

# **The Philosophical Thought of Health Preservation in the Lingshu of the Huangdi Neijing**

**Guo Lixia**

*No. 3 Fanghuali, Yanlanzhou, Shizhong District, Leshan City, Sichuan Province, China*

**Abstract:** The Lingshu is imbued with implicit knowledge of health preservation. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is not merely a technique aimed at dispelling pathogenic factors and curing diseases; fundamentally, it is a genuine life science dedicated to exploring how to prolong life and constantly nurture Qi (vital energy) and vitality. Starting from the foundation of "nurturing the Spirit" and pursuing "Harmony between Human and Nature", this paper aims to elaborate on the path to achieving health preservation.

**Keywords:** Lingshu; Nurturing the Spirit; Harmony between Human and Nature; Unity of Form and Spirit

## **1. Introduction**

TCM has always emphasized preventing diseases by eliminating them in their incipient stages before they manifest. To prevent diseases, it is essential to accumulate and protect the Yang Qi (yang vital energy) within the body. Only by properly nurturing Yang Qi can one truly maintain health. Health preservation lies in nurturing Yang Qi, and the ultimate goal of health preservation is to nurture the Spirit.

## **2. Prioritizing the Nurturing of the Spirit**

### **2.1 From "Form-Spirit" to "Unity of Form and Spirit"**

The physical form (Xing Ti) is the external manifestation of human beings and the basis for distinguishing individual differences in physical appearance. As the external expression of the human organism, observing the physical form allows one to discern the health status of internal Zang-organs (viscera), embodying the TCM-specific approach of "perceiving the subtle to discern the evident" and "understanding the whole from a part"-a method distinct from Western medicine in disease diagnosis.

The Spirit (Shen) refers to the vital activity

process generated by the combination of Yin and Yang essences. After life is formed, it is the result of the interaction between the Yin and Yang of Heaven and Earth, the Virtue of Heaven (Tian De), and the Qi of Earth (Di Qi). The Spirit also denotes the Upright Qi (Zheng Qi) within the body: abundant Spirit indicates sufficient Upright Qi; where the Spirit resides, Upright Qi will not be depleted, and pathogenic factors cannot invade. The Spirit governs the Qi of the five Zang-organs in the human body-loss of the Spirit leads to the dissipation of the Qi of the five Zang-organs. Abundant Spirit Qi endows people with full mental vitality, normal physical activity, and the ability to cope with unexpected external events without suffering severe emotional shocks that could trigger conditions like mania. Therefore, the way of health preservation lies in nurturing the Spirit, regulating mental and emotional states, and protecting the Spirit Qi. If the Spirit Qi is insufficient, numerous diseases will arise. A person can only exist fully when both form and Spirit are intact-one cannot discuss a complete Spirit in isolation from the form, nor a healthy form in isolation from the Spirit.

The Spirit is the dominant force of human beings, while the physical form is the marker of being human. Prolonged unhealed damage to the physical form will affect the heart and Spirit, transforming organic diseases into functional disorders and impairing mental and emotional states. The Zhuyou (Incantation Therapy) Department was established based on an understanding of the nature of diseases and their interrelationships; it embodies dialectical thinking consistent with scientific principles and should not be simplistically categorized as "shamanistic medicine". As stated in classical texts: "The ancient shamans, because they knew what overcame the hundred diseases, and first knew from where a disease arose, could cure it by Zhuyou." [1] The physical form acts externally, while the heart and Spirit act internally: the form mainly deals with external

pathogenic invasions, and the heart-Spirit with internal injuries. One is internal, the other external; one belongs to Yin, the other to Yang—they complement each other.

