



THE FIVE PHASES

Definition

Acupuncture is the art of balancing the flow of *ch'i* 氣 in the *yin-yang* progression of cold and hot, dark and light throughout the four seasons of the year. The ancient Chinese recognized particular relationships within this progression which became an important paradigm for the balance of *ch'i*. As early as the Shang dynasty (1766-1154 BC), the progression of these polarities became known as *wu-hsing*, or the "Five Phases," which originally portrayed the harmonious intermingling of traffic at a crossroads, or the cosmic dance of the four seasons around a common and balanced center of time.

The four seasons were viewed as a spiralic progression and evolution of *ch'i* through time. With each season generating the next, a harmonious mixing of spirit and matter over the years accomplishes the "spiritualization" of the body on one level (Heaven) and the fulfillment of personal destiny on another (Earth).

Winter and summer form the two mature *yin* and *yang* phases of the seasonal circuit and correspond to Water and Fire. Spring and Fall are the transitional and, therefore, immature phases, and correspond to Wood and Metal. The balance point where these four movements intersect traditionally corresponds to the two weeks before and after the solstices and equinoxes and is called Soil.

Correspondence

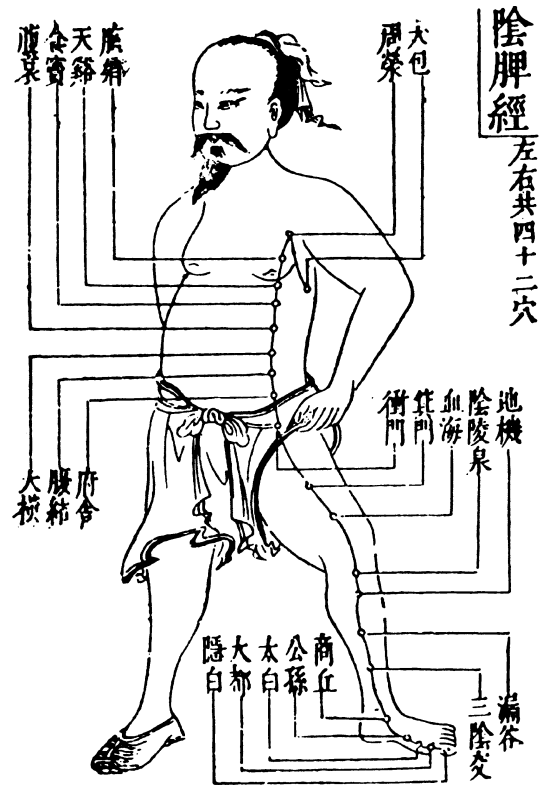
Ancient Chinese thinking saw the universe as a system of related parts integrated within the whole. Human beings were thought to be connected to the entire universe through resonant fields in correspondence with the Five Phases. Like a plucked string on a piano vibrating in harmony with other strings of its octave, an acupuncture point related to the phase Wood on a Wood meridian, for example, will set into motion everything else related to Wood and the Spring season. This includes specific internal organs, tissues, sense organs, emotions, and virtues (please see the chart at the bottom of the next page). In order to see how the correspondences of the Five Phases are related to "patterns of imbalance," let us now examine each of them in more detail.

Soil 土

The earliest idea for the Soil phase came from the Shang capitals. Although highly mobile, they were nevertheless thought of as *chung*, the center, because they provided a fixed point of reference for their political and religious activities. They were thus thought to be in resonance with the Pole Star at the center of heaven where the spiritual source of the universe (*Tao*) was thought to emanate. Shang religion was based on creating harmony between spirit and matter, or Heaven and Earth, through human intention. In many ancient cultures this connection has been symbolized by a sacred mountain or tree between Heaven and Earth called the *axis mundi*. The Shang, however, internalized this idea of a fixed sacred place on the earth into a human function capable of adapting to changing conditions. This later became the symbol of Soil in the Five Phases.

Soil gives us the ability to remain centered and in touch with our original-nature on a daily, seasonal, and yearly basis as well as throughout the long cycles of change in our lives. Soil is connected with the Spleen and Stomach in specific, and the function of digestion in general, because the process of food transformation is the core of organic change. How and what we eat is fundamental to our transformational ability to process change without losing touch with our composure, as well as inner purpose.

When we go off balance or have problems with digestion, Soil enables us to give and receive nourishment in the form of both physical nutrition and emotional sympathy in order to put things right again. Thus, the Soil phase is also the basis for balance in relationships, keeping us grounded in ourselves, while able to reach another. As a virtue, Soil provides loyalty and faithfulness, *hsin* 信. In Chinese, the character *hsin* depicts a man and his words with the implication that a man is only as good as his word, and his word is only good if he is true to himself. *Hsin* gives us the ability to "stick to" something and remain true to it, whether it is a thought, action, or another person. *Hsin* is also the basis for short-term memory.



The Spleen Meridian:
Yin Soil and Center of the Five Phases

Wood 木

Wood is the expansion of Spring when the stored-up activities of life begin to stir. It is responsible for the qualities of growth and self-assertion, giving us the ability to say "no" and to shout if necessary in order to establish boundaries. In the "Great Norm" chapter of the *Book of History* compiled and edited by Confucius around 483 BC, it is written that "the nature of Wood is to be crooked and straight." The ability to be crooked and straight is what allows us to bend and straighten. This means flexibility, not only physically, since Wood controls the tendons and ligaments, but psycho-emotionally as well.

