

5 Phases: Bodies, Minds, Hearts Mirror the Changes of Place

Presented at Traditions in Western Herbalism Conference
& Northeast Women's Herbal Conference 2011

Larken Bunce, MS, Clinical Herbalist, Co-Director Vermont Center for Integrative Herbalism
Larken@vtherbcenter.org

Through the Five Phases (or Elements), the Chinese recorded the clear reflection of the land in the mirror of humanity. While this system may seem culturally bound at first glance, we can easily translate its essence into our own bioregional and cultural contexts. We can weave the wisdom of the Phases into our intake processes and assessment of psychological and physiological tendencies and imbalances, even as Western herbalists. We can use the Phases as a foundation for counseling clients about the necessity of living a life that embraces change—the value of sitting with the fallow and dark times as readily as the productive and joyful—and the consequences of doing otherwise. We can also use our personal capacity to embody each Phase, engaging our own presence as a healing tool, using attitude and words to align ourselves with client needs and the spirit and actions of the plants we choose.

When considering the nature of each Phase, we see the life cycle of a plant moving from seed to sprout, to flower, to fruit, to making seed and letting it fall, beginning the cycle anew. We see ourselves as glints in our parents' DNA, becoming infants and children, young adults, parents, and elders, preparing to transition back to the earth. We see the dark of midnight, sliding into dawn, noon-day sun, afternoon's glow, evening, and night again. We see our fears, our hopes, our passion, our care and tenderness, and our solitude with spirit. We can universally recognize these cycles as expressed in ourselves and the land, though Spring in one place might have a different face than in another, just as we are each a singular terrain with unique stories. Regardless of place, this system suggests that Nature is a perfect, self-sustaining whole; in expressing Nature fully, we experience wholeness.

Below, I've offered a summary of the classic associations that the Chinese made with each Phase, to root us in the tradition. From there, instead of memorized theory, the system becomes lived practice. I have used simple language that aligns more closely with Western concepts. A snapshot of full expression of each Phase is followed by the consequences of inadequate or extreme expression. It's useful to note that one may be both under and over expressing a Phase—this is more complex, but by encouraging healthy manifestation, we can support balance for both simultaneously. It's also important to note that we cannot, as with heat or moisture, actually be deficient or excessive in a Phase, but instead we may put more or less attention into expressing these innate aspects of ourselves and nature (and this is not necessarily a conscious process). In the cycle of a year, every season is present; it is our work, then to be present to every season equally.

Each derangement of expression is paired with suggestions for what the practitioner can offer by way of language, presence, herbs, diet and lifestyle changes to help the client harmonize their expression of each Phase. The questions suggested in these sections are not necessarily to

be directly asked, but the answers are to be listened for in conversation. Last, there are suggestions for some of the actual physical behaviors and overall attitude of the practitioner. Recognize the Phase(s) that calls for attention and model positive manifestations of the attendant qualities. You will recognize many familiar skills; I'm suggesting both using these skills with specific purpose, as well as cultivating qualities that we may not commonly express. In this way we serve our clients, while also gently healing ourselves.

Water: power, potential, deep wisdom

Associations: Winter, Kidney/Bladder (+adrenals), bones, ears, groan, blue/black/purple

Gifts:

- this is the place of pure potential, no action
- not knowing, walking forward without answers, courage in the face of the unknown
- deep listening (to self and others) - going into the unseen, the depths, the unknown & emerging whole (plumbing the depths); facing old fears
- perseverance/endurance, as water wears down rock; "persistent confrontation" (water never stops); leads to wisdom, determination, willpower
- survival: the Winter is a time of meager physical support, so our inner reserves must support us and we must make wise use of resources
- this is personal, the deepest place we can go to; we are down to the "bare bones"

Full expression of Water: wise use of energy to follow one's passion and manifest purpose; balance of courage and healthy fear; finding enough stillness to allow time for reflection and rejuvenation/regeneration

Under-expressing Water: need support in being still and not knowing the answer; these folks don't stop, can't or are afraid to land; "energizer bunnies", no self-reflection, stressed-out/harried, too much to do; can't stop talking; will often have blue or dark circles under eyes, pulse is often thin and tight, but can eventually get thin, weak and slack

What to offer: show them that it's safe to slow down, meet them in slower space, holding a container that can be filled, *listen*; call up reflection (How do you spend your energy? For what purpose? Do you rest? How do you feel about uncertainty?); offer adaptogens to support adrenals, nourish blood, fluids (might need to astringe fluids as well); sleep, quiet time, and food (w/support for digestion)

