



The natural state

Daoist and Chinese medical views

By Thomas Richardson

In this article, I will examine the concept of “the natural state” – an experiential state of being in the world that is said to be an innate potential accessible to all humans, and is a central concept present in the traditions of Chinese medicine and Daoism. I will first explore the characteristics of the natural state, and then examine what it means for an individual to gravitate towards accessing this potential. This discussion will form a general background to then examine the relationship of the natural state to various conceptions of health in Chinese medicine – to investigate the similarities and differences between the religio-spiritual aspects and the medical aspects.¹ My primary purpose is to explore the way in which this spiritual and philosophical concept of the natural state has similarities to the understanding of what it means to be healthy and what it means to be human in Chinese medical philosophy, as well as to see where the medical and philosophical-spiritual perspectives differ.²

1. Chinese medical philosophy and epistemology is primarily associated with Daoist and proto-Daoist cosmology and worldviews. The intent of this paper is not to look for causation of how one aspect affected another, but to simply compare them side-by-side to flesh out similarities and differences.

2. It should be noted that throughout this paper I will be drawing on texts from various periods of history, from the Han Dynasty up through the present. My intent is not so much to track the historical development of the concept of the natural state, but more to gain a general idea of this concept across traditions and temporal periods. Where the historical period is relevant or necessary to understand the evolution of the concept or its relationship to Chinese medicine, it will be noted.

TO BEGIN, I would first like to explore the concept of the natural state and examine some of the cognates that are used throughout the Daoist tradition; however, the tradition itself frequently maintains that any words used to describe the natural state cannot encapsulate or perfectly portray the experiential state itself. Instead they are merely “fingers pointing to the moon” rather than the moon itself – or, as the first line of the *Dao De Jing* asserts, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao.”³

From the literature, it is clear that the terms used to describe the “natural state” refer both to the way in which one experiences oneself and the world around oneself, as well as the way one acts. Besides indicating a “state” that is experienced by the human

3. As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, “Spontaneity is a name for the Dao and vice versa: because we do not know the cause or the prime mover of existence, we call it *dao*, *zi ran*, *zide*, or *wu*, words that simply aim to negate the notion that there is something or someone prior to all things that makes them what they are.” (463)

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that exists as an individuated being, the term “natural” implies that this state is something that is simultaneously innate as well as connected to the natural world, connected to something beyond the limited individuated being.

This dual nature of the terminology is seen in one of the Chinese character compounds that is often translated as “natural state” in the Daoist tradition, *zi ran* (自然), which can literally be translated as “to be so of itself”.⁴

Zi ran is often used to refer to a kind of pre-reflective spontaneity that is characteristic of one acting from the natural state; thus it carries the dual connotation of the state itself as well as the way in which one acts when in such a state. To be in this state, or to act from this state, are both referred to as being in accord with the Dao, attaining or embodying the Dao, or flowing with the Dao.⁵

4. The pictograph *zi*, or self, is composed of the characters for sun and moon – thereby implying that the self is always a coming together of the polar energies of sun and moon, heaven and earth, and yin and yang. (Wong 12)

5. “The Dao is the way of heaven. It is also our original nature.” (Wong 12) There is also a

Another term closely associated with *zi ran* is *wu wei*, or “non-action”:

In Daoism, the natural state and zi ran is closely associated with the concept of “non-action” or wu wei (無為). In the Zhuang Zi, non-action appears as a more psychological mode and is a characteristic of spontaneity (zi ran), the main quality of the embodied Dao. It means to be free in mind and spirit and able to wander about the world with ease and pleasure (see yuan you), to engage in an ecstatic oneness with all-there-is. (Encyclopedia 1067)

For this reason, *zi ran* is also closely associated with the terms *xiao yao* and *yuan you*. As stated by Sarah Allan, in commenting on the *Zhuang Zi*:

relationship here to “the uncarved block” (*pu* 樸): “*Pu* is a state to which we can still return if we maintain our constant *de* 德 or ‘virtue’... “When your constant virtue is sufficient, then you will move towards (*gui* 歸) a natural state (*pu*).” (Allan 121) These terms also carry a close connection to the concept of spirit, *shen* (神), in Daoist thought: “The spirit is the original nature in us.” (Wong 35)


