

18



Gǔ

# ILLNESS

Illness.

Working to cure an illness is supremely blessed.

It is favorable to undertake the crossing of a great river.

Begin three days before the first day—

And you will end three days after it.

This hexagram shows someone who is faced with a difficult problem — an “illness” — that he must deal with before he can advance. The problem is like a river to be forded. If he starts work on it right away, he can solve it in seven days, delaying by only three days the start of a planned advance. The texts of the lines say that the problem is his father’s illness. He sets aside his own ambitions and goes home to take care of him.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## Lines

first line/6 — — He tends his father’s illness.  
Because the son is there,  
The sire comes to no harm.  
Danger ends in good fortune.

He sets to work on the problem right away here in the very first line of the hexagram. In treating an illness, the ancient Chinese used not only medicines but also prayers and sacrifices. That may be why the son’s presence is so important.

line two/9 — He tends his mother’s illness.  
He must not keep on.

He sets to work on a problem that is not his to solve. He should let his sisters tend his mother and continue with his own advance. There may be ritual reasons for this apparently heartless point of view. Line two is associated with women because it is within the inner trigram in the same way that a woman's place was within the home. The hexagram's protagonist should not retreat so far.

line three/9 ——— He tends his father's illness.  
Slight regret. No great harm.

He regrets having to interrupt his own advance, but averts the great harm of his father's death or of being unfilial. The misfortune normal in line three is here reduced to slight regret. The rest of it can be found in line four.

line four/6 — — He neglects his father's illness.  
Advancing, he sees trouble.

If he ignores the problem and tries to continue his own advance, he will get into difficulties. Line four sometimes has to do with being late.

line five/6 — — He tends his father's illness.  
And wins praise.

His filial conduct earns him the good opinion of others. Such a good reputation will make it easier for him to advance when the time comes for him to think of his own concerns again. Line five is the place of success and of the ruler whose good opinion he earns.

top line/9 ——— He serves no king or lord.  
His service is higher.

He serves his father, his clan, and the spirits of his ancestors. Because it is above all the other lines, the top line of a hexagram is sometimes associated with the supernatural.

STRUCTURE ䷳ 艮 Gēn Keep Still (stopped)  
䷵ 巽 Xùn Kneel in Submission

He submits (lower trigram ䷵ ) to being stopped (upper trigram ䷳ ) and sets to work on the problem that stops him.

SEQUENCE This and the previous hexagram, its inverse SUÍ (17) THE HUNT, both show ways of establishing merit in order to make possible an advance in status and power. In THE HUNT, this

was accomplished by going out actively after what one wanted. In ILLNESS, it is accomplished by returning home to solve a problem there first. Both approaches are “supremely blessed” and will end with arrival as a leader in LÍN (19) LEADERSHIP.

## Notes

1. ILLNESS — The word 蠱 *gǔ* refers to poison or to an illness caused by poison. It can also refer to spoilage, specifically to grain in which insects appear. On the other hand, some commentators say the character 蠱 is used for 故 *gù*, which means “thing,” “business,” “affair.” This would make the first line: “He does his father’s business.”

2. “first day” (opening text) — This is the day called 甲 *jiǎ*, the first day of the ancient ten-day week. I take it to refer generally to the day on which one intends to begin something. However, the last sentence of the opening text can also be translated: “The three days before the *jiǎ* day and the three days after it.” Some commentators think this refers to days that are lucky for sacrifice or other purposes.