

## **Inspiration and Expiration: the Lung and Large Intestine - Guardians and Servants of Creation**

*Honour the space between no longer and not yet.*

Nancy Levin

*Have you heard the one about the crisis meeting where the organs gathered to discuss who was boss?*

*The brain was first to speak. It pointed out its innate superiority in all things, its overriding importance in all matters and called the meeting to formally and summarily acknowledge its formal status as chief organ.*

*At which point the heart took the stage and argued, persuasively, that without its vital blood circulation, the brain would wither and die and that therefore it, the heart, should surely be conferred ruler status.*

*Things quickly descended into a less than polite shouting match with organs such as kidney and liver, even pancreas and thyroid arguing their own weighty merits for position as head of the organ hierarchy.*

*At the back of the room, smoking a leisurely cigarette and leaning against a wall, the colon sighed and said, as if to itself: "I'll just take a rest from duties for a few days till they come to their senses".*

The joke is a great way to rapidly bring perspective to similar arguments which tend to arise in Oriental medical circles. The legendary sage, Chuang Zi is credited with saying that he would not be able to choose which of his organs to lose – do they not all host vital functions? Surely then, to lose even one would be a catastrophe and to choose between their relative merits an impossibility.

In this light, consider just for a moment the relative status of the Heart and Small Intestine. Without the continual sacrifice of the lowly Small Intestine – routinely afforded what amounts to add-on status in Chinese medical texts – the Heart would not last five minutes. I exaggerate somewhat but you take the point, I hope.

Consider also the role of the much maligned appendix – the very name itself suggests an addendum lacking importance. Not true, I say. The appendix is identified within Ayurvedic medicine as a vital checkpoint between the functional zones of small and large intestine. It exists to check that no undigested food passes from the one to the other. I would argue that the function can be sketched even more broadly. The appendix in my experience is a detector of all toxic and inappropriate energy being passed either on a too regular or a too intense basis. Chinese medicine has, in silent recognition, awarded the appendix a special point on the right leg, one tsun below the very eminent

St 36. Needless to say, the point can be used for both diagnosis and treatment. It is very effective.

I write these lines at the very cusp of the Lung and Large Intestine time zones according to the Chinese meridian clock. The tone I have adopted here may seem slightly too defensive, perhaps even a tad aggressive. Why take that attitude? Surely the Lung and Large Intestine meridians are treated as equal members of the meridian community? Aren't they? In my experience – and I freely admit this may be a projection – they are not.

It seems to me that far more attention is awarded other, rather more glamorous meridians such as Heart, Kidney, Spleen and Liver. Pages of discussion are devoted to these meridians while the Yang meridians in general and the two meridians of the Metal element are routinely awarded far less. The staunch egalitarian within me reacts strongly to this. Clearly Chuang Zi had spotted a similar tendency in his own times, a mere two thousand years ago.

As practitioners of Oriental medicine, we instinctively react to what we perceive as nonchalant attitudes among conventional medical personnel – and the lay public – towards the extraction of say, the spleen or gall bladder, the uterus and ovaries, or even, in my case, the appendix. In doing so, are we not manifesting our instinct to defend all of the vital functions of all aspects of the system and place them on an essentially equal footing?

Take the term "Metal", as used to describe the set of functions and frequencies of the Lung and Large Intestine and their associated tissues, fluids, emotions and spiritual energies. The Chinese character used also means "gold" and "money", not just metal. How would our text books, noble commentaries and student essays look if the word gold was the accepted currency in the context of Lung and Large Intestine?

Let's be honest. As a word, "metal" has a host of cold and hard nuances resounding around it. Metal cuts through things. Yes, indeed. It encases things – no question about that. It separates very effectively, is enduring and it takes an awful lot of heat to melt. Those are all fine qualities but they are not especially endearing ones - strong and dependable but not very cuddly.

Even the timing – between three and seven in the morning seems as though designed to perpetuate obscurity and a role among the backstage staff (well, hello there Triple Heater, Gall Bladder, Small Intestine and Pericardium!)

