

THE ELEMENT OF FIRE

-Andrew Taylor

Andy elucidates the fire element, summer and health from the perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The five elements, or five phases, are a central philosophy within Chinese culture. They categorize and organize the qualities and relationships of the human body and other naturally occurring phenomena. Much of Chinese Medical theory is based on the five elements (along with Yin/Yang, Qi and blood) and each element has an associated internal organ, sensory organ, body tissue and fluid, color, season, flavor, climate, and emotion. As we did in our article from this February's magazine entitled, *Winter Wellness* (now applicable to those Down Under!) we will consult the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, the first original text discussing Yin and Yang, Qi, and the five elements from the first century CE, as our guide to living more in harmony with the seasons.

The summer months mark the most active and exciting time of the year for many people. As we have moved into the fire phase of the five elements in Chinese philosophy, Yang energy has now grown full and abundant. Our natural inclinations are to utilize this abundant and expansive energy through more activity and movement. We are naturally inspired to take full advantage of the longer days filled with warm weather and sunshine to be outdoors, go traveling or complete projects that may have begun in the spring. Though, we must take caution, as this Yang energy is not without limit, and may even possibly transform to a state of excess. Just as flames burn out or may spread rampant, we must skillfully remain

in harmony with this fire season to ensure healthy transitions back into the predominant Yin energy of autumn and winter.

In the three months of summer there is an abundance of sunshine and rain. The Heavenly energy descends, and the Earthly energy rises. When these energies merge there is intercourse between Heaven and Earth. As a result plants mature and animals, flowers, and fruit appear abundantly.

The fire element represents a blooming energy, characterized by warmth and heat, growth, expansion, upward movement, passion and creativity. The new life that was birthed from the wood energy of spring has now reached its peak in the summer, burning bright and strong like the hot sun. The *Nei Jing* advises on how to live in harmony with the summer season. Let's take a look and go a bit deeper into a few of the lines from *Chapter Two, Discourse on Regulating the Shen (spirit) According to the Four Seasons*, to get a better understanding of this renowned classical Chinese text.

"One may retire somewhat later at this time of year, while still arising early." My favorite memories as a child were those long summer evenings, when the day just didn't want to end and the sun stayed up past eight o'clock. Under a tamed sun, those late evening bike rides into the apple orchards or basketball games in the driveway made July and August a favorite time of year. A healthy body will naturally tune itself to the nature of Yin and Yang energy. At this time of year our

bodies tend to be more active late into the night. Allow yourself to go to bed later than you would normally throughout the year, but make sure to still arise early. Longer days come with more daylight, a kind of invitation that suggests using the more abundant natural energy that exists. Now that the Yang energy is more active, we don't require the same amount of rest needed during the restorative months of the winter. Turn off the air conditioner, keep the window open and let in that bright summertime sunshine to greet you in the morning.

"One should refrain from anger and stay physically active, to prevent the pores from closing and the Qi from stagnating." This statement relates to the interconnected functions of the liver, lung and heart in Chinese Medicine and their relationship with emotions, exercise and perspiration. In Chinese Medicine, anger is the emotion related to the liver. When one is angry, Qi rises up. Therefore, because of the exuberant Yang energy of the fire phase, an unskillful or unhealthy expression of anger may further constrain liver Qi, resulting in illness. Yoga, Qi Gong, or any exercise with movement are great ways to help promote the circulation of Qi and prevent its stagnation in the liver and lung. One of the other benefits from these types of exercise comes with perspiration. Sweat is the body fluid associated with the heart and cannot occur without a proper regulation of the pores (governed by lung function). Of course, this concept of exercise for maintaining good health applies

year-round, but because of the abundance of energy that requires more circulation during the fire phase, it becomes even more crucial at this time of year.

“Emotionally, it is important to be happy and easygoing and not hold grudges, so the energy can flow freely and communicate between the external and internal.” Each of the five elements has an associated emotion and between that emotion and the corresponding organ there exists an interconnected relationship. When the organ is in balance the emotion will manifest harmoniously, and conversely, if that emotion is exaggerated (excess) or lacking (deficient) it may signify an imbalance in that organ. Joy represents the healthy emotion of the heart. A calm and open heart releases tension and can function properly to circulate blood and Qi. An imbalanced heart in excess causes restlessness, over-excitement, impatience, and hysteria. A deficient heart may manifest as a lack of joy or apathy. For me, I have found the practice of daily tea and meditation to be the best prescription to keep my heart calm and open. This statement also reminds me that when the students here at the center have made a real boneheaded mistake or broken valuable teaware, Wu De teaches us a valuable lesson by saying in jest, “Don’t worry, it’s OK. I’ll just hold a grudge for the rest of my life!”

“The heart holds the office of Monarch, whence the spiritual light emanates.” The heart, with its several important roles in the physical body and spiritual realm, along

with small intestine are the associated organs of the fire element. The heart is regarded as the Emperor of the human body. And just as ancient civilizations would cease to function without an Emperor, the body will cease to work without a functional heart. In its role as “master of the blood” and “ruler of the vessels”, it promotes the circulation of Qi and blood throughout the body. As the “house of the *shen* (spirit)” the heart provides a storehouse for Spirit and consciousness that can be seen through the eyes. And as the sprout of the tongue, the heart governs speech, so an unclouded heart spirit manifests clear speech.

The role of diet is seen from a vastly different perspective in Chinese culture. Less emphasis is put on fat content, number of calories and carbohydrates, whereas the energetic properties of food are more taken into consideration when choosing something to eat. Naturally, because of the summer heat, most of us are now reaching for lighter foods like salads and fruits. But what foods are appropriate from a Chinese medical viewpoint to clear heat and quell fire? Bitter, the flavor associated with the fire element, is a flavor we don’t often incorporate into our diets in the West. However, Chinese and Taiwanese cuisine will often use bitter foods in dishes. The nature of bitter flavor is contrary to that of fire: cooling, contracting and descending. It also has a purgative effect along with antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. Bitterness in Chinese Medicine also dries dampness, so bitter foods will help to reduce mucus membrane

secretions that result from inflammatory processes. Some bitter foods that are commonly used are bitter melon, asparagus, vinegar, turnips, alfalfa sprouts, dandelion, and of course, tea! In addition to the aforementioned bitter foods, there are many other foods that are cooling in nature, helping to suppress the heat of summer. Fruits and vegetables such as watermelon, strawberries, grapefruit, pineapple, peach, cucumber, tomato, celery, lettuce, radish, and tofu are all cooling in nature. Here in Taiwan, the summertime comes the multitude of mung bean and grass jelly dessert dishes prepared in a variety of forms and at roadside stands. You can find old aunties selling homemade cooling beverages made from *qing cao*, literally “green grass” or local wild plants, mint or chrysanthemum. On a hot summer day, these snacks and drinks will instantly provide cooling relief to an overheated body! Do yourself a favor and make these foods a part of your everyday summer diet.

Just as we carefully select our tea to serve or drink based on the time of day or year, the weather, or expected guests, we must use this same approach in our orientation towards the energy of Heaven and Earth. Summer marks the time that allows us to embrace the resounding abundance, reap the benefits of a world in full bloom and creatively and skillfully channel this active energy for the good of all beings. Raising a bowl to all our sun-drenched calm and open hearts!



Fire Element

Cardinal Direction: South
Color: Red
Body Organ: Heart & Small Intestine
Season: Summer
Sense Organ: Tongue

Taste: Bitter
Emotion: Joy
Life Phase: Youth
Sound: Laughing