When self-assertion is challenged, contention and confrontation create the possibility of the extreme emotions of frustration, anger, and rage. The over-protection inherent in these emotions is related to the Chinese name for Liver, *Kan*, which is comprised of pictures for an organ, and a shield thus symbolizing this protective function. In tandem, the Chinese name for Gall Bladder, *Tan*, depicts the ability of a man to choose his words in a dangerous situation. It means, in other words, level-headed courage. Deficiencies or obstructions in Wood lead to self-denial and depression.

These mental attributes of Wood lead to its virtue which is Compassion, or *Jen* 仁, what two (二) people (人 ⇒ 亻) do when they are together. Wood people easily receive the spirit of Heaven and are dominated by the rational mind.



Confucius:
Philosopher of Harmony and Balance

Fire



Fire is the mature self-expression of summer and the forces of light which give rise to joy and laughter. Warmth and communication are also aspects of Fire, as is sexual pleasure and the fulfillment of destiny. In the *Book of History*, "the nature of Fire is to burn and ascend." Like a flower fully open to its surroundings, Fire symbolizes a person who is mature and comfortable in their state of being.

The main organ that belongs to Fire is the heart where the spirit (*shen* 神), or conscious awareness, resides inside of us, watching over and controlling our life through its virtue of Appropriateness, or *Li* 禮. *Li* ensures that in every moment all of our expressions are appropriate to the fulfillment of personal destiny in relation to the Highest Good of all. If and when we go out of this alignment, we bring about injury to our heart and conscious mind, lose control over our destiny, and enter into the world of darkness and despair.

Metal



In autumn the movement of Metal is in the harvest when the life-force of the sap is drawn within the earth and the seeds of ripened grain are completed. This is the phase of grief and parting where we must take in only what we need and let go of the rest. No adornments are allowed at this time and we must face ourselves as we are which ultimately is pure spirit, or no-thing-ness. In the *Tao-te ching*, the first classic of indigenous Chinese religion traditionally assigned to the 6th century BC, this nothingness is compared to the *Tao*, or Universal Principle. "The *Tao* is like an empty bowl, which in being used can never be filled up. Fathomless, it seems to be the origin of all things" (chap. 4).

People who are deficient in Metal are frightened of their inner emptiness and constantly seek to fill it up with useless as well as valuable things. They identify with their adornments. However, when Metal is balanced, this inner emptiness resonates with the Infinite and this becomes the source of the deepest sense of self-worth.

In the *Book of History*, "the nature of Metal is to yield and be modified" which gives us the capacity to create order, fulfill obligations and complete what we start. This in turn gives rise to the virtue of Metal, *I* 意, which is to do what is right, and implies Justice and Law. When this movement becomes extreme we become rigid and withdraw into ourselves in self-righteous justification. Balanced Metal allows us to extend our boundaries beyond the habitual. Metal people go by their instincts, which in the extreme, can be contentious.

Water



In the same way that water as a fluid always seeks the lowest level, the Water phase and its corresponding season of winter is a gathering where activity returns to pure potential. The *Book of History* says "the nature of Water is to moisten and descend." The Water phase plumbs the depths of being and sets things right. When confronted by unknown factors within the subconscious, as well as with the magnitude of destiny itself, the

emotions of awe, reverence and fear are created. Depending upon the strength of the Water phase, we either run away or face the challenges that lie before us. It is here at the depth of being where old fears are faced and grudges melt into forgiveness.

The attribute of the Water phase, persistent confrontation, gives rise to its virtue which is called *chih*, 知 wisdom, and leads to its psychic aspect, also called *chih* 志, which means determination or willpower. According to acupuncture, the kidneys (which belong to Water) are where the prenatal *ch'i* (see AES #2) is stored. This means that the Water phase and the kidney organs are sources of vital reserve *ch'i*, which is essential for keeping balance in times of stress, as well as the long cycles of change including aging.

Conclusion

The expanding and contracting movement of the Five Phases illustrates a map of human destiny. Emerging from the infinite potential of *Tao* in the Water phase, we assert ourselves into the stream of life through Wood, achieve full manifestation in Fire, and begin the return to spirit in Metal while Soil harmonizes the movement of each of these phases every moment along the way.

According to early Chinese philosophy, we are given a Destiny at birth by Heaven. From that moment, Heaven continues to support us in fulfilling that Destiny by sending us things, people, and events that keep us on track. The Five Phases represent interactive stages that mutually support and counteract each other in the fulfillment of that Destiny of which health is only a side-effect.

Because of our differing constitutions and conditions (see AES #3), each of us is at least slightly imbalanced according to the Five Phases.

That is, different Phases and combinations of Phases are more or less developed in each person. This gives us different strengths and weaknesses. If we indulge in strength (our strong Phases) at the expense of weakness (our weak Phases), or fail to develop strength using weakness as an excuse, we fall from the harmony of the cosmic dance of *wu-hsing*, the Five Phases, and lose our Destiny. If we lose our Destiny, we lose our spirit, and if we lose our spirit, ill-health is not far behind.

Correspondences of the Five Phases (*Wu-hsing* 五行)

	Fire	Wood	Soil	Metal	Water
Season	Summer	Spring	Solstices & Equinoxes	Autumn	Winter
Organ	Heart/Small Intestine	Liver/Gall Bladder	Stomach/Spleen	Lung/Large Intestine	Kidney/Bladder
Tissue	Blood Vessels	Tendons and ligaments	Flesh	Skin	Bones
Sense	Touch	Sight	Taste	Smell	Hearing
Emotion	Joy	Anger	Sympathy	Grief	Fear
Virtue	Appropriateness	Compassion	Faithfulness	Justice	Wisdom