The Shaman;s Initiation and Healing the Liver

Kathleen Downey

My experience and training in cross-cultural Shamanic healing traditions has offered me miraculous personal healing from illness and imbalance from the crippling effects of a herniated disc to cancer and Lyme disease. Thus allowing me to recognize that the health of the physical body is directly related to the health and balance of the spiritual/energetic body. Amongst a myriad of personal knowledge and profound experiences gained I have recognized that healing the liver and its energy is the first step in both the physical and emotional/spiritual healing process. It appears to have been the first step towards personal realization and empowerment in the traditions of the Shaman cross-culturally for thousands of years. Unfortunately the Shaman’s healing traditions have been passed down orally since aboriginal times, historians and anthropologist believe it dates back as far as twenty five to thirty thousand years. Therefore, apart from what we refer to as “Mythical” stories from different cultures, it is difficult to obtain specific recorded information on this ancient healing practice. However, In Chinese medicine and philosophy traditions, of which records can be traced back as far as the fifth century B.C. , concepts of the “spirit” are an integral part of diagnosis and treatment. The methods may vary, the Shaman does not use any intrusive measures to attain his/her goal in healing it is based entirely within the understanding of the spiritual life involved and endeavoring to reach the core of the issue, however, they are both, the Chinese Acupuncturist and the Shaman, induced to heal the spiritual/energetic imbalance of the illness. In order to best describe the interplay between physical illness and spirit or energy functions we will begin by looking at the diagnosis related to Chinese Medicine. Thereafter we will see the part that spirit plays in illness and unbalance and the healing I have personally experienced particular to the way of the Shaman.

The mechanical/ physical function of the liver is to filter the body’s toxins, constitutionally it is the strongest system. The liver is more capable of restoring itself than any other Organ. The energetic/emotional function of the liver (according to Chinese medicine) is similar in that it copes with any noxious emotional stimuli. Chinese medicine indicates that the liver is especially endowed in that it “stores the Blood.” This means that the liver energies, based on their advantageous Blood supply, play a major part in the movement and circulation of Qi (life force) and the prevention of stagnation. It’s rich blood supply also enables the Liver to nourish ligaments and tendons and make the body a lithe machine for work and defense. Liver Yin (Yin seen as body essence a “receptive” energy) controls the ligaments and tendons, including the muscular innervation of the eye: and Liver Yang (Yang seen as spirit-soul an “active” energy) controls, in the same fashion, the nervous system.

“Reversible pathway” refers to a principle of Chinese medicine in which the energy condition of an Organ System may influence the mental and emotional condition of a person, while at the same time, or at any time, the latter may be either stimulating or suppressing the energy function of an organ. Classical Chinese Medicine asserts that a particular emotion and a particular energy Organ system are inextricably linked in this manner. Tension, anger, frustration, suppression, repression and stress in general interplay with the Liver Organ System and the functions we have just described.

Emotion immediately contacts the Nervous System and several events are set into motion. To begin with, the Liver nourishes the Nervous System and is called upon to increase the amount of blood in the circulation to meet its obligation. The increased tension in the Nervous System may, under normal circumstances, be released through verbal expression or physical activity, thus restoring homeostasis. If speech is used, the Heart Organ System will be engaged. If physical activity solves the problem the Liver itself, as “controller” of the ligaments and tendons, the Lung as receiver of the Qi (life force), and the Heart Organ System (circulation) will all make a contribution.

If the tension or energy that initially creates hyperactivity of the Nervous System is not released, the latter will continue to call upon the Liver for added nourishment. The musculo-skeletal system, which is unable to respond to the call for release, will hold the tension and gradually also require more nourishment. Both of these systems will call upon the Liver to empty its stored Blood for their use. The Liver will slowly find that it has inadequate supplies left for its own recovery and for its many other functions. In such a situation, the energy that the Liver cannot recycle and renew becomes noxious energy; and, because the Liver is associated with “free flowing” of the Qi, this noxious energy will affect many parts of the body. Inhibition of the flow of Qi will create stagnation and pain in vulnerable areas.

