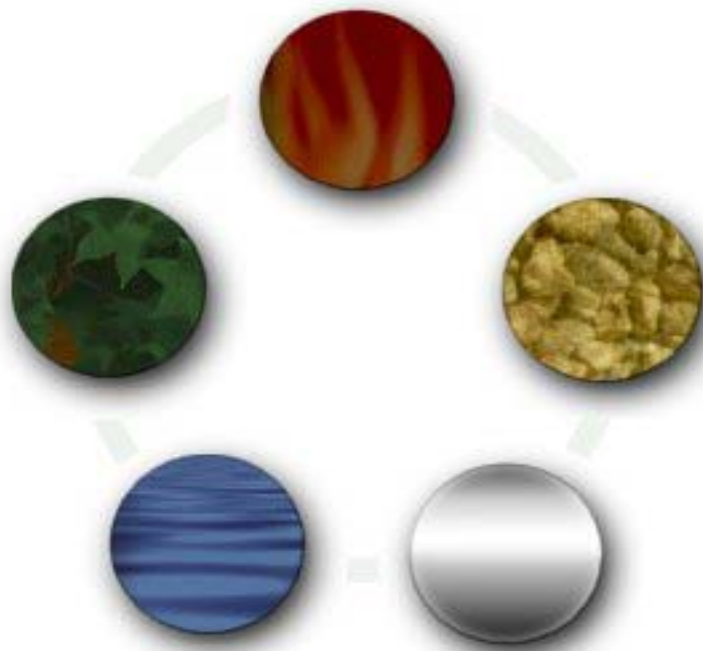


THE ORIENTAL MEDICINE APPROACH TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

by Damian Carey



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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to build an understanding of the full range of the human psyche in terms of the Five Phases and to thereby contribute to an Oriental Medicine approach to psychotherapy.

The ancient system of Oriental Medicine does not distinguish between body, mind and spirit but rather, these are seen as aspects of an interconnected whole. *'For the Oriental diagnostician, the body is the physical manifestation of the soul. Body and Soul are one. The body is both a symptom and a symbol of the spirit.'* (Ohashi & Monte, 1991) Consequently, the Oriental Medicine understanding of psychological problems is not separate from the standard frameworks for the treatment of physical problems such as the concepts of Yin and Yang and the Five Phases, the theory of Qi and Blood and Zang Fu functions and the understanding of pathogenic factors. The only addition to these concepts specific to psychology are the Five Faculties and the Seven Emotions, both of which are intricately associated with the Five Zang.

The Seven Emotions alone are too simplistic to describe the full range of human psychological experience. But when we undertake a close examination of the primary qualities of the Five Phases, and when we relate these qualities to the corresponding Zang functions and the Five Faculties, and translate all of this into the language of the human psyche, what emerges is a set of discrete psychological archetypes which in turn can be applied as a sophisticated psychotherapeutic framework.

The Five Phases is "... is a rich set of interacting symbols." (McDonald, 2005) and an invaluable tool for mental health counselling (as distinct from using Five Phases as an acupuncture treatment strategy). The highly interconnecting relationships among the Phases provides an excellent framework for discussion of the emotions, all of which have intrinsically blurred edges and are apt to transform from one to another.

This paper starts by taking a fresh look at the structure of the Five Phases and show how the cyclic unfolding of the Phases relates directly to Yin and Yang. This discussion is critical in establishing the primary qualities of each of the Phases. These qualities are sometimes distorted beyond their original meaning in the process of individual re-interpretation, yet "TCM theories like ... Five Elements/Phases spring from a central emblem/icon/image/symbol which ... are by no means arbitrary." (McDonald, 2005)

The Five Faculties make a significant contribution to our psychological framework and these will be briefly discussed. Each of the Phases are then discussed in terms of the spirit, mind and emotions of the human psyche, qualified by reference to Zang Fu functions. A brief discussion of the higher levels of consciousness in relationship to the Phases is included and, finally, a brief framework for a practical psychotherapeutic application of the Phases is presented.

This paper concludes by proposing an underlying mechanism for the therapeutic effect of acupuncture in combination with elementary psychotherapy.

