

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

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In Part I of this article I discussed the Five-Element model from the absolute perspective of spirit as consciousness. Here I take a look at the cultural forces at play that deny the absolute dimensions of self to glean an understanding of how Chinese medicine (CM), and spiritual practices in general, have been compromised by the failure of postmodernity to recognize hierarchy. I consider this within the context of the Five-Element (5E) system in order to illuminate a significant distortion and cause of stagnation in our culture of healing.

This distortion results from the overextension of the pluralistic perspective, and the conflation of it with relativism, to such a degree that it has led to a virtual inability of the last several generations to recognize hierarchy, constituting a condition I term 'Hierarchy Deficit Syndrome' (HDS). The denial of hierarchy is one of the most significant manifestations of the postmodern ego. The physician's failure to recognize an absolute dimension to his experience is constraining the emergence of integral medicine and serving as an anti-evolutionary force in culture. In short, it is potentiating illness.

Pluralism, Relativism and the Five Elements

In the wake of World War II with fascism defeated, the leading edge of culture transcended the dominator hierarchies that typified the culture of the pre-modern religions and nation states. Postmodern pluralism arose in response to the ethnocentric nationalism and absolutism that gave rise to the Holocaust, an event that is rightly the archetypal example of the dangers inherent in dominator hierarchies. In the face of this horror, some of us recognized that all human beings have an innate right to lead a life of dignity free from the fear of persecution based on gender identification, sexual preference, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. Chinese medicine came of age in the West during the 1970s at a time when postmodern pluralism was reaching its peak.

The ability of the postmodern human being to embrace multiple perspectives (pluralism) simultaneously has laid the foundation for the emergence of holistic and integral medicine.¹ The mature practitioner of CM has no problem thinking causally, synthetically, taking lab tests into account, and simultaneously assimilating data from multiple perspectives within CM such as the five-elements, six divisions, and the eight-principles.² This ability represents a level of cognitive and neural integration, reflecting our realization of a global world, hitherto unknown in humanity.

However, by relativistically embracing all perspectives as being equally valid, because they are all 'just' perspectives constructed by human beings, we have negated natural hierarchy as the true and right relationship between things. We have compromised our capacity to recognize any perspective or value as being higher than any other. By conflating pluralistic and relativistic values we have thrown the baby out with the bath water by relegating absolute reality, that truth that lies at the centre of the circle and beyond all distinctions, the enlightened perspective itself, to the status of being 'just another' point of view. And this is in fact, the position we most often take in relationship to our own conscience, our innermost known sense of what is true, right, good, and beautiful.

In such an amoral cultural climate, nothing is held as higher than any individual's opinion based on the momentary fluctuation of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. In such a culture there is no possibility of a medicine that is 'rooted in spirit'³ because, from a spiritual perspective, Spirit, or *Shen* capital 'S', is always what is Higher.

Having authentic experience with the absolute dimension of the self is a necessity for the emergence of an authentic integral medicine that takes full advantage of our knowledge and capacities in the 21st century. Comprehending the absolute dimensions of the self (the ground of being, authentic self, and ego) is the authentic ground for having an objective relationship to any of the complex diagnostic systems, such as the five-elements or eight-principles, that differentiate the complexity of manifestation.

While many of us talk about 'non-duality', this remains largely an intellectual construct for most. We tend to discuss the 'one' only from the position of the many. We consider the centre of the cycle from our own unique position within it. We define 'reality' with a culturally given psychological perspective based on our conditioned relationship to thought, feeling, fear, and desire. In this way we create the illusion of a self that in some mysterious way appears to be separate from everyone and everything else. Such a relative and isolated view is explicitly stated in the pluralistic cliché, 'You have your truth, I have my truth, and nobody knows the truth.' Individuation cannot proceed any further than the fantasy that the universe is a manifestation of the individual.⁴

What would it mean, and what would it take, to consider the 'many' from the perspective of the 'One'? For, to do so would be to look through the eyes and heart of simplicity straight through the illusion of complexity. This is the authentic basis of diagnosis in the enlightened practice of medicine where it is recognized that all knowledge, technique, and intellectual capacity are vehicles for the expression of the pure motive inherent in the life force and consciousness itself.

