

# Five Elements for Five Seasons



(By Karen Olsen – July-Aug 2007)

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## How getting in touch with wood, fire, earth, metal, and water can improve your health.

The history of medicine has given us some incredible treatments – and some very wacky ones. While most of the zanier contributions to medical history have gone the way of the horse-drawn buggy (no one today would down a bottle of the dubious 19th-century elixir “Microbe Killer” that was all the rage until it began killing more than just microbes), some of the most ancient ideas about health remain relevant today.

The fifth century BC Greek physician Hippocrates, for instance, declared that a person’s health was dependent on the balance of four bodily fluids that corresponded to the natural elements of air, water, fire and earth. By paying attention to this balance, he argued, we could improve our health.

The same elemental idea – along with a fifth component (ether) – is echoed in the ancient Indian healing traditions of yoga, Ayurvedic medicine and vastu (the Indian equivalent of Chinese feng shui). And for thousands of years, Chinese philosophy has held that good health is a result of five elements – wood, fire, earth, metal and water – being in harmony. In addition to their role in qigong and internal martial arts, the five elements help determine the design principles of feng shui and the underlying structure of traditional Chinese medicine, including acupuncture and herbal remedies.

While paying attention to the elements might sound like another bit of quackery at first, it has proven to be a remarkably constructive way to think about how our bodies work. Getting in touch with the elements can help us find better balance – in our bodies and our lives – and help us feel more connected to the natural world.

## The Elements at Work

Today, Americans are rediscovering how attention to the elements can improve our health. From preventive and integrative medicine clinics to feng shui in our homes and offices to yoga and fitness classes, finding balance through the elements is coming into the mainstream.

Thia Luby, owner of Yoga Imaging in Colorado Springs, Colo., teaches yoga poses that correspond to fire, water, earth and air. “I believe we are all connected to the elements through the make-up of our bodies,” she says. “We are made up of 60 percent water, we breathe air to survive, we walk on two legs to stay grounded and steady, and we have a great amount of heat stored within us to keep us fueled and regulated to endure various temperatures in our environment. If we can balance our bodies and minds with the elements, we will be healthier human beings mentally and physically.”

Luby, author of [\*Yoga of Nature: Union with Fire, Earth, Air and Water\*](#) (Clear Light, 2004), uses a four-element system in her yoga practice, but elsewhere you’ll find a five-element system at work. Sunstone Yoga in Dallas, Texas, for example, offers five different classes, each one based on one of the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. These are the elements that lie at the heart of Chinese philosophy and its concept of healing. Within traditional Chinese medicine, a holistic, integrated system of thinking, each element also corresponds to a season, a compass direction, a life stage, a color, a shape and a time of day, as well as to aspects of the individual, such as emotions, activities, internal organs and the senses.

This holistic, interconnected philosophy can guide us in using the elements to tend to our health. By focusing on each element and its corresponding season, we can see how the five elements can help keep our bodies in better harmony.

## Spring – Wood

The element of wood is associated with spring, a time of birth and new beginnings. “The wood element refers to living, growing entities: trees, plants and the human body,” writes Elson M. Haas, MD, in [Staying Healthy With the Seasons](#) (Celestial Arts, 2003), his classic book about integrative medicine first published in 1981.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, spring is the time for us to reach outward, develop deeper roots and remain flexible in the wind. In the body, that means paying attention to your spine, limbs and joints, as well as muscles, ligaments and tendons. It also means paying attention to your liver, which works to detoxify the blood and make bile to help metabolize carbohydrates, fats and proteins.

To support liver functioning, think spring-cleaning. Drink plenty of fluids, and add lemon to your water, because ingesting some, but not too much, sour or vinegary foods will nourish the liver. Try eating light, raw foods like greens, sprouts, fruits, nuts and seeds. Avoid heavy or fried foods, anything with chemical additives, and alcohol. Since exercise and sweating aid liver detoxification, spring is a great time to develop a regular exercise program.

In addition to diet and exercise, there are other ways to balance your wood element. Wood governs the early hours of the morning, when we first awake. Just as morning is a great time to plan the day ahead, spring is a great time to look at your life and where you want to be in the future. “Take a little time to write a new health/life plan, including goals for how you wish to feel and what you would like to do and see happen,” suggests Haas, who founded and directs the Preventive Medical Center of Marin in San Rafael, Calif.

### Spring is a good season to:

- Eat light, raw foods such as greens, sprouts, fruits, nuts, seeds and celery
- Add lemon to your drinking water to help detoxify the liver
- Develop an exercise program to further detoxify the liver
- Make plans for your future to capitalize on spring’s association with being awake and alert, and to have a plan for summer, the season of activity

## Summer – Fire

Fire is about warmth, transformation and dynamic, sparkling movement. Summer brings fire through the heat of the sun, long days and energized bodies. “In the five elements cycle, the fire phase describes a stage of peak power,” writes Gail Reichstein in [Wood Becomes Water: Chinese Medicine in Everyday Life](#) (Kodansha, 1998). “Fire, then, is about peaking – reaching a maximal stage of activity.”

