Healing with Five Element Acupuncture

An Interview with Robert J. Abramson, D.D.S., M.D., M.Ac.

Russ Mason, M.S.

Within the practice of acupuncture there are many variations of style and method. While all of these involve needling, the approach can vary markedly. A comparatively lesser-known form of acupuncture is Five Element Acupuncture.

The Five Element method of acupuncture was brought to the West by Jack Reginald ("J.R.") Worsley, Dr.Ac., M.Ac., N.D. (1923–2003), an Englishman, in the 1960s (see box entitled *Bringing Five Element Acupuncture to the West: The Teaching of Dr. J.R. Worsley*). Five Element Acupuncture does not seek to alleviate symptoms; instead, it addresses, and seeks to eliminate, the cause of an illness. Five Element Acupuncture is based on the seasonal cycles that exist in nature and, by extension, within ourselves.

Robert J. Abramson, D.D.S., M.D., M.Ac., first learned about Dr. Worsley in 1975. At that time, Dr. Abramson was practicing dentistry in New York City and using acupuncture, in addition to other therapies, for pain control.

After attending a lecture by Dr. Worsley, Dr. Abramson felt that this approach to healing and wellness was exactly right for him. In the years that followed, he studied Five Element Acupuncture with Dr. Worsley and acquired an M.D. and a Master of Acupuncture credential. Although Dr. Abramson occasionally integrates Western medical techniques into his practice, it is almost entirely devoted to Five Element Acupuncture. He sees patients in New York City and in East Hampton, New York. He is affiliated with Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

Russ Mason: Tell me about the Five Elements.

Robert J. Abramson: It is a system developed in China centuries ago. It dates back to Lao Tzu (see box entitled *About Lao Tzu*) and the *Tao Te Ching* (see box entitled *About the Tao Te Ching*), where the Five Elements are discussed. It is not an artificial or human-made system. It is looking and perceiving the way that nature is. When we, as people and patients, experience that we are part of the natural world, we feel comforted. We begin to heal.

The Five Elements form a circle, in the way that the seasons form a circle. Each season leads into the next, and each has unique qualities. So it is with the Five Elements. The only difference is that there are five, not four, Elements. If we were to mirror this in our seasonal reference we would add a late Summer season that would be after early Summer and before autumn, or harvest time.

RM: Please take us through the Five Elements and explain about how they make an impact on an individual's health.

RJA: The Five Elements are Water (Winter), Wood (Spring), Fire (Summer), Earth (Late Summer), and Metal (Autumn). Corresponding to each of the Five Elements is a specific color, odor, sound, and emotion. The color category may be perceived in the patient's face. Voice, odor and emotional state are all indicators of the person's state of health. So, for example, if the person's face has a blue cast, then an imbalance in the water element is considered.

While the Five Elements are based on the seasons, there is no direct correlation between the seasons and the patient's state of health. Each person carries with him or her all of the properties for all of the Five Elements. So, throughout the course of a day or an hour, "elemental" differences will arise and fall. If a person becomes momentarily angry, then the face color will change, as will the voice, and so forth. A practitioner of the Five Elements assesses patients as to their states of elemental balance or imbalance.

At the moment I am speaking to you from my porch. It has been raining for several days, and water has been very prevalent, so let us begin with the Water element. Water is about flow, allowing life its natural course. (I am referring to water in its liquid state, since frozen water has no flow.) The color is blue, the odor putrid; the voice has a deep groaning quality; the predominant emotion is fear.

A Five Element practitioner also looks for a lack of water, dryness, in the skin, [for someone who is] emotionally dry, mentally dry... the absence of water. So there are balanced and imbalanced aspects to each of the Five Elements. The Water Element is about Winter; other qualities are a sense of stillness and quiet. Nature is resting and building up its reserve. Then, Winter yields to Spring.

About Lao Tzu

Although ascetics and hermits first wrote about the *Tao* it is with the seventh century BCE philosopher Lao Tzu (born Li Erh) that the philosophy of Taoism really began. Some scholars believe Lao Tzu was a slightly older contemporary of Confucius. Others suggest that the *Tao Te Ching*, which has been attributed to Lao Tzu, is really a compilation of paradoxical poems written by several Taoists using the pen-name, Lao Tzu.

Painting by Shari Abramson.