When the Spirit Qi within the body perishes, the physical form will follow into death. From this perspective, the form persists as long as the Spirit Qi exists. However, the Spirit Qi also depends on the physical form for its existence: if the form ceases to exist before the Spirit Qi dissipates, the Spirit Qi will have no carrier and will scatter and vanish. For healthy people, if the Spirit Qi surpasses the capacity of the form, longevity can be achieved; if the form is already damaged, even strong Spirit Qi cannot prevent death. The physical form and the heart-Spirit are integrated as one. To achieve longevity with clear vision, one must pay equal attention to protecting the physical form and nurturing the Spirit Qi—achieving the "Unity of Form and Spirit" is the ultimate goal. Cultivating the mind and nature is based on cultivating the form; the purpose of cultivating the form is to cultivate the mind and nature. By progressing sequentially from nurturing the form to nurturing the mind in the correct direction, one can transcend the mundane and attain the state of longevity with clear vision.

"The foundation of health preservation lies in nurturing the form, i.e., nurturing the body, as the body is the most fundamental material basis of life. Nurturing the Spirit on the basis of nurturing the body can be regarded as an extension of humanity's basic way of existence—it is not merely survival, but a life that integrates materiality and spirituality." [2] Nurturing the body is the foundation for nurturing the Spirit; the form cannot be discussed in isolation from the Spirit, as the two blend into an inseparable whole. Nevertheless, the most fundamental aspect remains nurturing the Spirit: nurturing the body serves the ultimate purpose of nurturing the Spirit, and its goal is to create a better environment and conditions for nurturing the Spirit. The final destination of health preservation should be nurturing the Spirit. As stated in *Zhouyi · Xici Xia* (The Book of Changes · Great Appendix II): "Refining the meaning to enter into the Spirit is for its application; utilizing this to settle the body is to honor virtue." [3] The Spirit is superior to the form and occupies the primary position. Therefore, health preservation should take nurturing the Spirit as its foundation—it is of

paramount importance.

## **2.2 Emptiness, Concentration, and Maintaining Tranquility**

The occurrence of diseases all results from the interaction of internal and external factors. Internally, insufficient Upright Qi, coupled with externally weakened physical resistance, leads to the concurrent onset of internal injuries and external pathogenic invasions, resulting in numerous miscellaneous diseases. Deficiencies of the physical form can still be remedied, but the loss of Upright Qi, Spirit Qi, and Primordial Qi (Yuan Qi, congenital vital energy) is irreversible. If Upright Qi is sufficient, even minor damage to the physical form can be compensated for through the nourishment of Upright Qi and the regulation of external substances. However, insufficient Upright Qi cannot be replenished merely through the physical form; moreover, internal Qi deficiency will cause increasing damage to the form, making it more susceptible to external pathogenic invasions. Although the physical form and the heart-Spirit are equally important, the heart-Spirit takes precedence: the Spirit Qi within the heart determines the abundance or decline of a person's Upright Qi and governs life, death, longevity, and premature death. After the Spirit Qi scatters, the physical form will perish accordingly. If the internal Upright Qi is abundant, external pathogens cannot invade. Therefore, only by protecting and nurturing the internal Upright Qi and consolidating the foundation can one better nurture the form on the premise of internal solidity. Internal solidity leads to abundant Spirit Qi, which in turn provides a source for nurturing the physical form. When the form is not deficient, external pathogens find it difficult to invade. With the coordination of both internal and external factors, a person can achieve health and longevity. All things breed insects and eggs only after their interiors have spoiled—thus, the key to health preservation lies in "strengthening the interior and repelling the exterior": nurturing the body's Upright Qi to resist external pathogenic Qi, with a focus on nurturing the Spirit and supplemented by solidifying the physical form.

The way of health preservation lies in "not disturbing the heart" and "being able to endure nature (Ren Xing)". Tranquility is the essence and foundation of all things; movement is the function and activation—with movement, all

things are generated. Tranquility is the unmanifested essence, and movement is the manifested function. Heaven and Earth represent Yin and Yang; the continuous interplay of Yin and Yang gives rise to all things. Those who cultivate the mind and nurture the Spirit remain tranquil and can maintain this state: when external objects enter their consciousness, they do not become distracted by following these objects. Humans first have a body, relying on which senses are generated, and only then does the heart/mind exist. The senses are the medium through which the heart recognizes the existence of external objects—all things enter the heart through the senses to form cognition, which depends on the function of the heart. The heart can control and guide external matters: the existence of external objects is recognized and acknowledged by the heart; it is the heart that endows them with definitions and grants them the possibility of existence. If the heart does not move, things do not exist as cognized objects; if the heart is tranquil, the essence remains intact. If the heart moves recklessly, it is easily drained of essential Qi by external objects, consuming the physical form. The heart should not be enslaved by objects; it should follow its desires without obstruction.

