

The Energy of Water

Water is a miraculous substance, a wondrous energy that moves in the deep places of nature -- including the depths in ourselves. In the Five Elements of Classical Acupuncture, each season correlates with a different element. The Water Element is associated with winter. Wood is about spring, Fire about summer, Earth is late summer, and Metal is associated with autumn. Each energy feeds the next, just as each season prepares the way for the one that follows. As we move into springtime, it is helpful to examine how we lived during the past winter. Did we fill ourselves with the qualities of the Water Element that we need in order to move into spring in a healthy, balanced way? We are familiar with the energies of spring. The quality and mystery inherent in Water are less accessible to us.

Winter can be filled with wonder and fraught with difficulty. It is a time of long nights and short days. It can be bleak, filled with cold and snow and ice. Winter is a time of dormancy, of hibernation. It is the wide space between the death of autumn and the rebirth of spring. In winter, life exists in a potentiality that can seem like nothingness. It is a time for waiting. So, too, the energy of Water.

The winter seeds in the ground are blueprints for what will come. They are promises. While huge energies are condensed in the seed, life is reduced to bare bones, to what is essential. Unlike the cheery, playful dance of summer's Fire, Water is a quieter, deeper energy. In winter, in Water time, we are drawn to go deep into ourselves, to seek to know who we are in our essence, not in our activity. People spend more time inside, reflecting, reading by the fire.

Winter gives us space. We can see further — there are no leaves on the trees, no flowers in the gardens. No bugs, no frogs, few bird songs. We can see through to the fundamentals, earth and sky. It's a quiet time. The gift winter brings is the opportunity to explore our own spaciousness and to find clarity and quiet around us and in ourselves. We are replenishing our reserves, preparing for the spring to come.

Like molasses in January, winter slows everything down. I have found that only when I slow down can I take things in deeply. I think about the difference between what I am able to notice when I take a slow walk, stopping to look closely at the arrangement of snow flakes on an evergreen branch, as compared to what I see when I whiz by in a car. Or the tone of a conversation in which there are lots of pauses, space between thoughts, compared to a rush of words that seem to come from the top of the head.

Listening

Each of the elements has one of our five senses associated with it. Listening is emphasized in Water. On a cold bright winter morning, I can listen, bringing my attention to the silence. This is a listening with patience; there is no hurry, no movement. I can hear with no expectations, with no need to change anything. When I listen in this Water way, I encourage a deep intimacy — permitting myself and others just to be.

Fear

In Chinese medicine, there are five emotions associated with the Five Elements, each arising in its own time. It is natural to feel fear during the winter. Will the reserves I have last me until spring? Will there be enough food, heat, light?

In facing our fear, we come to know its companion, courage. Have you ever stretched yourself beyond your limits to know the exhilaration of overcoming fear? Rock-climbing or high-ropes courses, speaking up for something one believes in, even though trembling inside -- these kinds of experiences are born in the depths of Water's fear and strength.

A Personal Story of Water

As it is for many people, entry into the energy of the Water element often has been difficult for me. Only slowly have I come to understand and greatly value this energy within me.

All my life I have been busy, more comfortable doing than being still. Even as a child, I didn't spend much time just sitting quietly, looking at things around me. I was always on the go, and very involved with people. As a young adult, I had a husband and two children, work I was excited about, and a close community of friends. I remember talking with others about how we felt as if we were living several lives at once due to our constant busyness. I marveled that boredom was a problem for some people. I couldn't even grasp the concept.

I was living in Baltimore during this intense and hectic period. Slowly, I began to feel that my life was closing in on me. Too many people, too many activities. All very worthwhile, but too much. Suddenly there was a light shining through the tunnel. My husband had an opportunity for a job in far-off Maine. A longed-for dream to move to the country was coming true. With great sadness, but also a sense of relief, I bade farewell to all the people and activities that had been my life in Baltimore.

