

On Turtles

I frequently walk past King's Pond on the north end of Cedar Hill Golf course, stopping to enjoy the interesting variety of birds congregated in and around the pond, including mallards, wigeons, wood and ring-neck ducks. When the weather starts to warm up during spring another resident of King's Pond starts to reappear, the turtle. On a sunny day, I often see 7 or 8 of them lined up on the log float that's anchored in the middle of the pond. The turtles are lazily sunbathing and warming themselves, sometimes with one turtle half resting on its neighbour in a friendly fashion. The other day I took a photo of one turtle who decided to sit on a rock near the foot path. Turtles usually bring a smile to my face whenever I see them.



This got me thinking about turtle lore in ancient China and how they were used and still used in traditional Chinese medicine. I recall seeing the Turtle Dragon statue (Bíxí in Chinese pinyin) in the Forbidden City in Beijing and marveling at this mythical creature half turtle and half dragon. The Turtle Dragon is said to be a symbol of courage, longevity and good luck. It is used in traditional feng shui (geomancy) and is widely seen in temples, tombs, courtyards and other auspicious locations throughout China.





Bixi or Turtle Dragon in the Forbidden City

Looking far back in time, the ordinary turtle was once used for shamanic divination during and possibly before the Shang Dynasty (1600 - 1046 BCE). The shamans of the ancient past would heat turtle shells in coals or with hot irons and then interpret the unique patterns of cracks that appeared. This practice evolved over time to include written characters inscribed onto the shells before they were heated and read. These characters refer to the nature of the inquiry sought and the person's name requesting the divination. Today, examples of ancient *oracle bones* are found in many museums in China.



Shang Dynasty Shell Oracle

After the Shang Dynasty, reading the crack lines on oracle bones was gradually replaced by a new form of divination. Reading patterns of thrown dried yarrow sticks eventually evolved into the modern use of throwing coins, in a system of choosing a hexagram to interpret for the questioner. The interpretation and meaning of these hexagram symbols were eventually codified into a classic commentary known as the Book of Changes or I Ching (Yìjīng in pinyin). This shift from reading lines on shells and bones to written symbols corresponded to a movement in ancient society from shamanism towards a more scholarly approach.

The I Ching system of divination is based on 64 hexagrams, that were individually interpreted in reference to the question or concern being asked. A hexagram consists of combinations of two trigrams, with each trigram made up of three lines of solid  or broken  lines. Trigrams have only 8 possible combinations of broken and solid lines, and these 8 foundational trigrams form the basis of the entire system of 64 hexagrams (i.e. mathematically 8 x 8). The building blocks of solid and broken lines of the I Ching system can be likened to the modern binary system used in computer programming! Indeed, many mathematicians and computer scientists have been inspired by this ancient system. Can we thank the humble turtle for the very beginnings of our modern digital age!?



Eight Trigram around the Yin-Yang Symbol

In today's China the common turtle is still being praised as a symbol of long life, endurance, fertility, and a happy household. The turtle with its auspicious virtues and unique healing properties continues to be used as both food and medicine, as well as in moxibustion treatment.

According to Chinese medicine the turtle shell is said to nourish the Yin and subdue Yang, to soften hardness and disperse nodules, as well it can strengthen the Kidneys. I remember seeing turtle shells being used in the out-patient acupuncture clinic at the Guan An Men hospital back in 1982 when I studied in China. For example, patients with prostate problems were treated with moxa (the dried plant artemisia) burnt over a turtle shell resting on a bed of salt lying on top of the lower abdomen! Both teachers and patients claimed it was very effective.

I don't use that technique myself, nor do I advocate using animal parts in traditional Chinese medicine, as there are many alternatives to their use today. I would prefer seeing turtles live in nature to their full years. I believe we can engender the turtle's qualities in other ways. One method that I use is an old acupuncture technique called the *Magic Turtle on the Navel* which I learned in China. I was told this technique dates back many hundreds of years, its origins lost to history.

In the Magic Turtle technique, 8 needles are placed around the navel in a specific geometric pattern. The navel or umbilicus is called Spirit's Palace Gate (shénquè in pinyin) and in traditional thought, it is through this opening that the life force and Spirit enters the body during fetal development. This treatment is used to unblock the life force or Qi, as well as to regulate the abdominal organs, and most importantly, to reconnect with our formative, embryonic forces to promote longevity, endurance and happiness. In my experience, the Magic Turtle technique is very powerful and deeply healing, and is indicated for those who may suffer from irretractable digestive and reproductive issues to perinatal birth trauma. The 8 points harken back to the 8 trigrams of the I Ching and represent the mythic turtle with all its enduring qualities.

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