

just as the seasons of fall and winter do not compare unfavorably to spring and summer. Since the ancient pictogram for winter represents the image of a bottled-up sun, a paraphrased interpretation of the Chinese term *dong* (winter) could be “where the movement of the sun comes



to an end by going into storage, so that the cycle of life can continue once again.” The story of aging, therefore, is about the evolution toward a state of inner enlightenment and eventual rebirth, and the associated spiritual journey of surrendering all attachment to material possessions, including the youthful predilection for the vigor and prowess of the physical body.

Certain sources have described the active yang phase of this universal movement as *shen* 伸 (stretching out) and the passive yin phase as *gui* 歸 (returning inward), definitions that later merged with the homophonic mythopoeia *shen* 神 (solar light spirits) and *gui* 鬼 (nocturnal lunar demons). While the connotations of the latter generally invite the common bias toward the dynamic aspects of youth on one hand and prejudice against the outward decline of old age on the other, its original message is clearly impartial: all existence in the universe remains equally balanced between the processes of light and dark, active and passive, spring(ing up) and fall(ing down), and male and female. From this perspective, aging is likened to the reflective quality of the moon and the distinctly feminine quality of “letting be,” as opposed to the withdrawal into the dimming lights of “hell” portending impotence and senility.¹ It is important to note in this context that the Chinese term for

demon connotes an inappropriate attachment to the realm of the corporeal, describing the “ghost” of an overly attached ego that keeps hovering above the haunts of the physical body after death. If, by extension, someone in the letting-go phase of life stays farcically attached to the appearance of youth, s/he would take on the qualities of a ghost-like existence.

In the most general terms, the Chinese notion of aging can be summarized as the spiritual evolution toward a state of consciousness that exchanges a strongly guarded sense of self for the age related values of community, humility, and tradition. By no means, therefore, is the ancient Chinese quest for immortality limited to the predictable mechanical techniques aimed at keeping the physical body alive. “Who stays attached to the status quo may live long,” stated the *Daodejing* 2,500 years ago, “but who practices dying without vanishing lives forever.”²

The Chinese science of longevity thus entails a set of guiding principles for the cultivation of harmony at a time when the animal part of the human being undergoes a gradual drop in physical vitality. The nature of these principles can be understood best by examining the microcosmic organ networks associated with those positions on the macrocosmic dial that are situated at and beyond the high point of the movement—the positions where the momentum of the life force begins to move downward and inward. They are comprised of the following: the point of the summer solstice during the 5th lunar month (approximately the domain of Cancer), or high noon, associated with the heart; the point of the 6th lunar month (approximately the domain of Leo), or 1-3 pm, associated with the small intestine; the point of the 7th lunar month (approximately the domain of Virgo), or 3-5 pm, associated with the bladder; and the point of the autumnal equinox during the 8th lunar month (approximately the domain of Libra), or sunset time (5-7 pm), associated with the kidney.³ The following discussion examines the concept of aging through the multi-layered symbolism associated with these four networks of classical Chinese medicine, and the correlated ritual states of turning inward, sacrificing, bowing, and