

KEEPING IT SIMPLE:
THE FIVE ELEMENTS
by Richard Harnack, Faculty

Over the past 7 years of teaching and using TOUCH FOR HEALTH, I have been impressed with the simplicity of the Five Elements. When I first encountered the Five Element theory, I found myself thoroughly confused by the language used to describe the relationships, Mother-Son, Grandmother-Grandson, Husband-Wife, etc. I was further put off with the the description of the two basic cycles as "creative" and "destructive". In spite of this, I found the Five Elements useful in balancing. What follows is how I now teach the Five Elements in the ITW. The whole explanation takes about 20 - 30 minutes, and everyone is able to use it right away.

Before I give the explanation of the Five Elements, I have already reviewed the alarm points and balancing using the over/under energy model with the Wheel. The basic rules of thumb I cover here are:

1. Always start with the closest under-energy to the over-energy in the correction cycle.
2. Begin with the nearest yin under-energy to the over-energy in the correction cycle.

I find these two "rules of thumb" helpful to keep in mind.

Now on to the explanation of the Five Elements.

The first Element, or more appropriately, PHASE, is called Fire. The emotion associated with Fire is Joy, the color is Red, its' season is Summer. The next phase is called Earth. The emotion associated with Earth is Sympathy/Compassion, its' color is Gold/Yellow, its' season is Indian Summer. The next phase is called Metal. The emotion associated with Metal is Grief/Regret, the color is White, its' season is Autumn. The next phase is Water. The emotion associated with Water is Fear/Caution, the color is Blue, its' season is Winter. The final phase is Wood. The emotion associated with Wood is Anger, the color is Green, its' season is Spring.

All of these phases are connected by two basic relationships. The first of these relationship moves clockwise from one phase to the next. This can be illustrated by the following series of images: when Fire burns down it leaves ashes which feed the Earth; the Earth gives up ores from which we get Metal; the earliest Metals were soft and had a low melting point so they ran like Water; Water feeds the plant kingdom, thus engenders Wood; and, finally, wood can be used to build Fire. This cycle is called the Creation (or as I write in class, creatSHEN) cycle.

The other cycle skips every other phase and is as follows: Fire is used to melt and form Metal; Metal in the form of ore and rock, gives limits to where plants can grow, thus limiting Wood; Wood, in the form of plants and root systems,

holds the Earth in place; Earth gives Water form by giving it banks and shorelines; and, Water is used to control Fire. This is called the Control (or as I also write it KONTrol) cycle.

The only things you need to know now are which meridian belong to which phase. Fire has four: Heart, Circulation, Small Intestine and Triple Warmer. All the others have two each. Earth is Spleen and Stomach. Metal is Lung and Large Intestine. Water is Kidney and Bladder. Wood is Liver and Gall Bladder. Inside the Five Elements are all the yin meridians (yin is in). On the outside are all the YANG meridians.

You now have all the basic information to do a Five Element balance. Everything else is playing with it. So have fun!

I also, add in for fun the two cycles as expressed by the emotions, but that is another paper.

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KEEPING IT SIMPLE: THE FIVE ELEMENTS (cont'd)
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In the last article, I gave a brief outline of how I teach the Five Elements in the ITW. My primary focus is getting people to use and play with the Five Elements as a practical tool, rather than a theoretical model. One way I do this is to recount the two basic cycles by reviewing the five emotions.

The five emotions are: FIRE-JOY, EARTH-SYMPATHY/COMPASSION, METAL-GRIEF/REGRET, WATER-FEAR, and WOOD-ANGER. The key to understanding these emotions is the idea of appropriate expression. In oriental philosophy, the main idea is of moderation. Thus each of these emotions, when expressed appropriately. Each emotion has its' internal expression (Yin) and its' external social expression (Yang). With this background we will now review the emotions.