My first year in Maine was remarkably quiet. I entered the energy of Water. Before I left Baltimore, I had applied to acupuncture school, and I had to wait a year to begin my studies. Rather than pursue some kind of work, I stayed home, played with my young son, waited at the end of the driveway when the school bus dropped my daughter off, and was supportive of my husband as he adjusted to a new job. I walked in the beautiful woods. I gathered apples. I lived a very peaceful life, just being, very little doing. It was an extraordinary and wonder-filled year.

For the next 15 years, the pace of my life steadily increased. I immersed myself in being an acupuncturist, working extremely hard, and I frequently traveled both to learn and to teach. Gradually I developed another wonderful circle of friends. Once again busyness had become a way of life. Again I felt trapped. I had expanded into life so fully that there was no room for my quiet side. I was out of balance.

I had been living in a way that is typical for our culture. I had involved myself in the more yang energies of the Five Element cycle. I did plenty of growing and planning and birthing new ideas, as in the Wood element. The newness, the expansion, the learning, were exhilarating. I loved

that wonderful spurt of energy, the rapid growth in the springtime, that gives life direction and hope. I also was experiencing the great benefits of the summertime Fire element, blossoming fully in my life. I had been able to expand and open into my work, into my parenting, into being in partnership with my husband. I matured in these areas.

Like the rest of our culture, I was often missing out on the other Elements, the ones representing the more yin aspects of the cycle. I was not accessing enough of my late summer Earth element energy. I didn't take the time to digest and harvest all that I was doing, nor to feel gratitude for my bounty. Neither did I embrace the letting-go quality of the autumn Metal element. I valued "more" rather than "less." I gave myself births and cheated myself of the teachings of the deaths.

And, finally, I didn't enter the wondrous realms of the Water element, for when my life was predicated on the joys of accomplishments, it was easy to forget the happiness of stillness. The culture validates me for activity, I found, while giving little support -- and often condemnation -- for doing "nothing." Overdoing, overworking, and overspending have been institutionalized.

For years I had practiced meditation on a regular basis. While this was a dipping into the Water energy, it was not enough to balance my tendency to overflow with activities. Yet, giving myself even a small dosage of the peace and quiet led me to want more. So six years ago, without quite knowing what I was getting into, I went to a month-long meditation retreat. Each year since, I have returned. Gradually, by spending this much time in an environment that supports the Water in me, my life is changing. I am slowing down, making better choices. I have more to offer to my family, my patients, and, most important, to myself.

Even though I know thoroughly the benefits of this special retreat time, every fall when it comes time for me to go, I get terrified. I don't want to go. It feels like leaping off a cliff, and I have no idea where I will land. I hate the pain I must descend through in order to come to a deeper place of knowledge about myself and the cosmos.

The fear happens every single time. It is profoundly scary to dive into the depths of the Water energy. And I go anyhow, because I have come to know that by going through this process of retreat, I develop greater trust in who I am and what the universe is. I experience -- in my body and spirit, not only in my intellect -- that out of the long, dark winter, there does indeed come a springtime filled with freshness.

When I speak about my month of meditation, often people want to know, "What do you DO with all that time." What I do on retreat is receive what arises from a place within me that needs time and space to open. Lots comes up, all the difficult emotions — fear, anger, jealousy — all of it. Sitting with all that, not resisting it, ironically makes space for what lives in all of us at an even deeper level. I come to know that underneath the activity of life is a simplicity in which we are all the same, where I am one with all. It is a place where I can feel compassion for myself, for all that I suffer in life, and compassion for all suffering. Spending a month in the depths of Water helps me throughout the year to remember, and to revisit periodically, that slowed-down, deeper place.

Not everyone will want to explore the Water energies in the intensive way I am choosing to do.

Yet I have come to believe that if our planet is to survive, all of us must find our own ways to slow down, to be in the stillness.

Health is about balance. We must return to balance in whatever way we can.

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