

Wood and Metal - Part Three of an Introduction to the Five Elements

by Richard Bertschinger

As I open my Ipod Touch© this morning and jab at the latest app, I find I am more and more playing the patience games – card games for one. They involve the ‘traditional’ pack of 52 cards, with four suits – Hearts, Clubs, Spades and Diamonds. 52 and 4, should this ring a bell or two? 52 weeks in the year, 4 seasons – it is not a large step from here into the ‘five elements’ (the Chinese added the ‘earth’ or fifth element – most markedly!). But indeed the system works almost as well with four. Also on my shelf is the A.E. Waite pack of Tarot cards, an off-shoot of the traditional ‘pack of cards’ and in these the four suits are shown differently – Cups (for Hearts, but interestingly enough relating to Water), Wands (for Clubs or Wood), Swords (for Spades or Metal) and Pentacles (five pointed stars for Fire). So that must be it! In some shabby, run-down way the idea of ‘the five’ has come to nestle within our own common-or-garden pack of cards (see end note 1). Present-day culture is such a mish-mash of styles– even post-modernism is now branded post-post-modernism. So where does it stop? Thankfully, when we choose Chinese Medicine we come back to simplicity. As the *Tao-te Ching* advocates ‘seeing simplicity, embracing plainness, casting off selfishness, and reducing desire’ (Chapter 19) (see end note 2).

Sincerity, honesty and a firm foundation. That, I guess, is why we study Chinese medicine. And the most solid of all are the Five Elements.

From my previous article on water and fire we learnt about the crucial dialogue between water and fire, heat and cold which permeates the activities of the Five Elements. Once we consider wood and metal-gold, we see this dialogue enhanced and reinforced...*wood out of which, fire is born...gold smelted out of earth, the gold taken out of the water...*this has to be our rigmarole.

Throughout these articles I have been considering the Five Elements from the point of view of alchemical acupuncture and medicine. This is the most important aspect of the these ‘agents’...they are part of a transformative process or path (*dao*), essentially....

In my introduction to the *Cantong Qi*, the 2nd Cent. text on alchemy, I explain three ideas which underpin this transformative process: firstly the avid search by the Chinese into the properties of the natural world, into

the actions of herbs and minerals, the habits of animals and workings of the heavens; secondly the use of these inorganic and organic materials for therapy, the betterment of the body, and thirdly the tradition of aurification and auri-fiction – either the making or faking of gold, which was prevalent in early metal-based cultures.

Another trio of ideas could have been the philosophy of Change as depicted in the Yin and Yang hexagrams and trigrams of the *Yi Jing*, the Huang/Lao tradition of stillness-yoga, and lastly the Elixir process, inherent in alchemy. To sum up: the *Yi Jing*, the Taoist quietist tradition and the elixir method. Each of these illuminate the place of wood and gold within the fluid-and-fire dance of the Five Elements. We will look at them all below.

The purpose of this essay is to muse on the place of Wood and Metal in the Five Elements. Now we will find that wood creates fire and that metal leads to water (fluids). Yes! In its simplest form heated wood bursts into flame, and heated metal melts and turns liquid (water runs down, just as fire flames upward).

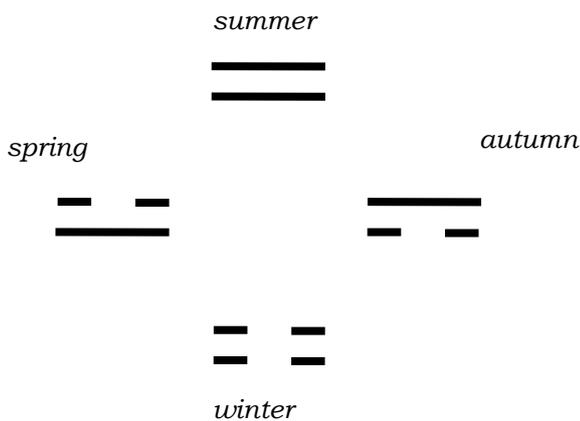
Metal - or *gold* if you would rather – the character *jin* means both; *jin* 金 also means *precious* (for all you Gollum fanciers!). Indeed the smelting of ore (by fire) to extract the metal, or essence, is exactly that which is implied by gold (metal)’s place in the Five Element cycle. Certainly J.R.R. Tolkien most have known something of this with his One Ring formed under the mountains by the dwarves.