The emotion for Fire is Joy. When we are in balance in this element, our internal feelings of Joy are congruent with our external expression of these feelings. Thus, if someone give us a gift which causes us to feel happy, we let them know of our joy for having received this gift. If we are able to feel and express Joy in our life, then we can also feel and express Sympathy/Compassion both for ourselves and others. Sympathy/Compassion here is the sense of support in difficult times we can give ourselves and others. It is the "pat on the back" for a job well done. If we can feel Sympathy/Compassion, we can also feel Grief/Regret. Grief/Regret may have to do with death and dying, but it also has to do with the sense of wistfulness we often feel when we change our life. Here we may grieve for the past state of our life which is no longer. If we allow ourselves to feel Grief/Regret, then we may also experience Fear. Fear of the future in terms of "what will my life be like". Whenever we go through a life change, we may experience Fear as something which informs us to proceed cautiously. Yet if we remain in Fear too long, we may experience Anger. Anger here is a motivating emotion. It moves us out of our Fear. When we feel anger inside and express it outwardly, we are able to "let go" of it. This "letting go" then frees us to experience Joy. This is one way of looking at the emotions on the Creation cycle.

When we move to the Control cycle, each of the emotions helps to modify the others. Thus our sense of Joy modifies our Grief. One way I think of this is in terms of the tradition of holding a wake after the funeral. At the beginning of the wake everyone is somber. As the wake proceeds, people begin to recall instances of humor and fun from the deceased's life. Before long the sense of Grief is replaced with a sense of appreciation for the person.

Our Grief in turn modifies our Anger. It is very hard to remain angry at someone over whom we feel Grief/Regret. As long as we grieve our anger cannot go to extremes. Kübler-Ross, in her work on death and dying, acknowledges one of the most difficult thing families have to deal with in death, is their and the dying person's anger. The family's anger comes from their sense of being left behind with "unfinished business". The person's anger comes from "why me". Yet it is our grief which mitigates this anger. Our Anger modifies our Sympathy/Compassion. My favorite image here is of a three year-old child. The "magic" word for three year-olds is "NO". Our ability to say no is an important one in establishing our own ego-space. People who cannot say "NO" quite often find themselves burnt out because they are in continual Sympathy for others.

Our Sympathy modifies our Fear. It is difficult to be very fearful of someone for whom we can feel sympathy and compassion. Our Fear in turn modifies our Joy. Fear here is understood better as Caution. We may be approached by someone to join in some "wonderful" opportunity. Now we may be truly ecstatic about this opportunity, it may be just what we have wanted to do, yet our "little voice" tells us to "look before we leap". It is in this manner that Fear modifies Joy.

We have been discussing the emotions as appropriate expressions internally and externally. Now let us move on to the negative side for a moment.

Whenever there is a lack of congruence between the internal feeling and the outward expression, then we are out of balance. For example, there are people who truly feel Joy when given a gift, but the most they can muster of this to the outside world is a terse "Thank-you". In other words, they are unable to convey their feeling of Joy to anyone else. Others may be expressing Joy outwardly continually, yet inside they have very little Joy. This may be in response to how they think they "should" behave. Such people after a while seem to be shallow persons indeed. Imbalance in Sympathy/Compassion may show up as self-pity if focused on one's self, or being overly hard on one's self, if not felt at all. Outwardly, the lack of Sympathy for others can be seen as a on-going state of anger toward the world. Just as too much sympathy for others, may lead to unrealistic expectations for particular individuals.

Too much or too little Grief/Regret, is an imbalance in Metal. Some people are unable to express their grief, and find themselves dominated by this lack of letting-go. Other people seem to be continually in grief, constantly regretting all of the "what-might-have-beens". They find themselves locked into a past that no longer meets any of their reality needs, thus they attempt to restructure their world in terms of the past.

Too much or too little Fear is indicative of an imbalance in Water. Too much Fear prevents us from moving on, we become paralyzed in the moment. the problem is that the moment passes us by. Too little Fear, and we find ourselves taking needlessly reckless chances with our life and others' lives. Fear informs us of when we are in danger. If we ignore this warning without any clear idea of how to get out of the danger, then we are being foolish with our well-being.

Anger is one of the most dicussed emotions in the literature of psychology. People who hold their anger in, or deny that they even feel anger, show up later in their lives with a host of physical problems. Surveys of persons with rheumatoid arthritis show up as having internalized their anger. This is of particular interest, for the Wood element is in control of the joints and ligaments. Thus, we have Western psychology confirming independently something taught in acupuncture. Just as some people hold their anger in, there are others who always seem angry. these people come across as being "forceful" even when this is not called for. Their voice betrays this as they sound as if they are shouting, no matter what feelings they are attempting to express.

This is a brief overview of a very interesting and exciting subject. there are many approaches to the Five Elements, it is my hope that this encourages you to discover your own.

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