THE PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHASES

What is the deeper meaning of the phases? What are we talking about when we refer to Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water? Each of these phases has a fundamental nature, a movement or posture which reflects its character. To best understand the primary characteristics of the phases, it is useful to visualise the phases as a cross, as shown in Figure 1. (see: *Townsend & Dedonna, 1990, page 53;*

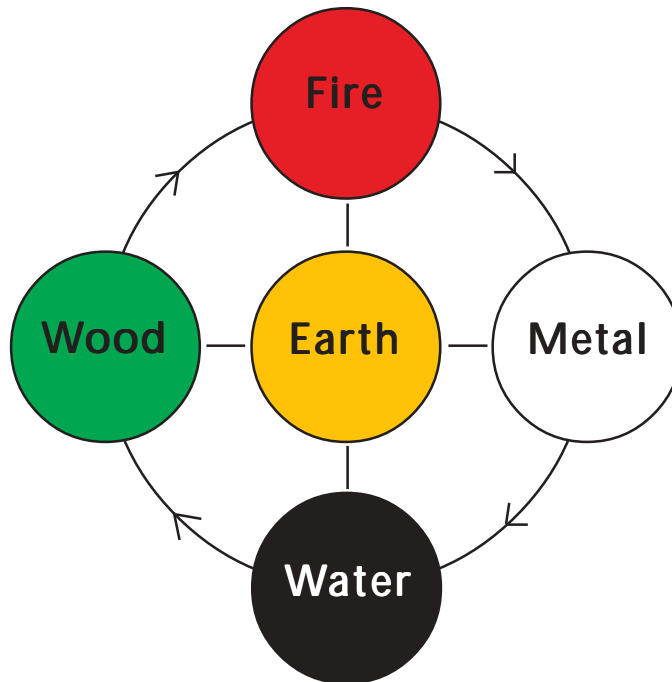


Figure 1: *The Five Phases in the Form of a Cross*

With this arrangement, the Five Phases are arranged in two axes: the Fire/Water axis and the Wood/Metal Axis, with the Earth being the neutral point at the centre, the point of balance. This arrangement corresponds to the primal map of the landscape, four directions arising from a central point, which is a template common to many ancient native cultures.

Viewing the Five Phases as a primal cross reveals its relationship to Yin and Yang, demonstrated graphically in Figure 2.

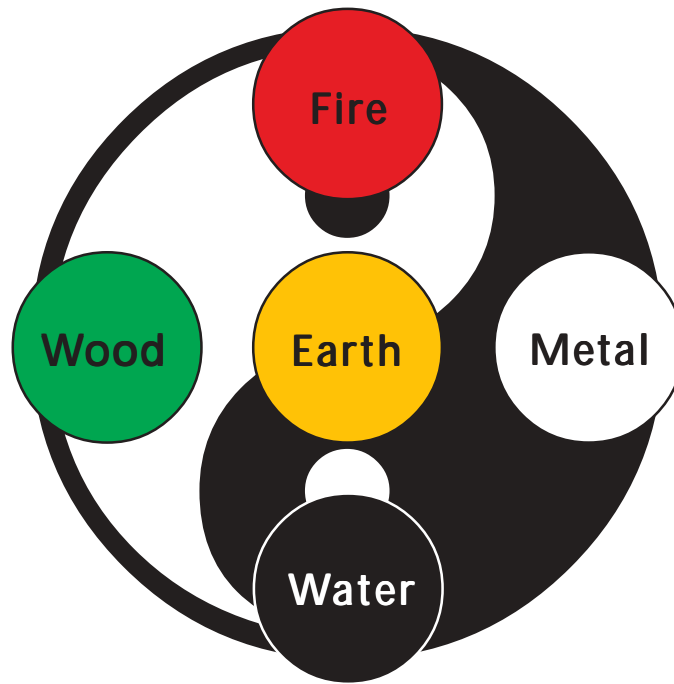


Figure 2: *The Five Phases in relationship to Yin and Yang*

Figure 2 gives us a deeper insight into the fundamental nature of each of the phases. Earth is placed in the centre because it represents the foundation in which the biosphere flourishes. Without the Earth there can be no Life. It is the ground of being which gives the framework and stability to all forms and within which all energetic action takes place. Earth is the beginning and end of all phenomena. The Earth phase is the phase of consolidation. It is characterised by qualities of stability and solidity.

Water is the phase of greatest quiescence when the essence of Life has withdrawn back into its potentiality. Water is the most Yin of the phases and reflects female energy. It represents darkness and instinct, the unconscious. It represents the essence which permeates and connects all life forms. Water also symbolises the world of feelings. Many commentators, in describing Water, emphasise the characteristic of tranquillity (*McDonald, 2005*). In doing so they see Water only in the form of a still pond or a gentle stream, ignoring the massive waterfall and the stormy ocean. The power of Water is reflected in the will to live, the will to survive and thrive. The nature of Water is the potential for life in all of its forms. The characteristic of Water, therefore, is the intrinsic connection to all life forms.