Perhaps it has to do with the very *mortality* of the two meridians. We speak respectfully, almost reverently, of the "breath of life" but the heartbeat starts in utero way before the lungs come into action with that notorious first spank on the infant buttocks. (Note the strategic placing of that spank right down there at the exit of the colon... and why, incidentally, must we beat our children from the word go?) As if to set neatly matching mortality-themed bookends in place, it is traditionally held that the Po, the spirit energy of the metal phase, exits the anus at the death of the physical body, returning to the earth. This, while the Hun of the Wood phase in some sense continues to be active and the Shen of Fire returns to the eternal continuum of life.

Even the colour white, associated with the metal element, is the colour of death.

All very temporal, wouldn't you say? Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes.

Let us therefore return to the outset and our amusing little joke scenario and also its unstated yet inevitable corollary. We imagine ourselves in the skin of a person suffering from constipation. Not only do we lack a sense of flow and release, we feel blocked in, all "backed up". We begin to feel toxic, dirty, full of waste energy. We start to get headaches or perhaps feel lightheaded, conversely heavy and weighted down in the abdomen. Bloated, we lack flexibility and feel as though we are carrying around tons of extra body mass. Our neck and shoulders are stiff. We cannot think. We cannot breathe properly. In short – it's a nightmare.

Now, let us wave our magic wands and grant instant relief to our suffering mortal. The toilet is no longer seen as a place of toil and suffering but of lightness and release – a veritable haven. Our happy releasee, relieved of his burden, wanders away without a care in the world, breathes deeply and sees the world around him no longer as a labyrinth of tangled and insurmountable problems but as a paradise of infinite possibilities.

This of course is to exaggerate a scenario for didactic purposes. However, it is reality for a large number of people. The relief granted by regular and satisfying toilet visits is a privilege not to be taken for granted. The exact opposite scenario could as easily be summoned of course – diarrhea is still a dire enemy in some parts of the world. A friend of mine literally "shat away" his legs during a bout of winter flu.

And should we for a moment forget the importance of the lungs in all of this, we need only bear in mind the intolerable suffering of the asthmatic. An acquaintance of mine would regularly smash whole rooms to pieces in an attempt to get air into his lungs. There's destructive power for you.

Project these perhaps banal images onto a more general screen and imagine that probably one fifth of the world's population - there being *five* elements we are told – suffer from at least low-grade and subliminal dysfunction in the Large Intestine and Lung meridians. Imagine what that means.

Many years ago, a wise colleague of mine looked at me with tender concern while performing a Shiatsu abdominal diagnosis. I had, after a few minutes of palpation, succumbed to my curiosity and asked how the Kidney zone was looking. At the time, I was deeply affected by the enormous weight given to the Kidney meridian in TCM and was keen to hear that said zone was in the pink of health. My colleague asked me which meridian I would prefer to have my imbalance in if it was truly the case that the Kidney should at all costs be spared – the logical implication of my enquiry. I was at something of a loss of course but, floundering in ignorance, opined that well, something like Large Intestine would in all likelihood be preferable. It was at this point the compassion in his eyes lit up. He nodded and said that he would like to show me what twenty years of Large Intestine imbalance could do to a person...

Enough said of matters pathological for the time being perhaps. Let's flip the coin and look at my favourite side – the side where we get to discuss all the magical functions housed in these two mighty meridians.

A few weeks ago I had tentatively begun an attempt to collate an array of disparate texts into a composite and congruent whole. I was stymied and had asked a friend to take a look and see what he thought of the material. His feedback had been mildly encouraging but in no way substantial, providing neither direction nor specificity. I continued thinking about the project but with no clear idea of how to proceed.

Two nights later I awoke, sometime in the early hours of the morning. It was still dark, Sweden being in the far north and it being mid-winter. My mind switched sedately from dream state into a kind of relaxed thought flow. The first item on the agenda apparently, was a run through of the highly important soccer match I had seen the previous evening. The match had been a pleasing and satisfying experience, with Barcelona demonstrating fluid mastery and achieving a 3-1 victory and thereby first place in their Champions League qualifying group - all in all a wonderful item with which to kick off an early morning stream of consciousness.