Drowning in Water: in a free fall to the depths of despair, exhaustion, fear; afraid there is no bottom to the ocean and they are alone; often depressed, adrenally exhausted and immunodeficient (these can cause or be caused by too much Water); voice is monotone, groaning; blue under eyes; pulse can be weak and slack (much variation)

What to offer: we can be the bottom for them to land on; “we’re down here w/you and it’s ok” —not shying away from fear or despair, showing that we can “hold” it (water needs a container); call up courage (where do you show courage in your life? What is your purpose?); offer stimulating adaptogens, immune support and nervines, circulatory and lymphatic stimulants; gentle exercise

Practitioner presence to model a good expression of Water: Physically: sit solidly in chair—deep in yourself—connected to whatever source looks like for you, *rooted*, focus on sending energy down into pelvis (1st-2nd chakra); just be; eye contact is soft, not pointed; *listen, listen, listen*—let there be silences, don’t rescue with words, make space and be the ground for them to feel safe on—be solid w/presence; let them know you’re hearing them, w/o soothing, etc., use reflective listening: “that sounds like..., I hear that you...”; demonstrate *not knowing*, not offering lots of ideas or solutions, ask open-ended questions, ask about possibilities/potentials

Wood: smooth, flexible flow, structure and vision

Associations: Spring, Liver/Gallbladder, ligaments/tendons, eyes, tears, green

Gifts:

- flexibility and creativity, smooth flow of qi (life energy, also can translate as “function”) through a flexible structure (like a bamboo shoot—hollow, bends in the wind)
- life moving towards the light (upward and outward), hope
- choosing a goal and beginning to move towards it; vision, clear perception, organization and accomplishment of goals

Full Expression: effective, smooth expression of will through a well-crafted vision; creative and flexible; appropriate boundaries, assertive, decisive; hopeful

Under-expressing Wood: unable to make decisions, poor boundaries, lack structure in life and/or lacking in creativity or vision; “windy” (often due to lack of rooting in Water, i.e. lack of resources); may have weak superficial pulses and/or thin, slack pulse

What to offer: supportive direction; suggest contained/directed structure (a vision/plan) that energy, activity can flow through; call up focus and direction (What is your vision of the future? Do your decisions serve your vision? What’s your relationship with structure?); offer choleric, bitters, but also adaptogens and food to support Water (energy and will drives vision and structure)

In a Wooden Box: overly structured and driven, no flexibility, overachievement, often without self-reflection; in-your-face, shouting, hot-tempered, often Type A; often have signs of heat rising (such as tension headaches, skin rash, hypertension); self-describe as stressed (not able to achieve everything); face may have flashes of green around mouth and at temples, red tongue likely, pulse often forceful, tight, even bounding

What to offer: relaxed efficiency; the possibility of not getting it all done, releasing/reconsidering responsibilities; call up creativity, larger purpose (do your accomplishments serve your purpose? What's your relationship with structure/control? When do you take time to reflect/relax/regroup?); offer cooling herbs: bitters (esp. cholagogues), relaxing nervines, flavonoid-rich plants

Practitioner presence: physically: sit closer to the edge of your seat with forward/upward energy, activate 3rd chakra (active will) and 6th (3rd eye, vision), while still rooted; pointed, direct eye contact; quick, repeated questions, clear direction of conversation; good boundaries—don't let intake flow all over the place, yet be flexible, always directing back to center/goal (like a branch to the trunk); asking about and help set goals, examine choices; you are holding the directed, effective visionary archetype

Fire: Spontaneity, Partnership, Joy

Associations: Summer, Heart/Small Intestine, Pericardium/Triple Burner; blood vessels, tongue, laughter, red

Gifts:

- spontaneity, joy, celebration
- sexual pleasure, sensuality
- partnership, relationship/intimacy, good communication, compassion (in Summer, nature supports us, so there's time/energy to connect with others)
- full manifestation of Heavens on Earth – the apex of the year, climax of growth
- light, illumination of darkness

Full expression of Fire: fully accessible heart, living in heartfelt manner, in line with our purpose; trusting life to unfold; "I am the best expression of me in this moment"; mature and comfortable in state of being; tending flames of fire sustainably (wisely consuming Water energy in fulfillment of our passions); engaging in "appropriate" relationships; effortless connection, laughter and openness—like a flower

