

Nourishing Life (養生 Yǎng Shēng): An Ancient Love of Lists

Abstract

Ancient Chinese specialists in 'nourishing life' (養生 yǎng shēng) often made lists of 'dos' and 'don'ts'. These lists guided patients toward activities that promoted health and longevity and away from those that might cause harm. Even in the twenty-first century, these lists contain much wisdom that can guide us how to live longer, healthier and more contented lives, and constitute a useful resource for practitioners who wish to provide focused lifestyle advice for their patients. In this article, seven of these ancient lists are discussed.

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Introduction

Nourishing life (養生 yǎng shēng) is the ancient Chinese art and science of living to promote longevity, minimise ageing and maximise health. For the most part, it employs practices that a person must do themselves, although some moxibustion or herbal treatment may also be incorporated. Aspects of nourishing life include regulation of food and drink, appropriate balance of work and exercise with rest and sleep, living in harmony with the cycles of the four seasons and day and night, reducing needless activity, harmonising the emotions and avoiding things that cause disease or injury.

Reducing harm

Nourishing life can be compared to gardening; some practices are like planting seeds to cultivate what is desired. Other practices resemble pulling weeds; one must eliminate the activities that cause harm. Passages on nourishing life often include numbered lists for activities to do or activities to avoid. In this essay, I discuss seven such lists. The goal of some of them is to plant seeds that promote health while others pull the weeds that lead to ageing and disease.

The more ancient lists tend to focus on behaviours to reduce, although they do not make absolute prohibitions. They emphasise the avoidance of performing particular activities for too long a period of time or too intensely. The earliest list presented here is The Five Taxations from *Sù Wèn* Chapter 23:

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Nourishing life practices were discussed as far back as the Warring States Period (476-221 BCE), so they are deeply embedded in Chinese culture. The early chapters of *Sù Wèn* (Elementary Questions) describe the theory and practice. Later texts added detail. It seems that many who wrote books on nourishing life were not physicians, but instead were literati who took an interest in the practices. In an unscientific survey, I found nineteen titles devoted to nourishing life that were published between the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE) and the Qīng dynasty (1644-1911). Only four of these books appear to be authored by doctors. Some scholar-physicians included sections on nourishing life in their medical books, but did not write complete books dedicated to the practice.

勞所傷：久視傷血，久臥傷氣，久坐傷肉，久立傷骨，久行傷筋，是謂五勞所傷。《素問•宣明五氣篇第二十三》

Damage by taxation: Looking for a long time damages blood; lying down for a long time damages qi; sitting for a long time damages flesh; standing for a long time damages bones; walking for a long time damages sinews. These are called damage by the five taxations.

The take-home message is that we should perform a variety of activities during the day, but no one activity should be done in excess. Many people today are office workers, sitting and looking at computer screens for long periods of time. This tends to damage the blood and the flesh, according to the theory of the five taxations. Alternating the use of a standing and a sitting desk, taking periodic breaks to walk around, and resting the eyes or passively looking out the window at distant objects might counter some of the damage.

Ancient books often mention avoiding the Five Taxations and the Seven Damages. The Seven Damages were first described in *Zhū Bīng Yuán Hòu Lùn* (Discussion of the Origin and Manifestations of Various Diseases) by Cháo Yuánfāng (Suí, published in 610).

七傷：大飽傷脾，大怒氣逆傷肝，強力舉重久坐濕地傷腎，形寒飲冷傷肺，憂愁思慮傷心，風雨寒暑傷形，大恐懼不節傷志。巢元方《諸病源候論》隋

The Seven Damages: Great fullness [from overeating] damages the spleen; great anger with qì counterflow damages the liver; using brute force, lifting heavy things, and sitting on damp ground for a long time damage the kidneys; coldness of the physical body and drinking cold things damage the lungs; [excessive] sadness, worry, thought, and contemplation damage the heart-mind; wind, rain, cold, and summerheat damage the physical body; great terror and uncontrolled fear damage the zhì-will.

The Five Taxations and Seven Damages not only list limits that should not be surpassed, they also list the resulting harm to the body or mind. This is useful to the practitioner in diagnosis, treatment and lifestyle recommendations. For example, if someone has a kidney pattern, we can recommend that the patient does not use brute force, lift heavy things or sit on damp ground for a long time. Equally, if a patient's job involves lifting heavy things, we can do more to protect the kidneys.

Less well known are the Three Warnings:

三戒：不妄出入；不妄言語；不妄憂慮。柳宗元

The Three Warnings: Not to groundlessly come and go; not to groundlessly talk and chatter; not to groundlessly be anxious and worry.

The Three Warnings were written by Táng dynasty poet and writer Liǔ Zōngyuán (773-819). They were included in three of his essays, written during a time when he was banished from court. We should remember that these lists were often written by people who had challenges in their own lives and health. These were the self-therapies that benefited the authors, so they wrote them down for later generations to follow. The first and second of the three warnings prevent needlessly using up qì (speaking is frequently said to scatter qì, see below). In addition, reckless words can cause trouble; perhaps they led to the banishment of the author. Frantic activity and speech also disquiet the spirit. And while the author had reason to worry, he found that worry did not help; this is today's 'accepting the things we cannot change.'

