

CHAPTER 4

Model of the Five Elements

Symbols of Energetic Movement and Their Associations

The sage continues the work of nature
in the human world.¹

—*I Ching*

The model of the Five Elements is one of the unchanging laws that brings order to the myriad manifestations of life, discovered through observing the workings of nature. For the ancient Chinese, the essence of the spiritual path was to live in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world, and the elemental relationships have guided that pursuit over the centuries. Applied throughout Chinese culture, the elements are found in a cuisine that balances five basic flavors, in paintings that incorporate the five associated colors, and in a system of music built on a five-note scale. There was a time in the history of China when these ideas were used to govern, infusing the political process with wisdom. Since the energy within the human being is seen to follow these same principles, an understanding of the Five Elements allows the medical practitioner to diagnose and treat the *ch'i*, which is the goal of Chinese medicine.

五行

Wu Hsing
(Five Elements)

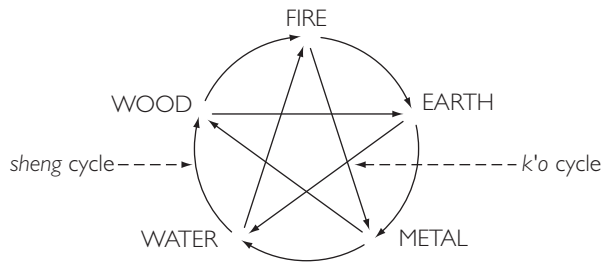


Figure 4. The Creative and Control Cycles

Essentially, the Law of the Five Elements describes a fundamental interrelationship of nature's elements. The circular arrangement, known as the *sheng* or creative-cycle, states simply that Wood creates Fire, Fire creates Earth, Earth creates Metal, Metal creates Water, and Water creates Wood (Figure 4). We can see how Wood creates Fire in the way a log serves as fuel for a flame; Fire, in turn, creates Earth as the ashes fall back to the soil; Earth creates Metal in the minerals found within the earth and in the mountains rising up from the plains; Metal then creates Water as seen in the rivers that run down from the mountains or in the rocks of the stream that hold the water in its place; and finally Water, the source of life that allows the tree to grow, creates Wood. This cycle of the elements is also referred to as the mother-child relationship.

In addition, the Five Element system includes another arrangement, the *k'o* or control-cycle, which is depicted by the arrows on the inside of the diagram. This pattern describes the observation that Wood controls Earth, Earth controls Water, Water controls Fire, Fire controls Metal, and Metal controls Wood. Wood controls the Earth in that trees prevent a hillside from eroding; Earth controls Water as the banks keep a river flowing in its course; Water controls Fire since it can put out a blaze; Fire controls Metal in that Fire can melt Metal; and Metal controls Wood in the way an axe can fell a tree.

Though some Chinese teachings refer to this elemental cycle as destructive, it is more useful to understand the *k'o* cycle as essential for keeping the balance, reflecting the principle of *yin/yang*. Without this controlling aspect, the *sheng* cycle would lead to an unchecked build-up of energies that is likely to become excessive.

These relationships are wonderfully balanced and certainly reflect a sense of wholeness. However, in order to use this model in the way the ancients did to describe the movement of life's energies, we must move beyond a concrete interpretation and think of these images symbolically. Symbols have traditionally been utilized in all cultures to allow people to transcend the limits of rational thought and approach the realm of mystery. Since these laws were derived from nature, especially from an awareness of the changes through the year and the alternations in the plant world, the qualities of the seasons can be used as a metaphor to uncover the true meaning of the elements. Because these patterns are inextricable from life, they are able to reflect the transformations of *ch'i*. Through observing the shifts in the energy through the cycle of the seasons, we move from a static and finite view of the elements to a dynamic model for grasping the infinite.

Wood symbolizes the energy of the springtime, a time of birth and growth. There is an upward movement of energy in nature, and we observe a bursting forth of activity, as for example in the bamboo shoot pushing up through the soil. In *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* this season is described as the period of "beginning and development of life," as living things unfold according to the plan inherent in their seed. To get a sense of what the Wood element means, we need only reflect on the vitality and creative expression that is all around us in this season.