The Wood phase represents the period of growth and development, when the stored essence of Yin is transforming into Yang and generating new forms. This is a dynamic and creative process. It is the phase of energetic and directed action. A key word for the wood phase is anabolism, the process of building complex molecules from simple ones.

The Fire Phase is the phase of culmination, when Life is most active. Fire is the most Yang of the phases and reflects male energy. It represents light and consciousness. It represents the Qi which motivates all life forms. It is the phase of individuation, when new forms have emerged out of the collective life essence to take their place at centre stage. If the Water phase symbolises emotion, which involves connection, the Fire phase symbolises mentality, which involves separation. The nature of Fire is the potential for full awareness. If Water represents the body, Fire is the mind. Where Water is form, Fire is function.

The Metal phase is the period of clearing and cleansing, where Yang is dissolving back into Yin to make way for regeneration. The Metal phase is the phase of catabolism, where complex forms are broken down. The Metal phase is characterised by the sense of dissolution, of letting go.

This cycle of rest, growth, action and dissolution is reflected in all phenomena. As such, the Five Phases are revealed as having a set of fundamental, archetypal qualities, shown in Figure 3.

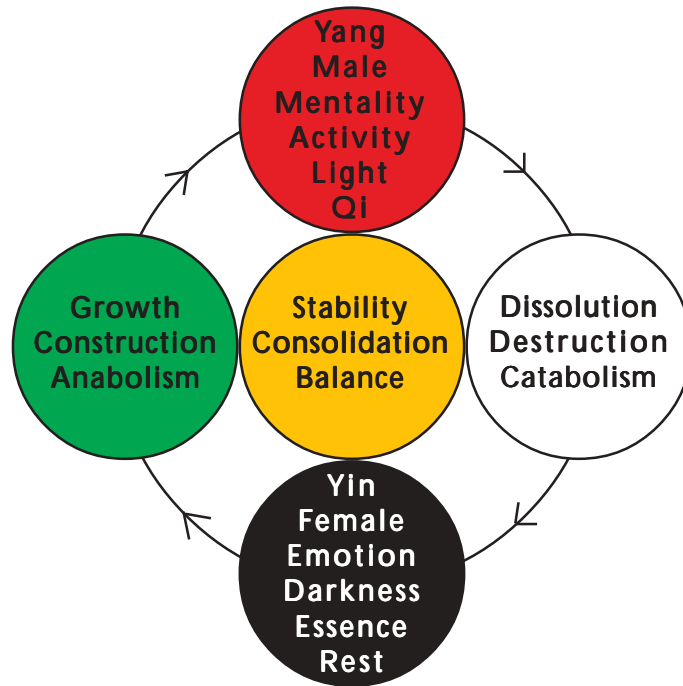


Figure 3: The Fundamental Qualities of the Five Phases

THE FIVE FACULTIES: HUN, PO, YI, ZHI & SHEN

The Su Wen refers to five mental faculties, also referred to as mental/spiritual faculties, each of which is housed by one of the five major Yin organs. These are shown in Table 4 below:

ZANG	FACULTY	TRANSLATION	FUNCTIONS
Liver	Hun	Ethereal Soul	Governs emotions, mental balance and conduct
Lung	Po	Corporeal Soul/ Animal Spirit	Governs sensation and movement
Spleen	Yi	Intellect	Stores and governs imagination, ideas and memory
Kidney	Zhi	Will	Stores and governs the will
Heart	Shen	Spirit/Mind	Governs consciousness, clear thinking and insight

Table 1: Hun, Po, Yi, Zhi, Shen

These five faculties are not always given much emphasis in discussion of the Oriental Medicine approach to psychology. Flaws ignores them as a group altogether and only rarely mentions the Ethereal Soul (*Flaws & Lake, 2004*). Yet Maciocia devotes several pages to the subject, leaving the reader well short of a concise and practical understanding of their relevance. Maciocia does make one very useful point, describing the concept of Shen as "... the activity of thinking, consciousness, insight and memory, all of which depend on the Heart" (*Maciocia, 1994*). This, he goes on to say, is only one part of the concept of 'Spirit' which he defines as a composite of all five mental/spiritual faculties.

If we are to incorporate the five faculties into our comprehensive psychological framework, there are several things I would like to clarify. The first is the question of Zhi or will which is housed in the Kidney. Will is normally related to conscious volition, yet the Kidney/Water phase is associated with primal instincts, the sub-consciousness. I propose that Zhi refers to the raw power of life, the instinctive will to survive, rather than the directed intention aspect of will, which is more closely associated with Liver/Wood. In this sense Zhi is analogous to the raw power of a motor vehicle to which Liver adds the intention, the vision and the action to drive the vehicle.