Essence (Jing) is the primary life substance of the human body. As stated: "Therefore, what life comes from is called essence." [1] The formation of the original embryo results from the combination of the father's essence and the mother's blood—these two substances belong to Yang and Yin respectively. The union of the father's Yang essence and the mother's Yin blood gives birth to a human being. The Yijing (The Book of Changes) states: "Heaven and Earth intermingle, and all things are transformed harmoniously; male and female essences unite, and all things are produced." [4] This also confirms that the union of male and female essences is the root of all things. In TCM, Essence is divided into "congenital Essence (Prenatal Essence)" and "acquired Essence (Postnatal Essence)": congenital Essence is stored in the kidneys, while acquired Essence resides in the spleen and stomach. Daoism, integrating traditional medicine, takes this as a theoretical basis for practice, as exemplified by the statement: "The Cinnabar Field (Dantian) is the mansion of Essence, the two kidneys are the residence of Essence." [4] Based on the location of Essence, it is known that Essence tends to

gather in the lower part of the body: "Below, it becomes Essence." [5] The Daoist practice of "refining Essence into Qi (Lian Jing Hua Qi)" involves transforming the Essence gathered in the lower body into Qi that disperses in the upper body: "Above, it disperses and becomes Qi." [5] The practice of "refining Qi into Spirit (Lian Qi Hua Shen)" reflects that the internal transformation of Qi ultimately converges on the Spirit. Refining the congenital Essence stored in the kidneys is the foundation for refining the Spirit—Essence belongs to the physical form, and the ultimate purpose of refining Essence is to transform it into the Spirit. The "Spirit" in traditional medicine corresponds to "mind-nature (Xin Xing)"; transforming the Spirit means refining and cultivating one's mind-nature without following the crowd. The third stage of Daoist practice is "refining Spirit to return to Emptiness (Lian Shen Fan Xu)", aiming to reach a state of emptiness and nothingness: when external objects appear before one's eyes, one remains unmoved, leaves no traces in the heart, and generates no thoughts. The "Benshen" (Fundamental Spirit) chapter holds that when the senses receive external objects, the impression left in the heart due to memory is called "intention (Yi)": "What the heart remembers is called intention." [1] Having no intention in the heart is "Emptiness (Xu)". Therefore, one must maintain tranquility and not act recklessly.

Hun (Ethereal Soul) and Po (Corporeal Soul) are inherent to human beings—without Hun and Po, mental activities become disordered. Hun and Po guarantee the normal functioning of mental and emotional states: Hun accompanies the activities of the Spirit, while Po arises with the entry and exit of Essence. As stated: "That which comes and goes with the Spirit is called Hun; that which enters and exits with the Essence is called Po." [1] Damage to Hun and Po indicates that Essence, Qi, and Spirit are also damaged. Observing a person's emotional state can reflect whether their Hun and Po are impaired, thereby revealing the status of their Essence, Qi, and Spirit. Essence, Qi, and Spirit determine the existence of Hun and Po—Hun and Po rely on Essence, Qi, and Spirit for their generation, and their normal state reflects the smooth functioning of Essence, Qi, and Spirit. Furthermore, the Spirit, as a vital activity, is generated through the interaction of Yin and Yang essences: "The mutual contention of the two essences is called Spirit." [6] Therefore, all

things ultimately converge on the Spirit. Health preservation must first nurture the Spirit; treating diseases must also first treat the Spirit-for the Spirit is the fundamental existence. As stated: "All needling methods must first be based on the Spirit." [1] Nurturing the Spirit lies in not overstraining the Spirit or injuring the heart, in "reaching the extreme of emptiness, guarding tranquility steadfastly," [7] and in maintaining purity and tranquility without reckless action.