Catering to the Ever So Sensitive Self

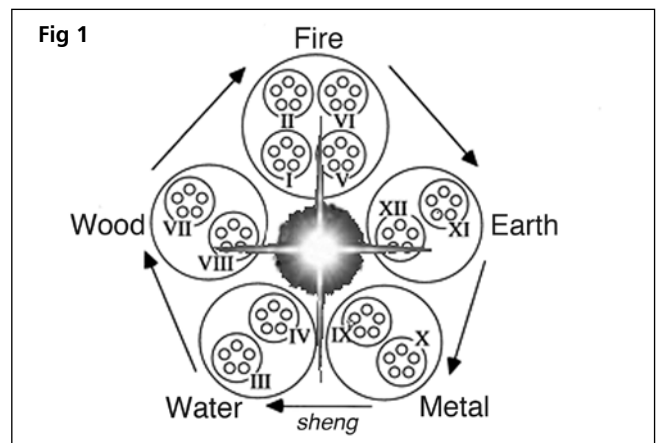
A consideration of how the 5E cycle is generally taught and understood can serve as a perfect metaphor for how postmodern relativism has conditioned our understanding of CM.⁵ Consider the 5E wheel [Fig. 1] depicting each element divided into the 12 officials and each official containing its five element points. This yields a picture of a hologram where the whole is contained in each of its parts. From a relative point of view the function of every one of these 60 points 'out in the circle' is equally important. Each position represents a relationship between elements and officials that have implications across all levels of human functioning. Constitutional 5E medicine is based on the ability to diagnose which element and official and, more specifically, which relationships as symbolized by a specific element point represent the 'weakest link' in the delicate web of physiological relationships.⁶

Dysfunction in any one of these points (wood 'within' metal or earth 'within' fire, for example) has the potential to compromise the entire circle. Therefore the conclusion is readily drawn that every point and every constitution is equal. And, from the relative perspective symbolized by the wheel (the *sheng* cycle) itself, they are. This is exactly how I was taught the 5E model when every teacher would delight in informing the class that the 'official' he was teaching was 'the most important' as the point was made that the integrity of the *sheng* cycle is holistically dependent on the health and contribution of every official.

Here holism is expressed through a pluralistic lens to express the culturally given sentiment that 'every perspective and all truth is relative, every person is special and unique, hierarchy is merely a human construct and in nature, in ultimate reality, all is equal.' This construct denies the hierarchy implicit in the recognition that, while everyone makes his or her contribution, the emperor or heart represents the embodiment of that absolute recognition of spirit that must always be held as highest and humbly submitted to. It is only in the awareness of the absolute dimension of self that spirit even begins to emerge as a possibility in the practice of medicine.

Cultural Stagnation: When Homeostasis, Consensus, and Peace are the goal

'If the goal is peace and not evolution then we will have neither. If the goal is evolution then we'll have both.' Michael Nagler⁷



The egalitarian view of the 5E circle is metaphorically present in the popular notion of 'consensus'. The culturally accepted pluralistic norm when facing a challenge that needs to be met is for everyone involved to sit in a circle implying that each person's perspective is equivalent. Everyone is allowed to express their view, ranging from the least competent to the most competent, and then a solution is sought that takes each person's point of view and feelings into account so that each person feels he or she 'has been heard'. This approach is very different from actually being concerned with finding the best solution to any given challenge. It is the hierarchical discernment needed to find the best solution that introduces a vertical dimension to any inquiry. And, in the life circumstances that face humanity today, we only have the time left to be concerned with finding best solutions. Best solutions in this relative world are only ever rooted in the absolute perspective.

This same model of 'consensus' is invoked in the treatment room when the perceived therapeutic goal is a sort of homeostatic 'peace' achieved by continually moving excess to deficiency around the *sheng* and *ke* cycles under the auspices of creating 'harmony'. If the patient is fearful we move *qi* to wood to give perspective, if tension appears we move *qi* to fire to 'open the heart', if the patient is too controlling we tonify earth to 'ground' them, and if they feel 'burdened' we tonify metal to help him 'let go' and so on around the cycle for another 100,000 incarnations. Such an approach just keeps patients comfortably identified with the goings on out in the 'circle' and does little to liberate them from it. It reinforces the notion that any felt discomfort signifies a fundamental problem to be rectified and the expectation that positive change should be easy and feel good.