A little earlier in the Táng Dynasty, Sūn Sīmiǎo described the Twelve Reductions in Volume 27 of *Qiān Jīn Yào Fāng* (Essential Formulas Worth a Thousand Pieces of Gold, published in 652):

故善攝生者，常少思少念，少欲少事，少語少笑，少愁少樂，少喜少怒，少好少惡，行此十二少者，養性之都契也。

Someone who is good at maintaining life constantly reduces thought and recollection, reduces desires and deeds, reduces speech and laughter, reduces mourning and merriment, reduces joy and anger, reduces preferences and aversions. Enacting these twelve reductions is already a turning point in nourishing nature.

These were the self-therapies that benefited the authors, so they wrote them down for later generations to follow.

多思則神殆，多念則志散，多欲則志昏，多事則形勞，多語則氣乏，多笑則臟傷，多愁則心懣，多樂則意溢，多喜則忘錯昏亂，多怒則百脈不定，多好則專迷不理，多惡則憔悴無歡。

Excessive thought endangers the shén-spirit;
Excessive recollection scatters the zhì-will;
Excessive desire confuses the zhì-will;
Excessive deeds tax the physical body;
Excessive speech exhausts qì;
Excessive laughter damages the zàng-organs;
Excessive mourning makes dread in the heart;
Excessive merriment makes yì-cognition become extravagant;
Excessive joy makes one forgetful, disordered, confused and chaotic;
Excessive anger destabilises the hundred vessels;
Excessive preferences make one lose focus and become illogical;
Excessive aversions make one dispirited and cheerless.

此十二多不除，則營衛失度，血氣妄行，喪生之本也。唯無多無少者，得幾於道矣。孫思邈《千金要方 卷二十七 養性》唐

When these twelve 'excesses' are not removed, yíng and wèi violate their limits while qì and blood move haphazardly. This is the root of abandoning life. Only someone without excesses and without insufficiencies [of these twelve activities] has nearly achieved the dào.

The last line means that finding the balance between too much and too little of these twelve is the key. In other words, we are not to avoid these activities completely, but it is better if we can 'turn down the volume' on all of them.

Cultivating benefit

If everything to reduce and avoid seems like too much negativity, there are also lists of activities and characteristics to promote. The Seven Constants come

from *Cháng Shēng Mì Jué* (The Secret of Longevity) by Shí Tiānjī (19th century?, Qīng dynasty).¹ In the book, the Seven Constants are headings for paragraphs. But since then, people have extracted the headings to make a list. The words below in parenthesis are summaries of the idea, not a translation.

If I have any wisdom to impart as I grow older, it is to appreciate the small moments of pleasure or beauty...

1. 常存良善想 Constantly preserve good feelings (even when others do bad things, say and do good things)
2. 常存和悅想 Constantly preserve kind feelings (take pleasure in helping others and avoid anger)
3. 常存安樂想 Constantly preserve contented feelings (even when you are suffering, appreciate what you actually have)
4. 常存康健想 Constantly preserve healthful feelings (appreciate whatever level of health you currently have)
5. 常存安靜心 Constantly preserve a peaceful heart (reduce desires; with few desires, the mind is naturally peaceful)
6. 常存正覺心 Constantly preserve an awakened heart (in the Buddhist sense)
7. 常存歡喜心 Constantly preserve a happy heart (the author says this promotes longevity)

These may seem like nice ideals, but how does one actually achieve them? The final two lists are my personal favourites because they describe activities we can do to adjust our mood and raise our level of contentedness. Both of these lists come from *Shòu Qīn Yang Lǎo Xīn Shū* (New Book of Longevity for Parents and Providing for the Elderly).² They are called the Five Activities and Ten Pleasures.

倪正父《經鋤堂雜志》述五事云：靜坐第一，觀書第二，看山水花木第三，與良朋講論第四，教子弟第五。*Jīng Chú Táng Zǐ Zhì* (Miscellaneous Notes from the Hall for Plowing the Classics) by Ní Zhèngfǔ³ described the Five Activities: 'Quiet sitting [a style of meditation] is first. Contemplating books is second. Viewing mountains and water, flowers and trees is third. Discussing things with a good friend is fourth. Teaching children and younger siblings is fifth.'

述齊齋十樂云：讀義理書，學法帖字，澄心靜坐，益友清談，小酌半醺，澆花種竹，聽琴玩鶴，焚香煎茶，登城觀山，寓意奕棋。

He also described Qí Zhāi's Ten Pleasures: 'Studying the meaning and principles in books; learning methods of calligraphy; calming the heart-mind with quiet sitting;

idle talk with helpful friends; drinking a little until half-intoxicated; watering flowers and planting bamboo; listening to the qín and enjoying cranes; burning incense and brewing tea; climbing the city walls to observe the mountains; telling parables and developing chess skills.'

