

CULTIVATING THE ELEMENTS

We all possess the capacity for expression in each of the five phases, or elements, of energy. However, there are often elements in which we feel more natural and comfortable than others. In our attempts to avoid unfamiliar ways of being, we can get thrown out of balance. There may be some energetic states or elements in which we are very skilled, and the over-reliance on that energetic state may be the cause of many of our physical symptoms and roadblocks in life.

The following is a self-assessment tool coupled with practical suggestions for cultivating each of the five elements. Look through the gifts and the signs of imbalance for each element. If you are blessed with most or all of the gifts and none of the struggles—congratulations and keep up the good work. (By the way, you don't need an acupuncturist.) If you find an element (or more than one) in which you show very few of the gifts or many signs of imbalance, study the suggestions for cultivating that phase of energy in yourself. Dabble in them. Try a couple each week. You may be a beginner at this, so be compassionate with yourself and just keep practicing. As with everything else, practice is the only path to mastery.

Best wishes,
Ann Furniss, L.Ac.

**GIFTS OF WOOD
(Liver/Gall Bladder)**

- **PLANNING**
- **DECISION MAKING**
- **CLEAR PERCEPTION**
- **CREATIVITY**
- **APPROPRIATE ANGER**
- **VISION**
- **FLEXIBILITY**

WOOD OUT OF BALANCE

- **INAPPROPRIATE ANGER**
- **INDECISIVENESS**
- **LACKING PLANS**
- **DISORGANIZATION**
- **HYPER-ORGANIZATION**
- **INFLEXIBILITY**
- **MUSCULAR PAIN OR STIFFNESS, FRAGILE NAILS,
GALL BLADDER, LIVER OR VISION PROBLEMS**

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING WOOD ENERGY:

- Practice arriving on time and ready to go.
- Organize your desk. Make lists.
- Get your blood circulating. Exercise and stretch to keep tendons supple.
- Learn from frustration and anger. What do they tell you? Is it time to act? Is it time to persevere or change plans? Have you lost the big picture to all the details?
- Start something new. Exercise creativity. Play with a new medium.
- Plant a garden and learn from the plants in it.
- Eat foods that refresh the body/mind/spirit. Tart foods such as lemons help to cleanse the Blood and Liver. In the springtime, enjoy dandelion greens, spring onions and leaf lettuce.
- Open up to possibility. Belief that something is possible increases by a hundredfold the likelihood that it will be.
- Stop procrastinating. (No, not later, do it now.)
- Begin new projects you have been contemplating.
- Practice mental, emotional and physical flexibility.
- Make clear, crisp requests.

GIFTS OF FIRE
(Heart/Small Intestine/Pericardium/Triple Heater)

- **WARMTH**
- **PARTNERSHIP**
- **COMPASSION**
- **JOY**
- **LAUGHTER**
- **TOUCH**

FIRE OUT OF BALANCE

- **CHAOTIC OR HYPER-CONTROLLING**
- **EMOTIONAL COLDNESS**
- **SADNESS**
- **INABILITY TO CONNECT WITH PEOPLE**
- **LONLINESS**
- **INAPPROPRIATE LAUGHTER**
- **INAPPROPRIATE SEXUALITY**
- **CIRCULATION PROBLEMS (heart rhythm problems, cold extremities)**

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING FIRE ENERGY.

- Address people by name.
- Delight in small joys.
- Laugh often. See the gentle humor in the human condition.
- Invite friends over to see a laugh-out-loud silly film.
- Connect with warmth to family and friends—getting past old hurts and arguments.
- Pick out funny cards and send them to friends and family.
- Meet someone new—it may be the start of a beautiful friendship.
- Bitter foods such as dark chocolate, endive, spinach and watercress nourish the circulatory system.
- Spend time with a puppy.
- Take ballroom dancing lessons and enjoy feeling sexy.
- Balance social activity with solitude. A walk, a bath, curling up with a good book, or just sipping a cup of tea and watching birds.
- Acknowledge pain and loss without dwelling on them. It is the contrast to pain that makes joy stand out in sharp relief.