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Intentionless movement is a common theme in [the Inner Chapters of the Zhuang Zi]. It is most frequently expressed by the term xiao yao 逍遙, often translated as “roaming” or “wandering”. Thus, the sage “roams freely” or “wanders” (xiao yao 逍遙) in the dao, just as fish swim freely in a stream... Like wu wei, xiao yao is to be free of conscious deliberation. (82-83)

This image of a fish in water indicates another important characteristic of one who is in the natural state – that they exist in a kind of non-separation with the world around them, or an “ecstatic oneness with all-there-is”. As another modern commentator, Rur-bin Yang, states: “What [this type of wandering] refers to is the emergence and circulation of the spiritual energy (*shen qi* 神氣) together with the world in a kind of super-experiential state. Its basis thus lies in the observer’s elevation of himself to enter into a kind of mystical state of coexistence with the existential basis of all things.” (113)

This is a coming together of the inner and outer worlds, of one’s inner nature being in harmony with the world around oneself.

However, this can also imply that one is manifesting and actualising their innate potential in the world, that they are fulfilling their destiny. As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, “Similarly, the ‘free and easy wandering’ of the *Zhuang Zi* is more specifically described as the complete harmony and alignment of the human being with one’s inner nature and destiny.” (1141)

When one exists in such a state, not only are they in harmony within and without and actualising their destiny, they also perceive reality as it is, for they are embodying the one true reality. “*Zhuang Zi* 31 defines the term saying: ‘Reality (*zhen*) is what is received from Heaven; it is so of itself (*zi ran*) and cannot be altered (*yi* 易).’ In *Zhuang Zi*... one who has attained the Dao is called *zhen ren*.” (*Encyclopedia* 1265)

Zhen ren (真人) is the true or authentic person and is thus another term that is often

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To experientially exist in the natural state is thus considered the highest expression of humanity.



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In Daoism, the impurities arise primarily due to desire, which comes from a mind/heart that is not still.

used to describe the individual who attains the natural state.

Along these lines, moving toward the natural state is often seen as synonymous with becoming more fully human – in other words, for the individual human being to attain the natural state is to fulfill their potential as a human. As stated by Allan, “The person who follows the dao is simply the most fully human.” (68)

Incidentally, this ability to follow the dao is closely linked to the function and development of the mind/heart (*xin* 心): “Thus, people are not ‘reasoning animals’ but living things which have a certain potential for growth when they are nurtured properly. As a species, they are defined by the uniqueness of their minds/hearts. Thus it is by fully developing the mind/heart that a person becomes most fully human.” (Allan 95-96)⁶

To experientially exist in the natural state is thus considered the highest expression of humanity, and the highest expression of what it means to be human.

Innate potentiality

According to the writings on the *dao* and *zi ran*, the natural state is an innate potentiality that all human beings possess and have the ability to actualise. This potentiality is not about achieving or gaining something extrinsic to oneself; it is already fully present within every individual. To experientially exist in the natural state does not require movement towards something else, nor does it require one to depend on or receive anything from anyone or anything else. The natural state is something that is accessible to all of us, at all times – it is just a matter of recognising it, and it is the shift in one’s state of mind or perspective that allows one to access this potential.

