A Time for Tea

Chinese herbalist, Frances Turner, speaks to Tricia Bullen about Chinese philosophy, nourishing life (*yang sheng*) and how Daoism has impacted on her life and work... over a lovely pot of tea.

As Fran poured hot water into a very small glass teapot over a handful of tea leaves she explained that what we were about to drink was Rock Oolong, ideal for what I was about to experience – my first Chinese Tea Ceremony. As a Chinese Herbalist, Fran uses tea in her cooking and herb classes as well as in prescriptions for her clients. She explained how tea works on an energetic level:

'Tea is like any other herb – its qi interacts with the human being in a very specific way. There are many different types of tea but they all come from the same plant. They are different because of where they are grown and the way they are prepared, so they have different energetic qualities. There is a huge body of knowledge about the energetic qualities of plants and how we interact with them. When I conduct a tea ceremony we compare different types of tea. For me Rock Oolong is quite meditative but when I drink green tea it is very buzzy and makes my energy go up. This movement of qi is completely energetic. Rock Oolong makes me feel calm and clear. With coffee, for example, I feel hyper. But sometimes I really want coffee. And this illustrates my relationship with yang sheng – I will sometimes have a cup of coffee, but at other times it might not be what I need.'

I didn't really understand. I thought that coffee was bad and that it should be avoided, but Fran explained how yang sheng is not about labelling things as good or bad:

'*Yang* means "to nourish" and *sheng* means "life" so yang sheng is to "nourish life." It is a broad subject which includes what we eat and how we breathe. From the Chinese medical perspective there are two functions of the body most closely associated with absorbing, or taking in, qi: the spleen absorbs the qi from food and the lungs take in qi from the air. Other things nourish us too, like meditation. As far as I am concerned that is a really important part of yang sheng. So, the two main areas of interest for me are meditation and food.

'Yang sheng is preventative medicine, so it is about what we can do ourselves to prevent the loss of our *jing*, or vital essence. Jing is the precious energy or subtle substance that we are born

with, and if you inherit good jing then you will be healthy. But we can also affect jing by what we do on a day to day basis. It is suggested that we can't replenish our inherited jing – it is used up as we go through life, and this is the ageing process – but by using nourishing life practices, it is possible to preserve our jing. For example, if you are tired and have a cup of coffee you are using the coffee to dig into your deep energy reserves – to give you more energy than you really have. The more you do that, the more quickly you will age. But there may be cases when drinking coffee is yang sheng. Coffee has a bitter taste, which helps the qi to descend, it aids digestion and generally helps to circulate qi in the body. So having a small coffee after a meal can be quite useful. So, nothing is good and nothing is bad. It's about finding out what effect things have on you and how to navigate that.'

But it can be difficult to notice the effect things have on us. Fran agreed to illustrate her point over another pot of tea. She asked me to smell and then drink the tea again, but this time to try to notice how the tea made me feel in my body. The first time I breathed in the vapours from the cup there was movement inside me, a more outward movement and when I smelled it again it felt more like a downward movement and a greater sense of calm. It was very interesting, as I had never paid so much attention to a sip of tea before. It really opened my eyes to the opportunities that are always around us to experience the world in a new way.

'Imagine how if we really put our attention on things what information we can actually get,' said Fran, 'especially as different people can feel different things. There are certain things which have very specific energetic qualities and everyone agrees on them. For example, if people taste horseradish they all agree it tastes pungent and spicy. But if people taste rice some people might find it more warming and some more cooling, as it depends on the body type.'

I was beginning to understand that nourishing life is about observing your reactions to things. But in my own cultivation I find it can be difficult to tell the difference between the part of me

Fran explains the qualities of tea

which needs genuine nourishment and the part of my conditioned self that craves something to feed an addiction. Fran explained that addiction is also something that can be observed:

'There are some things which are really addictive; you want them but you are not really listening to your body. The craving is happening because your body has a distorted qi pattern. It's the same as when we are sitting in meditation. The qi pattern is distorted, but a part of us wants to maintain that crooked qi pattern, because it is familiar and comfortable. I struggle a lot with sugar. I have had to recognise that I have an addiction to sugar and that I just can't have it. When I feel I want sugar, I know it is just the distorted qi pattern in action!'

Fran suggested that many things that do not nourish our lives may be part of our cultural conditioning. The desire to fit into society, or with our peer group, can be stronger than the desire to nourish ourselves. Fran recognises this as an issue, and wants to be able to help people through her work.

'A few of us have just opened a complementary health clinic in our local community centre in Cholsey, which has a herbal dispensary and rooms for acupuncture and various types of massage. I would like to explore yang sheng with young people in the community, to encourage them to think about it for themselves, and to help

empower them to keep themselves well. This is something we can all learn to do, and lifestyle factors like healthy dietary choices, or jing nourishing exercises such as taiji or qigong, are really helpful. Meditation, of course, is key, but each person has to find out what is right for them at this moment.'

I felt that Fran had helped me to understand that in nourishing life practices, all things can be good at the right time and for the right person. But I did wonder whether it would be easier to live somewhere like China where these philosophies come from. Fran didn't think so:

'If you want to know about classical Chinese medicine, you can find quite a lot out about it in the West, because people from the West have been going to China and badgering the old doctors for their teachings. Classically, the way to look at the properties of herbs is through their taste, movement and temperature and if you know those three things about a herb you can derive its action. But in modern Chinese culture there is now a more material way of looking at things. The energetic way comes from ancient China not modern China. What is being taught there in the universities now is not generally the old way.'