Wood is *the* organic element in the process, growth and bendability – or lack of bendability, when the green wood is missing. Metal is the ‘extracted’ element – essences, refinement – it also can be struck to make a spark! It can also be stuck and intransigent. Vegetation needs water to grow; metals (minerals) need to go into solution to move. This is how metal and wood dance together with water and fire, in the Five Element cycle.

Let us listen to this rhyme:

*Wood and Metal, Add and Subtract
Fire and Water, Lower and Raise –
Empty above, Full beneath
The secret of everlasting life (see end note).*

If we look at the cycle of the seasons in the natural world, regard how the Yang lines burgeon in the Spring, the green shoots sprout from below – wood's expansion and *adding on*, and see how the Yin enters in, from beneath, in the Autumn – metal's *subtraction* and extraction, to be left with the seed.



Truly the words for Wood and Metal are *adding on* and *subtraction*, spring and autumn. With regard to Wood and Fire, wood is added on and fire subtracted; with regard to Metal and Water, metal is added (the Gold built up), found beneath the Water – *under the surface of the Jade White pond...*

From the *Wu Zhen Pian* (Awakening to the Truth) by Zhang Boduan, famous Song Alchemist comes the poem:

*If you wish to retain the Mercury in the Gold Caldron
lining it red
First find the Sunken Silver under the surface of the
White-Jade Pond.
The Merit of the Sages is to circulate the Fire and
before midday
A Wheel of Sunlight appears - immersed in a Dark
Pool.*

The mercury is the Fire; the silver is the Gold. The sunlight is the light of enlightenment, blessed within the quiet and dark.

And again from the *Wu Zhen Pian*:

*Fire is born out of Wood originally hiding its keen tip,
If you do not reach its core you will never conquer it.
Failure rises all through self-infliction -
You must surely control it. Seek out Duke Gold!*

The Metal is given the accolade *Duke Gold*.

And once more from the *Yinfu Jing* (Book of the Hidden Shadow) (see end note 4), a famous Daoist tract comes:

*nature has five robbers
who notices them, flourishes
the five robbers dwell in the heart
and show their circuit in the sky:
time present, time past and time future
rest in your hand*

This describes the actions of the Five Elements as they wear away our system and body; and need to control and limit them. Then, and only then, do *time present, time past and time future rest in your hand*.

The *Yinfu Jing* continues:

*fire is born out of wood
its calamity must be controlled
treachery is born out of the state
the moment it stirs, there is trouble:
to know this method of training
is what is meant by being saintly*

In the last essay on water and fire, we talked about water and fire in equilibrium. We mentioned how to keep a smooth blending of fire and water in soft harmony ... so that they 'do not provoke one another' (from the *Shuogua* – see end note 5) which is *central* to the practice of classical Chinese medicine, and behind all aims at promoting health.

In the verse above, the wood is kept whole without bursting into flame. Likewise the gold (metal) shines our clear, as our spiritual enlightenment – without flowing away (you may think, if you like, of the sexual secretions of semen and menstrual flow, as the Chinese did.) In the *Candongqi* it says (see end note 6) 'the boy turn white, the girl goes red' – referring to the same thing (white semen and red menses).

In an earlier work of Zhang Boduan, his 400 word essay on the Golden Elixir also discussed wood and gold; we read:

*within wood, a drop of red mercury
within gold, heavy and black lead -
lead and mercury congealed into an Elixir
so bright! as purple coloured gold*

Again, in the flowery language of the Song, Zhang Boduan informs us that wood contains within itself the red fire, and gold (metal) contains within itself the darkness of the Kan-water (heavy lead) – bearing all before it in its passion. But, *but*, if we restrain, govern and congeal them together, we will attain the Elixir – the best of all, 'as purple coloured gold'.

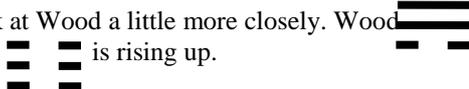
...so, remember, as you still the water, you find the gold.....



Kan-water



Yang-gold

Now let us look at Wood a little more closely. Wood under the Earth  is rising up.

Rising Up



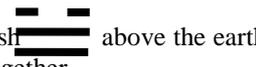
This is the hexagram *Rising Up* (I Jing: 46). In this shape the two Yang lines hold together and push up, through the earth trigram, which rests above them. This is a clear image of the rising green shoots of spring-time, the time of Wood.