After the growth of spring, there is a transition into the heat of summer, into the Fire element. The rising aspect of nature's cycle

has reached its zenith, as all things come to fullness in the light and warmth of the sun. Everywhere there is “luxurious growth,” and the life energy reaches maturity and finds its expression. To appreciate Fire, we can notice, for example, how we feel on a warm summer day at a picnic with friends. Again, it is through a personal experience of these elements that we can understand the meaning they held for the ancient Chinese.

Next, we move into the season of late summer, which accounts for the total of five seasons in this model. The energy has again shifted and transforms into the time of the Earth element. Here there is a welcome decrease from the intensity of the summer heat, as the light energy begins to wane. Earth represents a time of harvest and “abundance,” as witnessed in the fruits ripening on the vine. This energy is a symbol of nourishment, sustenance, and stability. During the late summer (sometimes referred to as Indian summer), one may feel that all the seasons are present, an impression that is consistent with the placement of Earth at the center in the Yellow River Map of the elements, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Continuing our journey through the seasons, we come to autumn, the time of the Metal element, when the diminishing of the light energy continues. This is a time of letting go, as seen in the leaves falling from the trees. Walking in the woods during this season provides a sense of peace; the active stages of the cycle are now complete, and we can get in touch with the quality of life. The autumn is a time of balance and is called the period of “tranquility of one’s conduct.” In this quiet time, when nature is turning inward, we feel inspiration and a strength of spirit.

Finally, with the coming of winter, we have the Water energy, a time to go down into the depths and return to the source of the life cycle. During this period of “closing and storing,” the reservoirs fill up and the energies are replenished through rest. There is a stark-

ness around us, an impression of “emphasis” in the natural world, as seen in the bare branches of the trees. At this time, the life energy is now underground; with the stillness of winter comes tremendous potential, as the Water element contains the seed for the new birth in the spring.

To deepen our appreciation of the movement of the energy through the seasons, it is helpful to compare the associations of the elements that have just been presented. The chart below summarizes these aspects and adds some others:

ASSOCIATIONS OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS IN NATURE

	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Season:	Spring	Summer	Late Summer (harvest)	Fall	Winter
Power:	Birth & Growth	Maturity	Decrease	Balance	Emphasis
Period of:	Beginning & Development of Life	Luxurious Growth	Abundance	Tranquility of One's Conduct	Closing & Storing
Climate:	Wind	Heat	Humidity	Dryness	Cold
Direction:	East	South	Center	West	North
Planet:	Jupiter	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
Animals:	Fowl	Sheep	Ox	Horse	Pig
Grains:	Wheat	Glutinous Millet	Millet	Rice	Beans
Number:	8	7	5	9	6

The Law of the Five Elements is so simple that it reminds us of a child's game, but this simplicity is the key to its elegance and power. The ancient Chinese lived close to the soil and had a keen sense of life's rhythms. They uncovered the principles of Five Element energetics in the most natural way, through tending their crops through the seasons. The old farmer knew that if he didn't

plant the seeds in the springtime, he would have missed the moment when the summer arrived. Without the growth of the spring (Wood), and the full maturity of summer (Fire), there would be no harvest (Earth). Similarly, if the farmer failed to pick the crops in the late summer and to turn the soil in the autumn, it would be too late once the frost set in. It is the work of the Earth time that allows for the letting go of autumn (Metal) and the rest of winter (Water). People who live an agrarian lifestyle are in intimate relationship with the seasonal energies, and they have a genuine sense of what it means to be in harmony with them. Because the elements are universal, as we study the Five Element model today we can, like the traditional farmer, draw upon our own connection with nature to build an awareness of the elements. This, in turn, allows us to cultivate true wisdom within. Words can only provide a description for energies that ultimately must be known through life experience.

As we follow the progression through the seasons, we can observe the *sheng* cycle operating in the way that each element creates the next one in the sequence. Since “the end of everything is joined to a new beginning,”² the movement is circular and self-perpetuating, resulting in the endless transformation of life’s energies. The *I Ching* speaks of this rhythm in terms of “the appearance and withdrawal of the vegetative life force.”³ We find an expansion of the light energy (*yang*) through spring and summer and a contraction of the light (or a rising of the dark *yin*) through late summer and autumn, coming to a rest in winter. If we think of these changes as a pattern of rising and falling energy, we have a model based on the number *two*, which provides an understanding in terms of *yin/yang*. If we choose to make *five* divisions in this alternation between light and dark instead of two, we generate the Five Elements.⁴ Each of the elements can thus be understood as stages in the flow of life