The stream flowed on. The ideas now up for perusal were to do with the texts I had wanted to collate. The ideas began to flow in flawless sequential order – such that I could scarcely keep up with them. On and on they flowed until I lay there almost breathless, hardly daring to interrupt the flow of ideas and images in case I should sabotage it. Once the flow had slowed to a natural hiatus I arose, went to the kitchen, grabbed pen and paper and wrote.

The remarkable thing was that not only had my metal element expelled a well thought out plan for the materials in question, it had also planned a four workshop series for the coming spring term and half of a four-day workshop in the summer. I returned to bed, to sleep the sleep of the stunned and fulfilled, internally shaking my head in wonder at the speed and accuracy, the downright exactitude and abundance of the process I had just witnessed. What had happened and how?

This is how I rationalise it.

We know that the Liver and Gall Bladder, representatives of the very sexy Wood or Tree element, are responsible for vision. They "flower" into the eyes and their spiritual energy, the Hun, floats whenever possible out on a cloud, into realms of altered consciousness to bring home new ideas from other dimensions - in the form of dreams or in the form of intuitive solutions and innovative ideas. This we call creativity and one of the reasons we go to bed somewhere around 11 o'clock is to maximise the efficiency of these creative whizz kids. There is no need to exaggerate or be too rigid when we imagine what creativity might imply. It can be everything from painting the Sistine Chapel to creatively organising your kids' activities to maximise flow, enjoyment and innovation.

The Liver and Gall Bladder have their peak time between eleven at night and three in the morning. What happens next? Metal takes over. In come the boys in armour, with swords and shields at the ready. Heavy bunches of keys hanging from their studded

belts, the Lung and Large Intestine march in for their shift, place their helmets briefly on the table and take up their iron lanterns for a patrol of the boundaries. There is after all, no knowing what has been going on, who or what has been let into the castle while the Wood twins have been gallivanting around.

There are also plenty of loose threads to gather up and sort through after the cahoots of dream activities the whizz kids have chaotically sprayed around them. Who knows what nuggets of gold might be lying there, buried among weird odds and ends from the previous day's recollections and half-meaningful reminiscences from childhood?

Some shifts are pretty much routine – a little tidying up here, sweeping rubbish into the bin there, mending a small breach in the walls, oiling the gates, sealing the windows – just routine stuff.

Other shifts are marked from the very outset with a heightened sense of drama. It could be that old battles never really fought to satisfying completion have been replayed. Perhaps the end was more complete this time, more comforting, more conclusive. Or maybe those old sores simply got ripped open again and the wounds need to be patched up and tended, cleaned and sanitised, maybe even re-sealed for safety's sake.

Some shifts are dramatic for more positive reasons, more creative reasons. The Tree brothers have been having a real brain storm and have filled reels of film with exciting images, bursting at the seams with invention and innovation. All well and good but someone needs to do the editing and we all know who's in charge of the scissors, don't we?

Once in a while, the Wood workers manage to create something that is relatively cohesive and not too wildly erratic. Those shifts are the golden ones. The scissors come out but there is no need for metres of film to end up on the cutting floor. The job is swiftly done and achieved with a skilful economy only full-blooded professionals can hope to achieve. If the golden shift is a real success you may well be woken up for an express delivery – when that happens get ready to be rendered breathless.

This, I believe, is what I experienced that morning and it is not the first time it has happened – although it is in all likelihood the most dramatic and productive. During the following day I tweaked the product delivered but in essence the job had already been done. It was a *fait accompli* in the very finest sense. As I marvelled at the occurrence, a new banner unfolded in my consciousness: "Guardians and Servants of Creation".

The beauty and harmony of the partnership between Wood energies and the energies of Metal have never been demonstrated so flawlessly for me. I have long regarded them as polar and complementary but never guessed the depth, the power and the magnitude of the work they were capable of achieving in tandem.

I have on the contrary, tended to focus on the pathology following from the split which can occur in certain individuals. When these energies *fail* to interlock productively, they can leave people defenseless and insomniac, wading through swamps of negative thoughts, memories and failures as the Tree twins angrily clock off, storming out in a

wind of frustration as the metal boys clock on with sullen, stomping, hob-nailed gracelessness.

