

## The Five Elements in Chinese Medicine - Wood

According to the Shang Shu (a compilation of documentary records related to events in ancient history of China) : “The 5 elements are Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth. Water moistens downwards, fire flares upwards, wood can be bent and straightened, metal can be molded and can harden, earth permits sowing, growing and reaping. That which soaks and descends [water] is salty. That which blazes upwards [fire] is bitter, that which can be bent and straightened [wood] is sour, that which can be molded and become hard [metal] is pungent, that which permits sowing and reaping [earth] is sweet.”

Within the five element tradition lies a truly holistic approach to the potential of health and healing both within and around us. In Chinese medicine there are five elements. They can be seen as aspects of Qi (vital force). In Chinese medicine these elements Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth exist in everything and everyone and are essential to life. Imbalances in the five elements are the root cause of illness of the body, mind, and spirit. Each person's physical, mental, and spiritual constitution can be described as a balance of the elements in which one or more may naturally dominate. The proportion of the elements in a person determines his or her temperament. Chinese medicine considers the ideal condition as one in which all the five elements are in balance or in harmony.

In the element of Wood lie the themes of growing, flourishing, rooted yet growing upward. Spring is when Qi in the wood element flourishes. Its two officials are liver and gallbladder. When in balance it has flexible strength and is self-assured. When out of balance it can be striving or controlling. This can manifest as physical symptoms such as headache, sore eyes, gas, poor appetite, weakness, pain in flanks, vertigo, and chest distress to name a few.

As Meridith St. John has written, “People who have strong energy of the Wood element have a clear vision and goals, and know how to bring them into being. They excel at planning and decision making. They can be forceful in disagreements and can strongly argue their opinions. Their piercing, penetrating eyes may attract you, but avoid their wrath. When the wood Qi is weak, people can be indecisive, without strong direction in life, and stuck. They may be constrained emotionally, unable to express anger. When the Liver Qi is congested or stagnant, people can be arrogant, over controlling, and have angry dispositions. They may have a tendency to be workaholics or have addictive personalities, including the possibility of abusing drugs and alcohol. They may have digestive problems like bloating, gas, alternating constipation and diarrhea.”

As Lonny Jarrett writes in his book Nourishing Destiny “it is the nature of life that the cutting edge of our growth is always blocked. This resistance empowers... The key life themes for those of the wood constitution involve the integration of planning and decision making in a graceful manner and in a way presided over by the virtue of benevolence. Bamboo offers a perfect model of healthy growth in nature. It derives its strengths from its emptiness, rootedness, and flexibility. To emulate the virtue of bamboo would be to remain calm and unattached to momentary deviations from our course while maintaining a steady view of the big picture.”

In general, it is wise to help the liver disperse the heaviness of winter so that we may have ample resources for the growth and activity of the warmer seasons. We can do this by waking earlier, doing brisk exercise, and increasing intake of pungent and bitter foods. Green is the color of the liver and of spring time so consume plentiful young plants, fresh greens, sprouts, & immature cereal grasses (if tendency is towards coldness lightly cook foods or steam at high temperatures for short periods of time). Basil, fennel, marjoram, rosemary, caraway, dill, & bay leaf are pungent cooking spices desirable for spring. Most complex carbohydrates such as grains, legumes, & seeds are sweet in flavor that increases with sprouting, these are good in spring. Eat less in quantity and avoid late meals as to not interfere with liver & gallbladder times of the night (11pm to 3am).