Cardiovascular exercise serves you especially well during summer, because fire rules the heart and circulation of the blood. Fire also rules the small intestine, which in traditional Chinese medicine is intricately connected with the heart. The small intestine transforms the foods we eat into usable components, which go directly into the blood. The blood moves to the heart and is circulated through the rest of the system. If you feed your body toxic food, the small intestine has little to work with when trying to pass on good nutrients. For this reason, it’s important to eat nutritious food year-round, but during the active summer season it’s especially crucial.

According to Chinese medicine, you can also have too much or too little of an element, causing illness or physical or emotional difficulties. A fire deficiency is characterized by a lack of activity. “There may be signs of cold, of weakness or lack of animation, or of the restless activity typical of deficient blood, which is unable to nourish and ground body processes,” claims Reichstein, an acupuncturist at the East Mountain Center in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. In this case, it’s important to eat heating foods like peppers, ginger, citrus, butter, meats, corn, cherries and basmati rice.

When fire is in excess, it often results in overexcitement, too much involvement and being overcommitted. To counteract this, Reichstein suggests eating bitter foods like romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, almonds and scallions, and cooling foods like cucumber, sprouts, watermelon, apples, lemons and limes. Avoid heavy foods like meats, eggs and oils.

Summer is also an ideal time for power lunches, good conversations and warm gatherings of friends, as fire is associated with midday and connectivity.

#### **Summer is a good season to:**

- Get plenty of cardiovascular exercise, because fire rules the heart and circulatory system
- If you are fire deficient, eat warming foods, such as peppers, ginger, citrus, butter, meats, corn, cherries and basmati rice
- If you have an excess of fire, eat cooling foods, such as cucumber, sprouts, watermelon, apples, lemons and limes
- Set up power lunches and meet with friends, because fire is linked to social connectivity

## **Late Summer – Earth**

Earth is unique among the five elements in that it corresponds to two unusual time periods. First, it's related to the short season called "Indian summer," those last warm, light-filled days in September or October, just before the cool weather sets in. Second, earth is linked to times of change throughout the year: those few weeks between seasons in which autumn changes to winter, winter to spring and spring to summer.

Earth is a stabilizing force during these times of transition. After all the activity of spring and summer, nature's time to grow and bloom, earth can help us get centered and balanced in late summer as we organize ourselves for the autumn harvest and begin to prepare ourselves for winter, the season of rest.

In traditional Chinese medicine, the earth element is associated with the spleen, pancreas and stomach, the organs of digestion and nutrition. The stomach receives the food you eat and starts to break it down. The spleen and pancreas then distribute the nourishment throughout the body. The pancreas also regulates your blood-sugar levels.

Choose your sugars wisely during late summer to aid the pancreas. You might try some of the foods the Chinese consider sweet, like apples, cabbage, carrots, dates, figs, grapes, kidney beans, lettuce, milk, olives, peaches, pears, squash, string beans, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and walnuts.

Also pay attention to *how* you eat, not just what you eat. Eating calmly and slowly and having reasonably sized portions will let your stomach and spleen work best. After eating and a short spell of relaxation, "the body needs to move a bit," writes Haas. "Movement aids the digestion, assimilation and distribution of nutrients."

Since the earth element rules mealtime and community, late summer is an ideal time to share a dinner with neighbors and friends – and take a walk afterward.

#### **Late summer is a good season to:**

- Choose smart sugars – apples, carrots, dates, figs, grapes, peaches, pears, squash and sweet potatoes – to help the pancreas regulate your blood sugar
- Eat mindfully. By paying attention to portions and slowing down when you eat, you can help the spleen.
- Throw a dinner party. Late summer is associated with community and mealtime.

## **Autumn – Metal**

Autumn brings the harvest of crops, shorter days and preparation for winter. The metal element, from rough ore to sparkling gemstones, symbolizes the process of refinement and its resulting products. In this season, it's time to make sure everything pure and necessary is used and maximized, and that anything unnecessary or wasteful is eliminated.

The Chinese do not include the element of air in the five-element system as Western systems do. But metal has similar associations. “For example, both air and metal energies concern mental and spiritual activities, including the workings of the mind, the intellect and communication,” writes Janice MacKenzie in [Discovering the Five Elements: One Day at a Time](#) (Wind Palace Publishing, 2002). In fact, she continues, “The inability to be open to new ideas or the rigid holding on to old thoughts and useful information could both point to an imbalance in metal.”

