

Reinventing the Wheel: A Top Down Perspective on the Five Elements, Part I

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‘The way to transcend karma lies in the proper use of the mind and will. The oneness of all life is a truth that can be fully realized only when false notions of a separate self, whose destiny can be considered apart from the whole, are forever annihilated.’

Bruce Lee¹

Introduction

This article is published in two parts. It represents my current perspective on the Five-Element (5E) model and both includes and transcends my previous work. Chinese medicine is a living medicine that must evolve along with culture to remain relevant. This article represents the evolution of my own personal synthesis in accordance with the leading edge of my clinical and life experience here in the 21st century. This is a perspective that looks forward to future potentials for inspiration significantly more than it looks back to ancient roots, however significant they may be.

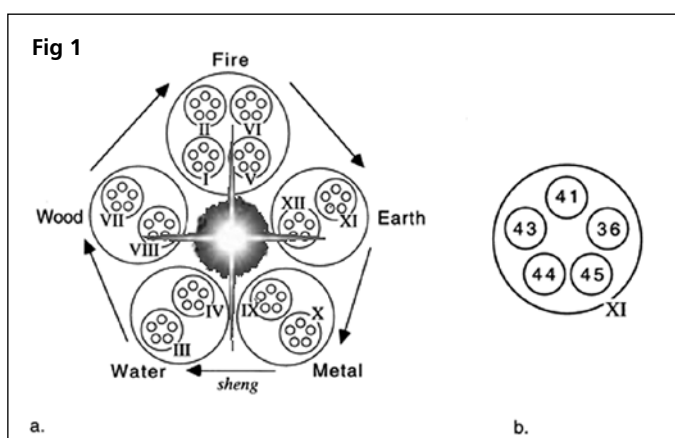
Here I elaborate the 5E model as an archetypal representation of the relationship between the one and the many. I examine the implications of the model for the individual, culture, and cosmos. Additionally I examine the five elements as a basis for understanding the relationship between the absolute and the relative, spirit and psychology, simplicity and complexity, and the virtues of autonomy and communion. This discussion occurs in the context of transcending the culturally conditioned pluralistic, relativistic, and humanistic psychological model that has prevailed in the West for the last 50 years.

The Sheng Cycle: Reinventing the Wheel

*We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the centre hole that makes the wagon move.
Laozi, Dao De Jing (DDJ), 11.*

The strength of the 5E system is that it represents the human condition in a cosmological context. The human being is considered to be subject to, constituted of, as well as a source of the same universal forces that are at work in the biosphere and cosmos at large. This model is the perfect archetype of a holographic perspective on humans, health, and healing (Fig 1 a, b).²

Fig 1: (a) The five elements are shown in their *sheng* and *ke* cycle relationships. The star in the middle represents that absolute point of consciousness free of attachment to any object ‘out in the wheel’. This point should read, ‘You are here’. Each organ is denoted in the order of flow of *qi* according to the Chinese clock beginning with the heart (I).³



The elements create each other around the *sheng* cycle and control each other around the *ke* cycle. The elements are further divided into the twelve officials that comprise the *yin* and *yang* aspect of each element. Each official retains its own discrete function yet has within it the implicit representation of the whole five-element cycle. This representation exists as the five-element points that are associated with each meridian. (b) Here the five-element points associated with the stomach official are represented by their numerical position on the stomach meridian. Hence Stomach 44 is the water point, Stomach 43 is the wood point, and so forth.

We can consider the 5E cycle as a metaphor for the relationship between the one and the many that can be applied simultaneously to varied dimensions of life. The perspective of the one is represented by the single point at the centre of the circle. The many are represented by the 60 individual element points that are ‘out in the wheel’.

We can extend this metaphor to describe the position of unified consciousness in relationship to creation as it occurs internally as physiology and psychology and externally as the biosphere, culture, and cosmos. The centre of the circle represents simplicity and autonomy while the circle itself represents complexity and communion. The centre represents the absolute, one pointed perspective of unconditioned consciousness, while the cycle itself depicts the relative positions of ‘officials’, and the interrelationship of seemingly distinct things to each other.

In a medical context we might define health as, 'a process that emerges when each of the functions represented by the 60 element points perform their tasks selflessly for the sake of the other 59'. In this ideal scenario each function takes autonomous responsibility for wholehearted fulfillment of its duty to a degree that the emergence of the whole is a seamless expression of communion. Such a communion emerges when each individual in a culture of 'officials' or humans recognizes himself, and all others, as being a vehicle for the expression of that one light emanating from the centre. Communion comes from knowing self, and other, as that one light. The authentic expression of autonomy is present when an individual takes full responsibility for the emergence of the whole.