The second concerns the idea of Yi or intellect which is housed in the Spleen. Many of our ideas about the intellect are incorporated in our understanding of the mind, associated with Heart. Perhaps the following will serve as a useful clarification: imagine the ability to think and perceive (Shen) as a function of the hardware of a computer. The capacity to gather, classify and store ideas (Yi) is analogous to data that is stored via the computer's software. The association of Spleen to thinking and ideation will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Thirdly, Maciocia's description of Hun/Ethereal Soul appears to have little practical relevance to clinical treatment of the Liver. However Ross's idea that Hun governs emotions clearly relates to the function of Liver Qi (*Ross, 1985*); and his inclusion of mental balance and conduct introduces ethics and appropriateness to the action/growth concept of Wood. This is a welcome addition to our understanding; rampant growth

without ethical governance would rapidly lead to imbalance. The concept also reinforces the traditional association of Gall Bladder with judgement and decision as well as emphasising the sense of flexibility which is critical to our understanding of Wood.

Finally, we must question the relationship of Po or Corporeal Soul to Lung and the Metal phase. Ross's relation of Po to Animal Spirit, and to sensation and movement, implies a link to the function of the brain stem (the reptilian brain), which plays a part in maintaining the rhythm of respiration. Po appears to be the primitive drive to keep our bodies connected to life from moment to moment via the breath. I suggest that the connection of Po to the Metal phase is the instinct to accept life and its eternal partner, death. The trap for individualised consciousness, which reaches its peak in the Fire phase, is to cling to life. Po reminds us of the need for detachment and the inevitable decline of the individual to make way for regeneration. The awareness of impermanence and death has an important role in Buddhist psychology and is the foundation of the clarity and detachment (Metal qualities) characteristic of a spiritually evolved individual.

THE HUMAN PSYCHE - SPIRIT, MIND AND EMOTIONS

Let's see how our broader understanding of the Phases applies to the human psyche. The word 'psyche' includes not only the emotions but other aspects of the human mind such as the ability to formulate ideas and to maintain attitudes and belief systems. It also includes things usually assigned to spirituality such as ethics, insight and the sense of connection of the individual to the wider cosmos.

Throughout the following discussion I will refer predominantly to the functions of the Yin organs. The Yin and Yang organs are very tightly interwoven emotionally. In general it can be said that the Yin organ is responsible for the inner experience of an emotion and the Yang organ is responsible for its outward expression.

Wood

The Wood phase is associated with Liver, spring and assertive action. It is the phase of construction and growth. Liver is responsible for harmonising the Qi of all the internal organs, it directs the movement of Qi in the body. Liver stores the Blood and rules the tendons or the tension of the muscles. In other words, Liver governs directed action. Simultaneously Liver opens into the eyes, so the idea of vision is intrinsic to our understanding of Liver. Without clear vision, action is blind.

Psychologically the Wood phase represents our ability to act, to project ourselves into our external environment, to manage our outer world. It signifies the ability to respond positively to external influences, to direct our intentions and maintain our goals. If Zhi represents the essence of will, which is the power of survival, Liver provides the plan and the vision to guide that will in a specific direction.

If Liver embodies the essence of action, Gall Bladder is responsible for directing that essence in a creative and flexible manner in order to adapt to the living environment. Gall Bladder is the organ which is subject to frustration, resentment and anger if things do not run smoothly. Anger is an upward and outward moving force. It comes up the body into the chest, throat, jaw and arms and is then directed outwardly towards an external object. The movement of Qi and Blood into the upper body and head directly disrupts the Liver's functions of storing the Blood and harmonising the Qi.

Sovereign Fire

The Fire phase is associated with the Heart, high summer, mental vitality and joy. Fire is the phase of culmination, when the individual has emerged from the collective pool of life to take its place on centre stage.

Psychologically, Fire represents our conscious awareness and capacity for joyful expression. Heart stores the Shen, a refinement of Qi. A person with good Shen has a bright and shiny personality and demonstrates joyful interest in the world around them. Such a person is awake, alert and refreshing to be with; they will have good self-expression and clarity. Their speech will be articulate. Heart opens into the tongue which implies speech and communication.

Physiologically the small intestine distinguishes what is useful to the body from what is not. So psychologically, the Small Intestine is associated with discrimination. It governs the disciplined use of mental faculties and communication. It's negative side is the tendency towards excessive intellectualisation of experience and emotions. Clouded Shen can lead to excessive thinking, doubt, worry, anxiety and compulsive talking. If somebody's Shen is dull or disturbed they may be neurotic, psychotic or just unpleasant company. They may be selfish or arrogant, or they may be unclear or socially unaware.

