

Aspects of Spirit

Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée

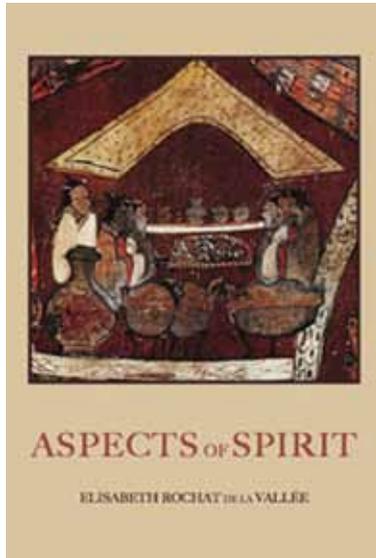
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These lectures by Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée are great. They discuss in clear terms and much detail certain 'aspects of spirit' - the *hun* and *po*, *jing* and *shen*, *yi* and *zhi* - and more besides. There are numerous indications of their use from the ancient Chinese texts. The pages are peppered with quotes. The book is clearly edited, in brief sections and - as with all classical works - should be read in short stretches. Read, muse over it, put it down, pick it up, put it down, go back to an earlier section - do something else, and pick it up again. Then the braid of understanding will begin to be formed. I cannot commend this work too highly.



The several chapters are all clearly laid out, although one small gripe: perhaps the contents page could be a bit clearer (three types of formatting in as many lines? Someone has gone a little mad here).

Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée begins her Foreword with a noble statement: 'Defining "spirit", whether in a western or eastern context, is bound to be fraught with difficulties.' An honest statement, and the question has to be, 'has she managed to evade/counter/be enabled (or subdued?) by such difficulties?'

But the great Mexican poet and translator Octavio Paz, whose long poem *Piedra de Sol* or *Sunstone* (based upon the Aztec calendar) first set my mind 'on higher matters' in the late '60s, famously believed that language and translation are fundamentally the same thing. Both share a human context. As Elisabeth states here, 'we are human beings, and as such we share with the ancient Chinese, the experience of what it means to be human.' (See the Foreword.) Paz believed the same. In a 1975 edition of the UNESCO journal, *The Courier*, he states:

Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original, because language itself is essentially a translation. In the first place, it translates from the non-verbal world. Then, too, each sign, each sentence, is the translation of another sign, another sentence. This reasoning may even be reversed without losing any of its force and we may assert that all texts are original because every translation is different. To a certain extent every translation is an original invention and thus constitutes a unique text.

The terse reasoning in this paragraph puts its finger on the difficulties of translation. It speaks, also, of the 'non-verbal' world, and asserts the value of each unique text in that every text is an attempt to give meaning. Let me say, at the outset, that Elisabeth's saving grace lies

in her choice of publishing house - Monkey Press - no doubt the mischievous, and playful nature of monkey wins through in the end! After all, does not Monkey (in the Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*) end up in the Buddhist Heaven?

Perhaps, but again, there may be a slight problem. This book is an edited transcript of three spoken lectures, over two years, and it is notoriously difficult to communicate these things on paper, let alone to speak them! ('The *tao* which can be told is not the constant *tao*'). Again, it could be argued that only those who are already 'in the fold', as it were, will understand the subtle meanings of these six Chinese terms given here: *hun* and *po*, *jing* and *shen*, *yi* and *zhi* - these are 'strange fish', indeed, and one removes them from the living water of their existence with the risk that the dry land of understanding might prove to be a barren place! So it is for most 'terms'.

The theoretical foundations of Chinese medicine are notoriously, stupendously deep, and any translator enters their dark cavern at his or her peril. She or he should appreciate, and be possessed with (and feel!) the vigour of the original authors. As an example, the first character on the first page of the (probably) oldest book in the classical canon, the *Yi Jing* or *Book Of Change*, is *yuan* 元 which is variously rendered 'primal, originating, sourced', and it carries all the implications of vitality and life. Indeed, the very character is simply the 'number 2 二 on legs 儿!' The primal, original egg, present at creation, cracks open and all its gubbins spill out.

Much in the same way I think Monkey Press is onto something here. What they have spilled out, so to speak, is just the most excellent introduction you could wish for - if you are able to crack open (read and ponder) this egg and spill it out. This is a super book. Pitched at just the right level for the budding student (preferably just after they have begun practising, see below), and also for the experienced practitioner rediscovering the Chinese tradition after many years of steady and solid practice, Sandra Hill's transcript of Elisabeth's lectures puts down brilliantly how all these 'aspects of spirit' are interrelated.

Their great merit lies in the fact that they are presented to practitioners. Let us not forget that we are possessors of a craft, above all. And that is what the '*tao* that cannot be told' is probably saying. As my Chinese instructor Feng Jiafu used to say: 'You have to DO IT!' And, of course, the words (and maybe the later memories of the words, or a recording, and possibly a book) will follow.

The next stage naturally would be to direct us, students of a nourishment and 'spiritual alchemy', towards the much deeper task of internal cultivation or *nei dan*. One can only hope that Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée before too long will be able to 'wipe out her sins' and instruct us as carefully and cautiously on this esoteric subject, returning all aspects of our spirits, eventually, 'to the void'.

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