She continued by explaining more about the main principles which underlie her classical teaching in Chinese medicine:

'When an acupuncturist inserts a needle, that needle is an invitation for the person's qi pattern to change. But sometimes you need to introduce something a little bit more. We can affect our energy by ingesting certain substances, so through food and herbs you are affecting the qi pattern via the digestive tract. From the dispensary in our new clinic, I give clients a mix of herbs or I advise on which herbs to use in their cooking – one of the easiest ways to use herbs is as a stock."

Fran showed me her dispensary, which was filled with hundreds of jars containing hundreds of herbs. She showed me Chinese Barley, or Jobs Tears (*yi yi ren*), which she might prescribe for someone with a damp and hot body type to help transform damp-heat and strengthen their digestion:

'It can be put into food like a congee (rice porridge) or a casserole. Ginger is a core Chinese medicine herb, and is used fresh (*sheng jiang*) or dried (*gan jiang*). It is hot and pungent, and warms the spleen and lungs. Fresh, it circulates round the body and is well known for stopping nausea, while dried it sits in the centre of the body and warms strongly. Red and black dates (*hong zao, da zao*) supplement the qi, and have a sweet flavour that is easy to use in stocks and stews, and codonopsis (*dang shen*) is another sweet herb that lends itself to cooking because when cooked it becomes soft and tasty, whereas some other herbs are rather woody and although they can be used for stocks they are not so good just thrown into a stew.

'Herbs can be helpful to nourish deficiencies a person might have. Many people in the West are deficient, because our lifestyle compromises our energy in continually more and more inventive ways. Generally in our culture there is an excess of yang and we tend not to nourish the yin aspect of ourselves enough. As a society we value speed, excitement, youth, achievement, accumulation, socialising – generally going out and doing things, always going faster and getting more. These attributes are associated with yang, while yin attributes such as rest, relaxation, sleep, daydreaming, being alone, or simply being, tend to be labelled as unproductive, unsociable, boring or even lazy.

'However, in the Chinese medicine way of thinking, yin and yang have to be balanced. Take, for example, somebody who works long hours on a computer, has a terrible diet and is always drinking coffee, then relaxes in front of the television at night. Coffee is yang, and tends to get that person going faster, but the price is that over time this uses up the yin. This person typically becomes increasingly dependent on coffee to get going, and this is a vicious cycle. Then the computer screen has a continuous fast vibration (yang), and if working on the computer is excessive, it can cause heat in the body that again can damage the yin, especially of the eyes and upper body. Because they are sitting down all day they are not moving their qi, which means stagnation will occur, which again causes heat that over time will burn up the yin. TV is probably the worst kind of relaxation for someone like this, as again it is about sitting still in front of that yang electronic vibration.

'The diet common to our contemporary world tends to be very high in sugars (not only sweets and cakes but also white bread and pasta) and meat, and rather low in fresh vegetables. The sweet taste supplements the digestive system, but an excess of the extreme sweetness of sugar will damage it. If the digestion is damaged, it can no longer efficiently transform our food into usable substances to nourish the body. In addition, meat, especially red meat, has a hot energy that supplements yang. If foods high in minerals and vitamins are absent (for example fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, pulses, whole grains and some fresh meat or fish), this means that nutrients that nourish yin and blood are missing. Thus yin and yang are out of balance.'

I wondered how Daoism and its teachings had come into Fran's life. She explained:

'I was a professional violinist for nearly 20 years, and during that time I met a teacher of healing who profoundly influenced my life and work, and was in fact a teacher of 'being'. From that starting point I gradually trained in various aspects of complementary medicine; to train in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine was a natural progression. Then, while I was doing a master's degree in the language of Chinese medicine, I started studying classic Chinese texts in Chinese with Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée and for quite a long time I was studying Zhuangzi. I saw how beautiful these texts were – but I realised that learning to translate Chinese texts was a whole life's work and that I had to choose between this and Chinese medicine. I didn't have enough brain cells to do both! I decided to concentrate on Chinese medicine, and eventually I went on to become course director at the London College of Traditional Acupuncture, and more recently at the College of Integrated Chinese Medicine.

I also realised that I wanted to live Daoism in a practical way rather than study it intellectually. When I was introduced to the BTA retreats, I had done some meditation before but not 'tranquil sitting'. I like our daoist meditation because we don't try to do anything, rather just breathe and allow whatever arises to arise. One of the strongest feelings I get from it is release. I try to bring a bit of that feeling into the way I live my life and to my work.

For example, when I run 'Cooking with Herbs' classes, I give out information, but it's really about just being together and cooking together. It's a kind of teaching through osmosis. Chinese herbs can be a bit of a cerebral subject and there is a lot to learn, but if you can approach it more through feelings – then it's great. I may have a role to facilitate a class but it doesn't mean I know any more than anyone else. The way Shi Jing runs the BTA retreats has been an important influence on me: it's about holding a space so that people can realign themselves. It is another level of 'non-doing', which I am learning more about all the time.

I feel really comfortable with the daoist meditation approach. It gives me a space to let go. It puts me in touch with spaces inside me where there is light and movement. It's like going home. And sometimes I remember to access that space inside the busy-ness of life, but to do that I have to practice yang sheng. It's almost as if the conscious yang sheng practices such as meditation or dao yin or cooking for health and longevity, remind me that presence is the most important thing there is, and that it is just there.