

Working with the Ming & Xing

By Bill Palmer M.Sc. ADPT FwSS

It is part of human nature to want things to be better. We imagine what could be and then we search for a way of manifesting that vision. All living beings seek for solutions to their problems; Roberto Kolter has even documented the intelligence of bacteria and slime moulds in collectively overcoming obstacles to find food¹. But our species takes this capacity to another level through invention for its own sake. This drive to improve everything and solve imaginary problems is both the source of our amazing success in dominating the planet but could also be the seed of our potential extinction.

The negative side of this impulse is that we imagine that any discomfort should be fixable. This gives marketing, religion and politics a hook with which to control our behaviour. They highlight imperfections and claim that our lives could be improved if we bought their products, believed in their dogma or voted for their party.



But the cost to humanity is that we easily become addicted to quick fixes and are continually dissatisfied. This insatiable state leads to super-consumerism, perpetually acquiring things that we don't need, if we can afford it, and yearning after those things if we can't. In the process we swarm over the planet like locusts, stripping its resources and driving other beings to extinction. As a species, we have a tendency to manifest the state of being that Buddhism calls the Hungry Ghosts².

However, this black picture is not the whole story. We also have an enormous capacity for love, for awareness and compassion. My aim in this article is to explore how the act of doing therapy often contributes and amplifies the Hungry Ghost state and to consider how to change the form of the therapy so that it supports our capacity for conscious responsibility.

Liberation is different from Cure

Liberation from dissatisfaction is different from fixing its imagined cause. Picture a bag overfilled with water so that the strain tears the membrane and water starts to spurt out. There are two obvious ways to fix this problem. The first, which we might identify with western medicine, is to put a patch on the hole – but then the pressure of the water tends to split the skin in another place. The second, which is more related to East Asian medicine, is to strengthen the material from which the bag is made. But, in the limited context of therapy, one can only identify a local weakness and strengthen that place; this actually creates more stress on other areas so new holes appear.

The real issue is the pressure of the water, which in my metaphor we are equating with the pressure of dissatisfaction. If one could decrease this stress, then the bag, *without change*, could hold firm without patches or reinforcement. Social pressure tends to drive us to want to be different from how we are. It is this desire for improvement *beyond the limits of our nature* that inflicts damage on the fabric of our being.

Many therapies, including Shiatsu and Chinese Medicine, focus on strengthening the weaknesses in the fabric. This is more sustainable than just patching the holes. However, because the practitioner is the active partner while the client is relatively passive, the *form* of the therapy still perpetuates the underlying issue. The client perceives the therapist as the person who is rescuing them from their problem and this perpetuates their tendency towards dissatisfaction; the next time something feels bad, they will come back to the therapy to have it fixed. Even if the therapist suggests exercises for the client to do at home, these are usually prescriptions rather than explorations. So, although the client is active, they are not in charge of their activity: they are still dependent on the therapist to tell them what to do. In this way therapy can become a consumer product rather than a way of liberation and empowerment.

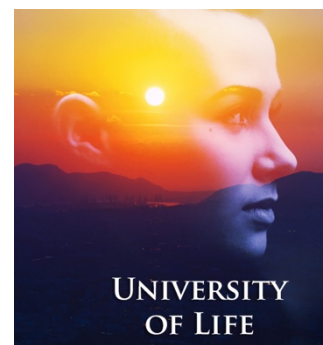
This active-expert, passive-client dynamic is less common in psychotherapy because it focuses on helping the client to be aware through introspection. Physical therapies tend to be more prescriptive simply because the internal workings of the body are less accessible to consciousness. Energy therapies like Shiatsu are even more inaccessible to the client because most therapists perform a mysterious Qi diagnosis and an equally obscure treatment. The client has no choice to be other than passive in this situation.

So there are essentially three ways of doing therapy: treating the symptoms (patching the hole), supporting the body's self-support systems (strengthening the fabric) and, thirdly, reducing the pressure of dissatisfaction. This is best accomplished by helping the client to actively explore themselves using their problems as valuable sources of information rather than trying to get rid of them. Both East Asian and Western Medicine focus on the first two but, in the modern world, the third option is mostly disregarded.

