

Evolution, Ancient Advice and the Five Elements

By Joseph Adams, LAc MTOM (Continued from Part 1, featured in Fall 2004 *The American Acupuncturist*)

From Chapter 22 of the *Su Wen*, “When one takes the tastes of cereal, fruit, meat, and vegetable in combination, it can invigorate the essence and nourish the vital energy.”

In Part I we discovered many examples of modern research reiterating the ancient wisdom of Chinese philosopher doctors such as Qibo, Sun Si-miao and Huang Di. Emerging realities regarding our pre-agrarian lifestyle and diet as enunciated in both the archeological record and Qibo’s ancient utopian ideal, made it clear that foods appropriate for healthy sustenance should include meats, vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains. Dairy products, especially cow’s milk, were not considered suitable for most humans. Vegetables, meats and fruits formed the major part of our diet. Contrary to the modern Chinese menu, it was made clear that grains should be eaten only in moderation.

From chapter eight of the *Su Wen*, Qibo, the Yellow Emperor’s physician and court philosopher is quoted as saying, “Those who knew the way of keeping good health in ancient times always kept their behavior in accordance with nature.” In tandem with quotes like this one from Qibo, we also explored genetic adaptation, fire use, brain vs. gut size, exercise, salt, calcium and omega oils in searching for our natural needs.

In Part II we will use ancient advice and truths about our pre-agrarian past as a foundation from which we can explore the development of the Five Elements and how a natural diet might be further refined based on variables such as constitution, seasonal changes, climate, emotions and the qualities of foods.

Yin and Yang Set the Stage for Five Elemental Thinking

No strict chronology traces the development of the Five Elements or medicated diets but rather a cross-cultural experience merged different beliefs into the comprehensive system we have

today. Yin and Yang embody the idea of observing and applying fundamental attributes to virtually any phenomena and were likely precursors to the idea of Five Elemental Correspondence. But even these ancient principles must have been precipitated by other ideologies.

Early Observations of Plant Properties

As early as 45,000 BC, ritualistic sanctions protected certain wild plants and initiated a new symbiotic relationship between people and their food sources. Protections were accorded to species such as yams to prevent disruption of their life cycle during periods critical to their growth. Man first became aware of the basic characteristics of plants out of necessity. Slowly over time more refined associations were made.

Fu Xi (about 4,000 BC) Other Sources (2852-2738 BC)

The story of the *I Ching* begins with Fu Xi, the “first and greatest emperor of China.” It was Fu Xi who discovered the eight trigrams. One story describes Fu Xi walking beside the Yellow River when a dragon horse, with extraordinary markings, rose from the waters. As a wise man, he understood the importance of carefully observing nature. Fu Xi remembered the markings, and in time he transcribed them as the Before Heaven Sequence of the trigrams. Through studying the natural world around him, Fu Xi came to understand how lines forming the trigrams reflect basic truths about how energy moves. In so doing, he laid the foundations for the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. We now know that trigrams explain many of Chinese Medicine’s fundamental truths regarding paired organ relationships, six channel divisions, treating below for diseases above, as well as the idea of five elemental correspondences.

Shen Nong period (2800 BC)

According to many historians, it was the Emperor Shen Nong who discovered tea in 2737 BC. As the story is told, one spring evening as he was resting under a tree, the wind blew some leaves into water he was boiling. “The water suddenly turned a wonderful color and tasted highly refreshing.” Shen Nong, is known to have tasted hundreds of plants, identifying not only those helpful in curing certain diseases, but also many poisonous substances. His work and experiences were finally written into the book, *The Herbal Classic of the Divine Plowman*, around 101 BC. The book describes in detail the taste, source, pharmacological action and therapeutic use of 365 medicinal materials. Also included are 170 diseases that can be treated with the medicines. It is thought that Shen Nong brought an end to hunting and gathering in China by encouraging the people to plow the fields and establish agriculture. Qibo, clearly disenchanted about “modern life,” might have been reticent about referring to Shen Nong as Divine.

Three Elements in the *Chândogya Upanishad*

The Indian theory of the three elements in the *Chândogya Upanishad* led to the development of the three forces or, gunas, which are still recognized today. Sattva (essence), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia) are primary qualities that exist in various degrees of concentration and combination. Their relative strengths determine fundamental nature, action, behavior, and attitude. According to Indian philosophy, correct understandings of these three qualities are essential to overcoming the bondage of earthly life and attaining the Supreme Self. The Gunas affect can also be modulated through Ayurvedic cooking to establish harmony or balance (Prakriti).

It seems likely, with the history of interaction between China and India, the idea of the three gunas, which are quite similar to the Five Elements, were introduced into Chinese thinking.

