



Lesson 4:

The Five Elements

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Image: A representation of the Five Elements from nature

The Five Elements, also referred to as the Five Phases or Five Abilities, are theorized to have originated around the same time as the theories of Yin and Yang; its first reference dates back to the Zhou Dynasty (1000-770 BCE) but was not popularized until the Warring States period (475-221 BCE). The theory of the Five Elements was developed through observation of the natural environment, by looking for patterns within nature, their effects on the body and the ways in which they would influence disharmony or disease.

The Five Elements are **Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood**. They symbolize the dynamic balance between their relationship to each other, the individual inherent qualities and states of natural phenomena. Each has its own characteristics including associations with colour, meridians, times of the year, organs, tissues, emotions etc. The Five Elements are used in acupuncture, assessment, food therapy, seasonal therapy and more modernly used to describe constitutional and personality types; it is best integrated with Zang Xiang (Organ theory) and meridian theory. In a more modern context, whole schools and ways of practicing TCM have been developed based on the theories of the Five Elements.



Basic Qualities of the Five Elements

Fire 火 *huǒ* is warming, heating and ascending.

Earth 土 *tǔ* is the sowing and reaping, representing the planting and harvesting of crops and the bringing forth of phenomena. It's generating and transmitting, and it carries and receives actions.

Metal 金 *jīn* is the working of change, having the qualities of purification, elimination, and reform. It is clearing, descending and astringent.

Water 水 *shuǐ* is moistening, has a downward movement and has a cool or cold nature.

Wood 木 *mù* represents bending and straightening, having the characteristics of growth and up-bearing. It represents flourishing and growing.

The Four Cycles of the Five Elements



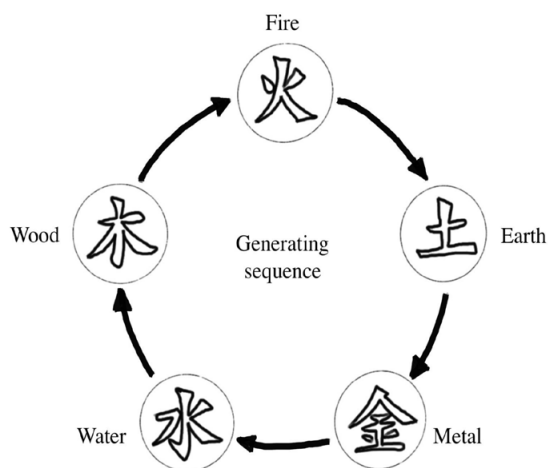
The Five Elements interact with each other via four cycles or natural paths in which they flow. These four cycles highlight the dynamics between the internal organs, as well as the tissues, senses, organs, tastes, smells, colours and sounds. The four cycles consist of the **Generating** cycle, the **Controlling** cycle, the **Overacting** cycle and the **Insulting** cycle.

The first two cycles, generating and controlling, represent a harmonious relationship and the later two cycles, overacting and insulting, represent an organ or cycle in excess.

Generating is a supportive interaction where one element generates the creation of the other, much like the relationship between a parent and child. One element gives birth to or is considered the parent of the other. For example, water generates wood, water is the parent of wood and wood is the child of water. Therapeutically we can tonify (build up the strength of) water to generate wood; by building up the strength of water, we strengthen the wood.

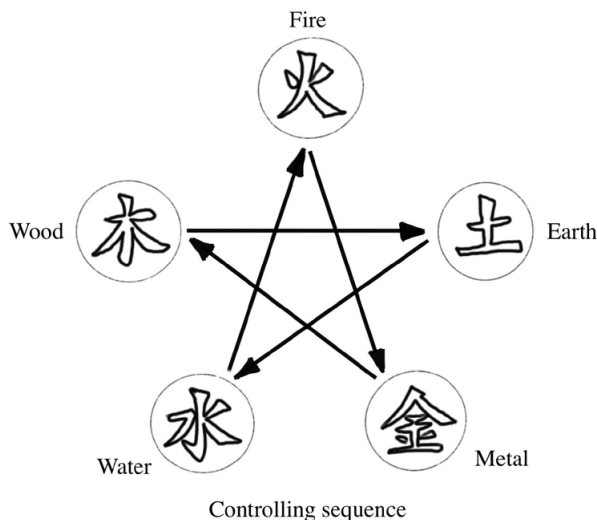


The Generating cycle sequence is: Fire into Earth, Earth into Metal, Metal into Water, Water into Wood, Wood into Fire and so on.