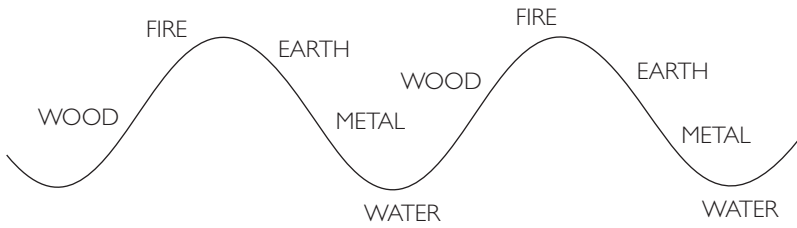


Figure 5. The Identity of the Five Element and Yin/Yang Models

from most *yin* to most *yang*, symbols of five aspects in the endless expansion and contraction of the energies over time. This temporal progression of the movement between *yin* and *yang* can be pictured as a continuous sine wave, with the elements created along the way (Figure 5). If the transformations of *yin/yang* give rise to the Five Elements, then these two models are really different ways to describe the same natural process, based respectively on the numbers two and five. At their core they are expressing the same truth.



Since humankind is seen in traditional cultures as an extension of nature, embodying the laws that are observed in the world around, it was an easy step for the sages of antiquity to apply the patterns of the elements to the human condition. Once it is understood that we are a microcosm reflecting the same patterns as the larger macrocosm, each of the elements holds a meaning for our lives. The Five Element model then became the basis for a system of medicine. Assessing the elements in a person could be a rather abstract, intellectual endeavor, if not for the fact that there evolved a practical way to read these energies through the senses. Since *ch'i* cannot be perceived directly, it is through the associations for each of the elements that we come to know the state of the energy. In

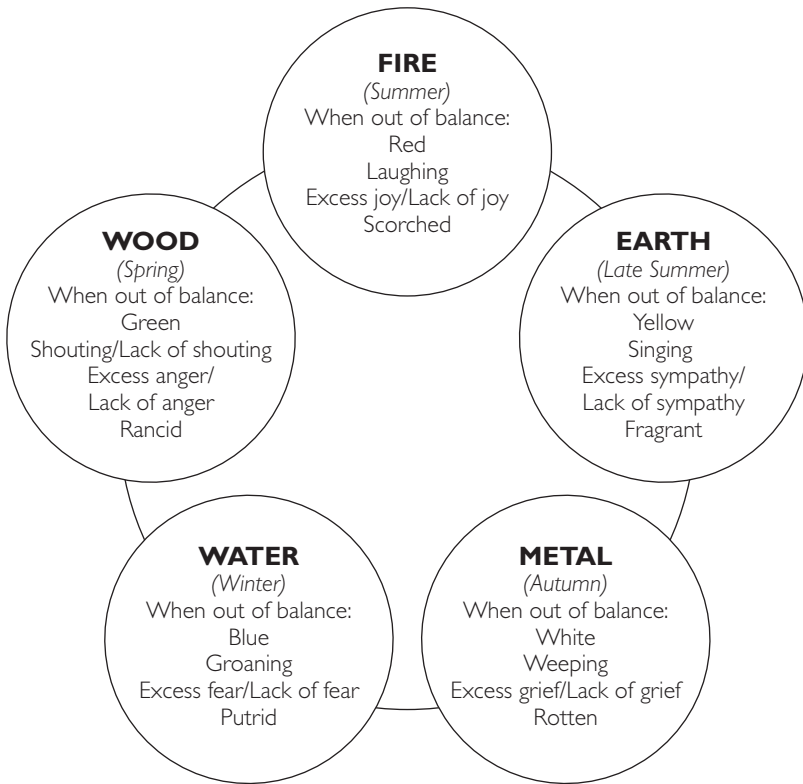


Figure 6. Color, Sound, Emotion, and Odor

particular, through observing the color, sound, emotion, and odor in a living human being, practitioners of Five Element acupuncture can bring this ancient system alive in the present moment. The above diagram of the elements indicates these correspondences (Figure 6).