Ministerial Fire

Although Xinbao and Sanjiao are traditionally assigned to Fire phase, a significant part of their function is to mediate between Heart and Kidney, so it makes better sense to assign them to the Fire/Water axis. Their emotional correspondence is consequently different to Sovereign Fire.

Xinbao carries Life Gate Fire from Kidney to Heart and acts as the protector of Heart. Psychologically Xinbao is the personality which protects the inner self. Its role is self containment and personal boundaries. Xinbao is involved with identity; it is the persona which helps to filter the relationship between the inner sense of self and the outer world. A dysfunctional Xinbao can lead to a lack of effective or appropriate personal boundaries.

Sanjiao is functionally complex. It can be seen as a Fu System, the Three Divisions or the Sanjiao channel and points. Sanjiao controls the formation, transformation and movement of Jin Ye; it acts as the servant of Kidney, distributing Yuan Qi from Kidney to the Organs and Channels; it is associated with Wei Qi and the dispersing of external pathogens; and Sanjiao points are concerned with invigorating the circulation of Qi in the Channels.

Sanjiao's multi-functionality implies practical organisation, self-regulation and self-protection. Maintenance of a homeostatically balanced internal environment enables an organism to adapt flexibly to changes and to protect it from external invasion. This complements Xinbao, both functionally and psychologically, and implicates both as modulators of the immune system.

Earth

The Earth phase is associated with Spleen, late summer, stability and balance. Earth is the phase of consolidation, the centre point. Psychologically, the Earth phase represents our emotional foundation. A child's early conditioning is instrumental in establishing adult belief systems and sense of self worth. With a solid, supportive foundation a child will grow up with good self esteem; they will feel emotionally nourished, self-assured and content. This is emphatically underlined by Spleen's role of transforming food and generating Qi and Blood; Spleen nourishes the body and maintains the healthy tone of the tissues. Psychologically, self nourishment is self esteem.

The stability of Earth allows us to integrate our experiences, providing space for reflection. A person who is self-contained and content is capable of sitting still and concentrating; they are able to focus their attention on the present moment. From this comes the ability to formulate and develop ideas. Also, a person who is grounded, nourished, focused and content is able to demonstrate compassion and sympathy, all key words associated with Spleen/Earth.

The disharmonious expression of Earth qualities has two polarities: on the one hand a person may be emotionally insecure and stuck in a state of being a victim, unable to move away from their limiting beliefs. They may be melancholic, despondent and emotionally depressed. The movement of melancholy is downwards; it is that sinking feeling people get when they feel stuck or depressed. This directly opposes the Spleen function of governing the upward moving Qi of the body and maintaining the tone of the tissues. On the other hand a person may become obsessed, fanatically devoted to particular ideas. They can demonstrate intractable habituation and dogmatism. Neither of these types will be skilled at recognising their own needs.

Metal

The Metal phase is associated with Lung, autumn and dissolution. Psychologically it is the stage of letting go and detachment, the time for clearing mental and emotional rubbish. It can take courage to let go of things from the past. We must be willing to feel loss and sadness, making space in our lives for future replenishment, or risk being congested and suffocated.

There a sense of spaciousness and freedom which is characteristic of the Metal phase and which resonates with the function of the lungs. The lungs are in a continual process of cleansing and clearing. In order to breathe well, our lungs must be de-congested, the breathing mechanism must be free. Psychologically the Lung is involved with feelings of freedom, freedom from emotional congestion and attachment. Chronic grief consumes the Qi, disrupting the Lung function of governing the Qi.

The Large Intestine gets rid of wastes in an obvious way. It literally lets go of the accumulated rubbish of our past interactions. If there are unresolved emotions from the past the Large Intestine will suffer; there will a build up of physical and emotional toxicity which will clog up your system. By releasing old wastes, you are open to new experience and open to the sadness that can come when things that have felt precious to you pass away.

Water

The Water phase is associated with Kidney, winter, death and rebirth. Winter is a time of darkness, a time for survival, a time of regeneration and germination. Water represents deep, primal feelings and the power of life. Note that feeling states come with a sense of connection (whereas mentality gives rise to a sense of separation): when we feel deeply, we connect with the Web of Life and the grand cycles of birth, death and rebirth; we experience awe, reverence and respect for other life forms.

