

## The Five Element Philosophy

excerpted from *Let Magic Happen*

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My understanding of the five-element philosophy deepened when a teacher of mine suggested I read *Nourishing Destiny* by Lonny Jarrett. Jarrett's descriptions of the archetypal themes of the elements in excess or deficiency took these concepts from the ancient Daoist wisdom to another level for me.

I enjoyed learning about transforming the emotional challenges unique to each element into life virtues through the functions of the paired organs, also known as officials.

Jarrett comments on some very interesting fundamental ironies inherent in the different constitutional types. He associates the term irony with "the tendency of our habitual reaction to the presence of a given emotion to reassert itself in a way that leaves us forever unfulfilled." We favor one or two of the elements in our genetic makeup, but we must deal with all five ironies as we move through the seasons, or stages, of our lives.

The emotional challenge of water, for example, is fear, which results in hoarding or squandering our resources.

The kidney is the official in



charge of the *jing*, which is our most important vital essence inherited from our parents. The life task of water is to transform fear into wisdom.

***The irony of the fire element is that "true emotional control comes from doing nothing," known in Chinese as wuwei, or effortless action.***

Both the kidney and the adrenal gland make up this official. It is the adrenal hormones that are mobilized in the fight or flight reaction when we respond to a frightening situation. Of course, if the impending threat is sufficiently dangerous, peeing in the pants may be the result of a deficient bladder official.

If the water element is in excess, it uses brute force to impose its will on life circumstances, but if it is blocked, it may respond in an impotent manner. The irony of water is that "true power comes from wisdom, which results from the cultivation of resources." According to Jarrett's interpretation, "wisdom is the virtue that empowers us to stand firmly in the face of the unknown and chart a course through uncertain waters."

He notes that in the Daoist texts, the sage takes this approach to the fulfillment of destiny, even in death. I often reflect on the role of fear in my dad's journey with kidney cancer, which ended when he eventually found the wisdom to face his death in a dream.

The emotion associated with fire is joy, which can be excessive, as in mania, or deficient, as in sorrow. Like the manic-depressive patient, the life task of fire is to find a balance in the potential chaos of these opposite emotional poles and follow a path of propriety, which is "being in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing."

The opposite of chaos is control, but that also comes with a price. Taking the metaphor of the manic-depressive patient one step further, too much medication may suppress

all the creativity and spirit in the bipolar personality. The spirit of the heart is referred to as the *shen*. The irony of the fire element is that "true emotional control comes from doing nothing," known in Chinese as *wuwei*, or effortless action.

Jarrett summarizes the teachings in the Dao De Jing that refer to the heart official as the sovereign of all the others. In the hierarchy of emperors, the lowest is the brutal tyrant. Just above him is the ruler by strict law, the third is the beloved monarch whose love is conditional, and the fourth, or highest, is the one nobody knows but whose pure intention effortlessly creates a harmonious realm.

In Chinese medicine, the brain, which is the dominant organ in Western medicine and controls all the other organs, plays a less significant role than the heart. The job of the other fire officials (small intestine, triple heater, and master of the heart) is to triage information to the emperor official to create appropriate balance. I know that when I "follow my heart" from a place of stillness, all the rest of the pieces of whatever puzzle I'm considering will fall into place as I gain access to my intuition.

As the wood element's primary organ, the liver is associated with anger. The word "bile" is also used to express anger and ill humor. The life challenge of wood is to transform "belligerence into benevolence."

***A practical application of wood energy suggested by Jarrett is to "face everything, avoid nothing."***

A growing plant that must push its way up through the ground is a useful metaphor for thinking about how the liver official deals with obstacles encountered during life. In a state of excess, obstruction to planned movement results in anger, metaphorically banging one's head against the wall. In deficiency, the tendency is to collapse in the face of any resistance.

The gall bladder official in balance gracefully makes decisions and skillfully plans its way around barriers to progress. A practical application of wood energy suggested by Jarrett is to "face everything, avoid nothing."

Grief is the emotion of metal, and the seasonal change of dead leaves falling from the trees in autumn is associated with this element. The life challenge of metal is to transform "loss and grief into righteousness" with an acceptance of divine justice.

The lung and large intestine officials are all about holding on and letting go, literally with the breath and bowel movements.

***The Daoist teaching refers to air as the least tangible and most important substance in life, a lesson that also has a spiritual aspect reflected by the multiple meanings of "inspiration" and "expiration."***

Like the alchemists of old with their quests to obtain philosophical gold from the base metals, people with a metal constitution may be obsessed with purity. The metallic emotion in this context is longing for something that is valued. However, the irony of metal is that "what is of the most essential worth is the least substantial."

This Daoist teaching refers to air as the least tangible and most important substance in life, a lesson that also has a spiritual aspect reflected by the multiple meanings of "inspiration" and "expiration."

Obsessive worrying is a manifestation of the earth element out of balance; "ruminating" is another useful term for the condition. In fact, ruminants like cows are known for continually rechewing their food within their multicompartmental stomachs, just like someone who is stuck in a brooding, repetitive thought pattern.

The stomach official is supposed to gather and process nutrition effectively from the outside world, not get caught up in regurgitating it.

The pancreas, which can be damaged by too much sweetness, is considered part of the spleen official. People with an earth imbalance may be ingratiatingly sweet in their attempts to get their needs met or act as doormats always supporting others in a co-dependent fashion.

For patients with diabetes, the key question I ask is whether there is enough sweetness in their life. The irony of earth is that "their ability to be truly nourished lies in the balance of producing and consuming what is nourishing in life," a sentiment that reflects the complex digestive processes orchestrated by the enzymes and hormones of the pancreas.

The life challenge of earth is to transform "selfishness and selflessness into integrity and reciprocity." Integrity is the opposite of hypocrisy, and reciprocity manifests in win-win solutions that meet both our needs and those of others.



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Jarrett presented the five elements in this order in his book and in the workshop I took with him. It is the sequence in which the elements arise according to Daoist cosmology, as opposed to the earthly seasonal cycle of transformation. I particularly like the progression of virtues from wisdom to propriety to benevolence to righteousness to integrity.

We could all use a big helping of every one of those attributes. Wise understanding leads to right action and evolutionary progress, with divine guidance to the eventual goal of balance and integration.

*Larry Burk presented  
"A Mind-Body-Spirit focus on the Lower Four Chakras"  
at MEDICAL YOGA 2022*



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