Wood is the energy of the springtime, a symbol of growth and development. To understand what the Wood element means in a human life, we can examine a person's ability to grow. Does her life contain new births and creativity in much the same way as this energy exists in nature? Is there a plan, a vision of where she is

headed? Can she make the decisions that allow growth to take place? The goal in Chinese medicine is a balance in the energies, and the healthy expression of Wood is probably best considered to be assertiveness, like the upward-expanding bamboo shoot that pushes up through a crack in the pavement. When this activity goes to the extreme, or when growth does not occur in a person's life, the tension and frustration may be reflected in a shouting voice and the emotion of anger, expressions that can be understood as diagnostic of a Wood element out of balance. The ideal of health in this system is seen to be the ability to express a range of emotions in the course of the day. This can be observed, for example, in the play of children, who are capable of getting fiercely angry, but then move on to other feelings in a relatively short time. In working with the Five Elements, when we find someone who is stuck in this emotion and is still angry long after an event is over, we suspect that she may have difficulty in the issues pertaining to Wood.

Conversely, an imbalance in this element may be associated with a lack of shouting and a lack of anger, as in the individual who is unable to assert herself to make things happen. Someone who is incapable of getting angry, who has her foot stepped on and says, "Pardon me for putting my foot under yours," could also be suffering from a Wood imbalance. It is likely this same person will not have the creative energy required to make changes in other areas of life, and as a result will most likely not be able to manifest growth. Thus, we find that each of the elements may be out of balance in either an excessive or deficient way (bipolar dysfunctions that reflect the principle of *yin* and *yang*).

Through observing the world in the springtime, we know that Wood is associated with the color green. When this element does not find a healthy expression in an individual, we can actually observe a green hue on the side of her face. The phrase in our language "green

with envy” indicates an awareness of this phenomenon. If a person has an imbalance in Wood, we may also smell a rancid odor, like the smell of a gym locker room or rancid oils. It is important to understand these associations in their proper context as natural expressions of their respective elements. The value of these correspondences lies in the way they reveal the energy of the moment: a person may deny being angry in words, but if she expresses herself in a shouting voice, her true feelings are unmasked.

The Fire element is the energy of the summer, and in evaluating a person’s Fire we want to know if there is warmth in his life; quite literally we can ask, Does he have sunshine? The realm of interpersonal relationships is in many ways the province of Fire, and we can see the health of this element reflected in the ability to communicate, make connections, and develop true intimacy. On the deepest level, Fire energy comes to us through love and it is here, in God’s greatest gift, that we experience the spiritual power of this element. An imbalance may be observed in a red color, inappropriate laughter in the voice, and excessive joy (or in a lack of these qualities). The odor of Fire is scorched, like the smell of a hot iron left too long on clothes, or of a child with a high fever. These associations can be derived quite easily from an awareness of our sensory impressions on a summer’s day.

We probably have all encountered people who are deficient in Fire, who seem cold and distant and lack the spark that is the essence of life itself. An absence in the warmth this element provides can be observed, in a very real way, through lack of laughing in the voice, lack of joy in the emotion, and a color that can be described as lack of red. These people may crave connection, only to find that others avoid them once it becomes clear that those lacking in Fire are only interested in taking that element and are incapable of giving it back, in turn. Then there are those who are always

laughing and socializing, who never seem happy unless they are partying. Might the compulsion to constantly seek joy on the outside be an indication that these people lack a genuinely sustained Fire on the inside? As we look beneath the surface we may indeed find that the seemingly excessive joy of the person addicted to parties is actually compensating for a deficiency within.

The ancient Chinese understanding is that any extreme in the associations is an expression of an elemental disharmony, and often there may be a mixture of excessive and deficient expressions. When the Fire element is out of balance it is actually quite common to observe an individual move suddenly from excess joy to a total lack of joy (say, for example, when he experiences rejection in a relationship). According to the principle that *yin* and *yang* mutually create each other, extremes turn into their opposite, as they prove to be “two sides of the same coin.”

The Earth energy brings stability and a sense of groundedness to the human condition. If a person is struggling in this element, she can experience tremendous insecurity. It is as if she literally has no connection to the earth. Since the late summer is the time of harvest, we can ask, in assessing an individual's Earth, whether she feels nurtured, can nurture others, and is capable of bringing forth a harvest in her life. A yellow color (like hay ready for the reaper) may be observed along the side of the face when there is an imbalance here. The sound of singing and the emotion of sympathy remind us of a mother caring for her child (Earth is indeed the great Mother). Again, an excess in these signs may reflect a disharmony—for example, a person who is inclined to mother everyone. Someone who is always feeling sorry for herself, who is constantly seeking sympathy, may also be expressing this same pattern; and, of course, a lack of sympathy may be observed in someone who is out of touch with this element. The odor is fragrant, like the earth in late summer, and it

is an interesting correlation that people with uncontrolled diabetes (a disease of the pancreas, which is an organ associated with the Earth element) have a fruity smell of ketones on the breath that is indeed fragrant.

