

## Tending the Fire



Snuggled up to the wood stove. Musing on what to write and what calls to be written. White-carpeted landscape out the window. Fresh powder overnight. Pausing to tend the fire. Hmm... tending the fire.

This house has a heat pump that excels at cooling in the summer and heats well down to 32 degrees. Colder than that, it is *very* inefficient, basically like electric baseboards. The wood stove is consistently burning from mid-November to mid-February. This is the first time I've relied primarily on wood for heat. I'm learning about the rhythm of tending the fire.

There are phases; it's a process: gathering, splitting, stacking and keeping the firewood dry. Bringing the wood inside. There are many variables influencing the fire: wood type, size and dryness,. Weather variables are also influential: temperature, humidity, barometric pressure, wind. And, there is the timing of building and feeding the fire, adjusting the damper and thermostat.

When awaring this rhythm of fire-tending, a natural balance and harmony occurs. There are obvious moments to attend to: bring in more wood before the next heavy snow/ice; replenish the water trays; turn up/down the thermostat; add a large log; start a few small pieces. Not listening, distraction, busyness can lead to imbalance, disharmony. The fire goes out = cold.

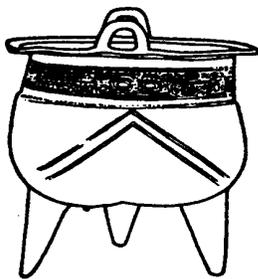
The wood stove can be a great teacher of the natural rhythms of life all around us, including our body, mind and spirit.

Chinese medicine is based on observing the natural rhythms of life as they appear in health and disease. As these theories developed thousands of years ago, they were expressed by the basic elements of nature around us: earth, metal, water, wood and... fire. Just as there is an obvious rhythm to tending the wood stove fire, Chinese medicine describes a rhythm and way of tending the fire within the body.

### Internal Fire

Chinese medicine uses energetic terms to describe the functions in the body, for example, fire. There is not a physical fire in the body, like in the wood stove. There is the energy of fire: heat, warmth, radiance, glow, expansiveness, exuberance, light. In Western culture there are phrases reflecting this, too, like: she has a fiery nature, you light up my life, he is warm and giving. This fire energy is noticeable both in its presence and absence: the fire went out in the relationship; no light in his eyes; they are cold, hard, bitter.

Chinese medicine has observed and explored these fire qualities and expressed them in how bodies function. There are several energetic fire layers including digestive fire and heart fire.



### Digestive Fire

Energetically, Chinese medicine describes the digestive process and organs like a cooking pot over a fire. A good quality pot and sufficient fire will cook/digest well and thoroughly. A cracked pot or low fire will not do as well.

Tending digestive fire can mean caring for the pot (stomach and intestines) and quality of energy. The drain of stress and worry can, over time, easily crack the pot (ulcers, acid reflux). Being overly busy, eating junk food, not enough rest can diminish the strength of digestive fire.

When young, the cooking pot and fire have a lot of energy and can deal with various stresses and less than ideal nourishment. As we age, the pot is more fragile and the fire has lessened. What we used to be able to *get away with*, now results in digestive symptoms.

Tending the digestive fire can start with being aware of what strains the digestive system and what supports it. Eating junk food (not food) is similar to putting junk wood (rotten, wet) into the wood stove. It *might* burn.

We may also notice that things like over-eating and the timing of eating (late or infrequently) can have the same detrimental affect on the digestive system as the wood stove.

Good quality food, moderate portions, chewing well can all support the maintenance of the digestive process which provides plentiful nourishment and energy.

## Heart Fire

Shen is the Chinese word that describes heart fire or spirit. The heart organ is considered the home of the spirit. Thus, fire of the heart reflects the quality of our spirit.

Heart fire is more subtle than digestive fire. This is the fire energy which gives meaning to, guides, inspires the unfolding of our life. A balanced and harmonious digestive fire provides nourishment and sustenance for the physical functioning of the body. Abundant heart fire, shen, provides the energetic/spiritual nourishment that leads to balance, harmony, calm, centered, grounded, content... happy.



Similar to the wood stove and cooking-pot-digestive-fire, there are ways to support and drain heart fire.

Heart fire is easily lessened when we don't listen to our heart's guidance, intuition. Not following our heart's path, ignoring what calls to us, being other than our true, genuine self. Over time, the cumulative drain on heart fire can lead to physical heart symptoms/conditions and also emotional imbalances such as anxiety or depression.

Nourishing heart fire can be as easy as pausing for a few moments to listen inwardly for what is most needed in the moment. Exploring what nourishes the heart can lead us into energizing areas of our life like, creativity, relaxation, exercise.

Not everyone is nourished by the same thing *and* everyone has something that deeply resonates with their heart-fire-spirit-shen. What is it?

It may be our work/profession, how we recreate, art, music, movement, exercise, parenting, gardening. There are 10,000 ways to nourish the spirit.

We may have spent our whole lives doing what we *should* do, what others wanted of us. And then, at a certain moment, we begin to listen, explore, find what nourishes our heart fire. Sometimes a medical adventure spurs this process. Or, the death of a family member or friend gets our attention. We also don't have to wait for that to happen to begin.

Tending the wood stove. Tending digestive fire. Tending heart fire. They share many similarities. Learning about one can guide us in learning about another.

Whether wood stove, digestion or heart fire, a few simple aspects can be very helpful: listening, patience, following what resonates with us and what feels natural.

Natural care and kind maintenance go a long way in maintaining the fire/warmth within our house, our body and our spirit.

*Time to add another log to the fire.....*