The Kidney governs inherited Qi, the life force that is handed down to us from our ancestors. Kidney also governs reproductive Qi, the ability to pass on the genetic inheritance to our children, therefore Kidney (and Bladder) govern sexual drive along with creative and emotional expression. Kidney also governs our instinctive urge for survival. These are powerful forces which can override conscious decision making, no matter how refined the attitudes and beliefs.

A person with good Kidney Qi will display strong vitality and a healthy sense of emotional connection. They will be able to socially engage without undue fear, whilst maintaining a strong sense of identity and protectiveness. A person with deficient Kidney Qi may display fear, paranoia or emotional disconnection; they may lack creative expression or respect for others; or they may have lost the will to live. Excessive and chronic fear will severely deplete Kidney Qi and therefore, because Kidney is the root of Yin and Yang in the whole body, chronic fear can give rise to disease in any of the organs.

The psychological correspondences of the Five Phases are summarised in Figures 4 and 5.

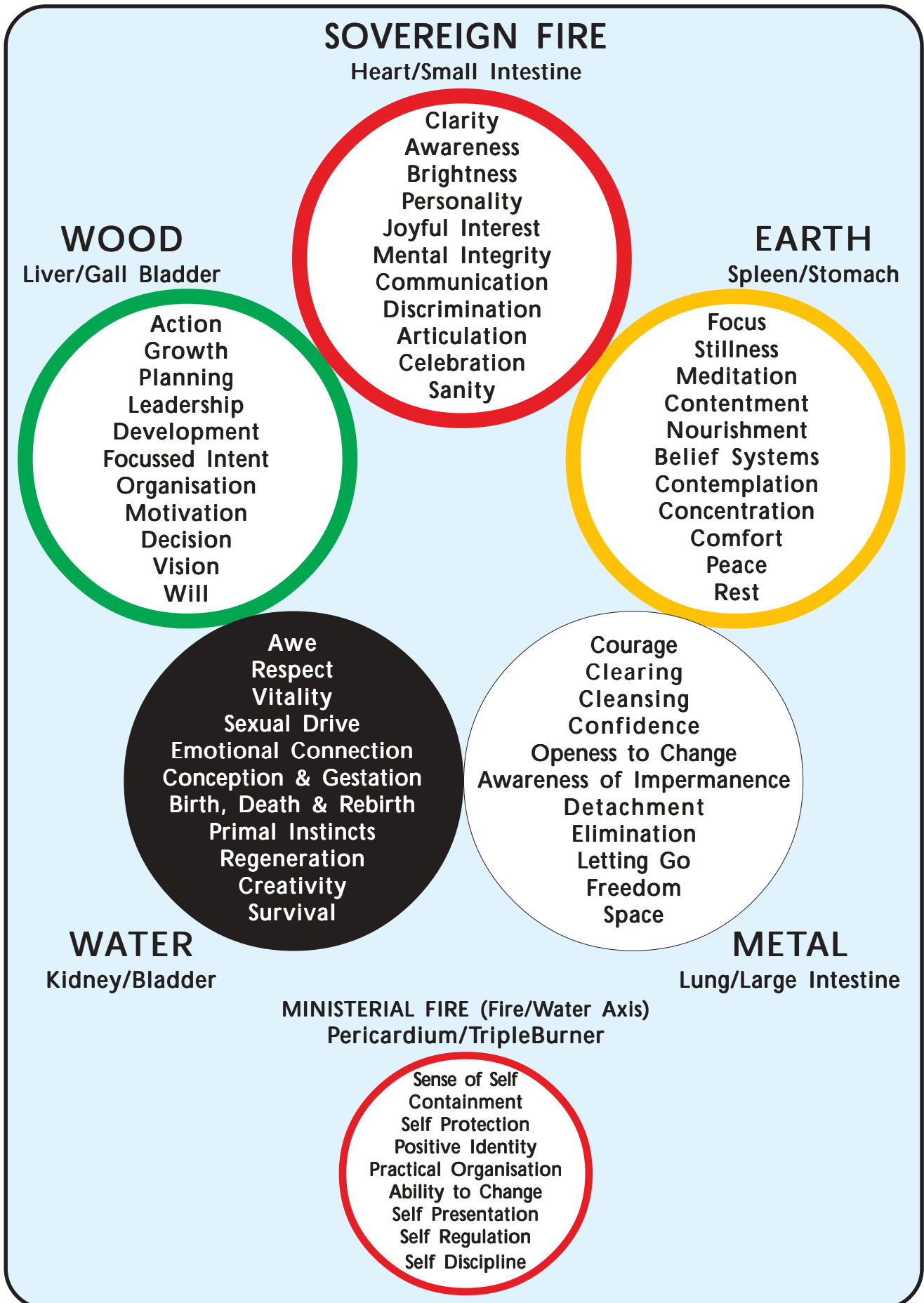


Figure 4: Psychological Correspondences of the Phases Harmonious Expression

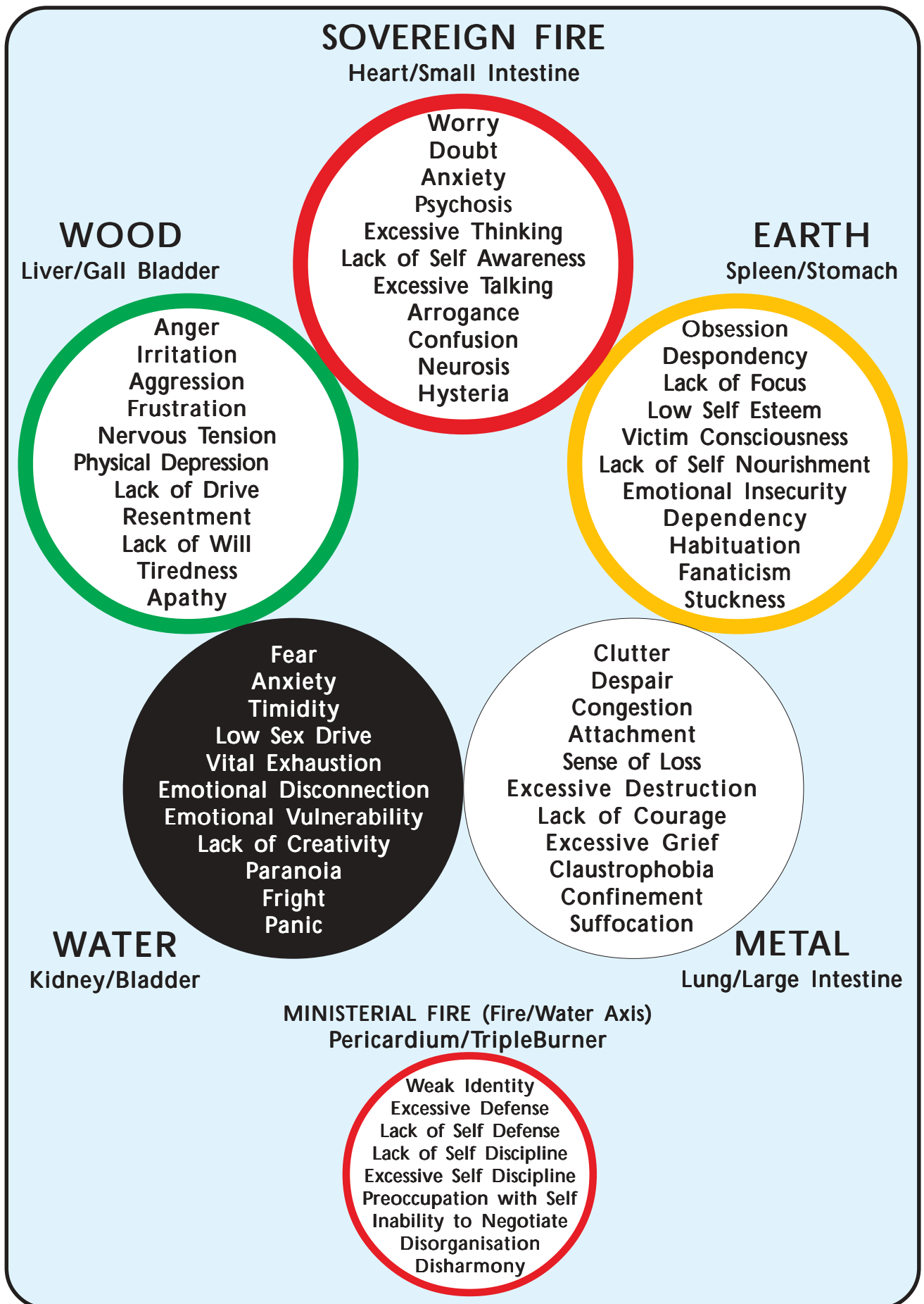


Figure 5: Psychological Correspondences of the Phases Disharmonious Expression

HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PHASES

Our psychological framework can be extended to include the higher levels of consciousness sought by spiritual practitioners and all who aspire to self development. The Phases can be seen to include the potential spiritual attainments and obstacles which must be mastered in the process of spiritual development. These are summarised in Table 5.

