

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE ELEMENTS

Chinese Medicine had a rich and sophisticated body of medical theory based on the Daoist concepts of Five Elements of nature: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. The five Elements described in this theory are simply another way (besides Yin-Yang) of describing human health as a reflection of the natural world.

The Five Elements [Wu Xing] are about cycles and patterns of change and are related to each other. To understand how these cycles and patterns work, think of a circle that we will call the Sheng or Generating cycle. This is like the creative relationship of mother to son. Going clockwise the Elements are Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. What do these elements signify? Let's begin with Wood.

Wood is springtime; it is the fuel which will generate Fire [and the heat of summer], which in turn will create ash and Earth. For the Chinese late summer and the nourishment of the harvest are Earth Element. And Earth is the source of ores yielding minerals and Metal; this leads us into autumn's wind whipping the dry leaves. And out of winter's deep cold condensation comes Water, which will moisturize the sprout, which will become a tree. So we are back to Wood again. The principles of the Five Elements can be applied to everything. Each Element is related to the world around it, with an affiliated season, color, taste, body organ and sensory organ, emotions and characteristics. Springtime is always a time of new growth as trees and plants begin to show new leaves and flowers blossom. The color associated with Wood is green/ cyan, which is described poetically as the color of a dragon's scales in sunlight.

Chinese medicine also associates the Elements with human traits, body types and medical profiles. It's fun to figure out which is our dominant Element that influences our strengths and weaknesses, both in aspects of our personality and in body organs that will tend to be prone to health issues-- but we all contain all five Elements. Being in harmony keeps the body and mind in optimum health. If one Element is in excess we see hyper function, whereas a deficiency will show as hypo function/ under-production. And if one Element is overtaxed, the deficiency drains the parent Element. For example, if Water is weak and backs up to affect Metal, we might see fluid in the lungs, because Metal is associated with the lung organs.

There are many options for applying this theory to treatment. Foods as well as herbs are categorized by Element so that we can know what will help us and what to avoid. And we can cultivate options as a means of counteracting any negative qualities of the dominant Element.

THE WOOD ELEMENT

The energy of Wood signifies dynamic movement and new beginnings. In the cycle of life it is birth and springtime, exemplified by new shoots pushing vigorously upward in new growth. The Qi associated with Wood is Wind, rapidly changing in its dynamics. Those of you in Vegas have seen plenty of this weather recently. We all have each of the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water) within us, but often one Element can be dominant. Today let's take a look at Wood. People who are primarily Wood types like to be free & easy, direct and deliberate, with a clear sense of vision. They tend to be good leaders and decision-makers. When the qi isn't flowing smoothly, they can miss the whole picture and get stuck in the details. The Zang Fu organs associated with Wood are the Liver and Gallbladder which regulate the harmonious distribution of Qi throughout the body so that there is an even flowing Qi in all directions. When movement and/or growth is blocked, we often see the emotional aspects of anger. Sometimes Wood people direct their energy against themselves. Instead of being pliant and flexible, their disharmonies produce a stiffness, especially in the muscles. Then we see excessive muscular

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tension, muscle spasms and even in the extreme case tetany, where the muscles cannot relax. Or we may see difficulty standing/ walking and alternately even muscle flaccidity and atrophy at the other end of the spectrum. Because the eyes are the sense organs of the Liver, if there is disharmony the vision can be poor, both literally and in a much broader sense. They can be prone to not only eye problems but also blurred vision, dry rough eyes and floaters. An imbalance in the Wood Element can result in red tearing eyes, insomnia, moodiness and compulsive energy. There can be erratic mood swings, irritability and frustration, or just difficulty making decisions. This can be brought back into harmony through acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.

The virtue of wood is benevolence, so when Qi is flowing smoothly we see people cultivating rhythmic exercise routines and having a healthy relationship with their anger, rather than bottling up petty grievances and then exploding inappropriately.

People who are Wood types are better off avoiding alcohol and caffeine, which can interfere with the flow of qi. I recommend lots of green leafy foods, organic liver and blood building foods.

THE FIRE ELEMENT

The power of Fire comes from the capacity to liberate heat and light and realize joy and fulfillment. The Fire organ of the Heart is the center of emotions, just as the emperor was the heart of China, so the heart is said to be responsible for communication with others. Fire types relish excitement and delight in intimacy. They are therefore able to articulate their feelings fully and have healthy happy relationships, especially one-on-one, and they are fond of talking. Being keenly intuitive, they love sensation, drama and sentiment. They believe in the power of charisma and desire; is it any wonder they can be natural performers too? The tongue is the sprout of the heart, after all, so it makes sense that many comedians and singers can be Fire types. There is a laughing quality to the voice.

Fire is linked with the color red and with summer, our time of greatest heat outdoors. This coloring manifests in the complexion too. Fire rules the blood and blood vessels, so look for a reddish complexion. But just because a person is Fire Element doesn't mean they like heat; in fact, they often dislike it because they already have so much of it in their nature.

The heart is said to house the Shen, our spirit, and the shen requires rest and tranquility if it is to be maintained in harmony. If this does not happen, there will frequently be unease, anxiety and sleep problems. Often in disharmony these people experience vivid dreams and night sweats and even an irregular heartbeat. The Heart is protected by the Pericardium surrounding it. In Oriental Medicine we treat the heart through the Pericardium when there is pain, angina, or palpitations. Drugs and alcohol muddle the shen, which is not helpful.

The emotional aspects of the heart are sensitive to external influences, just as fire can burn too brightly or fade if it is not properly maintained. The need for social contact may lead to mental overactivity. So these people when they are out of balance may be prone to over-stimulation, poor circulation, broken veins, bad complexion, rashes, restless sleep and hyperactivity.