Spring and Autumn Period (770-475 BC)

In China, the theory of Five Elements coexisted with the theory of yin and yang. In fact during the Spring and Autumn Period there was actually a Yin and Yang School. The implications of the theory as mentioned before, are outlined in the *Book of Changes*. From these basic opposites, a complete system developed. Yin represents everything that is dark, hidden, passive, receptive, yielding, cool, soft and feminine. Yang represents everything that is illuminated, evident, active, hard, aggressive, hot, controlling and masculine. Anything can be identified with either yin or yang. Although it is correct to see yin as feminine and yang as masculine, they are really a mixture of the two. These fundamental qualitative attributes were becoming standardized and contributed to the continuing development of the Five Elements.

Tsou Yen is usually credited as the one who combined the two independent currents into one. Unfortunately most of his original work was lost. The influence of the Yin Yang School is seen throughout various Chinese classics, and had a major impact on Taoist thought. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu also make reference to the idea of a natural balance throughout their texts.

Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine (221 BC – 220 AD?)

It is difficult to know exactly when the *Yellow Emperor's Canon*, which encompasses both the *Su Wen* and the *Ling Shu*, was written. In my translation, Dr. Wu suggests that in the preface of *Shang Shu*, or *The Book of History*, Kong An Guo calls the writings of Fu Xi, Shen Nong and Huang Di the “three mounds”, for describing the “great way”. The *Shang Shu* appeared around 500 BC, it seems obvious then that the *Nei Jing* must have been even older. Further,

Huang Di, and Qibo, who some argue are only mythological entities, are thought to have lived as long as 4,000 years ago. In either case, the time frame of 221 BC – 220 AD must include earlier thoughts.

The *Nei Jing*, considers the nourishment of body and mind and emphasizes that herbal medicine and food have the same origin. It repeatedly suggests that diet was essential to the prevention of disease. The idea of yin and yang, the Five Elements and influence of the seasons are introduced. There are also discussions on philosophy, sociology, anthropology, meteorology and ecology. The *Nei Jing* demonstrates that even in ancient times people struggled with issues that are relevant today. This may be the first book to give designations to foods, by defining them in terms of categories, and suggesting specific foods for different conditions. This great compilation forms the theoretical basis for much of Chinese Medicine.

Ye Tian Shi (1690-1760 AD)

According to Dr. Will Morris, “The famous Qing Dynasty physician Ye Tian Shi was heavily involved in the Wen Bing – febrile disease school development. He typically used small doses of herbal prescriptions and relied on foods for the basis of treatment. Many of his medicinal selections contain animal products that powerfully generate jing. He also wrote about herbs that related to the eight extra vessels”.

I believe these early works, as well as many others, were studied, synthesized and later refined into the Five Elemental model of correspondence we have today. Masters such as Fu Xi, Shen Nong and The Yellow Emperor encouraged later generations, through example, to realize the importance of observation. Without this tradition we would not have the clear understanding of plant and food's elemental qualities.

In Chapter 70 of the *Su wen*, Huang Di asks Qibo. “I hope to hear how to distinguish and moderate the energies of the five elements' motion.”

The Five Elements, Our Internal

System and External Environment

In China things in nature came to be classified into five types: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Everything in existence contains some quantity of all five elements. However, one of the qualities will predominate or manifest. The five elements are not just the materials that the names refer to, but rather, metaphors for describing many of life's intricate systems, each one depending on the others to fulfill their part. It is the smooth and harmonious transition from one phase to another, along with the balance between them that is important.

Taoist physicians and sages further determined that each element has a special association with specific tissues and organs in the human body, as well as colors, flavors, climate, seasons, emotions and many other things, (*Reference Diagram 1: via American Acupuncturist Online www.aaom.org*).

A number of these components will be covered shortly. Through observation of these qualitative realities Chinese medicine began to develop a holistic method for addressing the causes of illness. (*Reference 5 Elements Chart: via American Acupuncturist Online www.aaom.org*).

The Generating and Control Phases

The elements can be arranged into cyclical sequences that represent the flow of energy between these phases – one going clockwise represents the Shen, or Generation cycle and inside of this in a star pattern is the Ko, or Control cycle, (*Diagram 2*). (*Reference Diagram 2: via American Acupuncturist Online www.aaom.org*).

In the generating sequence each element enables or assists the next. Thus, water nourishes wood, wood generates fire, the ashes fertilize the earth, earth yields metal by extraction and metal becomes liquid when it is melted. The eastern notion of metal also includes the air element. In the Control Cycle, each element has the power potential to control the next.

Over-controlling can happen when one element becomes too strong. Counteracting occurs when a controlled element reacts against its controller. All of these elemental relationships form a

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framework for assessing how our internal systems and external environments interact.

When one organ fails, it has an affect on the whole system. For example, when the spleen energy is weak, the liver energy can attack or demonstrate unhealthy “control” over it, causing hypochondriac pain, bloating, and other digestion disruptions. In this case, attending to the spleen alone would not be sufficient. Attention would have to be given to the liver system as well.