At the same time the circulatory system is constricted peripherally by the mechanical tension in the muscles. Internally, the noxious Qi (lactic acid and its metabolites, such as acetaldehyde) stimulates circulatory centers, such as the carotid sinus, and the autonomic Nervous System centers, such as the sino-auricular node. The result is increasing blood pressure, which, in addition to affecting the Heart, causes the blood to be pushed too quickly through the Liver. This rapid passage of blood, as well as general overwork, first causes the Liver to develop “Strong Heat” and, over a period of time, “Weak Heat.”

The latter is analogous to the heat of friction in an engine that is working beyond it’s capacity.

This Odyssey leads us to a depleted Liver no longer capable of storing blood. The complex glucose buffering action of the Liver is disturbed, leading to hyperglycemia and many allergies.

Some of the consequences of Liver Organ System disharmony, according to Chinese medicine, are mental irritation, depression and anger, causing a diminishing of the free flowing of the Qi in the Liver and the Qi in other vulnerable parts of the body. The gastrointestinal tract is often most immediately affected by this stagnation. Along with the Liver-Gallbladder, some of the symptoms are pain and distention of the hypochondrium (which is referred to the chest, back, or scapula), stiffness in the chest, sighing, sensation of a foreign body in the throat, anorexia, belching, sour regurgitation and hiccough. Sudden explosive diarrhea is another expression of Liver Qi attacking the Spleen-Pancreas constellation of functions - in this case the Large Intestine. The stagnation of the Qi, or noxious energy also effects the genito-urinary system, the symptoms are irregular menstruation, pain before menstruation, headache, and easy irritability. As the disease process progresses it will cause a depletion of the Yin of the Kidney, which supports the Liver. Some of these symptoms will include headache, vertigo, tinnitus, deafness, insomnia, amnesia, numbness and tremors of the extremities, hypertension, neurosis, hyperthyroidism and facial paralysis. More severe syndromes can lead to stroke.

With the exception of the Spleen, all Organ Systems that begin in a relative state of health will produce Strong Heat in the early stages of distress as they attempt to overcome stagnation. As the Yin ( body essence) of an Organ System is depleted, it will require reinforcements, which are supplied by the water element, the Kidney Organ System. The Kidney Yang (spirit/soul or active energy) is the source of will power for the entire organism. When the Liver is under stress due to the repression of anger or other feelings, Kidney Yang may contribute its energies by reinforcing the will to express those feelings and to overcome the fear which has caused the repression. Should the conflict between fear of expression and the will to assert oneself become chronic, the Kidney Yang will suffer, leading to depression. The Kidney Organ System in its traditional role has a psychological vulnerability to fear. The repression of feeling, leading to stagnation of Qi (life force), is often founded on fear.

The Acupunturist will stimulate points on meridians of the body with needles in order to release energy in an attempt to move the Qi.

When the Shaman is the healer you participate in your healing by experiencing the core reason for the emotions that cause imbalance within the spirit body which manifests, as described above, as imbalance within the physical body. The organs, described above, live within the energy field of the solar plexus, heart and abdomen. The Shaman recognizes, when clearing the auric field for healing, that the solar plexus is where we hold the idea of our identity through ego. Who we believe we are by what we have experienced and energetically inherited within the family traditions, this being the core issue associated with family members inheriting similar diseases, and, what we have experienced in the memory of our soul, memories even our organs hold, our familiar. This is why in many of the “Mythical” stories from different cultures dissociation from the hubris of the ego is described as the liver being torn apart as when Prometheus had his liver torn out by Zeus’s eagle or when Medusa was beheaded. Osiris was dimembered and put together again by the love Isis bore him. This being torn apart or experiencing body dismemberment is still practiced today on a spiritual/energetic level by Shamans. It is designed to help the person release the belief of who he/she is, the ego, and build a new belief system that better serves them. Our abdomen holds the seat of the soul and our past that we have a tendency to strongly hold onto as that is all we can reference as being real. Holding onto traumatic events and energy that brings anger, frustration, repression ect. from the situation in the past back into the picture of the present does not serve us. The heart is the key, an open heart to learning what these patterns that bring frustration and pain into our lives are so that we may heal them and let go of who we believe we are and what we believe we need in order to become who we were meant to be.