When the cultural goal of 'peace' is synonymous with our notions of physiological 'homeostasis', then evolution is an unlikely consequence of treatment and patients are likely to become increasingly more comfortable at whatever stage of development they are already at. Too often, the goal of individuals practising

or partaking in any of the new age 'energetic' healing modalities, is the manipulation of feeling states. People learn *tai chi*, yoga, meditation, and utilize herbs and CM, in order to make continual and nuanced adjustments to their experience always endeavoring to be happier, look and feel better, and ease their own suffering in the face of their personally created existential dilemma: a dilemma that is always imbued with an illusory sense of uniqueness and often indulged in with morbid fascination. Such an orientation in any practice reinforces self-involvement and narcissism because it is predicated on the notion that, 'If I'm having an unpleasant experience, then there must be a problem and it is going to take time to solve'. How much time? From the ego's perspective, 'forever'. On the other hand the spirit/*shen*, who the patient really is, is always fine and ready to move ahead 'right now'.

Significant metabolic resources (*jing*, *qi*, and *shen*) are usurped in a vain attempt to overcome the past, as the ego creates the illusion that 'things will somehow be better in the future'. But, that future never comes and life is lived, sadly, 'in the meantime'. Hence, the most fortunate people who have ever lived spend their lives trapped and suffocating in a survival mode of consciousness.⁸ Most 'energetic healing' seems to be more akin to helping people decorate their prison cells and to live ever more comfortably within their inherent sense of limitation, than they are focused on helping individuals transcend their condition entirely. From an evolutionary perspective, if a person isn't evolving, he or she is ill.

The perspective that 'everything is relative' is a self-negating absolute statement.

In light of this recognition, any thoughtful person is left having to discern between what actually is absolute and what is relative. To what degree are we as practitioners identified with that best part of ourselves, which has never been wounded, traumatized, or victimized? To what degree do we speak to and address that part of the patient? To what degree do we hold ourselves and our patients to be accountable for the absolute dimension of the self? This recognition was a central foundation of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism and its presence today in our medicine, both in the East and West, is insignificant.

Top-Down v. Bottom-Up: Spirit v. the Humanistic Psychological Perspective

For lack of an absolute reference point, practitioners who came of age in the 20th and 21st centuries tend to adopt a relative and psychological perspective on life and medicine in lieu of having an authentic spirit-based relationship to practice. The psychological perspective reinforces the ego's illusion of separation, of being special, and having a special problem that requires time to overcome. Psychological approaches try to console the ego about its own miserable predicament by providing it comfort while never insisting on its transcendence. There is no such thing as that

which is implied by the term 'psycho-spiritual'.⁹ The psychological and the spiritual realms are two parallel lines that never meet and do not recognize each other's values. Most of new age healing culture is characterized by a conflation of the psychological and spiritual. When one is awake to consciousness as the source of self the mind is purified and becomes a vehicle for the emergence of spirit. Ego still exists, but only as an internally experienced structure and not as a motivating force substantially present in personality. The mind becomes a vehicle for the emergence of a pure motive (virtue) into the world through good deeds (karma).

When the absolute perspective of the centre is eliminated, we are left with only a relative psychological perspective focused on the thoughts, feelings, and life circumstances of each of the individual dots out in the wheel who now lack a central reference point. This is a 'bottom-up' perspective that imagines enlightenment, wholeness, and health at some point in an imagined future but never 'right now'. From this bottom-up view there is always more work to be done, more experience to be consumed, and more to understand before reaching clarity, before taking responsibility for the degree of enlightenment one already does possess. The ego loves this approach as it allows for the consuming of endless experience without obligation under the auspices of 'cultivating virtue' while always delaying having to change now. A basic spiritual principle is that, 'the path and the goal are one'. The only way to 'cultivate virtue' is to act virtuously and the only time ever to do that is 'right now'.

Far too much time is spent clinically trying to put things 'just right' and 'find the perfect key for the patient's lock' rather than simply and effectively speaking the truth directly to the part of the person that already knows it. Practising in this way reinforces the patient's view of himself as being 'very sensitive'. Nearly every patient I've ever treated has in some way entertained the thesis that, 'If what happened to me had happened to others they would have done much better handling it. It affected me as significantly as it did because I'm very sensitive.'