CASE HISTORY: I once treated an older woman who lived in a mobile home park. Having a long history of taking care of others, and happening to own a car, she took on the task of running errands for other residents who lacked transportation. She found herself unable to set limits and would ignore her own needs in order to try to please everyone else. In time, she developed gastritis and was put on the medicine Prilosec to reduce stomach acid. Since the stomach organ is involved with bringing in food, problems here may be a manifestation of an imbalance in the Earth element. From a Five Element perspective, her over involvement in which she attempted to fix every situation (based on excess sympathy) was at the root of her dis-ease. The goal of treatment, through both counseling and acupuncture, was to restore a healthier balance to this emotion. A wholistic approach, in this case, allowed a deeper level to be addressed and provided far more lasting results than did symptomatic treatment. Eventually, she was able to discontinue the medication.

The Metal energy of autumn represents a time to find meaning and spirit. For humans, this element connects us to a greater purpose, imbuing life with a sense of quality, rather than quantity. Metal is required for self-esteem and, in extreme cases, if a person is cut off from this element, there can be the most profound depression and despair. When out of balance, we can observe the white color (like a metallic sheen), a weeping voice, the emotion of grief, and a rotten odor (which reminds us of the smell of a decaying pumpkin in the autumn). These were the diagnostic clues in the

first Five Element patient I ever observed, as described in the “Introduction.”

It is not surprising that our modern world, having lost contact with traditions and meaningful rituals, suffers from a lack of spirit. Though the essence of Metal has little to do with material possessions, people typically attempt to compensate for a deficiency through acquiring money and jewels (physical manifestations of this element). Those who endlessly search for spiritual truths, who repeatedly travel across the globe to be with a guru, may be seeking on the outside what they are missing (and can in the end only find) on the inside. One of the healthiest expressions of the Metal element I’ve come across was the statement by an impoverished but very spiritual Hispanic woman who, when asked whether her life had meaning, replied simply, “God does not make junk.”

Water, the energy of winter, symbolizes a time of stillness and rest that allows for the building up of reserves. When the reservoirs are dry there can be no potential for coming forth into life, and those with a deficiency in this element may experience a severe depletion of energy. Since the winter rains bring fluidity and freshness, Water brings the ability to flow; when there is a lack of this energy, a person may become rigid. An imbalance in this element may be reflected in a blue color, which can appear under the eyes or as a darkening on the side of the face that makes it seem that the person needs a shave. A groaning sound in the voice and the emotion of fear are also associated with the Water element, which is understandable when one considers the fear of drowning or the feeling that would be engendered by a scarcity in the storehouse during the wintertime. Once again, the ideal is to achieve balance, and we need to realize there is appropriate fear that prevents a person from being unduly reckless. Thus, the daredevil who is constantly risking his life may also be expressing an imbalance in Water. The odor for

this element is putrid, the smell of stagnant water or of urinals. I have found the best place to experience this smell to be hospital wards, where the overwhelming putrid odor stems from the combination of bed pans plus the devastating fear that is typically present.

CASE HISTORY: I recall the case of a carpenter who, despite extensive bodywork therapy, suffered from chronic back pain. Of interest was the fact that his symptoms were especially severe in the winter months. His fear at not being able to earn a living was quite apparent and, since the meridians of the Water element run through the back, the pattern underlying his situation could be readily understood through the Five Element model. He failed to respond to treatments on the physical level essentially because the problem did not have a structural cause. Rather, it was an energetic disturbance of depleted reserves and held the underlying message that he needed to rest during the wintertime. Like so many in the modern world, he ignored the signals from his body as he was swept into a frenzy of activity during the Christmas season—behavior that was clearly not in harmony with nature. The advice found in the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine for staying healthy in the winter would apply here: go to bed early and rise late, after the sun is well up in the sky. Once he integrated this counsel into his life, the back pain began to subside.