The Five Activities and Ten Pleasures consist of quiet sitting, reading uplifting books, getting out in nature or gardening, in-person social interaction, helping others, pursuing pastimes, and savouring small sensory pleasures such as tea, incense and music. In fact, vision, hearing, taste and smell are all mentioned. Many of the Five Activities and Ten Pleasures include creative outlets and mild physical or mental exercise. They speak of spending time alone and in supportive social situations. The specifics of the list could be updated for modern times,⁴ but the essence of it is still appropriate.

Discussion

If you will indulge me and allow some personal comments: I have been discontent all my life. I always thought I would be happy when everything was in place and all my problems were resolved. Of course, this is an illusion. If I have any wisdom to impart as I grow older, it is to appreciate the small moments of pleasure or beauty; do not disdain them while waiting for great things to happen. Even when there are difficulties, it is still possible to enjoy many mundane pleasures throughout the day – the smell of a flower as you walk past someone's yard, the colours of the sunset, a smile from a friend (or stranger), the aroma of coffee as it brews, truly savouring a cup of fine tea. These are all inexpensive or free pleasures that many people, preoccupied with their own problems, never notice or appreciate. Yet they can be like the relief of a cool evening breeze after an excessively hot summer day.

It takes some discipline and time to cultivate awareness of these things and to value them. One can set daily goals. For example, every day notice ten small pleasures that do not cost anything. Or every night while going to sleep, list ten good things in your life. A while ago on Facebook, there was something going around called 'A Hundred Days of Happiness.' The activity was to post something that made you happy every day for a hundred days. Once these activities become habits, it is easier for the person to experience contentedness for longer periods of time.⁵ Once the habit of noticing what was previously unappreciated is established, the formal exercise is no longer necessary.

One of my hobbies is taking photographs. For a while, I took a lot of photos of fungi. Many are quite strange and beautiful. Once someone said to me, 'How do you find them? I never see them.' I realised that the first time I saw an interesting mushroom, I noticed it by happenstance. But once I started looking, I saw them everywhere. It is a matter of turning your attention to the desired object; then it becomes easy to see. Finding these small pleasures in

daily life is the same idea. One does not notice them until attention is consciously turned toward them. This is why the exercises mentioned above are beneficial.

As practitioners, we could update the list of small pleasures and give assignments to patients who suffer from unhappiness, pain or stress. The list could include taking a slow walk in a nearby park, savouring a cup of your favorite tea while doing nothing else, working on a creative hobby, playing a board game with a friend (in person, not online), and so forth. During this time, cell phones and other electronic devices must be turned off and the person must attempt to be in the current moment. Perhaps you might instruct the patient to do three things on the list before the next appointment. Hopefully, after a while, the patient will begin to spontaneously see the beauty of small things. At that point, their level of contentedness will rise.

In conclusion, the ancients liked to make lists of 'dos' and 'don'ts', incorporating their experiences in nourishing life. Even in the twenty-first century, these lists contain a lot of wisdom that can guide us as to how to live a longer, healthier and more contented life.

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Endnotes

1 石天基《長生秘訣》清。Searching in Chinese online, these are often called the Six Constants. In that case, the fourth one is missing. Number six is sometimes changed to say '常存平常心' ('Constantly preserve a just heart' - i.e. treat people fairly and equally). Also, in numbers 1-4, the word 'heart' often replaces 'feelings.'

2 *Yǎng Lǎo Fèng Qīn Shū* (Book of Providing for the Elderly and Attending to Parents) was written by Chén Zhí (not later than 1085, Northern Sòng) 陳直《養老奉親書》宋。During the Yuán dynasty, Zōu Xián added more content and renamed it *Shòu Qīn Yǎng Lǎo Xīn Shū* (New Book of Longevity for Parents and Providing for the Elderly) 鄭賢《壽親養老新書》元。The Five Activities and Ten Pleasures are found in the part by Zōu Xián.

3 Ní Sī (倪思) was a Southern Sòng dynasty writer. His zi-name was Zhèngfǔ (正甫). Here it is written as Zhèngfù (正父). He was from Guī'ān in Húzhōu (湖州歸安).

4 Although it is tempting to provide my own updated nourishing life list, from teaching this subject I have realised that this would require a longer discussion. It is worth making the point that modern Westerners are generally too self-obsessed, so anything that turns the attention outward is often helpful: volunteer work can increase self-esteem and gratitude, and reading just about anything - even detective novels - can take people out of their own 'stuff'. The one thing not to read is self-help books - which tend to make people more self-obsessed. Therefore I leave it to readers make nourishing lists appropriate for their own clientele and locality.

5 EDX has a course on the Science of Happiness from the University of California at Berkeley. Much of it supports the same ideas as the Five Activities and Ten Pleasures. This MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) can be taken for free at <https://www.edx.org/>.