

Using the 5 elements to cultivate personal mastery

by John Kirkwood

The three-legged stool

In the healing professions, mastery is based on three attributes of the healer: her knowledge, her skills and her personal development. These capacities can be seen as the legs of a three-legged stool. When all three legs are present and equally strong, the stool provides a firm base for our practice, but when one is weak or missing, the stool's support is compromised and the our healing capacity is limited.

So what do I mean by knowledge, skills, and personal development.

Knowledge is the informational content, or theory of our subject. For us as shiatsu practitioners that includes understanding things such as the principles of Chinese medicine, meridian pathways, locations of tsubo, and the various techniques that we use.

Skill comes from experience, and is the increasing refinement of our ability to effectively apply the theory to the individual case. We all begin with differing levels of innate skill, but if we stay open to new learning, then practise and experience can increase our skills indefinitely.

Personal development refers to the self-awareness and self-understanding that arise from an examined life. This self-understanding can be gained from one's own shiatsu treatments, and also includes the self-development that arises from various forms of meditation, mindfulness practices, and psychotherapy.

The first two legs of the stool are well recognised and well respected in the modern world. However, personal development is often underrated or not even considered. And yet, without this third leg, the foundation of our practice is limited and incomplete.

It is limited precisely because it is

difficult to effectively treat a client who is experiencing phenomena that lie beyond our own personal development. Whether it is spoken or not, our understanding of our own inner landscape provides the space for the client's inner horizons to expand. If those horizons are limited, so too will be the client's possibilities for healing on physical, emotional and spiritual levels.

This article is an attempt to address the often-missing but crucial third leg, personal development. Of the many self-development practices available, I have chosen one that is immediately at hand to practitioners of Asian bodywork therapy, the mindfulness practice of personal immersion in the Five Elements.

Personal development through the Five Elements

Just as all phenomena in our world can be seen as expressions of the yin-yang polarity, so too all of the Ten Thousand Things can be seen as arising within the framework of the Five Elements, or the Five Phases.

As humans, we too have our particular place within, and relationship to, each of the Elements. How we relate to each of the Five Elements both shows and shapes our body and health, our emotional reactions, our psychological patterns, and at a spiritual level, our view of our place in the cosmos. Understanding at deeper and deeper levels how we are influenced by our relationship to the Elements, and how they influence us, can bring the self-awareness and self-knowledge that develop the third leg of the stool of mastery.

So how can we use the cycle of the Elements to guide our self-exploration? The easiest place to begin is with the cycle of the seasons, which is perhaps the most graphic manifestation of the Five Elements.

The energy of an Element is at its peak in its corresponding season. Water is at its peak in winter, Wood in spring, Fire in summer, Earth in late summer and Metal in autumn. It's as though a high tide moves through the year. As the tide crests in a particular season, it will impact each of us differently, and will push up against any stuck places in us that lie within that Element. Thus, in a way that is remarkably diagnostic, we can use our responses to each season to examine how we are being affected. Luckily, nature kindly gives us a few months in which to do our examination. What's more, if we don't get it all this year, there'll be another opportunity next year!

There isn't the space here to look at all the Elements, so I have chosen just to write about Metal. This is because this article appears at the beginning of autumn, and is thus applicable to our immediate experience. Also, for many it is the most challenging season to negotiate. However, all the principles that I illustrate below can be used in any of the other four seasons. For your information, figure 1 summarises the correspondences for all five seasons.

I'll look at the impact the Metal Element can have on us at physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels, and how we can use this information to enhance our self-awareness and expand our inner horizons.

Autumn, the season of metal

The organs of Metal are Large Intestine and Lung. These are the organs of letting in and letting out, allowing and letting go. In autumn, the ambient energy of the season is about letting go as nature's energy ebbs. Just as the leaves fall from the trees, there is a stripping away of non-essentials.

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The Lungs take in the breath of Heaven while the Large Intestine deals with the basest of matter. This dichotomy demonstrates the profound way in which Metal combines the sacred with the mundane. Spirit animates Body. How much we can allow spirit to inhabit our body and our animal senses will tell us much about our relationship to Metal.

We can start our self-reflection by asking ourselves questions about our physical functioning, questions such as, how easy is our breathing, that 14 times a minute letting in and letting out? And how is our organ of elimination, the colon, which daily lets go of the garbage? What about our nose, the sense organ of Metal? How easy is it for the air to pass through? How is our sense of smell? How is our skin, the tissue of Metal, acting as our third lung, letting out toxins through perspiration, and providing a barrier to pathogens?

Not only does the autumn allow us to see more clearly how our body is in relationship to Metal, but the ambient Qi supports us in taking steps to heal its organs. Fasting, colonic cleansing, heavy metal detoxification and breathing practices all are supported in autumn. If you're a smoker, it's a great time to quit. Indeed the giving up and letting go of any addiction is naturally supported at this time of year.

These are the impacts of Metal upon the body. We also have our mental reactions to the Element. How do we respond to the approach of the season of autumn, to the shortening days, the lower angle of the sun, the diminution of heat and light? Is it with welcome and appreciation, or is there some discomfort, even dread? As I said above, for many this is the most challenging transition of the year. For as nature sheds itself in preparation for going within, it can be a reminder of our own ageing and mortality.

When Metal is out of balance, the mind can tend towards obsession, leading to compulsive behaviours. Such behaviours are a manifestation of the inability to let go of those things that do not serve us. Substance addiction is one way this shows up. It

can also manifest as perfectionism and nitpicking.

