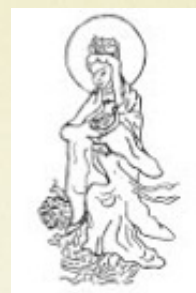


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Transforming Fear: Fear, Power and the Nature of the Kidneys

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"Of expressions of will, it (the qi of the Kidneys) is fear. Fear injures the Kidneys, thought prevails over fear."

Suwen chapter 5

"The Kidneys are responsible for the creation of power. Skill and ability stem from them."

- Suwen chapter 8

In the pithy manner of the classics of Chinese Medicine, these two quotes present a tremendous amount of information about the traditional role of the kidneys, our inner resources and the nature of fear.

The first quote appears near the end of the discussion of the Kidneys in Chapter 5 of the Neijing Suwen, one of the most important classics on the theory of Traditional Chinese medicine, adding an emotional correspondence to a long list of other related features and attributes. The first and most fundamental thing that this tells us, is that the emotions are manifestations of a specific quality of qi. Although a given within Traditional Chinese Medicine, this is hugely important for us to think about in modern life: our emotions are energy. When we feel an emotion, we are feeling the body at work physically and energetically, doing what it can to keep us healthy and congruent with our own nature. Fear is the most fundamental emotion and, although it is always debatable, one of the most powerful. Fear is fundamentally an expression of the will to live and to stay living.

With this in mind, we can return to the idea that emotions are energy. On the scale of emotional responses, fear involves a massive amount of energy that is there to mobilize the body into action. Within Chinese medicine this is a movement of kidney qi that becomes expressed through the liver qi. One of my teachers described this through discussing the imagery of the character for "power," (*qiang*) that appears in the second quote above. The character is the image of a double bow, being drawn, which takes tremendous strength. This is an image of the power and vitality of the kidneys and their ability to hold or contain that power. The actual release of the bow, the mobilization into action, can be correlated with the surge and outward push of the liver qi. Another common image that describes this is that of a seed in winter gathering its resources so that it can push itself through the hard soil of the springtime. So, in other words, when we feel fear, we are feeling an expression of the physical vitality of the body, preparing itself for action.

Unfortunately, we don't often make use of this energy and the productive fear that mobilizes us into action becomes the fear that immobilizes us, becoming an obstruction that drains our vitality and weakens the will. Thus, "Fear injures the Kidneys." This is probably our most

common experience of fear and as such, we view it as something to be avoided at all costs. The problem with this is that we can't really avoid it, and in trying to do so we engage in a self-perpetuating loop of anxiety, inaction and greater fear. This is one way to understand the idea that the same thing that is a healthy expression of our vitality is also that which injures our vitality. So what to do? The solution offered is that "thought overcomes fear." A simplistic interpretation would be that rational analysis overcomes fear. However, this is not very consistent with the overall text, and perhaps most importantly, doesn't actually work. We can rationally understand why we shouldn't be afraid and yet still feel the fear in all its potency. "Thought" in this context thus has to be understood as a specific quality of energy, just as fear and all of the emotions are energy. Within classical Chinese medicine, the nature of thought is to gather and organize. It is a return to the very center of our being, and at that center we have the capacity to arrange, categorize and organize all of the elements of life. When we are organized at our center we can see clearly and it is this that is the beginning of the solution.

When we recognize fear as a constructive, powerful force, we can make use of that energy. In seeing clearly we can begin to make use of that force by not contracting and fighting against it. We don't need to let it overwhelm and rule us either, but can instead look to a middle way. In other words, when we feel fear, first we recognize it as energy and then we can lean into it, gently pushing ourselves into it rather than pulling away. The first thing that you'll notice is that the body begins to relax and you'll probably then start to feel a surge of energy. You can take the tremendous power of that energy and guide it to your center, the lower abdomen and the lower spine. This is banking up energy which can then be used immediately to give you great strength or stored to give you great vitality.

This process is sometimes referred to as alchemy as it is a transformation of sorts. However, it is not really that abstract, it is simply making use of the internal resources that our bodies provide naturally and efficiently. You can start with minor anxieties and worries and practice leaning into the fear and discomfort. This is at the heart of the Chinese saying "to eat bitter," which is usually said about someone in admiration: "that person can really eat bitter." It is not so much about someone's ability to endure discomfort, as it is about the strength that facing and transforming discomfort and fear brings to us.

With this in mind it is interesting to read the second quote: "The Kidneys are responsible for the creation of power. Skill and ability stem from them." The skill and ability that is associated with the kidney qi (which is, as you'll recall, associated with fear in its emotional manifestation) is a non-specific sort. In other words, it is skill that can be applied to all of the aspects of our life, an ability to adapt effectively to change. This is closely related to the character *zhi* in Chinese which is often translated as wisdom, but is perhaps more accurately rendered as a "knowing how." One knows how to do things in a way that is consistent with one's own nature, the specific circumstances and the greater movements of nature. This is a type of knowledge that only comes from experience, and although it is in all of us, it takes a willingness to embrace discomfort, as fear is not comfortable.

I believe that this concept is fundamentally human, that is, it isn't specific to traditional Chinese culture. It can be found either implicitly or stated in just about every traditional culture, including our own from not too long ago. I remember hearing a Native American Medicine Man named Bear Heart say that the single best thing that a person could do to make themselves stronger was to bathe in cold water in the morning. Not because discomfort (or fear or pain) should be sought for its own sake, but rather because facing it and recognizing it for what it is will build strength and power.

This is an unparalleled source of strength and vitality, particularly if we create the right internal environment to make use of it. To create the right internal environment means recognizing that when we are tired, aren't eating regularly and not exercising we are going to have a much higher stress and fear response. It will also be harder to regulate and make use of, as we will tend more easily to overwhelm and inefficient activity. While all of us get into this at times, the remedy is actually very simple. Eat regularly, move and exercise regularly

and regulate your sleep and activity levels according to your circumstances and environment. I have noticed in the office, that when people take charge of even one of these areas the changes to their health is profound. If someone makes it a priority to develop an integrated support system with all of these aspects of self-care it can be remarkable.

It is interesting to see that our resistance to these simple, fundamental steps of self-care is often rooted in the very fears that we have. As mentioned earlier, if we don't act and make use of the energy that rises with stress and fear it can cause a habitual immobilization and overwhelm. So start small, with the little fears and stresses that come up every day. Recognize them as the huge sources of potential energy that they are and lean into them to make use of that energy. Soon you will build up a momentum that will carry you forward and you will be doing things that you never thought possible. This is cultivating the power of the kidneys and living with skill and ability.



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