Fire barely burning: lack of joy (Eeyore); doesn't laugh, or very nervous laugh; sometimes depressed because is lonely/alone (different from Water depression which wants to be alone); too "proper", not able to be one's true self; anxiety in groups; unable to connect to others (protects heart); lacks spark in eyes, face generally pale, pulse may be weak, deep, slack, possibly arrhythmic

What to offer: warmth, connection, appropriate touch, laughter, compassion; open-hearted, consistent, safe connection; *we aren't giving them warmth/fire—we are helping them connect to it themselves;* call up joy (how do you have fun/play? What are you passionate about? What

does your life serve?); offer warming, stimulating, circulating remedies; nervines appropriate to presentation, nourishing and warming adaptogens

Feeding a bonfire: “excessive” joy—happiness that is scattered/excited; stuck in play; nervous or big laugh that’s out of place; inability to show true self (distracts w/big fire); never grounding into connection or moving through shame that’s underneath; “love me, love me, love me, but don’t look”; can also be seduction without intimacy or inappropriate (in context of relationship) attention/love seeking behaviors; may present as insomnia, mania, anxiety; very red face (esp. end of nose) and tongue, esp. tip; pulse forceful, quick, licks at fingers, possibly erratic (can also become thin if Fire over-consumes Water)

What to offer: connection and warmth that is steady and grounded; good boundaries, compassion, safety for person to be themselves, unconditional positive regard; call up Destiny and connection (Do you feel like your life serves your heart/path? Can you give and receive love? What is the purpose of relationship for you?); offer cooling and grounding remedies: diaphoretics (disperse AND ground), bitters, nervines, flavonoid-rich plants, anti-inflammatories

Practitioner presence: physically, sit solidly in chair—deep in yourself—connected to source/rooted, bring energy up to heart (4th chakra) and open back of heart to energy of Universe (or whatever Source looks like for you); eye contact is soft and warm, not pointed; open heart and connect from there; later may come laughter, play, joking; be warm and intimate, touch (as appropriate); choose level of intimacy and stay there; fire is by nature changeable wants a stable point of contact (you might choose goofiness, just be *consistent*); “you be you, I’ll be right here”, offer safe place for spirit to dwell

Earth: nourishment, tending, savoring

Associations: Late Summer/Transitions, Spleen/Stomach, flesh/muscles, mouth, singing, yellow

Gifts:

- ability to receive nourishment (emotional and physical), abundance
- harvest, savoring the gifts of the rest of the cycle, thanks-giving
- adaptability to constant change; centered/grounded in self/true nature
- tending, sharing/generosity, thoughtfulness, empathy; deep devotion to others’ happiness w/o hope for gain; service; loyalty (can be true to others when we are true to ourselves); healthy mothering
- thinking, mental digestion of experiences
- transformation

Full expression of Earth: nourish self first; able to identify and meet own needs (give and receive nourishment); self-sufficiency so that one can be of service to others; attentive, thoughtful,

supportive, generous; savor gifts in each experience before moving on; attend to ecology of community

Undernourished Earth: rejecting sympathy or attention, inability to nourish oneself physically or emotionally, spiritually; needy; looking constantly outside of self for support and/or attached to single source of nourishment; feels lack of abundance; doesn't savor "harvests" of life; craves sweets; presentation might be pale, flighty, anxious (insubstantial flesh); tongue pale, dry/cracked, possibly thin, scalloped; pulse often weak and thin

What to offer: attention/tending w/o care-taking; model self-care (esp. important for practitioner); problem solve around getting physical needs met—connect to resources, consider diet; encourage steps towards self-sufficiency; call up nourishment (What feeds you? How do you take care of yourself? Do you allow others to take care of you?); offer good quality food and sweet tonic herbs to build blood and tissue w/digestive remedies to improve assimilation (aromatic bitters)

All-consuming Earth: over-mothering and care of others before self, preventing others from being part of their own ecology; may be secretly resentful; excessive worry or analysis w/o action (over-cultivating the field); over-eating, possibly to replace lack of spiritual/emotional nourishment or in response to lack of nourishment at another time; often presents with excess tissue and moisture (may be overweight, slow metabolism); digestion often sluggish, damp; thinking cloudy; worried; round, yellow face; tongue is wide, swollen, scalloped, moist, often coated; pulse is wide, slippery, possibly forceful, flooding

What to offer (much the same as for insufficient relationship with Earth): attention/tending w/o care-taking; demonstrate recognizing and meeting our own needs; call up self-tending (What are your needs? How do you feel about taking care of others? Do you feel deeply nourished?); consider diet deeply nourishing foods to replace empty calories/sweetness; warming and moving, along with draining herbs (lymphatics, circulatory stimulants/carminatives, diuretics, aperients) followed by nourishing foods and aromatics to support assimilation; possibly thyroid/endocrine support to shift metabolism (singing/humming!)