This leads us to the emotional associations of Metal. Just as the organs are concerned with letting go, the emotions of Metal, which are grief and sadness, relate to attachment. We can ask ourselves, how easy is it for us to let go of the past without clinging or longing for that which is no longer here? Grieving is a normal human response to the loss of someone or something dear to us. But if there is a hanging on long after the event, this points to an imbalance in our Metal Element. Equally important to consider is our reactions to this emotion. Is it easy for you to be sad, to cry, to grieve, or is it something you don't or can't do? Is there a judgement about having the emotion, or do you judge others who show grief and sadness?

Often our ability to move easily into and out of an emotion is learned from our family of origin and how open our parents were to the particular emotion. Much insight about the difficulties in our emotional life can be gained from working with our historical patterns.

Chinese medicine tells us that if an emotion gets stuck in the body, it dwells in the associated yin organ of the Element. In the case of Metal, unresolved grief becomes lodged in the Lungs, affecting both the organ and the channel. From this we can see how our physical and emotional responses to an Element are intertwined.

Finally, let's look at the associations of Metal at the level of spirit. By this, I refer to our relationship as humans to the Tao, the Great Mystery that is beyond description, and ultimately beyond understanding. As the Oneness manifests as the Ten Thousand Things, it also differentiates into the essential qualities or gifts in each of the Elements. In Metal, this includes Acceptance, Acknowledgement, Perfection, Preciousness and Value. The degree to which we can see the value and preciousness of each moment as a perfect unfolding of the Tao gives us a sense of the health of

our Metal at the level of spirit.

Some of us will have difficulty discriminating our particular responses to autumn from our responses to the other seasons. If this is the case, we can take a full year to do the same activity in each of the seasons, and note what happens each time. This can give us a measure of our response to each Element. For example, in each season we can receive a shiatsu treatment, take a long hike in the same location, spend an hour meditating in the same spot in our garden, or chat with a friend in a teashop about how we're feeling. We can then compare and contrast our response to the same activity as the seasons change.

As the year progresses from season to season, we can attune to the qualities of each Element as they express themselves through us. As the Qi of the year moves around the Sheng cycle, we can experience not only our responses to each Element, but also to the transitions between Elements.

These transition periods are often quite diagnostic as the arrival of a new energetic vibration particularly reveals our resistances to that vibration. It can be very useful to pay close attention to ourselves at these times of transition.

Bringing the Elements into life

The kind of self-examination that I've described above can reveal many pieces of information, but this information is only really useful to us if we can understand it in some kind of context of personal meaning, and then integrate these understandings into our personal and professional lives.

There are many ways that we can understand and integrate this work with the Elements into our lives. Sincere inquiry into our responses to the seasons is certainly a great way to begin. Journaling, writing, drawing, painting and sculpting are some of the ways we can express and explore our responses.

Each Element lends itself to expression in different ways. While

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	WATER	WOOD	FIRE	EARTH	METAL
Season	Winter	Spring	Summer	Late summer	Autumn
Organs	Bladder	Gall Bladder	Small intestine	Stomach	Large intestine
	Kidneys	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs
Sense organ	Ears	Eyes	Tongue	Mouth, lips	Nose
Tissue	Bones	Tendons and ligaments	Blood vessels	Muscles	Skin
Emotion	Fear	Anger	Joy	Sympathy	Grief
Gifts	Wisdom	Vision	Love	Nurturing	Perfection
	Trust	Clarity	Passion	Understanding	Acceptance
	Will	Strength	Spontaneity	Support	Value

Figure 1: Table of correspondences of the Elements

Wood for example might draw forth our creativity in planning and building things, reflection and meditation are more appropriate to Metal.

To integrate the spirit of Metal, we can invoke it by attuning ourselves to its frequency or vibration through our everyday activities. On a physical level, we can fast for a day or build a compost pile. We can make more space by doing things like cleaning out the garage, giving away what we don't need, washing the windows and letting in more light. We can take a walk, breathing in the season's cooler air, and breathing it out.

On an emotional level, we can make more allowance for the perfection of things as they are, and let go of the coulds, shoulds and woulds. On a spiritual level, we can visit a cathedral, walk in a graveyard, write haiku or read an inspiring book.

Conclusion

Over time, the kind of self-awareness work that I have described becomes an ongoing treatment, removing blocks to Qi flow and improving health at all levels, body, mind, emotion and spirit.

As year follows year, the understanding and wisdom that we cultivate take us to deeper and deeper places within ourselves. This is the wisdom that becomes the guidance for the fullest utilisation of our knowledge and experience. It is the depth that we need to bring to our work as practitioners so that our knowledge and skills can fully express themselves within the context of our own personal development.

We then have the complete and harmonious support of all three legs of our stool, and the necessary foundation for our own personal mastery.

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John Kirkwood is a practitioner of Five Element Acupressure, and has been living, working and playing with the Five Elements since 1985. He studied with the Jin Shin Do Foundation of California, and the Traditional Acupuncture Institute of Maryland. He is a student of the Diamond Approach to self-realization as taught by A.H. Almaas.

John has been teaching since 1989, and currently teaches Five Element Acupressure workshops in Melbourne and Adelaide. He is editor of the quarterly online newsletter Bubbling Spring. For more information about the classes, the newsletter and the Elements, visit www.acupressure.com.au, or contact John at john@acupressure.com.au.