Though there are a great many expressions in human life, it is the color, sound, emotion, and odor, along with the twelve pulses, that are primarily used to assess the state of the elements in Five Element acupuncture. As they come closest to reflecting the true

energy of the individual, these associations form the foundation for diagnosis in a system of medicine concerned with addressing the *ch'i*. Each of us needs to express all of the elements in our lives and, in a similar way, we tend to manifest a spectrum of colors, sounds, emotions, and odors in the course of a day. In order to discover the element that is most out of balance, the key is to recognize the correspondences that stand out as being inappropriate, whether excessive or strikingly absent. If a person fails to show any sorrow one week after the death of a parent, we would call that an inappropriate lack of grief. On the other hand, if years later the individual is still immobilized by the loss, that may represent an excess grief. Both situations point to an imbalance in the Metal element.

On the following page is an extended list of the Five Element associations. It is traditional for students of this system to inquire into a range of manifestations as a way to evaluate the state of the *ch'i*. As we continue our exploration of the elements, we will have the opportunity to examine these relationships in greater depth.

The universal applicability of the Five Element model can be appreciated in the way it can be applied to anatomy and physiology, as understood by modern biology. The vital organs fall nicely into a Five Element pattern, indicative of a plan for the organization of the body that is entirely consistent with traditional wisdom (Figure 7).⁵ On the level of cellular physiology, metabolism can be categorized according to the Five Elements, as the basic food groups and life-sustaining molecules also follow this framework.⁶ Fats can be associated with Wood, since they are digested with the aid of the gall bladder and are processed by the liver. Proteins, the spark of life, may be related to the Fire element. Carbohydrates are considered to be an expression of Earth, as they provide the sweet taste, while the pancreas produces the insulin needed for sugar to enter the cells. Both

ASSOCIATIONS OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS IN PEOPLE

	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Color:	Green	Red	Yellow	White	Blue
Sound:	Shouting	Laughing	Singing	Weeping	Groaning
Emotion:	Anger	Joy/Lack of Joy	Sympathy, Worry	Grief	Fear
Odor:	Rancid	Scorched	Fragrant	Rotten	Putrid
ORGANS/OFFICIALS:					
Yang	Gall Bladder	Three Heater, Sm. Intestine	Stomach	Colon	Bladder
Yin	Liver	Heart Protector, Heart	Spleen & Pancreas	Lungs	Kidneys
Metabolites:	Fats	Proteins	Carbohydrates	Minerals, Oxygen	Water
Sense Organ:	Eyes	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ears
Orifice:	Eyes	Ears	Mouth	Nose	Lower Orifices
Fortifies:	Ligaments	Pulse	Flesh (muscles)	Skin	Bones (joints)
External Manifestation:	Nails	Complexion	Lips	Body hair	Head hair
Flavor:	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Pungent	Salty
Fluid Secretions:	Tears	Perspiration	Saliva	Mucous	Urine
Spiritual Resource:	Spiritual Soul (<i>Hun</i>)	Heavenly Spirit (<i>Shen</i>)	Thought (<i>Yi</i>)	Animal Spirit (<i>P'o</i>)	Will (<i>Chih</i>)
Positive Aspect:	Bursting forth	Love	Thoughtfulness	Spirituality	Courage
Task:	Creativity	Compassion	Caring	Meaning & inspiration	Inner strength
Resolution For Emotional Imbalance:	Forgiveness, Letting go	Stillness, Surrender	Boundaries, Service	Relationship, Connection	Containment, Faith