The central position represents that single point of light, of consciousness, that never moves through any and all circumstances. We may understand the pole star (*di*: 帝), the sun, the emperor (*di*: 帝), the guru, and the heart to all be manifestations and embodied metaphors of that centre. Though the universe may spin around us in seeming chaos (*hun tun*: 混沌) it is the single pointed simplicity at the heart of the circle that is capable of seeing through the relative complexity of weather, emotions, thoughts, and sensations to comprehend the truth of the whole. It is in the collective recognition of, and submission to, this central truth that dispels the illusion of separation, cuts through apparent complexity, and allows for the unified functioning of physiology, culture, and cosmos. The awakened human is the vehicle for this unification of heaven (consciousness) and earth (the 10,000 things).

Who we are in the deepest and best part of ourselves is that single point. The highest purpose of medicine is to disembed this single point of light, of consciousness, from our identification with the goings on out in the wheel. In this way the true nature of self is revealed and our perspective on creation and our relationship to it may change radically.

The Three Absolutes: Being, Becoming, and Samsara

We can recognize three absolute dimensions of our experience, the timeless and formless ground of being (0), spirit, consciousness, or the authentic self (+1) and the ego (-1).⁵ It is our awareness of these three dimensions, and the nature of our choices in relationship to them, that determine the outcome of our individual and shared destiny.

From the absolute perspective, the 60 element points can be conceived as facets of a diamond radiating the one central light of consciousness into the periphery. Unhindered by ego, spirit shines through the individual elements as virtues that are evident in speech and action.⁶ Though we may discern discrete colours in a rainbow, the reality is always the one central light.

We can identify two capacities in this absolute dimension of consciousness and those are the capacities of awareness and choice. From the absolute perspective thoughts, feelings, sensations, and the weather (as a metaphor for changing circumstances) are just objects in consciousness having no self-

nature. Traditionally, the centre of the circle was realized through meditation. In seedless meditation we take the position of 'no relationship to the content of consciousness' and instantly are enlightened to that dimension of the self that is always free in relationship to the universe that has emerged from it. When we let go absolutely we discover zero (0), that timeless and formless ground of our own being. From this perspective creation, including the self, does not exist. Looking through the eyes of emptiness the psychological self, the body, the world, and all of creation are revealed to be an illusion. The proof of living such an awakening is manifest as ease of being in the face of adversity. This ease is the outer face of having transcended the illusion of the personal. From the position of meditation there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, and there are no choices to make. Such a realization, as a destination, is the end of becoming.

Eventually, however, some-thing explodes from no-thing and consciousness enters into incarnation. The moment we stop meditating and open our eyes an entire universe appears that we are in relationship to and that universe demands a response, always right now! Out in the wheel there are choices to make and those choices, conscious or unconscious, are what shape the outcome of our individual and collective destiny. Consciousness is the foundation of the impulse toward universal development, and human consciousness is the highest manifest capacity of consciousness to recognize and awaken to itself. Free of attachment, humans are vehicles for the manifestation in creation of the pure motive inherent in consciousness through our deeds.⁷ Such a pure motive is manifest as a pre-thought impulse to respond in a way that moves things forward to stages of greater integration and wholeness. Virtue is the transparent transmission of unadorned consciousness, of light incarnate, manifesting in creation through willed action.

Emptiness (0) and the creative impulse (+1) are absolute, and the ego (-1) is absolute as well. That is to say that, in any given moment, an individual is either identified with the selfish and corrupted motivation of ego or the pure and selfless motivation of the authentic self as it emerges from emptiness. While identified with ego the higher motives of spirit are impossible to identify with beyond the level of intellectual abstraction.

It is interesting to consider that the Chinese characters for samsara⁸, the karmic wheel of illusion, are *sheng si* (生死) meaning 'birth and death' respectively. We can consider birth to be the incarnation of the life-force into water and death to be exit of life from the metal element. Hence the *sheng* (生) cycle can also be taken as a metaphor for our existence as beings living a relative existence conditioned by internal and external forces. Externally, we are conditioned by weather, culture, and circumstance. Internally, we are conditioned by genetics, karma, thought, emotion, sensation, and the conclusions we draw in relation to all our experience both internal and external in nature.⁹

Within the context of this discussion, we may consider ego to be a filter that creates the illusion of a separate self whose existence is defined by history. It is as though we are driving through life

and have come to identify with all the accretions of mud, dust, and bugs on the car's windshield. We forget that we are the one perfectly clear consciousness perceiving the goings on 'out in the wheel'. Bound to the wheel by fear and desire we become lost in the illusion of a separate, individuated self.¹⁰ Hence Liu Yiming extols us to, 'shed the dust of personal history'.¹¹ Ego is the mechanism that creates the illusion of the personal by locating a self that exists in finite time and space through its attachments to objects out in the wheel. To the degree the elements are conditioned by ego an individual will act from a selfish motivation that creates karma, suffering, and potentiates the illusion of separation for self and other.