In Daoism, it is understood that all individuals have the capacity to become a fully actualised and authentic person (*zhen*

6. As noted by Pregadio, “A postface to *Awakening to Reality* says: ‘If you want to embody the supreme Dao, nothing is more important than understanding the Heart. The Heart is the axis of the Dao.’ According to Zhang Boduan, Heart and Spirit are related as follows: the Heart is the ultimate foundation, and Spirit is born from the Heart; the foundation of the Heart consists in non-doing and non-movement; as it moves, it is called Spirit” (37). This will have important implications later on, when we examine the relationship to medicine.

ren) they have simply forgotten. As Eva Wong states, in commenting on the Daoist text *Cultivating Stillness*:

*Many people are ignorant and do not recognise their original nature... in reality, the Dao is not far from human existence and human existence is never far from the Dao... This means that everyone can become a sage, a Buddha, or an immortal... although your existence is in the mortal realm, your heart transcends it. (24)*⁷

Not only do all people have the ability to “become a sage, a Buddha, or an immortal” but the author of *Cultivating Stillness* also notes that: “The sage symbolises the goodness inherent in all sentient beings.” (Wong 3)

As stated in *Cultivating Stillness*, “Although we speak of attaining the Dao, there is really nothing to attain.” In other words, we already have everything we need, and we do not possess anything that impedes us from being in this state. Wong elaborates on this: “Although it is said that you attain the Dao, you are really receiving nothing at all... all the treasures described are in the body and not anywhere else. That is why it is said that you receive nothing; you possess them from the beginning.” (90)

And as written in the *Nei-Yeh* 內業 (which is believed to predate both the *Lao Zi* and *Zhuang Zi*):

*That Way is not distant from us;
When people attain it they are sustained
That Way is not separated from us;
When people accord with it they are
harmonious. (103)*

Harold Roth writes: “These passages do not suggest that the Way is sometimes present within human beings and at other times absent. Rather, the Way is always present. However, the awareness of this presence enters the human mind only when it is properly cultivated.” (103)

7. This text was written no earlier than 1628 CE. Therefore, while it is primarily a Daoist text, it also clearly exhibits Buddhist influence, hence the idea that everyone can “become a sage, a Buddha, or an immortal”. These three states relate to the natural or achieved state of the *sanjiao* (三教), the three schools – in Confucianism the realised being is a sage, in Buddhism a Buddha, and in Daoism an immortal.

Therefore the only “work” to be done is the work of cultivating the ability to experientially exist in this state, to experientially realise that we already have the Way within us. This work is often seen as a process of purification, which we will now turn to examine.

Perfection in process

If all humans innately possess this potential, and it is also the highest state that the individual can achieve in actualising their humanness, then the question becomes: what prevents the individual from actualising this potential and experientially existing in the natural state? In Daoism, the primary impediment to actualising this potential is called impurity. To actualise the potential is thus seen as a process of purification, a process of clearing the obscurations or impurities that impede this natural perfection from fully manifesting.

In Daoism, the impurities arise primarily due to desire, which comes from a mind/heart that is not still. As stated in *Cultivating Stillness*, “The spirit tends toward purity, but the mind disturbs it.” (Wong 35)

Thus it is of the utmost importance to still the mind, to bring the mind/heart to quiescence; through doing so, desire for sense gratification will not arise. This quieting of the mind to remove desire is what is meant by purification: “What is meant by ‘purifying the spirit’? When there is not a thought in the mind, the spirit is pure. When the spirit is pure, no craving arises in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, heart, and body.” (Wong 48)⁸

It is common in Daoism to use metaphors associated with water to describe this process of stilling the mind and heart. As Allan quotes from the *Zhuang Zi*: “The mind/heart at rest is compared with water which becomes empty of sediment (*xu* 虛) when still: ‘If water, when still, is so clear, then how much more the quintessential spirit (*jing shen* 精神). The mind/heart (*xin*) of the sage is clear!’” (53)

She further elucidates this concept by looking at other words that are often used to describe this process: “Water’s ability to

empty itself of sediment when still and thus become reflective is particularly important in Daoist conceptions of the mind/heart (*xin* 心) and the terms still, *jing* 靜, empty, *xu* 虛, clear, *ming* 明, are all important in Daoist descriptions of the mind/heart...” (53)

In the Daoist metaphors of water, the emphasis is on non-action (*wu wei*) – all one needs to do is to still the mind/heart, and clarity will naturally arise:

To respect zi ran one should not interfere (wu wei), and gently let life act and speak through oneself rather than acting and speaking individually... To act spontaneously is to have no intention of one’s own, to let the natural force that is within everything work freely.