The sensitive self *IS* the postmodern ego and the 'holistic' healing modalities cater to it by striving to help it feel more comfortable. We practitioners avoid making and revealing distinctions about the higher and lower impulses within our patients, and choices made by them, to the exact degree we avoid doing so within ourselves. Our own lack of depth prevents us from treating patients in the most significant of ways.

Initially in clinical practice I was struck by how unique every individual seemed and was amazed by the ability of CM to generate a highly nuanced diagnosis for everyone. In time, however, the illusion of uniqueness disappeared as I awoke to the singular mechanism of separation at the core of all dysfunction. Certainly the details of each patient's story were different as to places, dates, and names and this necessitated moving stagnation,

dispersion, or tonification of different organ systems. But the underlying mechanism generating pathology was revealed to be the same in all. Just as it's the same distance back to the centre of the circle for every dot in the *sheng* cycle, so too was the jump back to the one true self, and the price paid for making it, the same for every individual.

Defining 'compassion' as 'honouring' each patient as being a 'unique individual' and 'celebrating' that 'uniqueness' by 'giving the gift of the elements'¹⁰ just reinforces culturally conditioned narcissism and the illusion of a separate, sensitive, and ever so 'special' self that is 'lost and suffering out in the wheel'. And it is this very self that is suffocating in the confines of its own mind and requiring, despite its privileged and fortunate position, endless 'therapy', sedatives, and special treatment just to cope.

Even worse than the unnecessary suffering a patient or practitioner might experience is the perpetuation of karma by causing others to suffer through our own self-involvement. The degree to which a person feels victimized is the exact degree to which he will victimize others. The most regrettable fact is the sin of how much human potential at the leading edge of culture is wasted in self-indulgence, often under the auspices of 'healing'.

The top-down view is the spiritual view. The human vehicle, our mind and body, has perhaps over one hundred thousand years of conditioning. It is imperative that we look at this conditioning, not from the psychological perspective of the conditioning itself, but rather through the illuminated eyes of spirit that never has any investment in turning from the truth.

The true, autonomous individual is that One to be found at the centre of the circle. For this is the position of the awakened heart. Stripped of conditioned history there is the same one fire arising out of emptiness in us all. Through serious effort, any human will discover that he or she is, in fact, that one light. Such an insight has the potential to change everything. No longer are we looking at circumstances of life from out in the wheel, or looking at the one from the position of the many. Instead we see through the illusion of the many from the perspective of the one. And, from a medical perspective what is revealed is that, though individual stories may differ in detail, there is only ever one patient coming for treatment, one mechanism generating illness, and only one step back to the centre for all. In fact, the root of all healing at its greatest depth and highest reach involves nothing more than a simple and instantaneous shift of identification from the relative to the absolute dimension of self.

The practical outcome of authentic holistic and integral treatment is development across all assessable qualities of functioning. Most importantly in the time we live, and demographic of patients that we treat, is the ethical line of development. A patient's entire syndrome pattern and symptom complex is already significantly

expressing their current stage of development. Simply put, patients must become the kind of people who don't have their problems. This means making different, better choices predicated on higher values. When values change, some things that were very important seem suddenly less so and some things that may not have even been on the radar screen may take on a new and significant meaning. When values change relationships change, both internally among our culture of officials and externally toward life. This very real threat to relationships is one of the most significant reasons that the ego, that part of ourselves that endeavors only to preserve the status quo, so violently resists wholesome, integrative change. And yet, from a certain perspective CM is about nothing but improving the quality of relationships!

Chinese medicine is a science of integrity and when the individual evolves, so too does culture. We who hold world-centric values have reached a level of development where the larger context of culture must inform our medicine. What seems to be missing in the profession is the passion, urgency, and moral imperative to rectify 'qi' in such a way that evolution takes place. To awaken the patient's own conscience and activate their will so that they are fuelled by the felt sense of responsibility of having to get better, right now, for a cause much greater than themselves.¹¹

While physiological process must certainly be 'in balance' it is only an awakened will and conscience informed by the soul that can add a vertical dimension to physiology.¹² It is a practitioner's own soul depth and degree of attention to the best part of himself that has the potential to awaken this awareness and interest in the patient. The minimum goal, which is well within the grasp of almost any practitioner or patient is a 51% shift of identification to spirit, that part of ourselves that is always free and striving toward the highest. Spirit is ready to make, and take, whatever hard choices and actions have to be initiated right now for the sake of wholeness based on whatever degree of truth has already been revealed. Spirit does not wait to arrive at some later point of feeling like doing the right thing. Spirit does not 'try' to exercise, take its herbs three times a day, meditate, or give up sweets. Spirit perceives truth and acts on it Right Now regardless of how the vehicle 'feels' about it.

