measures also late!⁴

Small, relatively easy adjustments at the beginning of a time of change can eliminate the need for making drastic alterations later on. The appropriate activities of each season prepare us for the next so long as we make the necessary adjustments at the right time. This is why people visit their Chinese doctor at the change of each season, even when they feel well, to nip any imbalance in the bud by adjusting their diet and activity. In this way they avoid getting ill later.

The reason many people fall sick in the autumn is because they do not adapt to the change of season. Now is the time to begin protecting ourselves from the cold and especially the wind with scarves and wind-breaking coats. The activities of the summer are over. Rather than spending our energies, it is time to start saving. If we continue to act in the autumn as we did in summer, we can expect to get sick. The *Neijing* warns us that if we do not act according to the dao of gathering, which is now underway, it will lead to diarrhoea in the winter. If this happens, at precisely the time when we most need to store and conserve that which nourishes us, our bodies will be unable to distinguish properly between what we must keep and what we must let go. And if we let our nourishment go we will become depleted and ill in the winter.

This, then, is the time to practise containment and balance, to let go of what we do not need and to gather and collect the spirit and the qi, and make the lung qi pure.

Eating what is in season is always a very good way to comply with the qi of the time. Eat more warming foods and drinks. Jasmine and, later, oolong teas should replace your green tea. It is a great time for fruit and vegetables: blackberries, plums, apples, pears, pumpkins, squash, leeks, courgettes and parsnips etc. Pears are especially good for the lungs. It is also a good idea to cut down on those 'dampening' foods that congest the lungs such as beer (anything made with yeast), sugary foods and especially dairy products.

Text and translations © Matthew Brewer, Daoist Internal Arts, 2017.

4. *Neijing* Chapter 2.