(Encyclopedia 1302-03)

In fact, stillness itself is often equated with the natural state. As Allan quotes from the *Dao De Jing*: “The living things [under the sky/heaven] flourish abundantly and each goes back again to its root. This is called “stillness” (*jing* 靜). Stillness means to return to the natural order (*ming* 命).” (98)

In the Daoist cannon the focus is on cultivating stillness of the mind-heart – and through stillness the impurities will naturally fall away like sediment. If desire is one of the primary impediments in this process, as it is the cause of impurity, where does this desire come from? In the Daoist tradition, there is a close relationship between the sense organs and the arising of attachment and desire. As stated by Eva Wong:

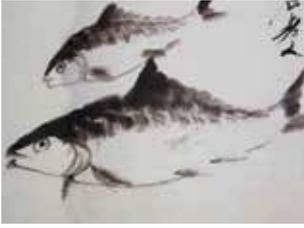
Our senses are the body’s interface with the world. They are openings through which the internal universe communicates with the external environment. They are also the organs through which desire can be projected onto objects. Emotions such as anger will dissipate qi while the presence of desire will dissipate the shen. (XXV)

This occurs, in part, through the connections that were believed to exist in the Daoist tradition between the sense organs and the internal organs. As stated in the text *Awakening to Reality (Wuzhen Pian)*, “If the Heart seeks quiescence, it is first of all necessary to control the eyes. The eyes

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It is through understanding the natural state that one can then understand illness and disease (i.e. the unnatural state).

8. “If you want to attain the Dao, you must train and discipline yourself... Do not crave riches. Do not crave sexual pleasure. Do not be daunted by threats and fear. Your will must be centered, or you will abandon the path along the way... You must cultivate yourself from within. Then you will receive the Dao.” (Wong 90)



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While the *Nei Jing's* focus is on medical practice, it is evident that to know what it means to be healthy, and therefore how to understand (and treat) illness, is inseparable from how to actualise one's potential as an individual human.

are the residences for the roaming of Spirit: Spirit roams through the eyes, and makes use of the Heart. Therefore restrain Spirit through the eyes and cause it to return to the Heart...Wherever the eyes go, the Heart also goes.” (Pregadio 40)

These citations imply that the spirit can easily be drawn outside of the body, and it is by bringing the spirit back within the body, to reside within the heart, that one finds quiescence and purification. Thus, one primary method for stilling the mind/heart is to still the sense organs, and in so doing one will be centered within the physical space of the body. Now that the Daoist foundation of the natural state has been explored, I will turn to examine its relationship to the foundations of Chinese medicine.

Chinese medicine and the natural state

Every system of medicine is built on an underlying cosmology and philosophy, which holds certain assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives about suffering, health, and what it means to be human; thus the concept of medicine is inherently connected to and influenced by social and cultural constructs. For this reason, there has often been an overlap and interplay – especially in their beginnings – between medical and religio-spiritual traditions. It can even be argued that in many early cultures there was not a clear division between medicine, religion, and philosophy; this is certainly true when examining the foundations of Chinese medicine as its foundations are deeply entwined with the roots of Daoist philosophy and the conceptions of the natural state. (Wong and Wu 1932)⁹

In this section I will examine this relationship between Daoist conceptions of the natural state and the perspective of

9. As Joseph Needham writes in *Medicine and Chinese Culture*: “In China there can be little doubt that physicians (*i*) came from the same origin as wizards (*wu*). They were therefore connected with one of the deepest roots of Taoism... During the course of the ages these [‘medicine-men’] differentiated into all kinds of specialised professions, not only physicians, but also Taoist alchemists, invocators and liturgiologists for the curanic religion of the Imperial court, pharmacists, veterinary leeches, priests, religious leaders, mystics and many other sorts of people. By Confucius’ time... the differentiation of physicians had already fully occurred” (264).

