

Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, Wood I

By Jessica Farley

Five Element theory and I Ching (or Book of Changes) lay at the heart of Chinese philosophy and Taoist spirituality. These two models are the foundation of Chinese culture from medicine and cooking to astrology and décor. I Ching centers on the concepts of yin and yang and how various combinations manifest and work in the universe. The Five Element model teaches us about the balance and interaction of five basic forms of energy: Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. This article will provide a brief introduction to this rich and encompassing system of thought, with a focus on how it pertains to the cultivation of virtue as a spiritual practice.

Five Element theory is often broad and abstract and thus may not be easy to grasp for Westerners accustomed to more literal and tangible explanations. Chinese philosophy, though highly detailed and specific, acknowledges the inherent mystery of our existence and explains it through lyrical language, attempting to illuminate relationships between the concrete and immaterial.

In Chinese philosophy, the word “element” indicates a category of diverse components with a similar energy. The term “Five Elements” is sometimes translated as the “Five Phases” or “Movements.” The labels of “Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood” are poetic representations that describe qualities of natural phenomenon. Items in the same category share an energetic sympathy. Every thing in the universe falls into at least one of these designations, often incorporating the properties of multiple Elements.

Below is a basic Five Element chart:

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Color	Green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Season	Spring	Summer	Late Season*	Autumn	Winter
Taste	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Pungent	Salty
Emotion	Anger	Joy (Mania)	Worry	Grief	Fear
Virtue	Compassion	Propriety/ Courtesy	Faith	Justice	Wisdom
Sensory Organs	Eyes	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ears
Yin Organ ¹	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidneys
Yang Organ	Gall Bladder	Small Intestine	Stomach	Large Intestine	Urinary Bladder
Tissues	Tendons	Blood Vessels	Muscles	Skin/ Hair	Bones
Climates	Wind	Heat	Damp	Dry	Cold

Direction	East	South	Center	West	North
Sounds	Shouting	Laughing	Singing	Crying	Groaning
Yin-Yang	Less Yang	Most Yang	Center	Less Yin	Most Yin

*The end of each season or Late Summer

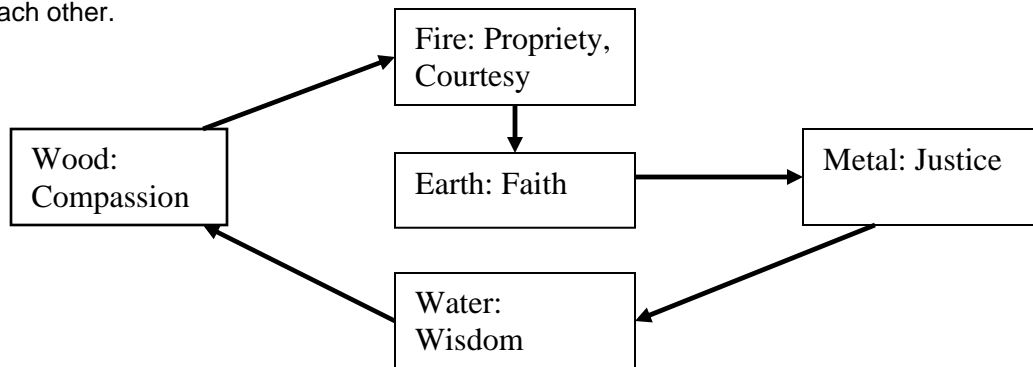
Some of these connections are intuitive, while others are not. For example, anyone who knows elementary physiology can see why the Kidneys and Urinary Bladder are related to water; however, they might find the relationship between the Liver and spring confusing.

Chinese thought is holistic and offers an entire paradigm with which to understand the world and, more specifically, the body. The liver's connection to spring may not make sense from a Western perspective. However, it does when it is placed in the context of energetic physiology from the standpoint of Chinese philosophy.

The Liver is responsible for the upward and outward flow of qi (energy) in the body. Visually and energetically, it is analogous to the upward and outward growth of new plants and trees in the springtime, the wooden branches of those trees reaching up towards the sunlight to thrive, and a compassionate soul that extends her arms to those in need, or anger that causes us to lash out in all directions. It would take an entire book or more to thoroughly explain each connection, but the example above illustrates that the associations exist and they are based on energetic resonances that make sense within an expansive framework.