Foods Become Categorized By Their Elemental Properties

Over time, distinct properties and effects of many foods were categorized in terms of these Five Elemental archetypes based on observations of their characteristics and the reactions they elicited once ingested. For example, if a food item causes dry mouth and chapped skin, it could be classified as “fire” type. An understanding of the elemental attributes of foods became a useful tool for designing therapeutic meals.

In Chapter 47 of the “Su Wen”, The Yellow Emperor asks, “Some people have sweet taste in the mouth, what is this disease, and how does it come about?” Qibo answers, “It is due to the overflowing of the earth energy, and the disease is called *pidan* (heat and wetness in spleen).”

The Five Tastes

The five tastes have profound affects on the five organs and are classified as sweet, sour, bitter, salty and pungent. Each taste has direct influence over a particular organ. When foods with specific qualities are consumed in moderation, it benefits their corresponding organs. Over indulgence in any taste harms the associated organ and can create imbalance among the other organ systems. For example, sweet benefits the spleen and digestion, which is why a bit of fruit after a meal is beneficial. But if the diet has too much sweet taste, it can dampen the spleen and impair function.

In Chapter 78 of the “Ling Shu” Qibo suggests, “When one takes foods of the five tastes they should practice temperance.”

Used correctly, sweet taste acts on the spleen and stomach helping digestion and neutralizing the toxic effects of other foods. Sour acts on the liver and gall bladder and controls diarrhea and excessive perspiration. Bitter acts on the heart and small intestine reducing body heat and excessive fluids. Salty foods act on the kidneys and bladder softening hardness of muscles or glands. Pungent acts on the lungs and large intestine and induces perspiration and promotes energy circulation. The five organ systems control and support each other. Proper coordination only exists when there is no one organ stronger or weaker than the others. In order to promote internal balance and harmony, an ideal diet should have a good combination of the five tastes.

According to Huang Di, “A wise and good man tallied with the ways of preserving health in ancient times, in order to prolong their lives to the maximum limit. This was accomplished by understanding, the mutual contradictions of Yin an Yang and the alternation of the four seasons.”

Eating and The Four Seasons

Each season and climate also has a profound affect on its associated organ. During these times, or conditions we are simultaneously most vulnerable and most able to facilitate powerful treatments. Correct nutrition can be used meaningfully by eating according to the Season: **Winter's** cold “yin-evil”, injures the body's yang energy. Eat plenty of warm slightly fatty foods.

Spring is dominated by wind. It is important to eat food that can eliminate excessive wind.

Summer is governed by heat and fire. Eat cooling yin foods and avoid hot foods.

Autumn dryness can easily injure the lungs. Nourishing yin foods counteract dryness.

Constantly observing and maintaining elemental balance in our bodies can prevent most illnesses. For example, a diet with too many spicy and deep fried foods generates excessive heat. It dries up the internal body fluid, and can cause constipation. This condition

would be exacerbated during summer when the weather is also hot. To bring the body back to the right balance, one would need to eat cool foods such as watermelon, citrus fruits, or white turnips. Eating to counter the seasonal excesses or evils is very effective.

Emotions

Emotions can have a dramatic effect on our vital organs and, just like foods, have elemental associations. Following are a few examples of extreme or prolonged emotional states causing harm: Protracted sadness or grief leading to asthma. Over joyfulness causing a heart attack. Unresolved anger manifesting as liver disease. Worrying causing indigestion. Extreme fright damaging the kidneys and causing hair to turn gray.

Charts are provided via American Acupuncturist Online @ www.aaom.org, outlining foods with different tastes as well as other charts correlating pathological states described by control and generating cycles with Shan Han lun, Wen Bing, Zang Fu, 8 Principles and San Jiao differentiation. In this way practitioners from various disciplines can see how the use of foods might be integrated into these paradigms.

Summary

While our ancient brothers described by Qibo may have experienced a utopian ideal, it must be said that pure “naturalism” does overlook some modern health advantages. Obviously, it is impossible to transport back before smog, ground water contamination and soil depletion, back to a time where the notion of organic food went without saying. We can however, seek out the highest quality pre-agrarian type foods and live in harmony with our natural needs.

Understanding common diseases, reading their early symptoms and knowing the nature and characteristics of foods are integral to eating correctly. If we can identify problems at an early stage, we can stop them from progressing further.

It is clear there are no hard rules chiseled into stone that outline the way in which we all should eat. As is evident from the research presented in Part I,

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our inherent capacities are an evolving matter and differ from one individual to the next. Rigorous attention and experimentation coupled with help from experienced diagnosticians can act as beacons for discerning what foods are appropriate. Disease, age, activities, genetics and even time of year necessitate tremendous dietary flexibility.

Perhaps in the future, Chinese medical centers combining wisdom from ancient times with the harmonizing ideologies of the five elements will offer dietary recommendations and medicinal meals as their preeminent modalities for promoting wellness.

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