

THE UNIQUE NATURE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE'S FIVE ELEMENT THEORIES

THE FIVE ELEMENTAL ENERGIES

Integrative Medicine's inclusive approach to health and wellness recognizes the profundity and depth of knowledge one can obtain from understanding the basic theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The New Medicine of today has convincing scientific validation of this 5,000 year old system and its influence on the western model of Energetic and Vibrational Medicine.

There is abundant information on TCM available today. We will only touch on some basic principles to prepare a fertile environment for fostering a foundational knowledge support base in this powerful system.

Before we can fully understand and appreciate the profundity of the Five Elemental Energies we must first understand the Chinese principle of Polarity (Yin and Yang).

Polarity is the most pervasive principle of the manifest universe, providing the boundless dynamic force that makes the world go round. Without polarity, material worlds and physical bodies could not exist and without polar fields, energy could not function, essence could not take form and the rhythmic cycles of nature could not transpire.

The Chinese call the Principle of Polarity, Yin and Yang. This is not a mystical or occult based concept but rather a highly scientific paradigm that applies to every process and phenomenon in the universe, from the macrocosmic to the microscopic. It explains the mystery of transformation and demonstrates that all changes in the universe are cyclical rather than linear and therefore predictable.

The Principle of Polarity applies equally to human energy and electric energy; the circulation of blood in the veins and the flow of water in rivers, the rotation of planets around the sun, the solar system around the central sun of our galaxy as well as electrons around the nucleus of an atom. It is a law with no loopholes, a rule without exceptions, and therefore those who understand and apply it in their lives enjoy the distinct advantage of being on "the right side of the law", living in harmony with the entire universe and acting in accord rather than in conflict with nature's cyclic patterns.

The Principle of Yin and Yang was formulated in prehistoric China as a way of explaining natural phenomena that had formerly been attributed to the actions of spirits and demons. It is one of the earliest instances in human history of rationally scientific principle replacing blind superstitious belief. Observing that all phenomena in nature occur in opposite pairs, the ancient Chinese deduced the natural law of complementary polarity and applied it to "everything under heaven." By contemplating the movements of planets and stars, the rhythmic cycles of seasons and weather, the sexual behavior of animals and humans, and the parallel patterns of day and night, life and death, growth and decay, they realized that polarity creates the dynamic field in which energy moves and change transpires.

Today, the Chinese still apply the Principle of Yin and Yang to their daily lives, in geomancy and astrology, medicine and cooking, arts and crafts, and other traditions. Yin and Yang Polarity is also the underlying principle in the binary system used in computer technology, in the flux of quantum physics, in aerodynamics and the thrust of rockets and in other modern sciences.

The Nature of Yin and Yang

There has been a common misconception that Yin and Yang are two different types of energy. This erroneous misunderstanding could not be further from the truth. Yin and Yang are actually two complementary poles of the same basic energy, like the positive and negative poles of an electric current or a magnetic field. Yin and Yang are reciprocal states of cyclic change, polar phases in the rhythmic transformation of energy.

When something obstructs the normal cyclic transformations of Yin and Yang and they are unable to establish and maintain relative balance, the extreme degree of one or the other causes abnormal conditions.

In nature, extreme imbalances in the energies of the sky and earth cause such abnormal phenomena as hurricanes, forest fires, floods, and earthquakes. In humans, energy imbalances cause fever, indigestion, headaches, high blood pressure, constipation, and other disorders, and if these conditions are not corrected, they lead to degeneration and death.

The Five Energies

To fully understand the profound effect seasonal and weather changes have on human life we must look further in to the pantheon of Ancient Chinese Philosophy and Cosmology. This leads us to the next phase of a basic didactic introduction to Five Element Theory.

The Five Elemental Energies represent the tangible activities of Yin and Yang as manifested in the cyclic changes of nature that regulate life on earth. Also known as the Five Movements, they define the various stages of transformation in the recurring natural cycles of seasonal change, growth and decay, shifting climatic conditions, sounds, flavors, emotions, and human physiology.

Each of the five energies is associated with the natural element that most closely resembles its function and character, and from these elements they take their names. Unlike the Western and other systems of five elements, the Chinese system focuses on energy and its transformations, not on form and substance. The elements thus symbolize the activities of the energies with which they are associated. As manifestations of Yin and Yang on earth, the Five Elemental Energies represent various degrees of “fullness” and “emptiness” in the relative balance of Yin and Yang within any particular energy system. An ancient Chinese text explains this principle as follows:

“By the transformation of yang and its union with yin, the Five Elemental Energies of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water arise, each with its specific nature according to its share of yin and yang. These Five Elemental Energies constantly change their sphere of activity, nurturing and

counteracting one another so that there is constancy in the transformation from emptiness to abundance and abundance to emptiness, like a ring without beginning or end.

