

## **TAKE HEART WITH TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE**

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In the Chinese language the heart is related to all affections. It is not just that rhythmic organ that controls our circulation, but is also viewed as the sovereign ruler of the body *and* the master of the emotions. These definitions developed by way of the many interpretations possible that stem from the artistic nature of the Chinese written language, for each pictograph, or character, is a symbolic representation of an action, object or concept. The written language is beautiful and lends itself to numerous translations for any given character. Within the context of the Chinese culture this allows for creative and thoughtful renderings for the meanings represented by the many thousands of written characters.

When reading Chinese medical literature, each character will then by nature have multiple meanings, some symbolic, some more concrete, but each open to wide interpretation and all of them true to some degree. Nearly everything about the Chinese worldview has a symbolic nature to it. Thus, in the ancient art of traditional Chinese medicine, symbolism and metaphor are automatically taken into account when assessing the health of an individual. This is a natural extension within the Chinese culture.

As noted above, when viewing the character for the heart, a wide range of interpretations present themselves. The character not only depicts the function of the circulation of blood, but also reveals how the heart houses the “mind”. The “mind” in this sense is our consciousness—our mental interpretations from our five senses, all our thoughts, aspirations, and dreams to our “spirit”. In the West, it is easy to accept the heart as a mechanical pump that controls the cardiovascular system. It is not as easy to imagine the heart connected to the mind and spirit, although most of us can relate to something that is “heartfelt” or perhaps having experienced a “broken” heart.

In Chinese medicine it is not only the heart, but each organ system within the body that has multiple considerations. The organ systems represent not only a specific tissue and function, but each also has associated with it specific emotions and psychospiritual aspects. It is said, for example, that the energy of the kidneys rules will power, the spine, bones, the ears and are affected by cold and fear. The lungs rule the energy of the body, the skin, and nose and are affected by dryness and grief. The spleen rules thought, digestion, muscles and the lips and is affected by dampness and worry. The liver rules the individual soul, tendons and ligaments, the eyes and is affected by wind and anger. The heart, which we’ve said rules the mind, spirit and circulation, is reflected in the complexion and is affected by heat, joy, anxiety and bitterness. Traditional

Chinese medicine does not look at the body as a machine detached from our thoughts, but as a multidimensional vessel containing Qi, the vital life force (pronounced CHEE), as well as blood, matter and spirit.

In traditional Chinese medicine, emotion plays a major role in wellness or illness. Emotions have a great effect upon the movement of Qi within the body. Pathology appears when there is a disturbance of this flow of energy as observed in hyper (excessive), hypo (deficient) or stagnant (blocked) conditions. Chinese medicine takes a holistic approach to healing and sees no mind/body/nature split. And, although there has been a wide chasm in western thought between matter and spirit, quantum physics is helping to close that gap.

It is too vast a subject to discuss here the rich meanings behind mind and spirit and the inherent paradox therein. We have, therefore, chosen to combine them simply into the term “Heartmind”. Some positive expressions of heartmind are love, joy, peace, mercy, laughter, openness, compassion, gratitude and forgiveness. These aspects nourish the energy of the heart and, according to Chinese medicine, “keep the complexion rosy and the blood circulating smoothly”. An imbalance of the heart energies can create such diverse disturbances as insomnia, palpitations, forgetfulness, mania, anxiety and cardiovascular disease.

Research has now shown that the mechanism of the heart has a stronger effect on the brain-mind than we thought. To quote from Dr. Christiane Northrup’s *Health Wisdom for Women* 4/96 newsletter: *“Though everyone knows that the brain produces electrical activity in the form of brain waves, few realize that the electrical activity of the heart (heart waves) is 40 to 60 times stronger than that of the brain. In fact, the electromagnetic field of the heart can be measured several feet away from your body. Research from the Institute of HeartMath in Boulder Creek, California, has shown that sincere experiences of ‘heartfelt emotions’ bring about increased coherence in the electromagnetic field of your heart—and in the hearts of those around you. This increased coherence also balances hormonal patterns so that a sense of well being is generated throughout your entire system. Conversely, negative feelings of anger, anxiety and worry have been shown to create disorganized, incoherent and unbalanced energy flow that, if gone unchecked, lead to accelerated aging and physical deterioration. Learning to stay connected to the energy of your heart can abate these patterns and replenish your system.”*

So, take heart! It’s never too late to stretch your wings and acknowledge your heartmind. You might want to take time out from your busy schedule to be playful and nourish your spirit, to tend that inner or outer garden that brings you most joy. Daily walks help circulate the Qi, increase inspiration as well as enable you to experience the heartfulness of your community. We suggest giving and receiving “heart-to-heart” hugs at every opportunity. Maybe if we stopped taking

ourselves so seriously, we could more easily find humor in the paradox of life and find awe in its mysteries. The best heart medicine is laughter and joy!