Chinese medicine, by examining passages from the *Huang Di Nei Jing* (黃帝內經, The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic).

The *Huang Di Nei Jing* seamlessly interweaves discussions on cosmology, philosophy, and medical practice. As stated in the *Su Wen*, “It is said that one who studies medicine must understand the knowledge of the universe – cosmology.” (Ni 249) This text then goes on to draw direct correlations between such cultivation of knowledge and one’s ability to understand the natural state. And it is through knowing the natural state that one knows what health is, and therefore one knows what disease is: “To know the natural way, one must continually cultivate one’s true nature. Knowing the natural way, of course, allows one to also understand the unnatural way.” (Ni 249)

From the earliest stages of Chinese medicine the concept of the natural state is foundational – and it is through understanding the natural state that one can then understand illness and disease (i.e. the unnatural state).

The connection between the early stages of Chinese medicine and conceptions of the natural state is fundamental to understanding the perspective and goals of Chinese medicine. The emphasis on the importance of understanding the natural state or “grasping the Dao” is restated several times, in different ways, throughout the *Su Wen's* 81 chapters:

I have heard that one who understands the heavens will also understand people. One who understands ancient times shall understand the present. One who has a firm grasp of energy transformations will also understand the myriad things... One who understands transformation and change will understand the essence of nature. (258).

Ultimately, by following the Dao and implementing its life-enhancing maxims, one can expect to live harmoniously in wellness with the ever-changing universe. (276)

Do not forget that the myriad things of the universe have an intimate relationship with one another. They may present as varied as yin and yang, internal and external, male and female, upper and lower, but they are

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This relationship between harmony, perception through the sense organs, and the channels connecting the individual to the world around them is essential in understanding the Chinese medical perspective on the natural state of the individual.

all interconnected, interdependent, and intertranscendent. Let us take medicine for example. As a medical practitioner, one should master the cosmologies of heaven and earth, understand the human mind and spirit, and grasp all sciences of nature. In this way one will have a holistic, integrated perspective, and will grasp the Dao. (287)¹⁰

Therefore, while the *Nei Jing*'s focus is on medical practice, it is evident that to know what it means to be healthy, and therefore how to understand (and treat) illness, is inseparable from how to actualise one's potential as an individual human being (i.e. by harmonising oneself with the “ever-changing universe”). According to the text, health is primarily achieved by living in harmony and balance, both within oneself as well as with the environment and the world around (and above and below) oneself.

From the medical perspective, when one exists in such harmony one will avoid disease and live a long life:

Thus the wise nourish life by flowing with the four seasons and adapting to cold or heat, by harmonizing joy and anger in a tranquil dwelling, by balancing yin and yang, and what is hard and soft. So it is that dissolute evil cannot reach the man of wisdom, and he will be witness to a long life. (Wu 39)

However, being in harmony is a complex process that involves being aware of oneself and the world around oneself, of adapting to the world even while remaining centered within oneself:

Health and well-being can be achieved only by remaining centered with one's spirit, guarding against squandering one's energy, maintaining the constant flow of one's qi and blood, adapting to the changing seasonal

10. It is also of note that this paragraph succinctly and directly states a theory of interdependence that is quite similar to the theory of interdependence in Buddhist philosophy. There are also many similarities in early Chinese thought to the Buddhist notion of impermanence. See Livia Kohn: “The notion of eternal change and ongoing transformation of all things, for example, is part of the very early Chinese speculation about the world. Being and non-being are alternate states of the same cycle of existence. Change is what existence means, it is neither deplorable nor delightful” (202).

and yearly macrocosmic influences, and nourishing one's self preventively. (Ni 265)

Here we can see several main themes of early Chinese medical thought, and the relationship they share to some of the themes of the natural state discussed above.¹¹ In the following sections, I will focus on the relationship of the natural state in Chinese medicine to the themes of harmony and free flow.