Consciousness and Incarnation: The Kidney

The kidney is the storehouse of will (*zhi*: 志) and *jing* (精) and forms the foundation of our awareness of our own capacities and purpose.¹² When consciousness (*shen*: 神) as will is aligned with life's purpose then we know who we are and why we are here. The question of how to live in the world emerges in the face of the recognition that we are, in fact, vehicles for the emergence and evolution of consciousness through, and into, creation.

Consciousness evolves, or not, in direct relationship to the quality of our choices. Our choices are based on values that are either unconsciously programmed into us by culture, or consciously reflect our striving toward our highest realization. Either way, our will serves our values and these values (ideals, ethics, morals) will determine the purpose for which all of our life resources are spent. For most of us, to the degree we identify with ego, the vast amount of resource is spent perpetuating the illusion of separation and the status quo.

The position of undifferentiated consciousness towards entering creation through the kidneys can be stated simply as 'freedom first'.¹³ It is when the human being recognizes spirit as being higher, and acts with fidelity to that recognition, that human will can be said to be aligned with the will of heaven (*shen*, consciousness). Then all choices spontaneously reflect the priority of freedom as the highest value. This infers the recognition of a hierarchy of values based on a clear recognition of lower (-1) and higher (+1) motive forces within ourselves. Consistently choosing the highest, a person will learn what it takes to hold firm and have conviction in the best part of himself. In this way fear is transformed into wisdom as one gains spiritual self-confidence which is the inner backbone of integrity. With this solid foundation, consciousness is liberated in all elements simultaneously as choices increasingly reflect the passion of consciousness to awaken to itself with increasing depth and clarity. The goal of consciousness enlightened to itself as the motivating force of creation is not 'peace' but rather eternal evolution evidenced by wholesome, integrative change. Such change frequently requires creative friction in the face of the evolutionary tension and demand to evolve.¹⁴ The motive force of consciousness entering the wheel transforms and purifies it in a way that ever greater states of wholeness and integration are attained.

From a spiritual perspective, the highest purpose of medicine is to awaken that one central point of light, of consciousness, that never moves to its own nature as the source, and the goal, of self. This means liberating the light of consciousness from the very personal and often painful illusion of its solitary existence out in the wheel. So liberated, this light 'burns through the accretions of mundane consciousness conditioned by history'¹⁵ placing free will and intention as the guiding force in one's life. In such a person, or culture, destiny is shaped by freely made choices inspired by shared higher ideals rather than being unconsciously swept along in a whirlpool of fate as victims of circumstance and history. The potential inherent in every choice is the possibility of gaining new vertical ground in the ascension of consciousness of light through the human vehicle. Such a transformation is rooted in the realization of emptiness, the transcendence of fear, and the emergence of wisdom. This is the liberation of water and fire, the transcendence of fear and desire, and the rectification of the heart/kidney axis pointed to in my previous writing.¹⁶

Such an individual, or collective, will evidence ease and confidence in the face of the forces of personal and cultural ego that always resist positive, wholesome, and integrative change, sometimes quite violently.

Conclusion

Practically speaking, the absolute position is expressed by a human being who means what he says and stands by his words. Such a position is metaphorically depicted by the Chinese character *xin* (信), the virtue associated with the earth element, which I translate as 'integrity'. Only when we put our stake in the ground, intent on not moving in word or deed from our highest realization, will we meet face to face that dimension of ourselves that has no interest in anything of a higher nature. Only when we become intent on changing for the better do we gain clarity regarding the dimension of ourselves that is invested solely in maintaining the status quo. It is in seeing the distinction between the higher and lower parts of our selves clearly that we are free to choose between them.

Acupuncture is particularly suited to inducing higher state experiences as a by-product of treatment regardless of therapeutic intent. Patients often have experiences beyond time, space, and conditioned mind evidencing little awareness of where they are, how long they've been in the treatment room, or whether the needles are still in them. Their faces look refreshed, and their entire demeanour may have changed to reveal a greater level of wholeness and integration.

However, this experience, or any higher experience in and of itself, rarely does little to meaningfully change a person in the long run. In post-modern humans, higher state experiences arise in a person whose culturally given conditioning is that no truth is higher than any other. Frequently, little moral obligation is found in higher state experiences which tend to be consumed as entertainment. Despite any philosophy regarding 'wholeness' that guides treatment, it will be the actual state of integrity attained by the practitioner that provides the ground for reaching that goal.

In part I of this article I have considered the five elements from an absolute perspective and as a metaphor for the relationship between the one and the many. I have discussed the centre of the circle, that point that never moves, as the metaphorical position of consciousness in relationship to incarnation. Emphasis has been placed on liberating consciousness from its identification with the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and weather 'out in the wheel' to identify itself as the ground of its own being (0) and cause of its own becoming (+1). The five-element wheel itself is a metaphor for the body, culture, and cosmos which are the vehicle for the expression and evolution of that one consciousness.

