



Healing in the Winter Season with Acupuncture

The Winter season is upon us with unique challenges and opportunities. In the West we usually think of the Winter Solstice as the beginning of Winter. However, given the four seasons of the year with three months to a season, it is easy to see why the ancient Chinese considered the three months of Winter to be December, January, and February. As the shortest day of the year, the Winter solstice marks the turning point of the Winter season. It is here that the waning life force begins to *return* after having reached its minimum.

In nature one can see this process in the deciduous trees which lose their leaves in Fall, lie dormant throughout December, and then slowly develop their buds in January and February as the light force returns in preparation for their opening in Spring. In the same way that trees gather and store their vital force in Winter, the fire of life in humans slowly consolidates within.

The fire of life is the human spirit, and is considered Yang. It emerges from the Yin of Emptiness and Non-being, and enters the physical body (also Yin) at the time when Yin changes to Yang, the Winter solstice. One aspect of spirit, Destiny, comes into us from Heaven at this time to become the infant spark of life potential that activates all other movement in the Body/Mind. If this spark is carefully nurtured, it will grow into the fully matured spirit six months later at the Summer solstice when the Yang-ch'i is at its peak. In order for this development to occur, the Winter solstice has always been treated in ancient China as the resting time of the year when this dynamic life force could be strengthened and renewed.

These ideas are set forth in many of ancient China's classical texts. For example in the *Tao-te ching*, the "Classic of the Way and its Power," a manual for aligning spirit with daily life, the Winter solstice is the time when humans can most easily *return* to their source. It is here that they gather support from their unity with all things. The *Lieh-tzu*, a fourth century text named after the legendary Taoist sage, associates the human spirit with Source by calling it the "Unborn" and "Unchanging," and recognizes its development between the spiritual to the mundane as occurring, like the seasons, through cyclic progressions:

"The Unborn is by our side and yet alone. The Unchanging goes forth and *returns*, *fu* 復. Going forth and returning, its successions are endless. By our side and yet alone, the Tao is boundless." [*Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*. Girardot, Norman J. 1983. Berkeley: University of California Press, *Lieh-tzu* 157]

Tao, the Way or Source, manifests through all things, and remains with them, though not always perceived, as
Dennis Willmont © 1999

the "Unborn" spirit throughout life. Attempting to remind us that we all have this spiritual aspect, the famous Zen koan asks, "who were you before you were born?" We forget the answer to this riddle to the degree that we get caught up struggling with mundane affairs. In order remain whole, each person needs to *return* periodically to Tao so that they can stay connected with the source of life, the Unborn and Unchanging part of ourselves. As pure potential, this universal Source becomes Destiny within each individual person. We are supported by Heaven, who sends us beneficial influences, rewarding us for embracing our Destiny, while those that turn their backs on Tao and Destiny suffer and perish prematurely.

| <i>Fu/Return</i> | |
|------------------|--|
| 復 | <p>To walk 彳 back to where one came from 復 in order to restore oneself in Spirit</p> |

In Chinese medicine, the place in the human body where the primary fire of life as Source and Destiny resides is the Kidneys. The Kidneys correspond to the Winter season and the Winter solstice where one can most easily restore and recharge themselves. Simultaneously, it is the time where this energy can be most easily depleted. The Kidneys store all of the reserve energy in the Body/Mind so that it can be used in times of stress and change, or to heal, prevent illness, and age gracefully. This reserve becomes will on the psychic level. It is absolutely essential that this reserve is not dissipated through frivolous or extraneous activity, especially in the Winter months, and most dramatically in the two week period before and after the Winter solstice.

In the *I-ching*, "Book of Changes," an ancient divination text and repository of Yin-Yang philosophy, the energetics of the Winter solstice is symbolized by the Hexagram *Fu* 復, "Return." Hexagrams are six-lined figures comprised of Yin, broken, and Yang, solid, lines. The Hexagram *Fu/Return* has one solid Yang line under five broken Yin lines ☱, and emerges from the Hexagram *K'un*, the Receptive Earth, which is comprised of all broken Yin lines ☷, and symbolizes maximum Yin and the early part of December. The Yang fire of life returning to us at the Winter solstice is described by the *I-ching* as having the power of thunder ☳ hidden within the earth ☷. This "thunder" is the divine power of one's potential, and is synonymous with Source and Destiny. It commands one's being to spring forth from spiritual quiescence into mundane action in accordance with the Will of Heaven and

the cycles of the seasons. Thus, the hexagram counsels:

“turning away from the confusion of external things, turning back to one’s inner light. There in the depths of the soul, one sees the Divine, the One . . . To know the One means to know oneself in relation to the cosmic forces. For this One is the ascending force of life in nature and in man.” [*I Ching*. Wilhelm, Richard. 1967. New York: Bollingen Foundation 505]

To the ancient Chinese, this *return* promises hope of new life. The complications of life cause one to lose touch with the “unborn” and “unchanging” part of oneself, which is what Taoists call Primal Simplicity, *p’u* 樸. The *Tao-te ching* admonishes one to be familiar with the activity of the world, but to hold on to the inactive, to the quiet feminine that forms the wellspring of all creativity, and to return to Primal Simplicity and Oneness. In its most fundamental aspect, healing with acupuncture is based upon this principle. The Taoist persona for one who attains this goal is the woodcutter, the one who chops wood and carries water, and attends to the simple essentials of life. His mind is unencumbered by extraneous thought and worldly attachments. In the *Tao-te ching*, this state is one of enlightenment where the sage, by attaining harmony with himself, also attains harmony with all things:

“Attain Utmost Emptiness and observe true quietude.
While all things strive together, only I perceive this Return,
For as much as things tend to proliferate, they will all return to their root.
To return to this root is to find peace,
And is called Returning to Destiny.
Returning to Destiny is called Constant,
And to know this Constant is called Enlightenment.”
[*Tao-te ching*, Chapter 16, my translation]

When one is in a state of harmony with all things, one no longer has to try excessively hard to be themselves. Instead, one is free to accept the positive reality of oneself, and to offer that reality spontaneously to the world. Taoists maintain that we are all children of Heaven, and that our needs can be met simply in abiding by Heaven’s Will—that we simply be who we are. Psycho-physical health is a side-effect of cultivating this state.

Chinese medicine holds that human beings are a microcosm of the universe. This means that our Body/Mind follows the same patterns as those of the universe at large, and that we are all connected to each other and to the greater whole. In order to maintain or recover health, we must, therefore, embrace this whole by placing ourselves in harmony with it. One of the most obvious ways to do this is to harmonize ourselves with the changing seasons. Therefore, at the Winter solstice we should loosen our grip on the world, and place greater emphasis on the *return* to our inner self. Rather than obscuring the voice of truth within by rushing madly about, we should instead pay homage to this inner voice as it links us to our Destiny and provides the only real fulfillment in life. This inner voice is the Yang solid line at the bottom of

the *Fu/Return* Hexagram ䷗. It is the essential movement within life expanding out to reach the world. The paradox of life and of the season is that, for this connection to occur, one must sacrifice the world to listen instead to the truth of inner reality. Then, once this voice is heard, one can realign oneself and one’s activities during the coming months with the truth one finds.

The *Tao-te ching* says that from the quiet, feminine, mother aspect of the universe (i.e., Yin) the actively moving spark of life comes forth (Yang). In homage to this principle, Chapter 42 says,

“The Ten Thousand Things carry Yin on their backs,
and embrace Yang in their front,
Blending these two vital breaths to attain harmony.”
[*Tao-te ching*, Chapter 42, my translation]

All things emerge from emptiness and Yin. Yet, in order to survive and achieve longevity, one must embrace the Yang-ch’i of one’s own vital energy which is derived from Heaven as Source, Destiny, and Will. One embraces it because it is one of life’s essential treasures, one that is not to be squandered through trivial pursuit. By keeping with the requirements that this treasure demands, one fulfills themselves and their Destiny upon the earth. Each Winter solstice provides another opportunity to *return* to the spiritual root, the spark within that generates each person’s life. Once this contact has been restored, life in the outwardly active mundane world can safely resume because there is now a congruency between the inner and outer.

The *Fu/Return* Hexagram of the *I-ching*, gives instructions as to how to go about restoring the true spontaneity of one’s life by discarding the outworn, and introducing the new:

“Thunder within the earth:
The image of RETURN.
Thus the kings of antiquity closed the passes
At the time of the solstice.
Merchants and strangers did not go about,
And the ruler
Did not travel through the provinces.” [Wilhelm 98]

The Winter solstice provides a natural access to the core of our spiritual self. As the seasons turn, we either grow closer or further apart from this essential part of ourselves. Health insurance can only pay to correct things once they have gone wrong. Even then, they only pay a fraction of the cost, and only for the most gross part of the damage. In contrast, seasonal acupuncture treatments during Winter protect against the possibilities of this damage. They restore health, and prevent psycho-spiritual imbalances from degenerating into physical disorders. They emphasize the natural tendencies of the season to integrate the mundane aspects of life with the all-important spirit, and help us to remember who we are, and why we are in the world.