

## Maintaining Your Life

攝 生 (She Sheng)

Maintaining Life is the first Chapter in the Tai Su 太 素 (Great Simplicity). This book covers the same material as the Su Wen, but this version of the text was lost in China during the Song dynasty and later recovered in Japan. Fortunately, Chinese Medicine and the entire famous classic the Nei Jing had been brought to Japan and it remained intact there, avoiding being edited by Wang Bing who made a different order to the original Chapters. Here I am adding the word “your” into the middle of the title in order for it to read more clearly in the English language.

The importance of being able to maintain one’s own life is inherent throughout Chinese Medical literature but often the texts, whether classical or new are primarily focused on describing the role of “experts” and their ability to know and inform other ordinary individuals. Wang Bing’s version of the Nei Jing begins with the description of the Yellow Emperor who is described as being born with special power and grace. He is appreciated as though divine rather being a normal person. Regardless, most of the stories still describe that he needs to seek the expert advice of his advisor when it comes to health and medicine.

To me this is very notable because it undermines assumptions that the ordinary person should be capable of understanding and maintaining their own life and health. With famous reference to treating before someone is actually sick, we understand that the advice of the best physician is supposed to address staying healthy in the first place. Once illness is actually present, then we understand the individual has failed at this at some level and must now defer to a doctor or some other specially trained person. The classical reference actually blames the doctor for this failure – not the patient.

Whether the specialists and experts may be the advisor to the King or the most experienced modern clinician, the emphasis of starting with a discussion on Maintaining Life is one that tells us that it is our own selves who are primarily responsible and capable of sustaining our own natural state of health.

攝生 She Sheng is literally defined in Mathew's dictionary as hygiene or sanitation. It doesn't describe the concept of trying to go somewhere else as a path to higher understanding or something to be strived for or achieved later in life. It describes more of a process of cleaning our own lenses to better see both who we are and where we belong. In the modern era we could interject the advice: "making healthy choices".

Maintaining Your Life is to value first and foremost who you are and the need to take care of yourself on all of the levels that matter. These include the physical, nutritional, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The concept closely parallels our modern discussion of "lifestyle" in a clinical setting. Both we as individuals and our health care providers have evolved in our thinking over the past century. We have learned and now have a much deeper understanding about how so many things impact our ability to maintain our health. Do we eat well?; take good care of ourselves?; is the air we breathe clean?: what about the liquids which we drink?; ...can we engage in a healthy way where we work?

Several years ago, I was asked to create a 30 hour course for acupuncture students to take at the beginning of their training. The goal was to introduce them to basic practices and understanding about how to stay healthy while in school. Acupuncture training had expanded into an extensive Masters Degree program at this point. Course loads and schedules had become grueling. At this particular school it was not until the third year that students were able really start putting much of the information they were learning together. After some negotiation the Dean agreed with my design of a curriculum which began with the reference and ideal of Maintaining Life. I made this the title of a course which provided a basic how to road map about what it is one should know in order to survive the experience of going through acupuncture school and to go on to afterward as a healthy healer. Its scope was quite a bit more ambitious than what the school had initially requested of me, but I would not have been interested in doing it any other way. The course turned out to be a remarkable success in terms of its results. It helped brand new acupuncture students acquire a solid foundation for the enormous amount of information which was to follow. We literally referred to it as a map.

At the end of the 30 hour course my students were able to assess and treat on another for what seemed to be all of the problems common to

being a full time student. Headaches, fatigue, too much studying, don't want to study, back pain, neck pain – virtually all of the things which they experienced and shared with one another. Their confidence and skill far exceeded what my initial expectations were to such an extent that it forced me to change my own beliefs about what is possible in a set amount of classroom hours. These students were able to assess with basic questions and employ a range of manual techniques working on the meridians and some acupoints. They were able to be creative in how they applied their own manual technique using the principles and basic knowledge that I had taught them. No one told them they couldn't do that much based on only 30 hours of class time. I certainly didn't tell them that I didn't think it was possible – until after they had proved that I was wrong.

It was impressive to the point that the few problems which arose generated from their boundless enthusiasm and confidence which required some reining in, and time spent on the subject of caution.

As with all students I have seen take a level One in Shiatsu school, the students were not inhibited by what they did not already know. Although I can't say that it ever became clear to the administration at the school just what the term "Maintaining Life" actually described, my teacher evaluations made very clear that the course was a great success. The three rounds of classes which I taught there were extremely rewarding to me personally and I came to believe that teaching beginners is actually more important than teaching Master level classes.

Below is my original translation which I provided in the first Handout that I used in for this class. It describes a number of core concepts. Here Qi is described as the energy and vitality which defines being alive and with which we are able to function. This reference also mirrors how Zhang Jie Bin emphasizes that it is our Jing Shen or Essential Spirit which is the core system defining our individual soul and capacity. That is what is able to manage all our other systems and it includes but is not limited by our "Mind". The first paragraph explains that:

Qi is the vital force which enlivens everything. Our own Qi defines our own unique vitality and life. Heaven and Earth provide the primary axis within which all life on Earth exists. Heaven provides the source of energy and spiritual illumination and Earth provides us the physical substance from which are body can be generated and constantly fed. Heaven and Earth

form the primary example of yin and yang and the principles it describes of mutual interaction between two opposite sides of a single thing.

When teaching students to understand Yin and Yang I tell them that it is correctly identifying what this single thing is to be what is most difficult. Once you know what that is then dividing it in half to dissect the dynamic of yin and yang is relatively easy. We humans are all a single, individual thing living in a world which can all come to be understood using the principles of yin and yang. This is what the Sages are attributed with having had the wisdom to discern. When we are in harmony and have clarity of our mind and perceptions then we are able to remain free of compromising evils and ills. When we know who we are then we can recognize that something else may be foreign and unfriendly to our nature. Things which are not part of our own inherent nature and do not support our own well-being will be unable to attack and cause us harm to if our Qi is strong and healthy.

**Handout Material for Maintaining Life  
At the New England School of Acupuncture**

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Class 1 Handout for Maintaining Life Fall Semester 2011

This handout includes excerpts from my original translation from Zhang Jie Bin's book the: Lei Jing (published in 1624 AD). "Maintaining Life" is the first chuan or (mini-chapter) which is discussed in Chapter 29 entitled: 會通 Hui Tong: comprehensive understanding.

**攝生 Maintaining Life**

**As the Qi from an azure sky, the lucid and tranquil mind is regulated. When in accord with this then the yang Qi is strong. Then even though you are attacked by a robbing evil, it will not be capable of causing harm. This relies on the season's ordered sequence. Therefore, the Sages distinguished the Jing Shen. They submitted to Heaven's Qi and penetrated its spiritual illumination. With loss of this then internally there is closing of the nine orifices. Externally there are obstructions of the fascia under the skin. The Protective Qi is scattered and separate. This is referred to as self-inflicted harm. The Qi is whittled away.**

**This is how the Sages were able to crack [the mystery of] yin and yang. Their sinews and vessels were well coordinated. Their bones and marrow were strong and hard. All their Qi and Blood were in compliance. To be such as this then the internal and external are able to adjust harmoniously. Then Evil is not capable of harm. The ears and eyes are capable of perceiving clarity and brilliance. The Qi is well established.**