

Listening *to the* Seasons

Winter approaches, like it does quite regularly around this time each year. The differences in temperature, rain, light, activity all become more noticeable. For some of us this can be a challenging time. There are many aspects to this transition. How we relate to, avoid, embrace, deny, engage or resist the seasonal changes greatly influences energy levels, moods, health and general well-being. Developing awareness of the energetic qualities of seasonal changes may also be quite useful when applied to other transitional phases of our lives.

The shifting patterns and energy of our climate and weather are continual reminders of the natural process of change. These reminders surround us, they are our environment, the context within which we live. Compared to earlier times, modern living conditions have created some separation from these natural elements. We are insulated from extremes of cold, heat, dry, damp and wind in wonderful ways that provide comfort and support good health. However, these positive aspects may also be used to separate or create a barrier to our natural surroundings.

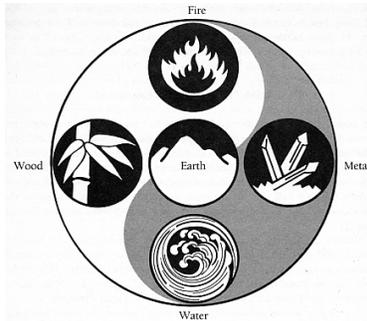


Having adequate/appropriate protection from environmental extremes is important. Too much protection runs a risk of becoming isolated, cut off from a very valuable process of adaptation, flexibility, changing in harmony with the natural world we live in. Finding a balance of comfort within our seasonal climate and yet still be aware of its natural rhythms could be called listening to the seasons.

There are several Chinese energetic concepts that explore these cyclical changes and transformations. In the simplest form, yin and yang describe the positive and negative: light and dark, warm and cold. They are complementary pairs. In the seasons, yang is the height of summer and yin is the depth of winter. The base of yin and yang may be expanded to another concept: the five elements or phases: earth, metal, water, wood, fire. Applied to the seasons, yin and yang expand to include the changes from winter to summer: summer-fire, fall-metal, winter-water, spring-wood. In this concept the earth element is the transition phase between each of the seasons. For example, between summer and fall there are usually a few weeks where it fluctuates between the two seasons.

Another energetic concept, the eight principles, adds more detail beyond the five elements: earth, sky, fire, water, wind, thunder, lake, mountain.

If you are really interested in exploring these concepts, the eight principles form the base of the 64 hexagrams in the Chinese classic, *I Ching*. It is a very elegant, detailed and sophisticated explanation of how energy transforms. It is also not very easy for a Western educated mind to follow.



These concepts are used as guides in Chinese medicine to follow a natural way of balancing the different energetic qualities in the organs and meridians. The concepts may be challenging to understand, yet listening to the seasons provides a very practical way to experience and feel what they describe. Following seasonal transitions influences the flow and balance of their associated energies in the body, mind and spirit.

Exploring seasonal transitions brought my awareness to a subtle sense of always being behind the curve. It felt like it took until the end of winter to find the rhythm of heating the house, layering the right kind of clothes and cooking warmer and more substantial foods. Then, it was spring. It felt the same for each seasonal change. As soon as I got acclimated to the summer heat rhythm, it was already cooling into fall.

One way I approach this is focusing on each equinox and solstice as a reminder, a marker of the transitional phases. During meditation, tai chi, walking, biking, yard work - just the daily activities of life - I note the 10 days before and after each solstice and equinox as the transitional earth phase.

In this process, other ways naturally appear. During personal retreat last winter, I noticed a recurring message: sleep outside this summer. At first this seemed to be about being outside on very hot nights. Yet, when I began in June, it quickly became every night and continues through to this writing in late November.

Another way of being in touch with the seasons comes from not having a car for a few years and brings me to more bicycling and walking. I've also been outside more while learning to kayak on the Willamette river. These activities involve being in nature, connecting with the cycles and rhythms of earth and sky, water and trees, clouds and rain. Making contact with the natural energies of our environment, helps maintain a harmonious rhythm with seasonal cycles.

Those are some ways I've found useful, though they might not resonate with everyone. Yet, if we are curious, make it a priority, pause to listen, usually opportunities will naturally arise that fit each person. It might be yard work or vegetable gardening. It could be art: painting, drawing, sculpting what we experience in the season. Or, having a meal outside, a picnic in any season. Just add more layers in cooler weather. And, it doesn't have to be outdoors. Shifting the foods, spices and methods of cooking based on seasons brings us the same connection. Singing, dancing, meditations, celebrations,

poetry, potlucks with friends, music and road trips with kids. Any of these and more can be useful gateways to harmony with seasonal cycles.

This morning, heading for the river, the wind says otherwise. 25 mph gusts and dark, laden clouds suggest another path unfolding to the day - writing this article. Pausing, I notice a break between the morning fall rain showers and take the opening to rake a few leaves amid light sprinkles and tend to the fall/winter transition of pond plants and compost.



A brief, very brief, sun-break and the rake rests against the bay laurel trees. I do some cat stretches, soaking in thin November sun. As dense rain showers return, I return, inside, to finish this writing, a fall ritual - sending a newsletter to friends. Ahhh... *there* is that rhythm, replacing what before felt like being behind the curve of seasonal transitions.

Winter happens. At this time of year as light decreases, daily temperatures drop, and rain increases it is easy to turn away from it all. Find a comfortable distraction. We have that option, yet in taking it we might be gaining short-term comfort and losing touch with valuable support, learning, guidance on how to negotiate transitions - changes - in all aspects of our lives. Listening to the seasons may help us through parenting toddlers or caring for aging parents. Midlife transitions, menopause. Career changes. Economic and political upturns and downturns. Family, relationships. Change is ever present and ongoing. There is a Taoist saying: The only thing that doesn't change is change itself. Adapting and learning to flow with changes leads to qualities like balance, harmony, equilibrium. All things worth taking a few moments to pause and listen to the seasons.

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