The King Wen text to the hexagram reads *rising up, the source of the blessings, see the great man, do not worry, an expedition to the south, good fortune*. The source of the *blessings* and joy of all the world rests in the growing spring-time. We are counselled to find a teacher and seek guidance. And *not to worry!* It is all too easy to worry about Wood. An *expedition to the south* counsels us to expect Summer fun – the time of Fire, *the south*. celebration and festival. Thus *good fortune*.

The Six at the fifth line of the hexagram speaks of *devotion, good fortune and rising up, step by step*. This line is the centre point of the rising energy. A fifth line gentle and centred, responds to a firm second line, which is also centred. As the second ascends, so do all the other lines. The first line trusts it as a friend; the third has its virtue, while the fourth shares its aim. With this devotion there must be good fortune. You can rely on the moment with complete confidence. You respond to the wise at court, the great man is honoured and you rise up and ascend, *step by step*.

This encapsulates the genius of the Wood element and trigram.

Now turn to Metal: In the I Jing (Book of Changes) Metal is also the marsh, or low-lying waters. The

Marsh  above the earth  pools and gathers in together.

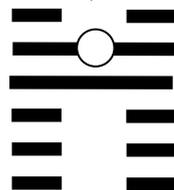
Gathering Together



This is the hexagram *Gathering Together* (I Jing: 45). In this shape the two Yang lines again hold and gather together, stretched as they are above the earth. This is the Yang of the marsh (or metal), lying flat across the earth. The waters of the year are attenuated, played out and exhausted. And waters which are not guided can also be dangerous – the marsh is also a trigram of dissolution and destruction. This is the Yang at an end – the cutting edge of the metal, hammered and formed into a point. What does the King Wen text say about this?

It reads *gathering, blessings, the King approaches the Temple, it is favourable to see the great man, blessings, favour devotion, using a large sacrificial animal, good fortune, it is favourable to take action*. In other words, this is a time to be sanguine and restrained, to *approach the ancestral Temples* and places of worship, to listen to our leaders or *great men*, and to *favour devotion*. Making a *large sacrifice* is counselled. This will bring *good fortune*. It is *favourable to act*.

The Nine at the fifth line of the hexagram states *gathering, a position without blame. Lack of faith? The source of everlasting devotion, remorse gone*. This fifth



line is again the centre and pivot point of the hexagram. It is the upper Yang line. Both the two Yang lines *gather the people*. The fourth leads the other Yin lines to return to the fifth because of its commanding position. This is a quite natural, so

of course there is *no blame*. However the gathering is great indeed and you may experience *lack of faith*. Here enters the grief of Metal and fear of the waters. Embody *the source* of the Heavenly heart through *everlasting devotion*. Then you may unite the virtues of Heaven and earth. All gather of their own accord and any remorse is gone.

Here we see how to extract the best of Metal from the situation. Take care, gather together and remain devoted, so that the Yang of Metal is gathered; then you will escape both remorse and blame.

In these two little escapades into the imagery of Wood and Metal, based upon the traditional sources of the I Jing, I hope you have appreciated the depth and wisdom of Five Element knowledge. The earth trigram has hardly been touched upon. That element – the greatest mother of all, doorway to Heaven and earth, will be discussed in the next and last article.

References

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- Bertschinger, R *The Secret of Everlasting Life* (A Translation of the Candong Qi), Singing Dragon (forthcoming) 2010.
- Bertschinger, R *Treasuries of the Tao* (The Tao-te Ching with Heshang Gong's commentary) Tao Booklets 2009 (ebook, on Chinese Medicine Times website)
- Bertschinger, R *The Single Idea in the Mind of the Yellow Emperor* (Selections from the Neijing Suwen) *The Daode Jing* Tao Booklets 2009 (ebook, translated on Chinese Medicine Times website)

End notes

1. What is not commonly known is that the Chinese invented the pack of cards. They had some affinity with bank notes, and Mahjong tiles.
2. See my translation.
3. My translation of the *Cangongqi*, the Secret of Everlasting Life is to be published by Singing Dragon (Jessica Kingsley) in December 2010. This is the oldest text on alchemy from China.
4. There are extracts from this translation on my website mytaoworld.com.
5. The Eighth Wing of the *I Jing* (Book of Changes).
6. *Candongqi* or The Secret of Everlasting Life p.79.