Harmony and balance

The natural state is characterised by harmony and balance between oneself and the world around oneself.¹² Earlier this balance was examined through the metaphor of a fish in water, where such harmony allows one to be in a state of non-separation with the world around oneself.

It is important to emphasise that the doctrines indicate that this is a form of dynamic balance – harmony and balance do not imply a static way of being in the world or that one does not change; it is quite the contrary. In other words, to truly be in harmony and in balance means to adapt and change as the moment, the season, and the setting requires; it means a dynamic, growth enhancing state of being, a process of growing ever more fully into oneself even while simultaneously growing even more connected to the world.

In Chinese medicine, the natural state is associated with the harmonisation that occurs through the dynamic balance of *yin* and *yang* and their constant inter-transformation; this is the source of health and well-being. As stated in the *Su Wen*:

11. “Remaining centered with one's spirit” is presented as a key to prevention of illness, which is also an equivalent the state of the still mind-heart: “However, if one is centered and the emotions are clear and calm, energy is abundant and resistance is strong; even when confronted with the force of the most powerful, vicious wind, one will not be invaded” (Ni 10).

12. This is also present in Buddhist medical philosophy. As stated in the Chinese version of the *Sutra of Golden Light* (*Jin guangming jing* 金光明經), “In accordance with the seasons of the year, the faculties and the Four Elements fluctuate between excess and depletion, causing the body to become ill. A good doctor will nurture and balance the Six Elements in accordance with the four seasons of three months each, and [give] drink, food, and medicines that are appropriate for the illness” (Salguero 33).

When yin and yang are balanced, the five zang organs function appropriately together... The key to mastering health is to regulate the yin and the yang of the body. (11)

The law of yin and yang is the natural order of the universe, the foundation of all things, mother of all changes, the root of life and death. In healing, one must grasp the root of the disharmony, which is always subject to the law of yin and yang... Yang is responsible for expanding and yin is responsible for contracting, becoming astringent, and consolidating. (17)¹³

This emphasis on the importance of dynamic balance begins in the very first chapter of the *Nei Jing*; here balance is directly related to the “transformation of the energies of the universe”, and therefore methods to “promote energy flow” are quintessential in maintaining balance, along with meditative practices:

In the past, people practiced the Dao, the Way of Life. They understood the principle of balance, of yin and yang, as represented by the transformation of the energies of the universe. Thus, they formulated practices such as Dao-in, and exercise combining stretching, massaging, and breathing to promote energy flow, and meditation to help maintain and harmonise themselves with the universe. (Ni 1)¹⁴

This concept of dynamic harmony and balance is also a fundamental aspect of *wu wei* (nonaction):

In the thought of Huang-Lao Taoism,

13. This is also the foundation of all acupuncture practice. As stated in the *Lingshu*: “So it is said, the essentials of using the needle lie in knowing how to harmonise yin and yang. In harmonising yin and yang, the essence and qi will glow with the joining of the physical body and the qi energy. This will send spirit to the inner storage chambers. Therefore it is said, the superior doctor balances the qi” (Wu 30).

14. It is of note here that the author differentiates “breathing to promote energy flow” from “meditation to help maintain and harmonise themselves with the universe”.

non-action meant to be in perfect alignment with the movements of the seasons, the planets, and the times. Yin and Yang in their various alterations were the key pattern to follow and non-action meant less the not doing of something than the doing of the right thing at the right time. (Encyclopedia 1067)

Here again, balance is achieved through harmonising with “yin and yang in their various alterations”, which is also likened to the non-action of stillness – the stillness of being in harmony within and without.

