



Xinzhai 心齋

Fasting of the Heart

“Fasting of the heart” is the arguably most important account of Zhuangzi’s practical approach to the cultivation of virtue. Most scholars¹ have interpreted “fasting of the heart” as an apophatic practice from the point of view of the “dissolution of the self.” However, this is not the whole story. Zhuangzi brings up “Fasting of the heart” in the following paragraph:

Make your will one! Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits for all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.” (Chapter 3 “In the World of Men,” transl. Watson p. 25)

回曰：“敢問心齋。”仲尼曰：“若一志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心；無聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也”

Ears, mind, spirit are different functions of the heart. “Listening stops with the ears” actually means that “the ears stop listening.” The “stop” is here pertaining to one aspect of the heart’s function, namely, the receiving of things. Thus, “listening stops with the ears” indicates the function of the heart that should, in the first place, be limited in receiving outer things and never be disturbed by outer things that would probably induce passions such as love and hate. The heart is thus supposed to settle in what it receives at the very beginning before dealing with things. Only by following these instructions can we truly put Zhuangzi’s primary warning of “don’t listen with your ears” into practice.

The “stop” in the phrase “the mind stops with recognition” is related to the other aspect of the heart’s function, namely, the responding to outer things. The problem is that, that, rather than tallying with the nature of outer things, the heart tends to be disturbed by the established concepts that it bears within, meaning that people take the heart as an authority (师心). More specifically, they follow the habitual thoughts and preconceived ideas as principles of behaviors (this would be the so-called “listen with your mind”). Consequently, it fails to act in accordance with the affairs or the nature of outer things, which ultimately leads to an unsatisfying outcome. This is why Zhuangzi suggests “don’t listen with the mind:” to avoid taking the “established heart” (chéng xīn 成心) as an authority. If the heart can respond to outer things by recognition, the best outcome will come about naturally.

The fasting practice of the two “stops” illustrated above thus provides a better understanding of “listen with your spirit” (*tīng zhī yǐ qì* 聽之以氣) together with the implication of so-called “emptiness” (*qì* 氣). Without the two “stops” we are inclined to become attached to the “outer things” and to the “established heart” This is why Zhuangzi puts a general emphasis on “selflessness,” which indicates the importance of breaking down the two sorts of attachments by achieving the two “stops.” Also, it makes the state of “emptiness” of the mind in true life possible and reveals the essential connotation of “listen with your spirit.”

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Bibliography and further reading:

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¹ See A.C. Graham’s comment on “fasting of the heart:” the practitioner “must trust to the *ch’i* (translated ‘energies’), the breath and other energizing fluids which alternate between activity as the Yang and passivity as the Yin (as in breathing out and in), training them with the meditative technique including controlled breathing. (...) When the purified fluid has become perfectly tenuous the heart will be emptied of conceptual knowledge, the channels of the senses will be cleared, and he will simply perceive and respond. Then the self dissolves, energies strange to him and higher than his own (the ‘daemonic’) enter from outside, the agent of his actions is no longer the man but Heaven working through him, yet paradoxically in discovering a deeper self he becomes for the first time truly the agent” (Graham 1981, p. 69). Bo Wang suggests that “fasting of the heart” is the method of settling one’s life in a world out of order by means of abandoning and evading (B. Wang 2004, p. 39); Youru Wang argues that *Zhuangzi* detects the problem of self-identity and the privileging mind and therefore proposes the practice of no-self, that is, to lose one’s discriminating and privileging mind. But this does not mean that Zhuangzi advocates a nihilistic notion of self that denies the existence of the empirical self and negates the possibility of spiritual progress and freedom. Rather, Zhuangzi’s deconstruction has more direct bearing on existential-practical problems, and on soteriological or therapeutic practices (Y. Wang 2000, p. 354-56).

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