

Expansive Consciousness: *Shen* and *Gui*

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In ancient times throughout the world, most disease was associated with malevolent forces or spirits. Now when we hear this, we laugh at the suggestion of something so far from our scientific understanding of the world. But could there have been a ray of truth to these beliefs?

In Giovanni Maciocia's *The Psyche in Chinese Medicine*, he outlines two opposing energies of consciousness. One, the *shen*, is defined as a light, centripetal, expanding, inclusive form of consciousness. The other, *gui*, is defined as a dark, centrifugal, contracting, separating form of consciousness. This *gui* was considered to be ghosts or spirits that were responsible for illness in ancient times. It is notable that this energy is the opposite of our own consciousness, the *shen*.¹

The Power of Spirits?

Many of the most prominent Chinese medical doctors of old, including Sun Si Miao, not only believed in these spirits, but also directly addressed their existence in the practice of medicine. As experts in both acupuncture and herbal medicine, practitioners often practiced forms of exorcism, including rituals and incantations, to rid their patients of these disease-causing spirits. They stated that while disease would be cured with just acupuncture and herbal medicine alone, the recovery time would be greatly expedited with the addition of these practices.

Could these respected men of medicine have been onto something that we are only in recent years rediscovering?

Zhang Jing Yue stated that he believed these spirits were self-created by the patient due to deficiency of *shen* (the expansive, uniting energy of consciousness). As acupuncturists, we are greatly familiar with two mysterious phenomena. One is a patient's ability to make themselves ill. This can range from full-blown, life-threatening illness or crippling, debilitating issues, to tension headaches or tight muscles.

While related to their thoughts, emotions and actions, illness often becomes fully out of the patient's control. Sometimes people use the expression that someone is "fighting their demons." It can be said that the issue takes a life of its own. It often relates to a part of the patient's mind they are neglecting or parts of themselves they haven't fully examined; perhaps repressed trauma, physical or mental.

We can say these are like separated aspects of their consciousness that keep them from being in the present moment (fully conscious).

Two, we are equally familiar with patients healing themselves, spontaneously, through a change in attitude, consciousness or action. In these situations, it is often notable that it comes side by side with the patient processing neglected or separated parts of their mind or themselves. It's as if the separated aspects of themselves are united by the power of shining the light of their consciousness on the parts of themselves left in the dark. This healing is created by aspects of the subconscious

mind.

In modern times, there have sprung up many ways of creating this uniting of the separated energies of ourselves. In the West, some of the first scientific methods were psychoanalysis, hypnosis or Jung's dream analysis. This can be said to be affecting the mind (and often the body) through bringing aspects of the subconscious mind to light.

Recently, ancient shamanic practices, such as soul retrieval, have come into fashion as a method of accessing the subconscious mind to unite the separated parts of ourselves. Could the ancient Chinese have been healing through accessing the subconscious mind?

Doorways Into Ourselves

There are few doorways into this aspect of ourselves as potent as symbolism. In the rituals described by these healers for so-called exorcism, there is often a form of symbolic release; letting go. The incantations are often symbolic as well. I propose that the healers knew exactly what they were doing and were often effective in a part of healing frequently neglected in modern times.

I don't think they thought of spirits the way we do when we watch a movie or become afraid of the dark. In ancient Greece, there was a pantheon of gods. Although perhaps the uneducated believed in their physical existence, the elite knew they were actually symbolic psychic aspects of themselves or the world. I believe this was the same in these exorcisms of evil spirits.

By accessing the subconscious mind through ritual and symbolism, they were able to rally the consciousness of the patient to release and process these severed parts of themselves. From this, the body and mind of the patient would be free to start the healing process, making for a quicker recovery time.

Editor's Note: This is the first in a short series on "expansive consciousness." In his second article, Jack discusses the healing power of *shen*.

Reference

1. Maciocia G. The Gui. In: *The Psyche in Chinese Medicine: Treatment of Emotional and Mental Disharmonies With Acupuncture and Chinese Herbs*. Churchill Livingstone, 2009; pp. 71-85.

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