

# Cultivating Wisdom - The Greatest Honor, The Hardest Task

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One day, Confucius was walking with his followers by a beautiful river. Far up the river the group noticed a tremendous and dangerous waterfall with a beautiful pool below. As they walked closer they noticed a man's body floating in the water. Very concerned that this man had chosen to commit suicide beneath the dangerous waterfall, Confucius immediately sent his followers rushing towards the pool to save this man's life. As his students moved toward the man, he gently climbed out of the water, untied his hair, began to sing and walked toward them. "How it is," Confucius said, "that you can jump in such dangerous water? I thought you had been trying to kill yourself. How is it that you can be safe in water that is deadly to all others?"

"When I was a child," the young man said, "I played on the Earth. It was my nature. But my mother exposed me to the water and so, for my entire childhood, I became one in my nature with the water. Now I can swim in all water and I can walk on all land."

"This man," Confucius said to his students, "teaches us what wisdom is, the capacity to expand one's nature."

We are all called upon to expand our natures because the medicine we practice contrasts with the values and definitions of life that surround us. To get good at what you do professionally, to be anything more than a technician wielding sharp pins, you must cultivate wisdom. Let's consider Confucius' words and look at wisdom from a TCM perspective.

In the beginning

All of life stems from "*Wuji*," the Great Nothingness, the undivided expanse. Biblically termed "the light" this infinite, omnipresent potential, evolved spontaneously into "*Taiji*," the great ultimate, which then divided into Yin/Yang. Time and space were born of *Taiji* and all that has ever evolved from "*Wuji*", everything that exists in the world, can be found within Yin/Yang.

The contextual source of wisdom in Chinese philosophy is the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes. Without change and evolution there can be no wisdom. I have mentioned this book many times in this column. It is a great oracle of Chinese philosophy/spirituality. It was thought that the *I Ching* was originally brought back from the Celestial Realms to *Fu Xi* in the 34th century B.C. The hexagrams of the *I Ching*, the original wisdom, were brought to *Fu Xi* on a tortoise's back. Throughout the next 3,000 years there was tremendous evolution in the concepts and, with the invention of writing, with the text. By Confucius's time, there was a very evolved system with commentaries, to which Confucius added during his later years.

Wisdom's Yin and Yang

Wisdom has Yin qualities. It is Yin in that its nature is hidden. It does not lie on the surface of the self, but must be revealed as we journey along the river of life. It comes from deep within us and

surfaces, altering our thinking and consciousness, as a result of life experiences. We call the glimpse of wisdom that we see "insight" because we are seeing within, the dwelling place of yin. Wisdom exposes the core of who we are; it enhances our connectedness to the Tao. Wisdom remains with us, causing enduring change in our perspectives and personalities. In these and many other ways, wisdom reflects the essence of Yin.

And yet, wisdom is Yang in that it rings true. It is on target, focused on the heart of things. Wisdom doesn't waver. Once we have found it, we feel the "light" of its truth changing the trajectory of our thoughts and behavior. It occurs in an instant, carried into our awareness through multiple meridians simultaneously. Its impact can be dramatic and life changing. Often, the yang aspect of wisdom inspires altruism and contributions to the betterment of others.

Historically one would "throw" coins or Yarrow stalks to access the *I Ching's* wisdom. By learning from the Book of Changes, you allow yourself to see the patterns of *qi* that are flowing through your life. You can "throw" the *I Ching* for a patient to discern what's going on with them energetically and to learn what life lessons you can help provide for them.

#### Four aspects of wisdom

Wisdom is born of an abundance of *qi*. To be fully aware, to have the capacity to be fully present at any given moment - this allows for wisdom to come through the abundance of *qi*. As a practitioner, you are trying to support your patients as they regenerate *qi*. You help them build vitality and the wisdom to use their health wisely. As we live our lives fully we feel the beauty of *qi* within us, and, wisely, we appreciate life and the moments we have in it.

Wisdom is born of a deficiency of *qi*, as exemplified by George Bernard Shaw's quote, "Youth is wasted on the young." He didn't say that when he was young, now did he? He said that when his *qi* began to decline with age and the deficiency made him aware of what he had lost by not recognizing the abundance in youth. Loss of *qi* through aging, illness, addiction and self-destructive behaviors may lead us to greater levels of self-respect. When we find more of ourselves through the experiences of life, when we know the darkness, we come to value ourselves more. This awareness of our value, this wisdom, is often what inspires us to heal our lives.

Wisdom is born of perspective, time or distance from events. Time, itself, is a great healer as exemplified by the expressions "time heals all wounds" and "hindsight is 20/20." Mourning, for example, has its own path along which we must travel to recover. Anyone who has gone through the mourning process knows that the journey cannot be controlled and the lessons given must be earned through the passage of time. Also, we see ourselves more clearly as time marches past events. We see our mistakes and the mistakes of others with greater clarity and compassion. As we move onward in life, we get closer to our ancestors, who await us on the other side. The ancestors link us to the eternal Yin /Yang, the source of wisdom.

Wisdom is born of sudden shock or change. The moment you became a parent, wisdom happened. You instantly learned something about life that you didn't know before. You may still have no words to explain what it was, but you know it happened and you are a better, more altruistic person for it. Another shock that would allow for the cultivation of wisdom would be an accident or illness. Suddenly you realize the blessings you had before the unfortunate twist of fate. Many patients will benefit when you help them see the wisdom to be gained by their ailments.

The great American author, Joseph Conrad, wrote to the heart of our work in his novel, *Lord Jim*, with the words: "To immerse yourself in the dangerous element and yet to do so within moderation. To live fully, no holds barred, within a moderate lifestyle, and yet to live moderately within a full

life." This statement epitomizes the healthy life, according to our medicine's philosophies. It is the essence of living in alignment with the Tao. Helping your patients achieve that wisdom, my dear colleague, is the truest of your professional challenges.

Wisdom, like all things, comes from *Wuji*. It is expressed in time and space, (Yin/Yang) and through the hexagrams of the *I Ching*. A person who "expands their nature" as Confucius put it, allows their consciousness to reflect that which is *Taiji*, unified. This expansion is wisdom. Illness is one of the greatest tools for creating health. Illness is one of the greatest tools for creating wisdom. As you work with your patients consider the wisdom that can be cultivated during each patient's time with you. Honor that above all things and you will be worthy of those who put their lives in your hands.

JULY 2012