

The concepts within Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) may at first appear mysterious or intangible, but once understood, they become very practical.

Allow me to generalize one of the major differences in Western vs. Eastern thinking: in the West, we think in terms of fixed, material things, while the East sees the world as a series of ever-changing processes.

You may have heard of a major Chinese philosophical work called *The I Ching*, also known as *The Book of Changes*. Through a sequence of orderly hexagrams, it describes the processes of the universe to explain how to maintain balance in an ever-changing world. And for the Chinese, change is life. Stability, as in lack of movement, means stagnation or death. The living world is thus viewed “in process.”

This applies to the five major elements, as well: Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. For example, when my Chinese Medicine instructor talked about “wood” he was not talking about a chunk of cellulose. He was referring to growth and expansion (in all directions, symbolically including a tree’s roots). Metal, on the other hand is the process of condensing or drawing together. Water flows whereas Earth dams up, and Fire transforms. These five elements express the basic processes of the universe.



There are actually two things going on within the Five Element Cycle: a nurturing or “generating” sequence and a restraining or “controlling” sequence. Think of the elements as you would a parent with a child. A child must be nurtured, but also requires boundaries. In the generating sequence, one element feeds the next. In the controlling sequence, one element restrains the other element to keep it in check.

It is easy to picture the GENERATING CYCLE mentally as: Wood is burned to create Fire, Fire turns the wood to ashes producing Earth, Earth condenses to form Metals, Metals can become liquid like Water, Water is needed to grow Wood. This nurturing cycle is pictured here as a clockwise circle in the diagram of the five elements.

Next, study the star within that circle, and follow the arrows to see how the elements CONTROL each other: Water can be used to put out Fire, Fire can be used to melt Metal, Metal can be used to chop Wood, Wood can be used to hold back Earth (as the roots of a tree hold the earth stable on a steep slope), and Earth can be used to dam Water.

Okay, enough with the vague symbolism. What does all this mean? How can it be applied to our health?

In TCM, health is all about balance. We don’t talk about something being BAD for the body or GOOD for one’s health. It is all a matter of amounts. Just like water, we need to drink enough water to survive, but too much water can drown us!

Let’s look at the example discussed in the September 26 newsletter where we discussed the spleen. A patient has the following symptoms: lack of energy, feeling bloated and poor digestion, moodiness, craving sweets. They worry too much, think so much that they sometimes can’t sleep even though they feel exhausted.

These are all signs of a lack of spleen energy. The spleen is associated with the Earth element. Two things can be happening: an imbalance in the nurture cycle could mean that the person is not eating correctly. Fire nurtures Earth, so I ask if they are eating too much cold, raw food (not enough fire/warmth)? Are they drinking too many cold beverages?

If they are eating correctly, then it is probably an imbalance in the restraining or CONTROL cycle. But if they are so tired, why would I suggest they go for a walk in the woods, as mentioned in my newsletter?

Signs of Spleen Qi Deficiency could mean they are under a lot of stress—because the spleen is associated with EARTH, and which element controls EARTH? Right! WOOD. Wood is the element associated with the liver. The liver is known to suffer under stress. Think of how an alcoholic with a damaged liver often becomes irritated and aggressive. The liver CONTROLS the spleen, so it can cause the spleen to suffer. Much like a parent scolding a child who then kicks the dog. Stress irritates the liver, which then overreacts on the spleen, causing the patient's symptoms.

Okay, so The Five Element Cycle may still seem a bit confusing, but to your TCM practitioner, it all makes sense. Analysis of the five elements can be applied to any internal organ. It takes years of training to get the hang of the subtle details, but with time it all falls into place...into a concept of BALANCE.