

Healing Archetypes in Chinese Medicine **A Brief Introduction to the Five Elements**

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Acupuncture has been practiced for over forty years in North America, yet for most westerners the concepts that explain its sometimes miraculous results are somewhat mystifying. Unfortunately, most people attempt to fit this unique practice into an evidence based medical model, a context that denies Chinese Medicine's philosophical roots. Understanding acupuncture as a form of therapeutic intervention requires developing more of a personal understanding of the body and the world – one characterized by dynamism and energy. Like all living systems our body is in a constant state of change, despite its apparent solidity and structure. Though we may feel like the same person who graduated from high school many years ago clearly we are not. According to the view of energetic medicine the body is more like a fountain of water than a statue. What determines the shape of the fountain is energy with a few particles to fill in the gaps.

In Chinese Medicine energy, known as 'Qi', is understood to arise spontaneously from primordial space or the Tao. This original energy is expressed in the physical world in five distinct ways, forming the basis of a system of associations known in Chinese Medicine as the **Five Elements**. Each element – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water - has a unique archetypal expression similar to the qualities of their associated seasons, with the addition of late summer corresponding to the earth element (see chart below). There are also distinct correlations between the elements and the internal organs, sense organs, flavors, colors, smells and emotional states.

Just as in nature all the elements are present in us. However, we tend to reflect one of these energies more strongly. This element represents our basic constitution strength, as well as our weak link. As we journey through life at some point we encounter an event or series of events that exposes our vulnerability or soft under belly. This experience tends to color the way we see the world and predisposes us to certain kinds of illnesses related to the element that is out of balance. Knowing our constitutional tendencies can therefore be tremendously empowering in regards to the day to day choices that impact our health.

In the most profound sense our constitution is also our connection to the principle of heaven, or what is known in Chinese Medicine as our Original Nature. Heaven in this sense is the experience of vast mind, completely free and open. When we understand and tune into the natural movement of our life energy we can begin to appreciate its gift. Its discovery is like finding a jewel in a heap of dust. Unfortunately, in our busy and speedy modern world very few people have the time or mindfulness to even begin looking for this jewel. More often than not the gift is habitually repressed in the pursuit of ego-orientated goals. It often takes a major health crisis to cause us to pause and reflect on our true needs and desires.

Herein lays the root of illness according to energetic medicine. Our original energy or constitution needs expression or movement for us to be healthy. Denying its movement creates an internal dichotomy or conflict that manifests as some form of tension. This tension cuts off the life current which nourishes and drives all physical and cognitive processes. As energy backs up in the system an imbalance results that manifests as pain. Acupuncture attempts to undo these 'energy blocks' to resolve tension and encourage energy movement as a way of restoring balance.

While lifestyle choices cannot be overlooked, lasting health is the result of accepting and integrating our elemental energy. We all know people who seem to be in the flow of things. They seem to accomplish what ever they desire effortlessly. The paradox is that we cannot truly know this state of ease until we are able to accept ourselves and life as it is. Acceptance means acknowledging our gifts and the pain of our soft underbelly together. Doing this we relax and open the door to fresh experience and new possibilities. It is a return to our Original Nature, an awareness of the Tao in everyday life. This is a very personal journey, beyond the boundaries of diagnostic labels. Instead of chasing after magic bullet treatments for our problems we enter into a process of transformation, like the alchemical process of turning lead into gold. The Five Element perspective can provide useful clues to the nature of the pain we feel in life and to its resolution through healthy and free exploration of our potential.

FIVE ELEMENT CORESPONDENCIES

Wood

The Wood organ associations are: *Liver* (Yin) and *Gall Bladder* (Yang) In balance Wood is creative, directed, perceptive and flexible. Out of balance is suggested by difficulties with anger, which can either explode, or implode.

EXPLODER	BALANCED	IMPLODER
Angry, belligerent, aggressive	flexible, creative, clear perception	depressed, apathetic, passive aggressive

Table 1 – The balance/imbalance of the Wood element

FIRE

The Fire element is associated with two organ pairs: *Heart*(Yin)/*Small Intestine*(Yang), and the *Pericardium* (Yin)/*Triple Heater*(Yang). When in balance, Fire personalities feel totally in tune with life. When Fire people go off balance, they lose their connection with life and feel out-of-tune.

JOYLESS	BALANCED	OVERJOYED
Sad, bored lonely & chaotic	Effortless atonement	Manic, controlling delusional

Table 2 – The balance/imbalance of the Fire Element

EARTH

The Earth organ associations are: *Spleen* (Yin) and *Stomach* (Yang). In balance, they are centered, thoughtful and altruistic. Out of balance there is a block somewhere in the cycle of giving and receiving.

DIFFICULTY GIVING	BALANCE	DIFFICULTY RECEIVING
selfishness stubbornness	altruism groundedness	Ingratiation / martyrdom insecurity / dependence

Table 3 – The balance/imbalance of the Earth Element

METAL

The Metal associations are: The *Large Intestine* (Yang) and the *Lungs* (Yin). Balance is reflected by the image of the compassionate sage. Imbalance is indicated by over or under rigidity. Too much results in mental, physical or moral rigidity; too little gives rise to formless dependence and depression.

TOO FORMLESS	BALANCED	TOO RIGID
Low self-esteem depressed, empty	warm, flexible, connected non-attached wisdom	cold, brittle, cut-off, moralizing

Table 4 – The balance/imbalance of Metal

WATER

The organs associated with the Water element are the *Kidneys* (Yin) and *Bladder* (Yang). In balance Waters are quiet, thoughtful and good listeners, powerful and self-sufficient, philosophical about the uncertainties of life and relatively comfortable with not knowing. Imbalance is suggested by too much or too little fear.

TOO MUCH FEAR	BALANCE	TOO LITTLE FEAR
Conservative fearful, anxious	Potency, power, deep wisdom	Recklessness and/or bravado

Table 5 – The balance/imbalance of the Water element

	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Main organs	Liver (Yin) Gall Bladder (Yang)	Pericardium & Heart (Yin), Small Intestine & Triple Heater (Yang)	Spleen (Yin) Stomach (Yang)	Lungs (Yin) Large Intestine (Yang)	Kidneys (Yin) Bladder (Yang)
Emotion	Anger	Joy	Worry	Grief	Fear
Tissues	Tendons	Blood Vessels	Muscles	Skin	Bones
Season	Spring	Summer	Late Summer	Fall	Winter
Personality associations	Decisive, creative, visionary	Passionate, joyful, loving, excited	Caring, sympathetic	Reverent, inspired, open, ascetic	Self-sufficient philosophical, solitary,
Disease associations	Headaches, hypertension, menstrual pain, eye disease	Heart disease, insomnia, manic depression	Digestive disorders, muscle pains, chronic fatigue	Arthritis, skin, lung disease allergies, asthma	Kidney disease, low back pain, memory loss, deafness
Life theme	Growth, creativity, direction	Harmony, being in tune	Altruism empowered giving	Death/ transcendence	Bringing potential into manifestation