



CHINESE & ASIAN MEDICINE

From *Qi* to *Yin* (Pt. 1)

EXPLORING THE PHYSICS AND POETRY OF THE FIVE PHASES

Judyth Shamosh, PhD

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- The original term for the five phases of energy-matter is *the five elements*. The five phases describe the qualities of the functional nature of phenomena intrinsic to all matter.
- The wood phase in Chinese medicine is potential and expansiveness, and can be correlated with the space phase.
- By vicariously experiencing space, we gather critical information about its qualities: rarefied, cold, movement, clear, light, and subtle.

The original term for the five phases of energy-matter is *the five elements*. The word *element* is a static concept, whereas *phases* is more befitting the mutable nature of the concept. Therefore, the term *phase* is more appropriate for the dynamic flow of nature. Henceforth, the term *the five phases of energy-matter*, or simply *the five phases*, will be used instead of *the five elements*.

The five phases describe the qualities of the functional nature of phenomena intrinsic to all matter. The theory of the five phases, which first appears in ayurveda, is that one can attain an understanding and poetic experience of the processes of nature. Tibetan and Japanese concepts are similar to ayurveda, but Chinese medicine uses different terms for space (wood) and air (metal).

The five phases precisely and poetically describe the functional processes inherent in the energy-matter of the cosmos. The ancients of Eastern medicines knew that matter and energy are diverse manifestations of the same cosmic reality. The patterns of energy, on which our reality is founded, are not structurally based. Physicist Fritjof Capra explains:¹

Subatomic particles are not made of any material stuff; they are patterns of energy. ... When we observe them, we never see any substance, nor any fundamental structure. What we observe are dynamic patterns continually changing into one another – a continuous dance of energy.

The Five Phases and Dynamic Energy-Matter

Eastern medicine's five phases give us a system to explain these functional processes inherent in dynamic energy-matter. For example, water can exist as liquid: water (water phase), a solid: ice (earth phase), or a gas: steam (metal/air phase). The first law of thermodynamics states that to produce work or transformation, one needs to supply heat. It is the heat of the fire phase, from the first law of thermodynamics, that transforms the liquid-water phase to a gaseous-air phase or a solid-earth phase.

The second law of thermodynamics states that *qi*/energy (heat) concentrated in one place will always flow to places of lower concentration. It is the action of the wood/space phase or the second law of thermodynamics that imparts the lack of heat or cold to make solid-ice (earth phase).

Referring to Eastern medicine's food guidelines and herbal medicine, the water phase gives certain foods or herbs their moistening and cooling qualities; the earth phase its stabilizing and drying qualities; the metal/air phase its ability to move stagnation; the wood/space phase imparting a cooling and dispersing quality; and the fire phase its heat-conveying and matter-transforming quality.

The Poetry of the Five Phases

Modern physics tells us different forms of matter have different amounts of space between their atoms. For example, ice has less space between its atoms than steam. Ice is a condensed form of water and steam a rarefied (low density) form of water.

In physics, we call ice a solid form of matter and steam a gaseous form of matter. In other words, water can transform through three phases: air, liquid and solid.

Experiencing ice tells us it is cold and heavy relative to steam, which is hot and lightweight. Physics gives us the ability to measure temperature and weight of ice or steam, providing us with data that can be quantified. But experience is the basis of our comprehension, giving us the ability to qualify the data provided by science. Experience is the poetry of our existence, combined with the facts of science to take on meaning and value.

The Wood/Space Phase

The wood phase in Chinese medicine is potential and expansiveness, and can be correlated with the space phase. The wood/space phase implies more than simply rarefied space. As alluded to in Eastern mysticism, this phase implies subatomic energies and/or forces yet undiscovered by modern physics.

The Physics of the Wood/Space Phase

Space is not empty. It is a realm where there is a large amount of space between what little matter is present. This relative emptiness contains, besides sparse amounts of physical particles, the force of gravity, electromagnetic radiation, as well as other unknown forces suspected, but undiscovered, by physicists.

In physics, the wood/space phase can be correlated to astrophysicist Sir Fred Hoyle's theory of a

“creation field,” where there is a continuous creation of new matter and energy from *quintessence*, meaning fifth element — ether — also known as Akasha the Cosmic Matrix, where transformation occurs and all is related.

Physicist David Bohm also discusses this cosmic matrix in the concept of “the flux”:² [In] intelligent perception, the brain and nervous system respond directly to an order in the universal and unknown flux that cannot be reduced to anything that could be defined in terms of knowable structures.”

This thought is also similar to “the cloud” where we store and retrieve our data. “The cloud is not a physical entity, but instead is a vast network of remote servers around the globe that are hooked together and meant to operate as a single ecosystem.”³

The Poetry of the Wood/Space Phase

Space

*Space is a place where I am cold
Nothing here to warm me.*

*So light I feel, so easy to move
Nothing here to hold me.*

*So far I see
Nothing here to bar my eye.*

*Soon I am no more
Nothing here to breathe me.*

J. Shamosh⁴

Most of us have never been in outer space, and indeed we could not exist there without protection and support. However, we can imagine what it would feel like if we were able to experience it.

By vicariously experiencing space, we gather some critically important information about its qualities: rarefied, cold, movement, clear, light, and subtle. From Eastern philosophy, we know the functioning of our world (microcosm) is the same as the universe (macrocosm).

In part 2, we will discuss the experiences of the phases of metal/air, fire, water, and earth; and how they change into one another in a continuous dance of energy.

References

1. Capra F. *The Tao of Physics*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991: p. 329.
2. Bohm D. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. New York: Routledge, 1995: p. 53.
3. What Is the Cloud? Azure.Microsoft.com; cloud computing dictionary.
4. Shamosh J. *The Physics & Poetry of Eastern Herbal Medicine*. Glendale: Pure Carbon Publishing, 2022: p. 32.

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