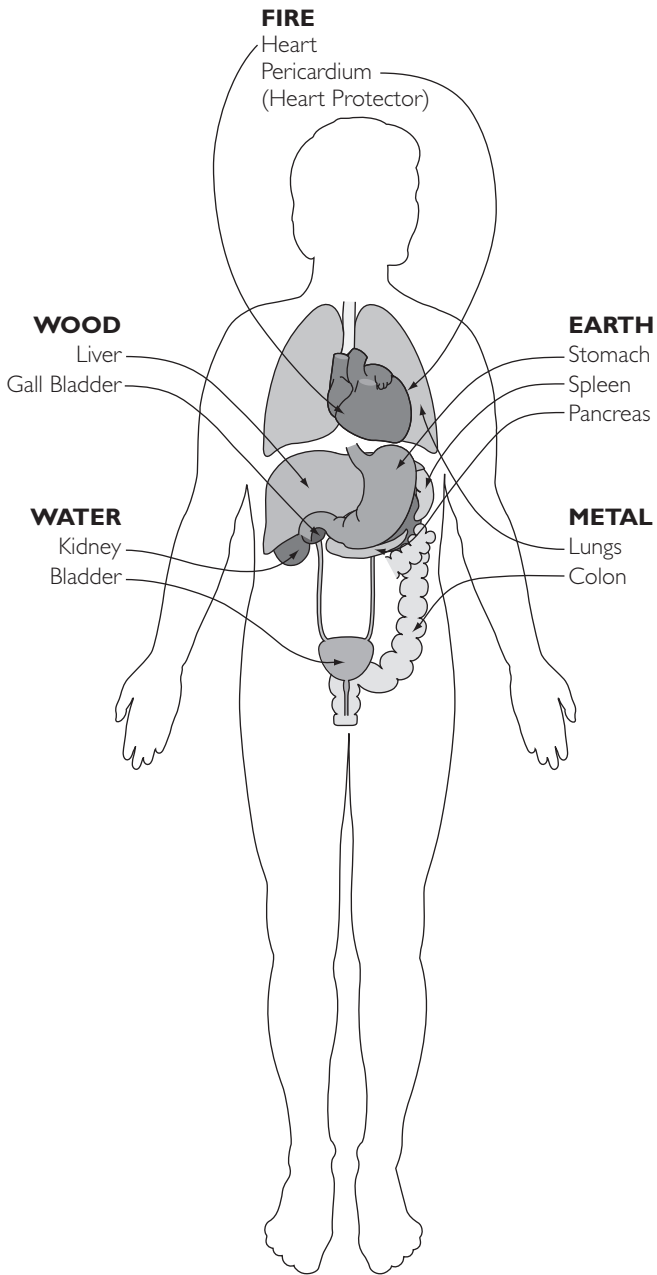


Figure 7. A Lay-out of the Organs of the Body According to the Five Element Map

the minerals needed for healthy function, as well as the oxygen required for respiration, correspond to Metal. Lastly, water, which comprises two-thirds of our bodies, belongs with the Water element.

Historically rooted in ancient China, the practical use of the Law of the Five Elements based on observable associations is, to a great extent, the work of Professor J. R. Worsley, with whom I had the good fortune to study in England. Drawing upon diverse healing methods, as well as his own experience in Asia, he revitalized classical practices, placing a strong emphasis on sensory perception. The genius of this approach is that it is able to cut through words and symptoms in order to read the energy of the moment. As a system of medicine, it is transmitted largely through oral teaching and, when asked for a textbook, Dr. Worsley never failed to remind his students that nature is the real teacher of the elements. Practitioners are encouraged to develop themselves as instruments in order to effectively apply these principles in the treatment room, and non-acupuncturists can certainly use these same tools to assess energy and act in harmony with the demands of the time.

It is said that “the map is not the territory,” and it is indeed important to not become so focused on the methodology that we forget the real person who is the reason for the inquiry. Yet, to address the full range of life’s expressions, we need a vehicle capable of expressing a deep level of experience. Based on enduring patterns of nature, the Five Element model is a form that encapsulates a greater wisdom. Since it is built on images that are inherently part of the human condition, it has survived the test of time and remains as applicable today as it was in China, thousands of years ago.

NOTES

1. *I Ching*, Bollingen Series, trans. Richard Wilhelm (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), Hexagram 30, *The Clinging*, p. 119.

2. *I Ching*, “Discussion of the Trigrams,” p. 271.
3. *I Ching*, “The Great Treatise,” p. 294.
4. For those who prefer fewer categories, the “lumpers” among us, the *yin/yang* model offers a way to describe the movement of life energy with just *two* distinctions. The “splitters,” who enjoy breaking things down further, would naturally gravitate to a system based on *five* (or more) possibilities.
5. Susan Mankowski first brought this East-West connection to my awareness, during conversations we had while working together at Jade Mountain Health Centre.
6. I am indebted to Darlena L’Orange, fellow Taoist and co-author, for pointing out this relationship to me. For a more in-depth exploration of metabolism and nutrition in a format consistent with Five Element theory, please see the book we have written together: *Ancient Roots, Many Branches: Energetics of Healing across Cultures and through Time* (Twin Lakes, Wisc.: Lotus Press, 2002).