

Difficult Questions: 18 (excerpt) / 難經: 經脈診候, 十八難

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The Classic Text:

手太陰，陽明金也；足少陰，太陽水也。金生水，水流下行而不能上，故在下部也。足厥陰，少陽木也，生手太陽、少陰火，火炎上行而不能下，故為上部。手心主，少陽火，生足太陰、陽明土，土主中宮，故在中部也。

The Translation:

The [lung and large intestine channels] are metal, and the [kidney and bladder channels] are water. Metal generates water. Water flows downward and cannot ascend; therefore, it is in the bottom part of the pulse. The [liver and gallbladder channels] are wood. They generate the [heart and small intestine] fire channels. Fire burns upward and cannot descend; therefore, it is in the upper part of the pulse. The [pericardium and triple burner channels] are [ministerial] fire. [Ministerial] fire generates the [spleen and stomach] earth channels. Earth governs the middle region; therefore, it is in the middle part of the pulse.

The Commentary:

It is often said that the ancient Chinese cosmologists learned by observing nature. One simple, yet profound example of these observations is reflected in the above passage: fire burns upward and water flows downward. This may seem inconsequential, but its ramifications are actually quite broad. In the body, for instance, heat tends to rise and fluids tend to sink. With this in mind, can you imagine what someone might look like when their heat rises too much? Do you think they might have a red face? What about when their fluids "over-sink"?

Fire and water are just the tip of the iceberg. Looking out into the natural world, we can observe how innumerable things "behave". How does the expansive quality of an oak differ from that of an elm? How is the touch of an autumn breeze different from that of a springtime gust? Even inside we can experiment, perhaps with the "behavior" of various flavors. Sourness, for example, pulls inward. Can you imagine what someone might look like if they ate too much sour food? Do you think they might be too tense? What about salty food? Or spicy?

Once one develops a sense of the behavior of things, the world simply opens up.

Translation Notes:

[various organs]: the Chinese has the conventional names, e.g., hand shàoyīn, etc. I've chosen to write the organ names in order to simplify things for the layperson.

[ministerial]:

For the layperson: Chinese medical theory distinguishes between the sovereign fire of the heart and the ministerial fire of the pericardium. To put it simply, the ministerial fire administers on behalf of the sovereign fire.

For the practitioner: That it is the ministerial fire which generates earth may come as a surprise; even so, the text is quite clear on the subject.