It only takes a 51% degree of shift to the authentic self, the spirit, *Shen*, with a capital 'S', to 'reverse the wheel' and to operate in the world from a pure motive. Such a shift itself will do as much as can be done to rectify internal physiological relationships from the inside out. What else could be the basis of any authentic holistic or integral model of healing? Simply, we must hold the expectation for ourselves, our colleagues, and our patients that everything possible that can be done, will be done, for the sake of building together the integrity that is the outcome of all true medicine. Only a culture based on such a shared value has any hope of overcoming the significant challenges that face us.

Cultural Evolution: Autonomy and Communion

Our practice of medicine will either blindly reflect the superficial and materialistic values of culture at large or we will strive for it to reflect our deeper comprehension of humanity and its higher potentials. Throughout history, human consciousness has been embedded in culture as a force that has invisibly shaped us for better or worse. We are now at a historical vantage point where we are aware of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in all previous forms of cultural development. Such a top-down perspective provides the opportunity to consciously create culture based on the best of our knowledge and our highest ideals rather than to have our destiny forged by forces we are either unaware of or don't understand.

As we awaken to the reality of a global world facing global challenges, it makes sense that medicine also must make the transition from a solely personal focus on healing individuals' bodies and relaxing their minds, to becoming a significant force of cultural change.¹³ Given the impersonal nature of the greatest challenges that face us, the context for creating functional integrity within the individual can only be meaningfully understood as the foundation for a greater emergence of integrity within culture itself.

Chinese diagnosis requires reference of all observable phenomena to a set of agreed upon qualitative standards.¹⁴ But what better standard of reference for diagnosis is there than reality? Most of us have grown cynical regarding the possibility that humans can recognize truth with a capital 'T' in a cultural context. This makes sense as a reaction to the Holocaust. Still, as the leading edge of culture transcends ethnocentrism and nationalism to embrace world-centric values, this cynicism must fall away if individuals and cultures are ever really going to come together in a more wholesome way.

Historically, autonomy and communion have been at odds with the individual's rights being subsumed by the collective. However, it only makes sense according to *yin/yang* theory that the negative potential fulfilled by collectives in the past can be balanced by the potential of a collective to manifest an even greater good. Chinese medicine has always recognized the inexorable relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. From a Confucian perspective health manifests as a dynamic balance between a culture of organ systems or 'officials'. Chinese medicine predicts that 'health' emerges when each 'official' is giving selflessly for the sake of the whole. Such an ideal balance could only be sustained, however, to the degree that a patient has shifted his own motive in life from the ego's fears and desires to a positive cause greater than himself. There is no sustainable balance of officials that medicine can create independent of the recognition of oneness on the part of the individual and the will to make one's life a living example of that recognition.

The most direct route out of the postmodern ego's existential dilemma of self concern is in awakening to self as the vehicle for vertical development in the context of a collective that is moving forward together. In a person so liberated, gratitude, ego-less passion, and a visceral sense of both urgency and responsibility for bringing in the new replaces the small, inherently limited, and painfully personal contraction of ego evidenced as victimization focused on past events that patients usually present with. Healing and development aren't any longer a choice we make to feel better, rather, they are understood to be an obligation the fulfillment of which simply respects who and what we know ourselves to be – vehicles for the evolution of consciousness. From an integral (non-dual) perspective the practitioner must be the living embodiment of that realization.

Cynicism regarding the potential of self and culture to manifest a pure motive renders obsolete the very heart of CM. Why? Because the outward expression of a culture of inner 'officials' that are unified in intention and purpose and expressing 'health' is a culture of individuals who are aligned with each other in the very same way. Thus the most significant manifestation of our understanding of complex system theory will be evidenced in the quality of our relationships as we strive and move forward together. That's integral medicine in an evolutionary context.

