

HEALTH

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TCM

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Elements, Watson

According to ancient Chinese philosophy, harmony surrounds the human body and the ever-changing universe.

They noticed how the seasons change cyclically. They saw how their crops germinated and grew. They saw how landscapes varied.

Such observations were integrated into the holistic ancient Chinese philosophy such as yin-yang, and led to the birth of the five-elements theory. The theory asserts that natural phenomena can be divided into any one of five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water.

Each has its own characteristics and properties, and is related to all other. The five elements can be used for grouping functions and processes. They can also be used for analysing changes.

Ancient Chinese medical

philosophers, having understood the physiological relationships within the body, used the theory to summarise their experiences in medical practice.

Together with yin-yang, the five elements theory was used to explain pathological presentations and guide the choice of herbs in the treatment of diseases. Both theories worked together and gradually built up the philosophical architecture of Chinese medicine.

As early as the 4th century BC, the five elements concept was described in an ancient text. According to the historical literature *Shangshu* (The book of Documents), the wood element was considered to possess bending and stretching properties. This emerged from observation of wood (branches of trees, herbs and plants), which was flexible, soft, smooth and rich in the power of growth.

As a result, phenomena related to the properties of growth and softness belong to the wood element.

From observing fire, which burns and flares up with heat, the fire element was

considered to possess burning and ascending properties. Phenomena that are related to warming and heating, or associated with ascending properties, belong to fire elements.

Earth is an important element. The ancients appreciated that earth gave them food and all other agricultural yields. This element possesses properties of agricultural phenomena, which allow for production, transformation, support and receiving of nutrients. The ancients believed that the earth element carries all other elements and is the mother of everything.

Metal is formed from the changing of ores, so the metal element was considered to possess properties of change. Metal is usually heavy and made into weapons for killing.

Therefore, phenomena which are related to properties of sinking, descending, killing and astringing, belong to the metal element.

The water element possesses nourishing and downward moving properties. Phenomena related to nourishing and downward-moving properties belong to a water element.

The influence of the five elements on people and various phenomena in nature are shown in the table below. Next week, we'll discuss rules that govern the relations between the elements and how they're applied in Chinese medicine.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner

FROM GROWING TO GROANING: WHAT GOES WITH WHAT

	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Orientation	East	South	Middle	West	North
Season	Spring	Summer	Late summer	Autumn	Winter
Climate	Wind	Summer heat	Dampness	Dryness	Cold
Cultivation	Germinate	Grow	Transform	Reap	Store
Yin organ	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lung	Kidney
Yang organ	Gall bladder	Small intestine	Stomach	Large intestine	Bladder
Orifice	Eye	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ear
Tissues	Tendons	Vessels	Muscles	Skin and hair	Bones
Emotions	Anger	Joy	Pensiveness	Grief	Fear
Colour	Blue/ Green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Taste	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Pungent	Salty
Voice	Shout	Laugh	Sing	Cry	Groan