It’s easy to state these words and write them down it is not so easy to own them and live them. Unconditional love for ourselves and others is a difficult road to live on and follow. The work of the Shaman and the experience it affords has taken us as human beings down this road for centuries and will help us to stay on it if we allow ourselves this. We have, as a culture in the present, looked for love by looking for someone who will suffer for us and live through our trauma for us or to re-live our trauma with us thus we call in our familiar. The Shaman who is well trained suffers for you, feels every emotional and physical pain you have suffered during the journey on your behalf and then brings back the energy you have lost through this trauma, pure energy. Thus supporting you in your qwest to deal with, overcome and finally surpass the traumatic experiences you and your soul have lived through at which time you will allow yourself to step surefooted into the unknown and trust that you will learn how to fly or be supported.

From a Shamanic perspective there are three reasons for illness; the first cause being power loss, losing the connection to our true selves through the spirit of nature, the second partial Soul loss, losing part of our vitality and essence due to trauma or Soul theft, when others feed off of us energetically and the third intrusion, in some cases intrusions in the spirit body are caused by negative thought forms that we can, in some cases, create ourselves.

I would like to share my first experience with the Shamanic Journey process as an example of how energy can be released within the experience of your spirit life. At the time that I met a Shamanic practitioner I was involved daily with healing my body in a year where I was burdened with a myriad of illness that seemed to escalate rapidly. Beginning with a herniated disc in my lower spine which kept me crippled for many months I then developed asthma, third degree conjunctivitis, colon cancer which was fortunately caught early on and then Lyme disease.

I unequivocally understood the immediacy of my need to surrender the anger and repression that had unbalanced the liver energies so that I would heal. At the moment that I fully understood this the opportunity arose to find exactly what I was looking for. I found an acupuncturist, who while working on me couldn’t find a release for this same stuck blood situation described above. I looked at him and said, “This is not physical, this is spiritual.” Hearing this declaration along with information on my, now, two experiences with “near” death he took out a drum and started to beat it. Spontaneously I started to have visions. He came back from a shamanic journey taken on my behalf with information that led me to begin my process of healing through this ancient spiritual practice.

The initiatory journey practiced today is the same that was practiced thousands of years ago. It is the journey to meet the animal guiding spirit or power animal that your soul is symbolically connected to. It is a guiding and protective spirit that has been with you throughout this lifetime although you may be unaware of it. During this journey I was immediately met by my primary power animal, the eagle, who escorted me to a healing circle that was taking place in a desert landscape that seemed to be in the New Mexico/Arizona areas of this country. There were indigenous peoples dressed in full regalia dancing around a person on a slab of stone, a fire burning nearby. I hovered above the scene as I was taken there in flight with the Eagle. Upon closer look I recognized the person on the slab of stone.

With no time to consider why I might be seeing this person on this, my first journey for spiritual empowerment and healing through the initial meeting with my power animal. I cannot articulate exactly how we exchanged spirits, or how I entered into his spirit body however, I did. Thereafter I immediately started to experience the traumas in this person’s life as his soul experienced them. Regressing through time from his present age of seventy into younger adulthood and married life, as father of seven and then a young man, until childhood and infancy. All the while my body took on the effects of his traumas. I could feel my liver quivering and convulsing throughout as if it would jump out of my body. My body temperature rose steadily until I felt that the physical manifestation of this emotional pain would explode from the fire that burned in me/him. Finally, as my journey met with the time before this person was born all convulsions stopped the stream of burning tears ceased and I met blissful peace.

I had suffered through the emotional and physical traumas of the person who’s energy I had taken on as a child and released it. Within thirty hours I released the tumor in my colon and stopped having the fevers I had, for five months, been continuously encountering with Lyme disease. I had been given the opportunity to understand first hand someone else’s suffering and thus felt compassion and love that I had not been able to feel before for that person. At the same time I was able to release the energy of anger and repression that that person brought to my life. This was my initiation as a Shaman, this healed my liver energy and put me on the road to seeing with my heart in the way of the Shaman.

Since this initiatory journey and the miraculous healing I recieved I have dedicated my life to training in this original spiritual practice for healing myself, others and the planet. During one of the many expeditions I took on this healing practice I met with an Altaic Shaman who approached me about my Shamanic experiences. After hearing about my initial journey she informed me that, according to her traditions, healing the liver was the first step one must take in becomming a Shaman or Shamanka.

Kathleen Downey is practicing Shamanic healing work in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, CA at 858 646-9808, and in Boulder, CO at 303 449-1349

Copyright 2003, Kathleen Downey