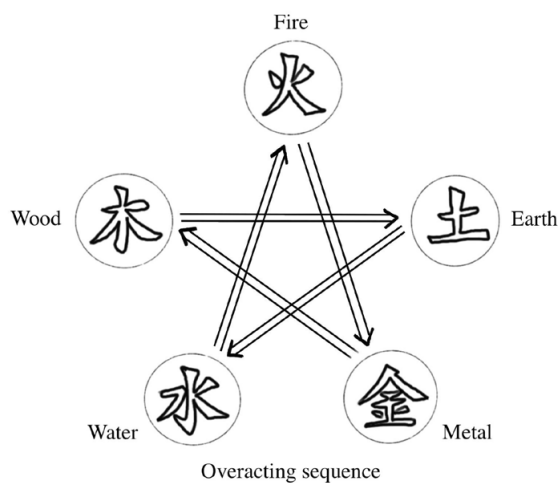


The **Controlling** cycle is a supportive interaction that keeps the proper balance among the Five Elements by supporting rather than suppressing the function of the other Element.

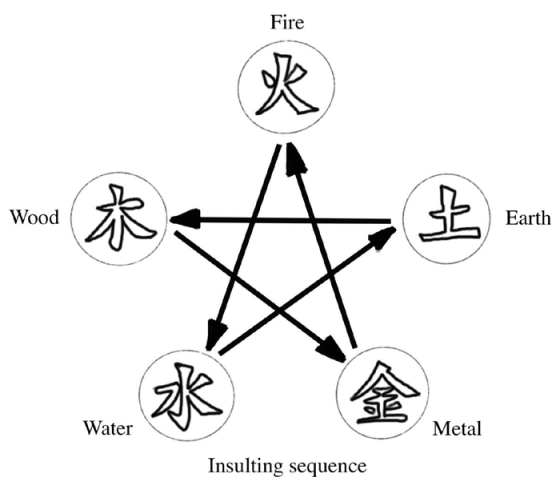
The Controlling cycle sequence is: Fire controls Metal, Metal controls Wood, Wood controls Earth, Earth controls Water and Water controls Fire.



The **Overacting** cycle occurs when the controlling cycle relationship between the element that is responsible for controlling another element gets out of control. For example, Fire controls Metal. If it gets excessive, too much Fire will impact Metal and the Metal will become weakened by that overacting Fire.



The **Insulting** cycle occurs when the element being controlled rebels and insults the element that controls it. For example, the Metal element insults the Fire element and the element that is used to being controlled insults or rebels on the element that controls it.



Therapeutic Use of the Four Cycles

Therapeutically the four cycles can be helpful when looking for ways to assess and treat patterns, whether that is to support an Element (and the Organs in which they govern) or to treat pathological processes in the body.

5 common rules of thumb:

1. Boost fire to engender (generate) earth
2. Bank up earth to engender (generate) metal
3. Mutual engendering (generating) of metal and water



4. Enriching water to moisten wood
5. Banking up earth to dam water

The Five Element theory is best integrated with Zang Xiang (Organ theory) and meridian theory; on its own, there are some discrepancies, such as Lung overacting on Liver, which rarely happens. However, it is very useful for describing personality types, its relation to food, herbs, favours, seasons, emotions and so forth.

Diagnosis and the Five Elements

Each element has its own unique and individual inherent qualities. When we observe these aspects, we can determine a lot about the nature of a condition and the state of well-being of the individual. We learn about the health of the organs, meridians and tissues; we learn about the excessive or deficient nature of a disease, and the ways in which we can support the person with appropriate treatment protocols. The qualities of each of the Five Elements are found in all aspects of assessment and diagnosis in TCM.

Organs and Meridians

In TCM we often discuss organs and meridians together. As we will be discussing further in future lessons, meridians are an extension of the organs. For example, when we discuss the Liver we are also referencing the Liver meridian.

Organs are paired into Yin (Zang Organ) and Yang (Fu Organ) organs and each element contains a Yin and Yang pair.

- The Fire element represents the **Heart** (Zang/ Yin) and is paired with the organ the **Small Intestine** (Fu/ Yang)
- The Earth element represents the **Spleen** (Zang/ Yin) and is paired with the organ the **Stomach** (Fu/ Yang)
- The Metal element represents the **Lung** (Zang/ Yin) and is paired with the organ the **Large Intestine** (Fu/ Yang)
- The Water element represents the **Kidneys** (Zang/ Yin) and is paired with the organ the **Urinary Bladder** (Fu/ Yang)
- The Wood element represents the **Liver** (Zang/ Yin) and is paired with the organ the **Gallbladder** (Fu/ Yang)

Element	Yin / Zang Organ	Yang / Fu Organ
Fire	Heart	Small Intestine
Earth	Spleen	Stomach
Metal	Lung	Large Intestine
Water	Kidney	Urinary Bladder
Wood	Liver	Gallbladder