In part II of this article I will examine the cultural forces that

have prevailed over Chinese medicine as it has developed in the West over the last 40 years. I will discuss how and why the psychological perspective has been conflated with an authentic spiritual perspective. And, I will discuss the importance of transcending the psychological world view in order for Chinese medicine to continue to evolve toward its potential as a holistic and integral science that leaves no part of the human being, most importantly spirit, behind.

Editor's note: Although it is EJOM's normal editorial policy to capitalise English translations of Chinese terms for the organs etc (see p 52) the author has specifically requested that we keep his use of lower case in this article.

Endnotes

- 1 Lee, B. *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Burbank: Ohara Publications, 1975, p. 7
- 2 See Jarrett, LS, The holographic paradigm and acupuncture, *Journal of Traditional Acupuncture*, Autumn, 1985, Vol. 8, #2: 36-41.
- 3 Traditionally the circulation of *qi* is said to start with the Lung official at 3am. In the five-element tradition associated with JR Worsley the circulation of *qi* is said to begin with the heart official at 1pm. This designation places emphasis on the primacy of the heart and its association with heaven, spirit, and consciousness. Note that the Chinese language begins with the character *yi* (一) designated by a single stroke. The meaning of the character is 'one' which corresponds to *yang* and the influence of heaven.
- 4 Owing to the influence of Confucianism on medicine, the internal organs were conceived of as 'officials'. Each official represents a sphere of functioning with duties to be discharged faithfully.
- 5 A detailed discussion of ego is beyond the scope of this article. I define it here as, 'the illusion of a separate self' and recognize it as the only impediment to the spontaneous emergence of virtue and wholeness in self, culture, and cosmos. I understand it to manifest clinically as 'the irrational refusal to change for the better'. I am not using the term 'ego' in reference to any of the positive attributes associated with the term in a modern psychological sense such as 'positive striving toward a goal' or 'an integrative function that creates unity out of the disparate parts of consciousness'.
- 6 The Confucian virtues as they are paired with the elements are presented in Jarrett, S: *Nourishing Destiny: The Inner Tradition of Chinese Medicine*, Stockbridge: Spirit Path Press, 1999, 168-299.
- 7 Karma (from the Sanskrit kri, 'to do'—literally, 'deed')
- 8 Samsara: literally meaning 'continuous flow', is the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.
- 9 We may consider 'genetics' to encompass physical transmission from ancestry and 'karma' to include that, but to also encompass non-physical transmission from ancestry.
- 10 Fear is associated with the kidney and desire with the heart. I have discussed the significance of rectifying the heart/kidney axis at length in Jarrett, LS, *The Clinical Practice of Chinese Medicine*. Stockbridge, Spirit Path Press, 2003, p.1-15.
- 11 Liu Yiming in: Cleary, T. *The Inner Teachings of Taoism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986, p. 110.
- 12 Note that Bl 47/52, the outer kidney *shu* point is named both *zhi shi* (Room of Will) and *jing gong* (Palace of Essence). This is the only point whose name includes the characters for will and essence.

- 13 Each element has a virtue associated with it. The virtues when manifest are the living proof of non-duality between the human being as a vehicle and the positivity inherent in the process of creation itself. Each element is liberated, and virtue is manifested, when the individual takes the position of consciousness itself in relationship to incarnation through that element. The position of consciousness can be expressed as a tenet which, if lived, will purify that element of conditioning and spontaneously reassert virtue as the foundation of the elements functioning. We might state the tenet that liberates the water element to transform fear into wisdom as 'I recognize myself as a vehicle for the evolution of consciousness and I, as consciousness, put spirit first and want to be free more than anything else'.
- 14 The traditional emphasis on 'peace' reflects an awakening, and cultural disposition toward, the ground of being which exists beyond the universe. I see little evidence of 'peace' within the universe. Here, the mission appears to be an evolution toward clarity and wholeness. This process is hardly peaceful but rather an explosive, infinitely positive, movement forward toward the enlightenment of matter, at its leading edge.
- 15 Here I paraphrase Liu Yi Ming.
- 16 For a discussion of the heart/kidney axis see: Jarrett, LS: 2005, pp. 5-15

References

- Lee, B. (1975) *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Burbank: Ohara Publications.
- Jarrett, L.S. (1985). The holographic paradigm and acupuncture, *Journal of Traditional Acupuncture*, Vol. 8, #2: 36-41.
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- Cleary, T. (1986). *The Inner Teachings of Taoism*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Suggested Reading**
- The historic roots of my perspective are extensively detailed in my previous texts. My current view is informed in part by these contemporary sources.
- Cohen, A. (2011). *Evolutionary Enlightenment: A New Path to Spiritual Awakening*. New York: Select Books.
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- Wilber, K. (2000). *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.