GIFTS OF EARTH
(Spleen-Pancreas/Stomach)

- **NURTURING (self and others)**
- **THOUGHTFULNESS**
- **NOURISHMENT**
- **TASTE**
- **SYMPATHY**
- **STABILITY**
- **HOME**

EARTH OUT OF BALANCE

- **WORRY**
- **SMOTHERING CARETAKING**
- **NEGLECT OF SELF OR OTHERS**
- **EATING DISORDERS (anorexia, bulimia, over-eating)**
- **OBESITY, BRUISING, PROLAPSE, HEMORRHOIDS, EDEMA, DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS**

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING EARTH ENERGY:

- Recognize abundance in your life and express gratitude.
- Practice giving thoughtful, inexpensive gifts for no reason.
- Accept offers of help.
- If you are ill, nurture yourself by allowing yourself time to heal completely. Rushing back to work too soon simply encourages further breakdown.
- Accept expressions of gratitude from others.
- Sit down and eat slowly in a calm atmosphere. Chew well.
- Give yourself time to “digest” ideas.
- Sometimes hunger has to do with longings of the spirit. If you crave sweets, is there an absence of sweetness and nurturing in your life?
- Practice meditation to give your mind a holiday from thought.
- Eat locally-grown produce that is in season.
- Sing. That’s right, sing. It doesn’t matter if your voice frightens the cats and upsets the children. Singing helps the lungs to expand fully, circulates *qi* and soothes the spirit.

GIFTS OF METAL
(Lung/Colon)

- **AWE**
- **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**
- **RESPECT**
- **INSPIRATION**
- **PRECIOUSNESS**
- **ACCEPTANCE**
- **PRUNING THE INESSENTIAL**

METAL OUT OF BALANCE

- **ABSENCE OF MEANING**
- **CYNICISM**
- **HARSH JUDGEMENT**
- **PERFECTIONISM**
- **PROLONGED GRIEF**
- **CLUTTER (inability to get rid of things)**
- **RESPIRATORY, SKIN, OR ELIMINATION PROBLEMS**

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING METAL ENERGY:

- Clean out a closet.
- Practice abdominal breathing/meditation.
- If your time is chaotic, establish a framework of regularity and rhythm around meals, exercise and bedtime.
- Ask yourself if your standards are too high, if you're too critical.
- If the answer is yes, make one deliberate mistake every day.
- Practice offering acknowledgement. Be specific and sincere. Others may know that we appreciate them, but it is always nice to hear it.
- When someone is expressing recognition of your contribution, practice taking in that acknowledgement with a simple, "Thank you." Avoid, downgrading your accomplishment ("It was nothing.")
- Practice letting go. Write on a piece of paper something you find difficult to let go of and allow yourself to hold onto it. For example, you might write, I allow myself to smoke. Experience your feelings around that statement. Then write, I allow myself NOT to smoke. Experience those feelings. Go back and forth, and recognize that in each moment you do, in fact, have a choice in the matter.
- Seek out places in nature in which you experience awe; such as the ocean, the river, an ancient tree, the night sky, a sunrise or sunset.

**GIFTS OF WATER
(Kidney/Bladder)**

- **WISDOM**
- **STILLNESS**
- **PATIENCE**
- **POTENCY**
- **LISTENING**
- **SENSE OF HEARING**
- **APPROPRIATE FEAR**

WATER OUT OF BALANCE

- **EXCESSIVE FEAR**
- **FEARLESSNESS**
- **HYPERACTIVITY**
- **WORKING UNTIL EXHAUSTED**
- **LACK OF WILL POWER**
- **LETHARGY**
- **BLADDER OR KIDNEY PROBLEMS, SKELETAL PROBLEMS, HEARING DIFFICULTY, PREMATURE GRAYING/LOSS OF HAIR, IMPOTENCE**

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING WATER ENERGY:

- Listen without formulating a response.
- Tap into the wisdom of elders.
- Give yourself a holiday from stimulation. Turn off the TV, the radio, the computer. Unplug the phone. Even put down books, newspapers and magazines. Make no appointments and run no errands. Notice what arises in the absence of distraction.
- Take a long soak in the tub.
- Eat warming foods including root vegetables in the wintertime.
- When it's cold outside, dress warmly so you don't consume life energy just to stay warm. Be sure to keep your head and neck covered.
- In the winter, go to bed earlier and rise later as the sun does.
- Take up one of the internal arts such as qi gong, taiji, yoga or meditation. If you already have a practice, try going down deeper and staying with it longer.
- If you find yourself in a place of fear, stay with it, unblinking. Breathe deeply.