The interaction of these primordial forces brings harmonious change and the cycles of nature run their course. The Five Elemental Energies combine and recombine in innumerable ways to produce manifest existence. All things contain all five Elemental Energies in various proportions.”

Let’s take a look at this idea in terms of season’s cycles of nature, which influence every living thing on earth. Water is the elemental energy associate with winter, when a state of extreme Yin prevails. Winter is the season of stillness and rest, during which energy is condensed, conserved, and stored. Water is a highly concentrated element containing great potential power awaiting release. In the human body, water is associated with essential fluids such as hormones, lymph, marrow, and enzymes, all of which contain great potential energy. In nature, water is dissipated by excess heat; in humans, water energy is depleted by the heat of stress and excess emotions. The way to conserve the potential energy of water is to stay still and be cool.

The next phase of the seasonal cycle is spring, during which the Wood element arises from the potential energy of water, just as plants sprout from the ground in spring rains. This is the new Yang stage of the cycle. Wood energy is expansive, exhilarant and explosive. It is the creative energy of “spring fever” awakening the procreative drive of sexuality. It is associated with vigor and youth, growth and development. In the human body, Wood energy is associated with the movement of muscles and the activity of tissues. Wood energy demands free expression and space for open expansion. Blocking it gives rise to feelings of frustration, anger, jealousy, and stagnation.

Just as spring develops into summer, so the aggressive creative energy of Wood matures into the flourishing “Full Yang” energy of Fire. This cycle is the most overtly energetic phase during which the heat of full Yang energy is sustained. Owing to the warm, stable glow of Fire energy, all life forms flourish in the summer heat. Fire is related to the heart, which is the seat of human emotions and the organ whose constant warmth and pulse keeps blood and energy moving. The heart is associated with love and compassion, generosity and joy, openness and abundance. If blocked, it results in hypertension and hysteria, heart problems and nervous disorders.

Toward the end of summer comes an interlude of perfect balance during which Fire burns down and energy mellows, transforming itself into the elemental energy of Earth. Neither Yin nor Yang predominates during this period; instead, they are in a state of optimum balance. This pivotal cycle is the fulcrum between the Yang energies of spring and summer and the Yin energies of autumn and winter.

The Five Elemental Energies are in harmony at this time, providing a sense of ease, well being, and completion. The Earth energy of late summer is the phase of feeling at ease. Hence, we have the term used so frequently today called “Getting Grounded.” This actually means getting in balance. In the human anatomy, The Earth element is associated with the stomach, spleen and pancreas, which lie in the center of the body and nourish the entire system. If Earth energy is

deficient, digestion is impaired and the entire organism is thrown off balance owing to insufficient nourishment and vitality.

As summer passes into autumn, the energy of Earth transforms into Metal. During the Metal phase, energy once again begins to condense, contract, and draw inward for accumulation and storage, just as the crops of summer are harvested and stored in autumn for use in winter. Wastes are eliminated, and only the most vital hormonal essence is kept in preparation for the non-productive Water phase of winter. If the harvest fails or falls short, there may not be sufficient energy stored during Water/Winter to generate a strong and healthy new cycle in the following Wood/Spring. Metal energy controls the lungs, which extract and store essential energy from air and expel wastes from the blood and the large intestine, which eliminates solid wastes while retaining and recycling water. Autumn is the season of retrospection and meditative insight, for shedding old skin and dumping the excess baggage of external, attachments and emotions accumulated in Summer. Resisting this energy by clinging sentimentally to past attachments can cause feelings of melancholy, grief, and anxiety, which manifest themselves physiologically in breathing difficulties, chest pain, skin problems, and low resistance.

Flu symptoms, colds, and other respiratory ailments are common indicators of blocked Metal energy, which is associated with the lungs. Just as Metal is a refined extract of Earth, forged by Fire, so, Autumn is the season for extracting and refining essential lessons from activities and experiences of Summer, transforming them into the quiet wisdom of Winter.

And so the great wheel of nature turns in a continuous cycle of elementary energies, drawing all living things in its wake and proceeding in an orderly and rhythmic sequence.

Excerpt from
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