It is by regulating and balancing the flow of *yin* and *yang* in the body and quieting the mind/heart that the spirit can remain centered and grounded within the physical space of the body, which in turn allows the sense organs to perceive clearly:

Thus, the body of one who understands the Tao will remain strong and healthy... Those who are knowledgeable have clear orifices, perceptions, hearing, vision, smell, and taste, and are light and strong... Those who understand the principles of wholesome living tame their minds and prevent them from straying. (Ni 22)

Similarly, in the body, pure yang qi reaches the sensory orifices, allowing one to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and decipher all information so that the shen/spirit can remain clear and centered. (Ni 17)

This is significant, as it gives another point of contact between Chinese medical philosophy and Daoism: they both point to the sense organs as a primary interface between the individual and the world around them, and when the sense organs perceive clearly it is both an indication, as well as a cause, of being closer to the natural state. This relationship between harmony, perception through the sense organs, and the channels connecting the individual to the world around

them is essential in understanding the Chinese medical perspective on the natural state of the individual.

Free flow and *xiao yao* 逍遙

As seen above, the free flow of qi and blood in the channels is closely related to harmony and balance within the individual, and is a significant factor affecting health and disease prevention in the *Huang Di Nei Jing*. In other words, when one is in harmony and balance within oneself and with the world, then the qi and blood flow freely through the channels, and vice-versa – if the qi and blood flow freely, then the individual will be in a state of harmony and balance. In terms of physical aspects of health, it is a lack in the free flow of qi and blood that is said to give rise to all disease.

As stated in the *Su Wen*: “All disorders can be attributed to the blood and qi not arriving at certain streams and valleys and caves [i.e. acupuncture points]” (43) and “Regardless of the type of illness, one must first regulate and balance the flow of qi and blood.” (84)¹⁵

This free flow of qi through the vessels is directly related to the “free and easy wandering” (*xiao yao* or *yuan you*) of the individual in the natural state; when the channels are open and the qi and blood is flowing freely, the individual is thus able to enter into the state of complete connection and non-

15. Harper sums this up nicely: “By the second century BC, the vessels (*mai* 脈) carrying blood (*xue* 血) and vapour (*qi* 氣) through the body were seen to constitute the essential physiological structure around which the other constituents of the body were organised. The ascendancy of vessel theory was spurred by a still new, universal model of illness that attributed illness (or nameable ailments) to dysfunctions within the system of vessels. In contrast to older ideas that ailments were the consequence of demonic agents or pathogens occupying the patient’s body, the new model considered an ailment to be the manifestation of a deeper physiological dysfunction. The goal of diagnosis and treatment was to determine the nature of the dysfunction and to re-establish somatic harmony... Vessel theory provided a framework for the application of yinyang 陰陽 and Five Agent (*wuxing* 五行) theories to the human organism...” (99).

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The flow of qi and blood in the channels is directly connected to the state of the heart/mind and spirit.

separation from the world around them – just as a fish in water. As stated by a modern commentator examining this process in the Daoist tradition:

Once the entire body is transformed by the vital energy – that is, when the adept's body has become manifest to the full – the sense organs and body that had originally been used to support or restrain one into individuality have now become, on the contrary, the channels through which the individual flows into and interconnects with the outer world. (Yang 110)

This process of interconnection can also be seen as a process of “reconnection”, whereby the individual returns to the primordial oneness that is the natural state of humanity within this perspective. As stated by Livia Kohn:

The One is divided into the two forces yin and yang, and they are its functions. However, in the course of their interaction in the world, the two forces establish a harmony. Thus there are three, the third being a newly found, recovered unity on the basis of the One that was divided originally. The number three consequently implies a totality as complete as was the original unity of the One. Three is a oneness on a more complex level... The notion is then associated with other classical sets of three, such as the three main agents of the universe – heaven, earth, and humanity. (Baopuzi 18) (129)

In Chinese cosmology, one corresponds to heaven, two corresponds to earth, and three corresponds to humanity – thus the individual human is the “newly found, recovered unity on the basis of the One that was divided originally”. Humans are the coming together of heaven above and earth below, and the channels are the flow of qi connecting these polarities to create the bipolar unity of the human being.