The jarring dischord that can arise between these two very different energetic tendencies creates a rift that is swiftly and inexorably filled with misery. In Swedish they call the time from three o'clock onwards the "wolf hours" or the "blue hours", the implication being that it is not a good idea to be awake just then for the result can only be painful and negative.

Indeed who among us has not experienced this once or twice in our lives? We lie awake – wide awake – and seem to churn through a catalogue of failure, negativity and dead ends. Nothing seems to be encouraging, everything points downhill towards futility and fruitlessness. Consolation is nowhere to be found.

This negativity is real and not to be trivialised. The responsibility for it should however, be apportioned correctly. It is not solely the fault of the hapless metal workers – the wood twins have just as much of a share in the morass. It is almost certainly the split, the tension between Tree and Metal energies that produces this sorrowful quagmire but it is usually Lung and Large Intestine who get the blame, since the conflict happens to play itself out on their watch.

If we switch back to the happy and harmonious scenario where Tree and Metal energies complement each other, we can begin to explore the sense of the slogan that opened itself up to my inner eye that day: guardians and servants of creation.

In our nocturnal dreamwork scene we noted their complementary actions with the Liver and Gall Bladder working their creative wizardry and the Lung and Large Intestine meridians then taking charge and making sense of the work done: ordering and structuring, teasing and tweaking, cutting and readjusting, framing and encasing, slicing and sequencing.

We see that the energy of metal is able to claim and protect the valuable work done and then polish it to an ordered perfection. Metal can be seen as the exact counterpart of Wood and while perhaps lacking its creative spark has on the other hand all the tools necessary to complete the work then frame, hang and sell it. It thus serves the creative force and, by giving a framework, offers a safe and protective casing: servant and guardian.

If that seems like an unfair bargain then one might reflect on the position of artists throughout the ages – invariably poverty struck and scorned in their own lifetimes, only to be praised and heralded after the fact once safely buried in a pauper's grave. The wealthy patrons who posed for their portraits or commissioned grand works of art meanwhile get fat and reap the benefits. Better to have a guardian who is also a servant of the creative act of living, who also has a vested interest in the creative work being fully utilised in the most efficient way possible.

Let's extend this now by re-introducing the first half of this article's title: "Inspiration and Expiration". These are the French terms for inhalation and exhalation and they are highly symbolic in our present context. Inspiration – air comes in, fuel is provided for the creative processes everywhere in the body, mind and spirit. Expiration – metal knows when something is finished. It breathes out a sigh of completion, cutting the thread at the right place and tailoring the suit to perfection. Processes that drag on too long can lack the fulfilment of timely completion, while sudden or abrupt endings deny us true satisfaction.

This rhythmic quality that metal energy adds to our lives is like the tides that surround our land masses – in and out, back and forth, opening and closing. These are primal actions that repeat themselves without ceasing but are seldom noticed except by those whose job it is to monitor time and tide or else when they are disrupted... asthma, constipation, diarrhea – we notice only when the rhythm fails.

Part of this rhythmic quality we can assign to the metallic gift of separating the wheat from the chaff, its ability to move in tune with time. We often call this "letting go" and "clearing space"; welcoming the new by discarding the old, used, broken or soiled.

Think of it this way. If the cupboards in your home are full to overflowing, the loft space is full and the cellar is crammed to the extent that you can barely enter; if every available storage space is used, then it is undoubtedly time to start discarding. How do we do this?

We make piles.

One pile is for the things we definitely want to keep. We keep things because they are at least potentially useful or because we are attached to them for emotional reasons. In an ideal situation we keep things that resonate with positive emotional memories: good times. In a less than ideal one, we keep all sorts of stuff simply because we have not been able to keep up with the rhythm of the times and our separation function has stopped working.

Another pile begins to form - hopefully - this one comprised of items from which we can easily separate. Here we find stuff that is either broken, malfunctioning, otherwise useless or directly polluting in an emotional, mental or spiritual sense: "shit". We all know what is supposed to happen to shit, don't we?

So far so good. There is however, one more pile. This one we can call: "not sure", "grey area" or "bordeline". Here are the things from which we are as yet only able to half-separate. Depending on the kind of person doing the exercise, this can turn out to be the biggest pile of all.