Good foods to recommend would include oily fish like salmon, salads with bitter leaves such as endive, radicchio and dandelion, dates and logan fruit. Avoid stimulant such as coffee and sugar and excessive spicy foods. They will make you too irritable and out of balance. Instead, cultivate a quiet pastime like gardening that will keep your feet on the ground, and try to cultivate an early bedtime. Your heart will thank you for it.

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THE EARTH ELEMENT

Earth is the center around which the other Elements revolve, much as the Earth organs of the Spleen and Stomach are the center of the body. The soils that feed us and the ground beneath us give us stability. Earth is a force that allows growth and development. Just as all produce grows, so all nourishment comes from Earth. The food and fluids we consume are processed by the Stomach to produce our qi and blood. But just as with soil, our Stomachs "dislike" too much damp weather conditions and cold, which can lead to abdominal swelling if there is sluggish digestion. Flabbiness and weight gain can be a problem, as can eating disorders.

Many teachers have a lot of Earth Element because they nurture their students' growth. The nature of an Earth person is abundance and generosity, and this bountiful attitude often extends to taking on the cares and worries of others. Because the Earth type values stability, she is often a peacemaker, a preserver of families and societies, embodying sympathy and caring, a ready advocate for those in greatest need of friendship, sustenance and recognition.

What happens when an Earth type is out of harmony mothering sympathy can become obsessive and oppressive. So too does her sunny and supportive disposition become fatigued, with poor muscle tone, easily bruising and varicose veins, a pale sallow complexion, digestive and bowel problems, eating disorders and yeast infections? Food intolerance can develop as well as worry poor memory and concentration. People who are Earth types should avoid sweet foods that include processed sugars and especially artificial sweeteners. An excess of tropical fruit such as bananas and mangoes, large quantities of fruit juice and too much cold fluid especially with your meals is not a good idea. This means look out for those daily breakfast smoothies that you've been thinking were so healthy! Cow dairy products and wheat, especially white bread, will further weaken your Earth Element. This is why when you have too much of sweets or bakery items, you feel sluggish; it's too much strain on your digestion. Instead try grains such as rice and barley, naturally sweet veggies such as carrots, parsnips, turnips and squash, orchard fruit such as apples. Be sure to cultivate breakfast; it's the most important meal of the day. Do not eat late and then go to bed; instead eat only until you are two-thirds full. You will digest your food better, and your Earth Element will thank you.

THE METAL ELEMENT

People who are primarily Metal types are wonderful at details, immaculate, impeccable and well-organized. They like structure, expressing themselves through symmetry, self-discipline, a purity of ideals and a logical mind. Their body types tend to be often triangular, with broad shoulders above a small waist. Sound like anyone you know? Probably!

The color white is associated with Metal; let's think about purity. The Lungs and Large Intestines are the organs associated with Metal, removing waste from the body through the skin and through elimination. The skin is our external barrier, defining where we end and the outside world begins. So, one of Metal's functions is to protect the body from outside invasion by harmful influences such as airborne allergies or colds. Consequently, Metal types tend to dislike dry weather and dry conditions, which can hurt the lungs. Dry skin and a weak voice can often be common ailments. The act of breathing in, therefore, is tied to the spiritual aspect of Metal as inspiration, so you will often find Metal types to be very interested in developing their spiritual side. However, the emotion people most often associate with Metal is grief or sadness when they are down; the flip side when they are up is strength and sustainability. So when Metal becomes out of balance, Metal types suffer from shortness of breath, a feeling of emotional isolation and an inability to share their problems; their tendency to put up boundaries can lead to health problems such as asthma or constipation, which translates as dryness in the large intestine. Stiffness, dryness, and inhibition can be key issues. To help keep Metal types moist and healthy,

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I recommend eating pears and nuts, along with grains like millet and root vegetables and some pungent spices such as ginger and black pepper. Stay away from too much baked or barbecued food, smoked food and too much dairy produce, and you'll have a happier and more balanced summer despite the heat.

THE WATER ELEMENT

Water is the root of Life; it is the deep hidden aspect within all living things. Water represents the primeval ooze out of which form materializes as life. It links past and future, ancestor and descendant, and is the source of our inherited intelligence. The Water organs of the Kidney and Bladder have an obvious role to play in the process of Water metabolism, but Water also refers to the deepest aspects of growth that take place in the recesses of the earth. Water is responsible for the bodily functions of fertility and development, so it is Water that determines the characteristics and qualities that will be handed down to you from your parents. The strength and development of the deepest parts of the body, such as the bones, are determined by Water energy. Teeth and Marrow rely on it too; in Oriental medicine bone marrow includes the brain, spinal cord and cerebrospinal fluid. Since Water is the root of life, it governs the entire process of life: birth, growth, maturation, aging and death. And the Kidney houses the will.

So keywords include wisdom, destiny, willpower, development and motivation, along with fear and shock. The color associated with Water is black, which is associated both with fear and with determination.

Water types can be isolated by their solitary nature, and this can cause fearfulness about what the future will bring. Water types can be prone to back problems, especially in the low back, or problems with weak bones. Do you suffer with bladder problems or weak teeth? Menopause is a change primarily in the Water Element that occurs naturally in women as they experience hormonal changes. Men may experience loss of libido or even impotence. Both sexes may experience more frequent urination particularly at night, infertility or incontinence. Loss of hearing is also common with aging.

To improve or alter an imbalance caused by a deficiency of Water I recommend such naturally salty foods as seaweed, miso soup and fish. Find an exercise routine that will keep your knees and back strong. Avoid raw/ cold foods and icy fluids, which can have a sudden chilling effect. Try to find the correct fluid intake, neither too much nor too little in this time of such extreme temperature, and you will maintain a harmonious balance. The power of Water comes from the capacity to conceive, concentrate, and conserve.

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