In accordance with Chinese cosmology, this flow of qi has a direct relationship to heaven above and earth below, as seen in the *Su Wen*: “The most important element in clinical diagnosis is to know the relationships between heaven, earth, and humankind... The qi of the body flows in accordance with

the changes of heaven and earth.” (Ni 58)

This free flow in the channels connects heaven and earth within the individuated human and balances the flow and transformation of *yin* and *yang* within the body: “People's qi circulates ceaselessly, similar to the constantly regenerating quality of nature... The blood and qi within the body circulate throughout the channels and vessels, balancing yin and yang, just as water in rivers and lakes circulates endlessly.” (Ni 194)¹⁶

However, the flow of *qi* not only regulates the yin and yang of above and below (heaven and earth) but also the relationship of inside and outside: “So you have one yin and one yang. The qi of the yin and of the yang move unobstructed throughout the entire body. This is because of the interplay of the yin and yang and the relationship of the exterior and interior.” (29)

The flow of qi and blood is affected by the emotions as well as the spirit. As stated in the *Su Wen*:

The qi and blood in the body are affected by the various movements of the person throughout the day. This includes the emotions of rage, fear, too much thinking, sadness, and joy. (Ni 87)

If the spirit is disturbed and unclear, the other organs will not function properly. This creates damage. The pathways and roads along which the qi flows will become blocked and health will suffer... The principles of healing and medicine in general are difficult to grasp because many changes occur in illness, and the healing process must adapt to that. (Ni 34)

The emotions and the spirit can change quickly, thus many changes can also occur in illness. Here it is interesting to note the differences between the *Nei Jing* and the Daoist doctrines. While both of these traditions emphasise the way in which emotions can prevent one from being in the natural state, each examines different facets of the human experience that the emotions impact.

16. Also see Vivienne Lo: “A regulated flow of qi, the vital substance of life, was as basic to physical health as it was to the harmony of heaven and earth, and the channels through which it flowed were as carefully mapped as the waterways of the empire” (31).

While the *Nei Jing* emphasises the impact of the emotional state on the free flow of *qi* and blood in the channels, and how this creates blockages and damages organ function, thereby leading to disease, in Daoism the focus is on the ability of the emotions to influence the ability of the practitioner to maintain quiescence of the heart/mind and spirit. However, even though the focus may seem to differ, these two spheres are intimately connected – the flow of *qi* and blood in the channels is directly connected to the state of the heart/mind and spirit.

Another interesting difference is that the emphasis in the *Nei Jing* regarding the free flow is focused on the flow of *qi* and blood within the 12 primary channels of acupuncture, which relate to the internal organs; in the Daoist texts the emphasis seems to be more on free flow between the three *dantian* as well as free flow between the individual and the environment. The 12 primary channels correspond to the viscera and bowels, and are associated with more mundane aspects of life (eating, breathing, sleeping, excrement, etc) – the physical body – whereas the three *dantian* are more associated with spiritual transformation and the spiritual body.

Conclusion

Through these ideas of harmony, balance between yin and yang, and free flow in the channels, it is possible to construct a generalised picture of the natural state of health and humanity according to Daoist texts and the *Huang Di Nei Jing*.

In highly simplistic terms, this can be stated as the coming together, interpenetration, and harmony of the *yin* and *yang* aspects of being (heaven and earth, body and spirit) in the individuated human, which occurs when there is free flow of *qi* and blood in the channels combined with an inner sense of stillness. This, then, gives us a view of the individual as a bipolar unity, composed of physical and nonphysical aspects, that is simultaneously separate from, and yet always connected to, the external world.

In the end, perhaps the most interesting aspect is simply the fact that both of these perspectives believe that there is such a thing as the natural state of humanity, and yet each takes a slightly different approach to understanding how to best actualise this

state. Taking into account both perspectives, and their similarities and differences, can engender a deeper understanding of the nuances of the natural state and what it means to be human.

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The emphasis in the *Nei Jing* regarding free flow is focused on the flow of *qi* and blood within the 12 primary channels of acupuncture, which relate to the internal organs; in the Daoist texts the emphasis seems to be more on free flow between the three *dantian* as well as free flow between the individual and the environment.