



DIAGNOSING WITH THE FIVE ELEMENTS

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To correctly diagnose our patients is one of the most important parts of formulating a successful treatment plan. The ability to listen to our patient attentively, without judgments or projections is as vital as having knowledge of all the different identification of patterns. Many patients we see in clinic these days present with very complex, and sometimes contradictory patterns. Prescription drugs, which some of our patients may have taken for years, often distort the natural signs that their illness should manifest. I remember a child who came in with diarrhea and severe chills, but he had red cheeks and a bright red tongue. This was clearly a case of internal cold, with misleading external heat signs.

In cases such as these, we need to tune in with our patient at a deeper level

and look beyond the gross manifestation of the illness for subtle or more hidden clues such as a grayish hue on their face, or the tone of their voice, their body language, or their likes and dislikes ... any of these examples can reveal a deeper layer of disharmony. This is where the theory of the five elements comes in. It can help determine the patient's constitution and possibly one main element involved in the illness.

I would like to share the story of one of my patients in order to illustrate this point. Mr. M., a strongly built man in his mid-forties with a reddish complexion came to my office complaining of tremors of the head and high blood pressure. The tremors had started a few years prior and were connected with social anxiety. He had been experiencing states of heightened social anxiety and panic attacks for a number of years, but had managed to live with them. When the tremors started, he was prescribed an anti-depressant, which seemed to control the symptoms. The anti-depressant and the blood pressure medication had side effects, which made him feel terrible. In order to avoid taking the anti-depressant too often, he had become a recluse, using it only when he absolutely needed to face a social situation. He had been living this way for many years and although the drug could keep his symptoms under control, he was deeply unhappy and started to question the very meaning of his existence.

When I delved into his emotional life, I discovered that he had been married earlier on in life, but his wife had left

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him soon after. He had been living alone ever since. He experienced deep feelings of loneliness, but felt he could never handle another relationship. I also found out that he hated his job, (He worked in construction.) because it was rough, dirty and messy. However, he never had the courage to look for another job. He smoked a lot of cigarettes and was concerned about the smell on his body and clothes when he came for his sessions.

Besides his symptoms and the obvious signs his body manifested, these psychological and emotional factors gave me some insights into his condition. However, something that he shared with me in passing gave me the biggest revelation: "When I go to San Francisco, he said, I come back to life". One thing I personally dislike about San Francisco is its weather. Throughout the year and especially in the summer, it's cold, damp and foggy. This helped me to realize how hot and dry this man's internal environment was. Further talks also revealed that he had a strong dislike of water and never drinks it.

Now, I was able to clearly determine the best way to help this patient. Coming up with an herbal formula and acupuncture points prescription is just one part of the treatment and maybe the easiest. Helping him to realize what he was doing to himself and make the necessary changes in his life was the real challenge. I decided to give him some understanding of the five elements and drew him a picture of his condition according to this theory.



The theory of the five elements provides wonderful insights in the body-mind connection and into the inter-relatedness of our total body system. First, I explained that the sense of self is connected with the Wood element. Each major organ in the body belongs to one of the five elements; both Liver and Gallbladder are classified under Wood. High blood pressure and tremors are two disorders related to the Liver in Chinese medicine. In the psychological realm, a Liver imbalance can manifest as lack of self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of direction in life. The courage to change is attributed to the Gallbladder. In the generative cycle of the elements, Wood is the mother of Fire. The Fire element has to do with communication, sociability, joy and feeling of ease with others. From this we can see how an imbalance or weakness in one element can affect another.

In the cyclic phase of the elements, which represents the rhythmic dance of the universe, Wood and Fire are both related with heat or Yang energy. When this energy is not controlled, it easily becomes excessive. Water is the element, which moistens, cools, nourishes and controls heat or Fire. The fact that Mr. M.'s internal environment was so hot and dry clearly indicated a long term depletion of fluids. Emotionally, he exhibited a lack of will power to change unwanted situations as well as a sense of resignation. These two characteristics are both symptoms of Kidney disharmony, which belongs to the Water element. Water is the mother of Wood and Wood is the mother of Fire. Here again, we see an example of elements affecting each other in the generative cycle. This is called the "mother" not nourishing the "son".

Emotionally, he presented the triangle formed by Water, Wood and Fire. We have another relationship between Water and Fire, which is based on control. This is called "husband" not controlling the "wife" in the controlling cycle. The lack of communication between Water and Fire manifested physically as too much heat in the body, and psychologically, as his social anxiety and panic attacks. The Fire imbalance also showed itself in his lack of social skills and inability to keep a relationship. In Mr. M.'s case, the Water element was at the root of the disharmony. Hence, the treatment principle from the five element theory is to nourish the Water in

order to nourish the Wood and control the Fire.

We can also look at this scenario from the Zang-fu perspective: In Chinese Medicine, it is said that the Liver stores Blood, which is the nourishing substance for both our activities and our rest periods. During activity, the Blood goes out to the extremities; during rest, it regenerates our internal system. Good, deep sleep, for example, which is a must for rejuvenation and healing, is dependent on Blood. If Blood is deficient, the Spirit cannot rest and our sleep will be interrupted or disturbed. Deficiency of Blood can also affect the state of our musculo-skeletal system, making our tendons drier and our joints stiffer.

There is a saying in TCM that Blood and Yin share the same root. Smoking cigarettes dries out the system and in the case of Mr. M., led to a state of Yin deficiency, which pushed the disharmony to a deeper level. The Kidney is said to be the reservoir of both Yin and Yang in our bodies. When the Yin of the Kidney is affected, it further affects the Liver Yin and Blood. A deficiency of both Kidney and Liver Yin can bring about empty heat and the rising of Yang.

High blood pressure is a typical symptom of this pattern. In time, this condition can give rise to the stirring of Liver Wind, which manifested as the tremors. The fact that the tremors were associated with social interactions, clearly showed the emotional cause of the disorder. Our treatment principle from this perspective is thus: Nourish Kidney and Liver Yin, subdue hyperactive Yang, extinguish Liver wind, clear Shen and calm the Heart.

To free this man from his dependence on drugs and stop his tremors is the goal of the therapy. To help this man gain the courage to face his deep feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness and to find the will to face the world instead of hiding from it – this is where true healing begins. To help this man become aware of the mental, emotional and psychological tools and empower him to take care of his own health.