This is a shame because the third way is particularly appropriate for people with chronic issues. They have often tried an assortment of therapies without success and are looking for a different type of approach that helps them to live harmoniously with their condition rather than trying another way of curing it. I also think that the third way supports the spiritual development of the human species while the first two paradigms tend to pander to the state of dissatisfaction. So how can we work in this third mode?

Life as a Course

I have a fantasy. It doesn't matter whether it is true or not. It gives a new perspective on life. I dream that, before I was born, I went to the University of Life and looked at the courses on offer. One, in particular, appealed to me and I applied to enrol. They told me that I was qualified to take this course and that they would give me these parents, this body, particular relationships and the problems and diseases that went with them all. This life is my course!



From this viewpoint, problems are transformed from obstacles into lessons. There is no point in curing or fixing my issues if the process doesn't fit with the 'course-plan' I was given at conception. In fact, fixing my problems robs me of an opportunity to learn. This approach reflects the principles of the Chinese system called Internal Alchemy (内丹 – Nei Dan, which

focuses on the cultivation of Xing (性) and Ming (命). These concepts are aspects of our underlying nature and Neidan emphasises refining and engaging with what we are, rather than trying to change.

The most superficial translation is that Xing is our innate character and Ming is our pre-ordained Destiny. In the medieval Chinese world-view, these were given by the gods and could only be changed by divine intervention. The oldest medical texts^{3,4} suggest that working with the Qi will not be effective unless you take both Xing and Ming into account. In this level of meaning, they form a fixed landscape that pre-determines an individual's strengths and vulnerabilities. This means that the attempt to balance the activity of Qi, which is often the aim of East Asian therapies, may be doomed to failure because their fixed landscape pushes them in another direction

Sensing the Xing

Chinese words are multi-dimensional and have many layers of meaning depending on the context. A deeper meaning to Xing and Ming is less fixed and more relevant to explorative therapy. The character for Xing combines Heart and Life and so means the direction to which one's heart is drawn. The Ming is seen as the path through life created by this direction and has the meaning of a *calling or vocation*⁵. My fantasy about the University of Life fits with this interpretation and it is this meaning that I find most useful in working with clients who are struggling with chronic conditions or the problems of youth and old age.



When we are young, friends, media and parents pressure us to fit in with their world-view, which may conflict with our Xing. We can easily become lost and without an inner sense of direction. Following emotions like happiness and desire can take us off the path because they are conditioned by outer pressures. In contrast, the body is not concerned with other people and, by learning to listen to its messages, we can learn to sense the Xing. The essential point is that when we fall off our heart-path there is always a sense of deflation or contraction. So by learning to recognise these deep but subtle sensations we can tell when we are aligned with the Xing.

The desire to fix chronic conditions can often become an obsession that pulls us off our heart-path. We never meet the challenge of the condition and the lessons we can learn from it. On the other hand, if we embrace and value it, the difficulty can temper our soul and strengthen the spirit. This is the path of the Ming: to embrace challenges and follow our heart-path. A client called Claire with a brain tumour taught me how to work in this way. She had been told by her doctor that she only had a few months to live but the prospect of death had kicked her into a state of aliveness she had never before experienced. She came to see me, not to try to cure the cancer, but to *“help her to stay fully alive for as long as she had left”*.

Claire's main challenge was fear which negated her feeling of aliveness. I first asked her to sense which parts of the body contracted in response to the fear. We explored how she could breathe into the organs underlying that part of the body. This organ breathing gives a feeling of inner expansion that is relaxed and open, unlike effortful breathing performed by

the muscles, which tends to maintain a feeling of contraction. She soon learned to sense where in her body she felt fear and to use this breathing technique to expand rather than contract, so that she faced the difficulties of her condition with an open, positive posture. As a side effect of this, she reported that her friends stopped treating her as ill. In only a few sessions she found she could do without my support and I only saw her every two months or so for a top up. The cancer did not go away, but she ended up valuing it for the quality of life it gave her, and maybe because of that attitude, Claire enjoyed life for another nine years.

Developing Self-Compassion

If we can reframe our problems as opportunities for development then we can look back at



what we have learned and see the strengths and abilities that our condition has given us. Learning to feel when we are on our heart-path, and meeting any obstacles as lessons to be learned, gives us a sense of purpose, which is the deeper meaning of Ming. This is shown in the Chinese character, which has the connotation of telling, calling or instructing an embryo what to do in its future life.