In a best case scenario, we can allow this middle pile to grow naturally and then return to it once the main sorting is completed. Then we do the whole thing once more but this time, if we are lucky, with a reduced amount of stuff. Still, the process can be expected to follow approximately the same stages - three piles once again form and the middle pile will have to be subjected to the exact same process one more time. And so on and so forth.

An optimally functioning metal element need never let things go this far of course but how often is life optimal? No, we take it as we find it and as often as not we get around to a real discarding event like this maybe once every few years. Really tip-top metal people can do this as they walk and talk - their eyes are trained to pick up on accumulating stuff and instantly compute whether what they are seeing is really useful or simply just shit. This can easily go to extremes as well. If this cleaning function gets out of hand we are in for a very tough time indeed. Many are the examples who spring to mind of people who become too fussy, who simply can't stand mess of any kind and clear up stuff that is actually sitting just where it should be and is ready for use.

We have all known individuals who go into overdrive and can't stop cleaning either themselves or their environment or both. Too much is as bad as too little and does no one any good in the long run. The atmosphere becomes brittle around such people in just the way it can become too sluggish, stuck, heavy and congested in a person whose Lung and Large Intestine (especially the latter) have been on go-slow for too long.

An often unnamed but essential part of this scenario is what we might call judgement or perhaps *discernment*, the gift of being able to discriminate and leave aside the unnecessary. Easier said than done, I hear you say and I can only agree. Some have this almost innate instinct to brush things off, to almost instantly know what is needed and what is completely superfluous.

A good engineer in a recording studio has exactly this kind of quality - especially when the artists recording are too close to their material and have become stuck and clogged in the process. Brian Eno, a man with startling metal qualities, invented the 'Oblique Strategies' flash cards for exactly this purpose. "Think fresh", "create a new perspective" or simply "get some fresh air" are often the essence of the suggestions appearing through a process of pure 'chance' as the cards are consulted.

We have already investigated the image of dream movie cutters in an earlier part of this article and we recognise the same qualities being applied in this scenario.

Imagine a hand opening and closing, rhythmically and freely. First the hand is held in a loose fist. It is closed, holding. Smoothly it opens. It lets go. It allows release and in the same instant, fresh input. The new energy is welcomed and the hand closes again. Repeat until death do us part.

Think of a bellows being opened to suck in and then being closed to discharge a powerful surge of air - fuel for the flagging fire. Such is the power and pulse of the metal element. It is not part of the fire but is nevertheless essential to its growth and development. Anyone who has camped outdoors or made a bonfire without gasoline will recognise the truth of this. When your breath is honed and directed - and dry - it becomes the fire's best friend and closest ally. The fledgling flames that once licked powerlessly gain appetite and strength. They begin to lick hungrily at the dried grass and wood, to engulf and consume them.

And so we come to the somewhat delicate subject of detachment. This word arouses remarkably different feelings and associations depending on the audience. Buddhists relish the clean tasting freshness of the word. Head coaches try hard to banish it from



the hearts and minds of players facing a powerful opponent - "get in there and fight" is the admonition used. Passion is invoked.

But a bellows must necessarily stay out of range of the fire. Remember to keep your lips at a safe distance from the flames as you blow, for the fire will otherwise not hesitate to scorch them.

We speak of distance and this can seem cold. It can sound like a force which encourages withdrawal and limits engagement. When we use the word "witness", it can sometimes be taken to mean an emotional numbness incapable of empathy. Then we add "equanimity" and realise that it denotes not numbness but the ability to witness with clear-eyed detachment. It seems to indicate a person able to balance on a scale where the gaze is neither averted to conceal nor directly engaged with emotions that would hasten to judge too harshly.

With this quality we move into the outward manifestation of metal energy in its ability to cleanly and clearly isolate direction, thus providing leadership - pointing the way with clarity and unified purpose.

When the strictly necessary and beneficial is included and the outmoded, disfigured and irrelevant are discarded, then we may proceed on our chosen path without interference - either internal or external.

Until the next clearing phase becomes necessary.