Practitioner presence: physically: sit solidly in chair, connected to source/rooted, bring energy up to throat (5th chakra) (song), also center in middle burner (around 3rd chakra); eye contact is soft and warm; classically, head is cocked to side in attention, voice is soft and rhythmic; might be more or less "squishy"/tending, some clients feel better w/just a gentle, attentive container; pay close attention and be empathetic; be sure we are meeting our own needs so that we don't resent our clients for getting theirs met!; we are not giving of ourselves—we are helping them connect to sources of nourishment

Metal: finding inspiration (heaven on earth), acknowledgement, letting go

Associations: Autumn, Lungs/Large Intestine, skin, nose, weeping, white

Gifts:

- inspiration, drawing in the heavens, recognizing beauty in ourselves and others

- acknowledgement of things as they are, respect, honoring, ritual
- purifying/pruning—getting to the bare bones—identifying what has true value and letting the rest go (in preparation for Winter and survival mode)
- taking in/keeping only what we need, w/o adornment
- grieving fully, until it is truly assimilated, then moving forward
- fair judgment, righteousness, fulfillment of obligations, completion and order

Full expression of Metal: in touch with spirit and what we value most; acknowledging gifts of others and what is; feeling our inner emptiness as resonant with the infinite (a sense of deep self-worth); comfortable being alone with self; allowing grief to evoke a keen sense of value and beauty—opening us to acute awareness of what we call heaven, here on earth; right action/judgment to serve a greater good

Un-inspired Metal: sense of emptiness; lack of connection to spirit or sense of self-worth/value; inability to feel grief or to fully assimilate it, so secretly not letting go, may cling to past or feel many small daily griefs; may try to fill emptiness with material possessions; shallow breather (esp. poor inhale); may have thin, weak, deep pulse

What to offer: recognition of beauty, being in touch with spirit; acknowledgement of person's innate value; encourage consideration of one's spiritual nature and of what is valuable to them; ask into small "griefs" as doorway into larger unprocessed grief, often pushed aside; demonstrate "cutting to the quick" without fear; call up inspiration (What inspires you? What do you value? Do you have a spiritual practice?); offer roots to bring energy down and volatile oil rich plants to bring clarity/focus; pungent remedies to open lungs to breath

Metal cutting deep: aloofness/coldness, brittle or cutting nature—often because life/others are not meeting "heavenly" expectations; overly spiritual/ethereal, wanting to transcend material; may seem ego-driven, righteous, judgmental—very attached to values/beauty; may be stuck in grieving process, unable to let go and move on; ravaged by grief, can't exhale fully; white on face; pulse may be thin, but tight and forceful (esp. in Metal pulse), may be superficial overall

What to offer: acknowledgment of beauty and of loss; deep respect and listening w/o attempt to connect; grief is a solitary process which is often compromised by "supportive" family and friends; simply be and assume you don't know how they feel; acknowledge then, eventually, call up letting go (What no longer serves you?); offer pungent, dispersing and draining herbs: circulatory stimulants and lymphatics, laxatives/aperients (even expectorants) to open bowels and lungs

Practitioner Presence: physically, sit solidly in chair, connected to source/rooted, bring energy up to third eye and crown (6th & 7th chakra), breathe deeply and open to heavens, but root!, gaze is penetrating, speech is direct, reverent/acknowledging, with sense of spirit, presence may feel "monastic"; connect, but as two objects in a Zen garden, allowing spaciousness; side

by side, not in person's lap; respect their ultimately private journey; assume *you don't know how they feel* (Earth wants sympathy, not Metal)

For more learning about the Five Phases:

The Law of the Five Elements, Dianne Connelly; also via programs at Tai Sophia Institute

In the House of the Moon, Jason Elias & Katherine Ketcham

Thea Elijah, offers practitioner and public education nationally