

Spring

The Dao of Sprouting

生之道

Dr Matthew Brewer

The three months of Spring are called putting forth and displaying.
Heaven and Earth all sprout.
The ten thousand things become lush
At night to bed, early to rise.
Briskly walk around the courtyard.
Let your hair down and relax the body
in order to make that which is of the heart-mind sprout.
Sprout but do not kill. Give but do not take. Reward but do not punish.
This is the Spring compliance of *qi*
(and) the cultivation of the Dao of sprouting.
To oppose these principles injures the liver.
(Consequently) Summer will bring cold changes,
(and) there will be little to offer one's growth.¹

Spring is the time of sprouting. The Chinese character that I translate here as 'sprouting' is *shēng* 生, which depicts a plant growing out of the earth. It means 'to begin to open,' 'to begin to blossom' and more generally 'to come into existence,' 'to give birth,' 'to live.'

The months of spring are called 'putting forth and displaying' *fā chén* 發陳. *Fā* means 'to send out,' 'to emit,' 'to release' like an arrow from a bow. It is the same word that we use in Taiji in the phrase *fā jìn* 發勁, the ability to release a great deal of power with little effort. *Chén* means 'to spread out,' 'to arrange,' 'to display.' Spring then is the time of opening when everything in the world begins to grow, sending out shoots and buds. The yin of Winter is followed by the yang of spring.

This is the time to return to activity, 'briskly walking around' after having hibernated over Winter. The energy that we have been storing can now be used and enjoyed. Still, we are reminded to let our hair down and to relax the body. Interestingly, the character for the word most com-

¹ *Neijing* Chapter 2.

monly used for relaxation in the internal arts, *sōng* 鬆, invokes the image of hair 髮 hanging loose.

Being more energetic does not mean that we have to be tense, either physically or mentally. Relaxation allows the *zhì* 志, that which is of the heart-mind, to sprout. The *zhì* was spoken of in our passage from the *Neijing* on Winter, which told us to keep it 'as though hidden, as though concealed.' Often translated as 'will,' *zhì* is the faculty which identifies and works towards goals and things that we want. The character shows a plant growing out of the heart-mind and on the most basic level means 'that towards which the heart is growing' and more generally 'goal,' 'purpose,' 'wish.' Remember that for Daoists the heart-mind is our true self, not our ego junk. 'That towards which the heart is growing,' then, is about becoming genuinely ourselves.

Now is the time to activate the *zhì* through relaxed activity. It is a generous time of giving and nurturing life. It is a good time to reflect on the direction in which we are headed and the way we are proceeding.

Zhì is of the kidneys, in spring the energy that we stored in the kidneys through the winter comes to the surface to be used, just as fish return to the surface of the pond having spent all winter resting at the bottom. It is the same with the flowering of snowdrops and crocus. Bulbs rest in the winter so that they can flower in the spring.

In terms of the five elements, springtime is dominated by the element of Wood, *mù* 木. Wood is strong and flexible. Its organs are the liver and gall bladder. Physically the liver has to do with the putting forth and spreading out (*fā chén*) of *qi* and blood. It affects our flexibility and vision on all levels. In nourishing the tendons it keeps us physically flexible and it makes the eyes bright and clear. It also has a strong effect on one's mood and clarity of mind. It enables us to look and plan towards goals, mundane and spiritual, while giving us the mental flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

The functioning of the gall bladder is closely tied to that of the liver. Physically it aids the digestion of fats and oils. Mentally and spiritually it is the decision maker. It is what allows us to make split-second decisions and gives us the courage to take action.

This is why it is important to take special care of the liver in spring. When healthy, the liver and gall bladder enable you to move toward that which you have set your heart on. When unhealthy it makes us short tempered and angry. Anger arises when we are prevented from doing what we want to do. A healthy liver can help us to respond more calmly to obstacles in our path; to smoothly adapt and change rather than getting stuck.

Spring is the beginning of the yang cycle of the seasons. Like all beginnings it starts slowly and gently. Doing the same will keep us healthy. It is tempting to rush out on the first warm, sunny day in spring and go for a very long walk or cycle ride. This is too much too soon. It is always best to follow the season, which is another way of saying follow the 'Goldilocks principle' of not doing too much or too little. When the green tips of plants are just emerging, we can do the same in our activity, starting gently and slowly. Later as the earth warms up and the plants grow

more vigorously we can follow suit. Remember, we do not want to be like the man from Sung who Mencius warned about:

One must work at it, but not rigidly. Do not forget about it, but do not help it to grow either. Do not be like the man from Sung. There was a man from Sung who was worried that his crops were not growing, so he pulled on them. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, "Today I am worn out; I have been helping the crops to grow!" His sons rushed out to look, but the crops had already withered. Those in the world who do not help their crops grow are few indeed. Those who abandon them, thinking it will not help, are those who do not even weed their crops. Those who help them grow are those who pull on their crops. Not only does this not help, but it actually harms them.²

Heaven & Earth is the neigong set that is particularly suited to spring, as it directly activates the wood element in the body. It clears and tonifies the liver. It helps all of the body's tissue lengthen and grow, making it strong and flexible. It circulates blood and *qi*. Most importantly it strengthens and harmonises all of the opening and closing actions of the body, the natural pulsations of life.

Eating what is in season is always a very good way to comply with the *qi* of the time. So in spring eat plenty of green leafy vegetables and sprouts, mung beans, broccoli etc. When it is cool cooking food is better, but as it warms up we can eat more salads.

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² Mencius 2A.2.