### **3. Pursuing Harmony between Human and Nature**

#### **3.1 Acting in Accordance with the Seasons**

The Zhouyi · Wenyan (The Book of Changes · Words of Literature) states: "The great man is he who is in harmony, in his attributes, with Heaven and Earth; in his brightness, with the sun and moon; in his orderly procedure, with the four seasons; and in his relation to what is fortunate and what is calamitous, with the spiritual agencies. He may precede Heaven, and Heaven will not act in opposition to him; he may follow Heaven, but will act only as Heaven would have done. If Heaven will not act in opposition to him, how much less will men! How much less will the spiritual agencies!" [6] Humans must align with the Dao of Heaven and Earth, not violate the order of the four seasons, and act in accordance with seasonal changes to attain peace and nourishment. Traditional medicine is consistent with this view: it also advocates following the passage of time, complying with Yin-Yang changes, and obeying the laws of seasonal development to protect the internal Upright Qi from deficiency and prevent invasion by external pathogenic Qi. Failure to guard the interior and defend against external pathogens will inevitably lead to injury from internal emotions and external pathogens. As stated: "When one is affected by Xu Xie (deficiency pathogenic factors), it is due to the timing of Heaven, together with one's bodily form; correlating these with deficiency and excess, major disease is then formed." [1] The occurrence of all diseases stems from internal injury, external contraction, or a combination of both. Internal injuries arise from within-preventing and controlling such diseases lies in nurturing the internal Upright Qi, i.e., nurturing the Spirit Qi. Abundant Spirit means sufficient Upright Qi; if Upright Qi is not deficient, pathogens cannot invade. Preventing and

treating external contractions lies in acting in accordance with seasonal development, avoiding reckless action, following the principles of nature, observing changes in the Dao of Heaven, and complying without opposition.

The Daodejing (Tao Te Ching) states: "Humans model themselves on Earth, Earth models itself on Heaven, Heaven models itself on the Dao, the Dao models itself on Nature." [7] Humans must follow the laws of Earth, Earth must follow the laws of Heaven, Heaven in turn follows the Dao, and the Dao ultimately aligns with Nature. By extension, humans must follow the laws of Nature. The Dao of Nature lies in "non-action (Wu Wei)", just as "Heaven and Earth unite to send down the sweet dew, without the command of the people, it is evenly distributed of itself." [7] Sweet dew is naturally produced by the interaction of the Qi of Heaven and Earth-no one can command this process. The same applies to human health preservation: do not excessively interfere with external things, nor allow external things to excessively affect the inner heart; follow the Dao of Nature and act without overexertion (Wu Wei). Acting in accordance with the seasons means complying with seasonal changes, which are the natural manifestation of the Dao of Heaven. The Dao of Heaven is impartial and unbiased: "Heaven and Earth are not humane; they regard all things as straw dogs." [7] Humans, in harmony with Heaven and Earth and unified with all things, must practice non-action and avoid recklessness. Following trends and acting accordingly means complying with natural development without arbitrary action-this is the key to health preservation and maintaining physical integrity.

The "Benshen" chapter of the Lingshu states: "That which Heaven endows in me is Virtue (De); that which Earth endows in me is Qi. It is the flowing of Virtue and the pressuring of Qi that generate life." [1] Here, humans are regarded as the product of the combination of Heavenly Virtue and Earthly Qi: Virtue flows downward, and Qi rises upward; their convergence and the interaction of Yin and Yang enable human survival and the transformation of all things. All things and humans depend on the interaction of Heavenly Virtue and Earthly Qi. In the Mencius, the view on Virtue and land holds that land can be used to nurture people, and benevolence and Virtue can be used to educate people-for the sake of the people, one can abandon land. Between Virtue and land, Virtue takes precedence: "The



superior man does not use that by which he nurtures people to harm people." [8] However, in medicine, there is no bias-Heavenly Virtue and Earth are equally important. Virtue is bestowed on humans by Heaven, and Qi by Earth; between Heaven and Earth are Virtue and Qi. Humans exist between Heaven and Earth, and both are indispensable.

