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Chinese lesson: tong

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The character tong 通 describes any kind of communication which is free from obstruction. Within medicine it is used for the spreading, interpenetration and free movement of qi, but it can equally suggest good communication between people.

In classical Chinese, tong is to open the way, to open dialogue, to allow the mingling of different things, ideas, people. It is to give free access to something; to penetrate and to permeate – to create synergy.

The radical of the character 是/辵 is to walk, in a measured and rhythmical way – which is very similar to the character xing 行, the xing of wu xing 五行, the five phases, movements or elements. It suggests a regular and well-regulated movement, the easy flow of one thing into another.

The character xing 行 is used to describe the regular movement of the heavens – the movement of the stars and planets is xing xing 星行 – and tong has the added dimension of the even distribution of qi made possible by this perpetual movement.

The same radical is seen in the character for dao 道 which – as well as its more philosophical meanings of the way, the way things are, the ways things move and change and transform – is also seen within physiology to imply movement and free-flow.

The character dao is often used to describe the movement of water – as seen in the point name shui dao ST 28 – and also the free movement of the spirit/consciousness – as in shen dao DU 11 and ling dao HT 4.

The character tong is found in the point names of BL 7 tong tian 通天 Communication With Heaven, and HT 5 tong li 通理 Communication With The Interior. This tendency to use the character tong in association with heaven, the spirits and the heart, suggests the importance of this constant movement, circulation and communication within the psyche as well as the general physiology.

In the philosophical classics tong dao 通道 and tong xuan 通玄 are common terms for understanding the dao and penetrating the mystery of life. Shen tong 神通 is the ability to communicate with spirits and the spirit world.

Therapeutically, tong is to restore the movement and circulation of qi wherever there is blockage and restriction. Bu tong 不通 suggests the lack of free circulation, which is the main cause of disease and disease. Tong bu tong 痛不通 is a common expression which is used to describe pain/tong 痛 due to blockage – the character for pain sharing the same phonetic 甬 with the added radical for illness 疒.

Disease can be seen as a lack of communication, a lack of synergy; health – whether of the individual, the community, or of humanity – requires unrestricted, unimpeded, unobstructed free-flow.

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