Xing can be sensed at any stage of life by noticing what makes us feel alive. On the other hand, Ming is usually not understood until later, when we look back and see what we have made with our life. Erik Eriksson characterized human development as a series of challenges that each teach a capacity⁶. He identifies the challenge of old age as “ego-integration” which means to embrace all the events of our life equally and thus make sense of our existence. The main obstacles to this process are regrets.

It’s difficult to let go of regrets. But it is possible to reframe our view of them and develop compassion for our past self. I find it is easier to learn this self-compassion through our attitude to our body than to our past behaviour. For instance, we often treat tense muscles as a problem, trying to stretch them, complaining about them or getting massage to try to relax them.

But the purpose of muscle tension is often protection; holding a vulnerable part of the body from moving. We can value this even if the protection is not needed any more. Practically, we can do this by consciously condensing the muscle further. This is not performed as a way of tricking the muscle to relax, but as a way of saying to the muscle that we are going with it and valuing its positive functions. Once we learn this way of reframing physical problems, it is easier apply the same process to those things we regret in our past, valuing them as lessons which are part of our life-course or simply as ways we managed to survive at the time.

At this level, cultivating Xing and Ming resolves the state of dissatisfaction by giving meaning to life. In our metaphor of the bag full of water, this reduces the pressure so the bag can hold the water without change.

Everything is the Play of the Dharmakaya

There is an even deeper meaning to the words Xing and Ming that underlies the philosophy and practice of Dzogchen (Tibetan for “Great Perfection”), which I studied with Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and which forms the centre of my personal practice.

Several physicists⁷ and philosophers⁸ suggest that consciousness is a fundamental part of the fabric of reality. Donald Hoffmann, in his book *The Case Against Reality*⁹, gives experimental evidence that material reality is a construction of consciousness rather than something that consciousness passively perceives. He therefore suggests that we see consciousness as fundamental instead of trying to understand how it can emerge from matter. From this viewpoint, all manifestation is a creation of this universal state.



From this perspective, I am the universe, manifesting as an individual in order to learn or even just to play. I don't **go** to the University of Life to learn a course, my individuality **is** consciousness creating its own course. Namkhai Norbu, often quoted a Dzogchen saying: “All manifestation is the play of the dharmakaya”¹⁰. In Buddhist philosophy, dharmakaya (“truth-body” in Sanskrit) is universal consciousness. Li Daochun and other Neidan authors³ identify Dharmakaya with Ming, and Xing is the creative intention of this universal state. From this universal point of view there is no dissatisfaction, every manifestation is part of the play of the universe and, through play, it learns.¹¹.

*Bill & Teresa are hosting a five day residential on **Working with the Ming**, April 7-12 2024. Most of their other courses worldwide in 2024 are on the same theme. See www.seed.org for details.*

¹ Rennie J (13 November 2017). ["The Beautiful Intelligence of Bacteria and Other Microbes"](#). *Quanta Magazine*

² Irmgard Schoegl. *The Zen Way*. The Zen Centre 1987

³ Commentary on the *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine: A Fourteenth-Century Work on Taoist Internal Alchemy* by [Wang Jie](#) (Author), [Fabrizio Pregadio](#) (Translator)

⁴ [Commentary on the Shen Nong Bencao Jing](#), course notes from my studies in China.

The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica is a 2000 year old book detailing the whole of Chinese herbal medicine. The statement “that none of the herbal remedies will be effective unless they are harmonious with the Xing and Ming of the person” comes from one of the commentaries to this ancient book.

⁵ XingMing – the Nature and Destiny of a Human Being – Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée – TCM Academy

⁶ Erikson E. H. (1982). *The life cycle completed*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company

⁷ e.g. On the place of qualia in a relational universe by Lee Smolin, Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics

⁸ e.g. Galileo's Error by Philip Goff, Penguin RIDER

⁹ e.g. The Case against Reality – Donald Hoffmann. Penguin 2019

^{10,11} Dzogchen View of Tantric Ngöndro - A Teaching by Düdjom Rinpoche:
https://www.encyclopaedia.org/shared/text/n/ngondro_ar_03_dudjom_eng.php