The above correspondences can be used to attain greater balance, health, and spiritual growth on a practical level. For example, Chinese medicine advocates eating foods of every color (green, red, yellow, white, and black) to nourish the respective organs of each Element. Herbs and dietary recommendations are made based upon which Element is out of balance. Intense expression of any one emotion also indicates a disharmony because excessive emotion causes the body's energy to shift. Over time, this can disturb the qi of organ systems and damage a person physically and spiritually.

The Elements exist in a state of mutual dependence. There are several cycles that depict interactions between the Five. The Creation, Generating, or Producing² cycle tells us which Element nourishes and leads to the next following the pattern of the seasons: Spring → Summer → Late Summer → Fall → Winter. The diagram below has Earth as the center of all the others; this is an important schematic for understanding how virtues of the Elements connect and build upon each other.



The implications of Five Element theory transcend the world of the five senses and the body because the patterns of energy associated with each connect the levels of Earth, human, and spirit. Consequently, Five Element Theory can teach us about cultivating our hearts.

Virtue

The virtues are probably the most relevant aspect of Five Element theory to the Tao practice. They are Compassion, Propriety, Justice, Wisdom, and Faith.

The virtues are connected to one another through a progressive cycle. For example, Compassion builds Propriety, because love and empathy can lead us to appreciate and respect others and ourselves. Genuine cultivation of these two virtues can transform the heart, because a shift in our perception and action naturally leads to an evolved understanding of the world and our personal connection to it. This in turn leads to Faith.

Faith carries us upward and provides the motivation and insight to continue development. Justice follows because the foundation of Faith allows us to believe and offers the confidence and motivation to act righteously, in accord with our higher selves. Justice perpetuates Wisdom as our discernment increases. Wisdom organically fosters a deepening Compassion. As we grow in awareness we learn to see past the illusions and outward manifestations. Wisdom allows us to appreciate the heart behind each man's mask and have sympathy for struggles and transgressions. The cycle continues as we become brighter.

The contemporary reader might ask, "What do these words mean?" Many consider virtue to be subjective. Relativism is popular in our day and ideals like "propriety" are often considered outdated and conservative, perhaps even discriminatory and closed-minded. However, the virtues of the Five Elements are fluid in that they develop as we grow. Our comprehension and experience of the virtues change as we spiral up through an evolving cycle. As we travel through it we transform, just as the seasons alter an ever-changing world. Therefore, the meaning of Compassion, for example, is different at each turn of the wheel. When we reach a higher level our grasp of each virtue becomes more profound; this is how we mature.

Thus, the five virtues are to be discovered as we seek them. They are at the heart of religions and spiritualities all over the world. The Five Element framework offers a model for understanding and a guide for practice.

Faith is in the center, and like the Earth it offers us a place to stand and is our bridge to something higher. However, the awesome thing about Five Element theory is that you don't have to start with Faith, which is hard to manufacture out of thin air! One can begin with Compassion and Propriety, which are easier to achieve as we live in a material world. We can practice compassion with our actions by refraining from participation in violence. Vegetarianism is one of the most useful tools for exercising compassion as we cultivate Tao and ourselves. It is a daily practice in which we affirm our decision to be loving and mindful of other creatures.

Propriety can be fostered through our behavior. "Propriety" is a near-translation of the virtue it represents. It includes manners, courtesy, mindfulness, righteousness, and etiquette. It does not refer to a frivolous or superficial show of politeness, but rather appropriate action that expresses esteem and reverence for others and ourselves; this action demonstrates an awareness that we must cooperate and grow with those with whom we share the world. This virtue is expansive and also refers to respect for the sacred in life, for love, for Heaven, for our bodies, minds, and words, and within our societies and communities. Our attitude becomes increasingly important as we progress.

We can develop Propriety everyday through conversation with the checkout boy at the grocery store; while waiting in line at the bank; or by saying thank you to a friend. Know that many little actions can result in a big energetic shift! Life is filled with opportunities. We may overlook our daily interactions and find them menial, but they all present us with the choice to exercise virtue and feed the positive seeds within. Those positive practical efforts are excellent nutrition for a spiritual journey of transformation.

To be continued...