Conclusion:

We may understand Chinese medicine to be a science of the relationship between the one and the many, the human and the macrocosm. The 5E model may be taken as a metaphor to describe the relationship between unadorned consciousness and creation including physiology, culture, the biosphere, and the cosmos. Creating heaven on earth may serve as a metaphor for the enlightened practice of medicine.

A reasonable, and frequently raised objection I encounter is, "The philosophy is compelling, but how do we do this practically with our patients?" I always tell my students that they only need to be concerned with their own integrity and that there is nothing 'to do' with patients. While the mind wants a technique it can use on Monday morning to earn an income, the ever so simple reality is that the potential for medicine that I'm pointing to can only be attained by a practitioner who has realized the absolute perspective, has given him or herself to it, and has a depth born of the discovery of what it takes to not compromise that metaphorical position 'at the centre of the circle'.

While such an attainment may have been rare historically, it is well within the grasp of those of us in the classes privileged enough to learn and practice CM. From such a vantage point all questions will instantly be answered regarding the nature of our clinical relationships. Of course, none of us is going to be perfect. But it appears to me reasonable that people who are advanced systems

thinkers and at a world-centric stage of development could reach at least a 51% point of identity shift to the core values I'm pointing to if they cared to.¹⁵ Fifty one percent means that spirit is in the driver's seat as the motivating force for speech and action and the values of spirit are the reference point for all experience. Chinese medicine is not a religion or even a form of spirituality. It is a medical science whose strength is as primary care for the inner dimension of the human being. There is only one inner dimension

to the cosmos and from this cosmo-centric vantage point, the care we extend to individuals is nothing short of care for the process of creation and cosmic development itself.

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 A detailed discussion of integral theory is beyond the scope of this article. For a brief introduction to integral theory I refer people to Wilber, K. (2000) *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 2 I can remember conferences in the early 80s when practitioners would actually fight over the superiority of the five-element or eight-principle perspective and which constituted 'real' Chinese medicine.
- 3 Here I reference the opening line of the *Zhen Jiu Jia Yi Jing* affirming that, 'All treatment must be rooted in spirit.' The ground of being and the authentic self constitute the absolute dimension of the self whereas the term 'ego' refers to the relative dimension. I refer to the ego as 'absolute' here because it is 'absolutely relative' and to make the point that, from a spiritual perspective, it is the only impediment to the expression of spirit.
- 4 Whenever an individual insists to me that the universe is a creation of his own mind I'm inclined to slap him and assert, 'That was an odd thing for you to do!'
- 5 Much of CM is conditioned by scientific materialism and has not yet evolved to pluralism. The ability to hold multiple perspectives signifies a relatively high state of development. However it is not a final destination and, as such, does not go far enough. The denial of hierarchy based on relativism represents a distortion of pluralistic consciousness.
- 6 For example, the selection of Liv 2 as being iconographic of a patient's constitution would imply that his constitution is 'fire within wood'.
- 7 Personal communication.
- 8 Anyone who can afford \$25 a week for acupuncture is most likely to be living in the top fortunate five percent of all of humanity.
- 9 I apologize for having added to the confusion by having previously used this term in my own writing.
- 10 This is standard lingo in segments of the 5E community that reflects a culturally conditioned psychological, 'feel good' perspective that is pervasive in new age healing. In my experience, sentimentality is not an attribute of authentic spiritual expression.
- 11 I am speaking only from a spiritual perspective. While the body may need time to heal or, may never heal, the spirit is that dimension of the self that is whole right now, never puts time in the picture, and can not relate to healing because nothing ever happened there.
- 12 For the sake of this discussion I define 'soul' as the deepest part of the relative part of the self. It is the capacity to respond to truth and to evoke response in others. The condition of the soul reflects the sum total of all previous choices. 'Conscience' may be thought of as the voice of the soul informing us of the gap between what we have seen to be true and the nature of the choices we are actually making.
- 13 Challenges such as global warming, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the contamination of crops with genetic modification concern all of us and are more significant than an individual's problems.
- 14 Such as the 'Five-Element' or 'Eight-Principle' systems theories.
- 15 Of course ego, the accumulated momentum of all past conditioned actions is not likely to go away easily and a 51% degree of attainment will require very hard work for most of us. Such work will be anathema to the postmodern human who feels so entitled, and looks to 'spiritual practice' mostly for psychological relief.

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