

Simple Questions: 1 (excerpt) / 素問: 上古天真

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The Classic Text:

上古之人，其知道者，法於陰陽，和於術數，食飲有節，起居有常，不妄作勞，故能形與神俱，而盡終其天年，度百歲乃去。今時之人不然也，以酒為漿，以妄為常，醉以入房，以欲竭其精，以耗散其真，不知持滿，不時御神，務快其心，逆於生樂，起居無節，故半百而衰也

Translation:

Ancient peoples knew the Way 道, including the law of yin 陰 and yang 陽, restraint in eating and drinking, constancy in waking and sleeping, and avoidance of rash action and overwork. Therefore their [minds] and bodies stayed together until the end of their 100 years. Nowadays, people are not like this. They drink alcohol as though it is a nourishing broth. They consider rash action to be measured regularity. They weary themselves in pleasure and squander their true nature. They do not know how to be satisfied. They let their [minds] run wild and unsettle their hearts. They seek after pleasure [in an untimely way]. They rise and turn in without constancy. Therefore, at 50 years they are weak.

Commentary:

The first time I read this 2500 year old text, I was surprised to see that even in ancient China they longed for the 'good old days'. What I found even more surprising though, was the message of balance. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for the very first chapter of the quintessential Chinese medicinal text to have started with grand words about how acupuncture could cure all ills? Not so. Rather we have two contrasted lifestyles, one measured and balanced, moving with the natural harmony of things, the other dissipated, seeking instant gratification and unable to provide satisfaction.

This is a theme which returns throughout the text. Live within the cycles of the year. Establish consistent routines in your activity. Seek to enter the natural flow of things.

And indeed, acupuncture is at its best when it helps us move back into this flow, allowing us to reconnect to the heartbeat of the cosmos and the gentle breath of the natural world.

Translation Notes:

[minds]: this is shen² 神; I've rendered shen as 'minds' to demystify the text somewhat; in a fuller translation with more context, 'spirit' would be more appropriate.

[in a timely way]: ni⁴ 逆 literally means 'contrary', but in Chinese medicine it has a connotation of a cycle turning back on itself and flowing against the stream. Therefore, the text is not saying that pleasure itself is unhealthy, but that seeking pleasure against the grain of the cycles of daily living is unhealthy. Let us be clear: this is not an exhortation to prudery.