Wood

Attainments

Ethical action - the motivation to act for the highest benefit

Obstacles

Spiritual rigidity/arrogance

Fire

Attainments

Insight into the true nature of reality and human consciousness

Obstacles

Ego - the illusion of a separate identity

Earth

Attainments

Samatha (calm abiding) meditation

Mindfulness - the ability to be in control of one's mind state

Obstacles

Obsession and fixation

Complacency

Metal

Attainments

Awareness of impermanence

Equanimity

Obstacles

Excessive detachment, austerity or asceticism

Water

Attainments

Absorption

Devotion

Awareness of the preciousness of the human re-birth

Obstacles

Failure to realise one's potential

Inappropriate sexual expression

Table 2: Spiritual Attainments and Potential Obstacles of the Five Phases

PRACTICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

When dealing with patterns of psychological disharmony, each of the phases evokes a set of in-built practical solutions, as shown in Table 6, ensuring that all facets of the psyche are functioning optimally and in consort with the whole.

Wood

Get on with it! Take action.
Re-assess your goals and get a clear vision on where you are intending to go.
Is that vision congruent with all facets of your being?
Harmonise - clear up your living and work spaces (Metal controls Wood).
Tap in to the source of your creativity and will (Water nourishes Wood).
Disperse frustration with joy (Fire sedates Wood).

Just Do It!

Fire

Wake up!
Celebrate your existence.
Express your personality.
Govern your attitudes and speech with coolness and respect (Water controls Fire).
Movement and exercise encourage mental clarity (Wood nourishes Fire).
Focus your mind by doing something tangible (Earth sedates Fire).

Adopt an attitude of Joyful Interest!

Earth

Get real!
Get grounded, be still.
Consolidate.
Balance complacency with appropriate action (Wood controls Earth).
Mental clarity encourages focused productivity (Fire nourishes Earth).
Keep your space calm and focused by regular cleansing (Metal sedates Earth).

Be Here Now!

Metal

Let go!
Remember impermanence. This too will pass!
Get out of your comfort zone.
Balance excessive destruction with awareness of personal needs (Fire controls Metal).
Peace and quiescence encourage detachment and equanimity (Earth nourishes Metal).
Everything that decays will be re-born and re-generated (Water sedates Metal).

Get over it!

Water

Regenerate - get out into nature.
Connect with life by nurturing wholesome relationships.
Create something, bury something!
Balance fear with mental focus and contact with the earth (Earth controls Water).
Clear the old to make way for the new (Metal nourishes Water).
Feel the fear and do it anyway! (Wood sedates Water).

Tap into the Power and the Passion!

Table 3: Practical Psychotherapy For the Five Phases

CONCLUSION

The fundamental premise of Oriental Medicine remains firmly established: body and mind are intrinsically interconnected. "No ... dualism between body and mind exists in Chinese Medicine." (*Flaws, 2004*) Therefore the organ systems are responsive to specific emotional conditions. Human life and health is a dynamic interaction of these systems, on both a physiological and a psychological level, in a continual unfolding of rest and activity, balance and counterbalance. Familiarity with Five Phases psychology enables these reactions to be observed with clarity and predicted with confidence.

The foregoing discussion of Five Phases psychology is just the beginning of an Oriental Medicine approach to psychotherapy. The framework described provides a highly effective foundation for mental health counselling, however its true value lies in its simultaneous application with acupuncture treatment. When a patient is given clear insight into their fundamental mental-emotional state, when this is explained in relation to their physical symptoms, and, when specific points are simultaneously needed to rectify the underlying disharmony, the resulting therapeutic benefit is considerably augmented.

I propose the underlying mechanism for this therapeutic benefit is consciousness. A needle inserted anywhere into the human body alerts the organism at the primitive body-mind level. The body becomes aware of itself at that point and an immune response is initiated, manifest by the increase in local circulation.

In the same manner, a practitioner with clear understanding of human psychodynamics can focus a patient's consciousness on the point of disharmony in the mental-emotional realm; and likewise, a psychological immune response will be initiated, a process of internal re-organisation and expelling of disruptive mind states.

When these two facets come together, when body and mind re-align in confluence, a highly effective healing process has begun ... a process that can change people's lives for the better.

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Authors Note: The following texts and references, even those not specifically referenced in the text of this paper, have contributed in various ways to the development of my ideas on the Five Phases. In particular, my understanding of the emotional correspondences of the Five Phases has been shaped by the work of my teacher, Graham Townsend. His text 'Pulses and Impulses' is highly recommended for an in depth understanding of psychology in the language of the Phases. All diagrams and tables are the original work of the author.

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