### **3.2 Holding Fast to the Doctrine of the Mean**

The Zhongyong (The Doctrine of the Mean) states: "While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium (Zhong). When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of Harmony (He). This Equilibrium is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and this Harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of Equilibrium and Harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout Heaven and Earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish." [9] When people's dispositions are not yet expressed and remain unbiased, this state is called "Zhong (the Mean)"; after coming into contact with external things and experiencing emotions such as "pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy", if one can conform to "using the two extremes and upholding the Mean" (zhi yong liang zhong) and achieve neither excess nor deficiency, this state is called "He (Harmony)". [9] The "Benshen" chapter holds that emotions and will (Qing Zhi) are the understanding formed by intention (Yi)-the impression left in the heart by external objects. Based on this, the recognition generated from such impressions is called "Will (Zhi)": "What the heart remembers is called intention; where the intention rests is called will." [1] Because things are constantly changing, after the will is expressed, one repeatedly researches and ponders the understanding of things-a stage called "thought (Si)": "Based on the will, it preserves and changes, this is called thought." [1] When external objects remain outside the sensory system, they are objectively existing matter; once they enter the senses and are processed by the heart into "intention", they carry human subjectivity. This is unavoidable. Therefore, the Zhongyong only emphasizes being unbiased, neither excessive nor insufficient, and holding fast to the Mean-acknowledging that when people recognize

things, they process them independently. Regarding this inevitable phenomenon, attention must be paid to the principle of moderation: actions must conform to measures and be limited within a certain range.

The way of health preservation lies in maintaining a peaceful mental state and avoiding excessive worry or overthinking that could injure the Spirit. As stated: "Therefore, those given to apprehension, planning, and thought injure the Spirit. When the Spirit is injured, there is fear, and [the Essence] flows away unchecked. When sadness and sorrow affect the center, it is exhausted and loses life. Those given to joy and happiness find the Spirit scattered and not stored. Those given to melancholy and worry find the Qi blocked and not flowing. Those given to great anger become confused and ungoverned. Those given to fear find the Spirit agitated, frightened, and unable to be collected." [1] Excessive worry, thought, joy, and anger injure the internal Essence, Qi, and Spirit, leading to external physical withering and eventually the dissipation of Spirit Qi and the death of the physical form. Therefore, the way of health preservation must also emphasize holding fast to the Doctrine of the Mean: internally, do not excessively injure the Spirit or disturb Qi; externally, do not excessively injure the sinews and bones. Remain unbiased, neither excessive nor insufficient-this is also an extremely important aspect of health preservation.

### **4. Conclusion**

Humans are born between Heaven and Earth, precisely within the framework of "the Dao models itself on Nature". They act in accordance with Heaven, abide by the laws of Heaven and Earth, exist through the physical form and the Spirit, and attain the state where form and Spirit are inseparable-the state of "Unity of Form and Spirit". The way of health preservation is the sublimation of this state. The ultimate purpose of traditional medicine is health preservation: extending the length of life, broadening the breadth of life, and finally transcending the mundane to attain the merit of longevity with clear vision.

The vessels and Qi circulate within the body, maintaining the state of the physical form and preventing it from "partial flourishing (pian rong)" or "partial withering (pian ku)", thus providing a good dwelling environment for the Spirit. The Yin-Yang and Five Elements (Metal,

Wood, Water, Fire, Earth) of an individual are the foundation for ensuring that form and Spirit remain united. The generation of all things originates from the interaction of Yin and Yang Qi, and the fundamental attributes of all things are derived from the Five Elements.

This chapter serves a summarizing and inductive role in the full text; subsequent chapters elaborate on the core ideas of this chapter. Whether discussing the theory of vessels, Qi, or Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, the ultimate goal is to emphasize preserving the complete form, protecting the Spirit, achieving the Unity of Form and Spirit, and transcending the mundane realm.

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