Furthermore, metal is connected to air through the lungs. The lungs and the large intestine, associated with metal in Chinese medicine, both deal with purification and elimination. The lungs take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide through breathing. The large intestine absorbs water and completes the absorption of nutrients, minerals and vitamins. It also holds and eliminates waste.

Eating vegetables and whole grains is necessary for our bodies year-round. Because they serve as cleansers for the intestines, however, they have added significance in autumn, when it’s important to keep your metal element in balance. A balanced metal diet also consists of hearty, rich and warm foods, including meats, nuts, fish and oils, with hints of strong flavors like Roquefort, pepper and mustard. Root vegetables – such as potatoes, carrots, garlic and onion – are particularly healthful metal foods, as are thick-skinned fruits like bananas and mangoes. Cayenne, ginger and curry promote good digestion and elimination.

You might also try practicing a form of breathing meditation for the health of your lungs. And weight training is a useful autumn exercise, as it balances the higher amount of protein and calories you crave while preparing for winter. This is a good time of the year to enjoy the late afternoon and evening, the time associated with metal, by relaxing, letting go of the day’s concerns and preparing for sleep.

#### **This is a good season to:**

- Eat root vegetables, whole grains and hearty foods as a way to clean out the intestines
- Do weight training to make good use of the muscle-building protein you crave as winter comes
- Focus on relaxation in the evening hours. Autumn is associated with late afternoon and evening time, and getting ready for sleep.

## **Winter – Water**

Winter, the cold and dark season, is a time of inward reflection, rest and restoration. It is associated with water, the element of pooling, tranquility and flow. In the body, the water element is connected with circulation of the blood, perspiration, tears, the bladder and, most significantly, the kidney.

“In Chinese medicine, the kidney is revered,” says Shoshanna Katzman, founder and director of the Red Bank Acupuncture and Wellness Center in Tinton Falls, N.J., and author of [Qigong for Staying Young](#) (Avery/Penguin, 2003). “The kidneys contain the root energy of all your organs and spark the energy of the whole body.”

To keep the kidneys healthy, you should keep them warm and well hydrated. “Kids today often wear low-rider pants and no jackets outside, so the wind and cold hits their kidneys,” Katzman observes. “That’s the worst thing they can do for their health in the winter.” When you’re outside enjoying winter activities, make sure to keep your lower back warm. Likewise, while you want to drink plenty of liquids to cleanse the bladder and kidney, avoid ice water, which can be too cooling.

In winter your body will appreciate warming foods like hearty soups, whole grains and roasted nuts, or steaming cups of ginger or cinnamon tea. To further fortify the kidney, eat black beans, kidney beans or red adzuki beans along with seaweed and steamed greens. Fish and shellfish are a good source of protein at this time of year. A simple way to feel more connected to the water element is to use sea salt instead of table salt on your food. A moderate amount of salty food can help nourish the kidneys, but remember that excessive salt damages them.

Winter may be a time to conserve energy, but that doesn’t mean you need to stay completely still. Like the element of water that moves downhill, we can learn to find the path of least resistance and to practice fluid movement. Tai chi, qigong, yoga and dance are great practices for the winter months.

Associated with introspection, receptivity and nighttime, winter is a particularly good season to pay attention to your dreams. Try writing about them or processing them through other creative activities.

### **This is a good season to:**

- Keep your back covered! In traditional Chinese medicine, it's important to keep your kidneys warm in winter.
- Eat warming foods such as hearty soups, whole grains and roasted nuts, or steaming cups of ginger or cinnamon tea
- Practice fluid exercises like Tai Chi, qigong or yoga
- Pay attention to your dreams. Winter is associated with introspection and receptivity.

Paying attention to one element at a time is a wonderful way to begin noticing their effects. But, ultimately, you should balance all five elements within your body, because they work together in a rich, complex system.

When in harmony, for example, the elements support each other in a creation cycle: Water nourishes wood, wood feeds fire, fire creates earth, earth produces metal, and metal produces water (through condensation). But when the elements are out of balance, they have the capacity to damage each other. In the destructive cycle, water extinguishes fire, wood separates earth, metal chops wood, fire melts metal, and earth absorbs water.

Making efforts to find just a little more balance with the elements in your body can go a long way toward better health and vitality. So go ahead, go elemental, and reap the healthy rewards.

## **Resources**

### **Books**

[\*Discovering the Five Elements: One Day at a Time\*](#) by Janice MacKenzie (Wind Palace Publishing, 2002)

[\*Qigong for Staying Young\*](#) by Shoshanna Katzman (Avery/Penguin, 2003)

[\*Staying Healthy With the Seasons\*](#) by Elson Haas, MD (Celestial Arts, 2003)

[\*Wood Becomes Water: Chinese Medicine in Everyday Life\*](#) by Gail Reichstein (Kodansha, 1998)