According to legend, Lao Tzu was keeper of the archives at the imperial court. When he was 80 years old, he set out for the western border of China, toward what is now Tibet, saddened and disillusioned that people were unwilling to follow the path to natural goodness. At the border (Hank Pass), a guard, Yin Xi (Yin Hsi), asked Lao Tzu to record his teachings before he left. He then composed, in 5000 characters, the *Tao Te Ching* (*The Book of The Way of Life*).

Source: www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Taichi/lao.html

The Spring, or Wood, element is about movement, growth, beginnings. The voice quality, interestingly, is shouting and the emotion is anger. This may seem odd, but anger in this context really means intensity, forcefulness. It's the sprout coming up through the earth, regardless of the obstacles. How many times have we seen little sprouts emerge through concrete? The Wood Element derives its flexibility from the Water, the previous element. Without the Water, there would be no source of power. The odor is rancid and the color is green. This also means forcefulness in one's behavior—sometimes a project needs to get pushed through; think of the intensity of the birth experience.

RM: As a practitioner, what do these various indications suggest to you?

RJA: As a practitioner, what one looks for in a patient is: "what is appropriate?" So now, from my porch, I can see the lush greenness of Spring. But if a tree were to be turning to Fall colors, then that would not be appropriate. The tree would be sick, and calling out, via its colors. So it is with a person.

When we are in balance—there is an acupuncture point called *Heavenly Pivot*—everything is in the right place and is working well at the body, mind, and spirit levels. At times, anger and forcefulness are appropriate, so I don't want you to think that placidity is the ideal state. Anger is part of life, as are grief, joy, and other states within the Five Element model. We should have

all these qualities in us at the appropriate time, melding together. If you shine white light through a prism you will see a rainbow. So the colors are separate but together.

As we exist, we have all of the Five Elements within us. This system reminds us, it wakes us up, as to how we, as individuals, function in the world and are part of the natural world.

The Law of Five Elements is known as "the mother/child" or *Sheng Cycle*. This means that one Element is the mother to the next; Water feeds Wood, Wood nourishes Fire, and so on.

RM: How do you see your role with respect to the Five Elements?

RJA: It keeps coming back to putting the patient in harmony with the natural flow of the earth, the universe, and the cosmos, and letting that person experience that he or she is part of that. That is when the person experiences healing.

RM: The next element would be Fire, or Summer?

RJA: Yes, Summer is about heat, about love, and about joy. Just think of the Summer—everyone feels warm and passionate. The color is red; it is Fire. The voice quality has to do with laughter, including inappropriate laughter or lack of laughter. The emotion is joy—either over-the-top joy or no joy at all. The odor is scorched, like toast. "I'm burnt out" is something we have heard people say. We all have Fire in us all the time—that is what keeps us warm. . . our metabolism. Now, applying the Law of the Five Elements, the mother/child paradigm, we can see that out of Fire comes the ashes that create Earth, which is the next Element.

Earth is about centeredness, fertility, nourishing. . . our mother. It is being held in the womb of Mother Earth, obtaining sustenance. The color is yellow, like corn. The emotion is sympathy, a sense of being taken care of. The voice quality is singing. I don't necessarily mean singing musical notes when a person speaks but you can hear the voice going up and down in pitch, regardless of the content of what a person is saying. The Earth smell is fragrant—sometimes too fragrant, like overly ripe fruit.

When things have reached their zenith, the crops are harvested and the cycle is complete. It's a little like throwing a ball into the air. It will reach its zenith and then start to come back down, or fall, which is the next Element. Fall is represented by Metal. Out of the vastness of Earth comes the preciousness and scarcity of Metal—gold, silver, platinum.

The Metal element is about quality. We have metals in our bodies in the form of trace elements. If we don't have iron or the mineral magnesium we're in a lot of trouble. But if we have too much iron then we're in trouble also. So this element is about quantity, but even more so, about quality. The voice quality is weeping. Since the season is Fall, there is a letting go, a departure, a sadness. The emotion is one of grief. The color is white. The odor is rotten, one of decay. This is the last stage of a cycle, and then it begins again with the Water element in Winter.

RM: I can follow all of the transitions—Wood to Fire, for example—but not Metal into Water.

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RJA: I know. It seems less comfortable than the others, but one must remember that Metal, in the form of rock, provides a home and channel for Water. Without the hard rock streambed, the Water would drain away; on a smooth, cool Metal surface, Water condenses. The invisible becomes visible.

Through the Five Element System, through the *Tao*, we can feel an integral part of the natural world; we are part of it, as much as the raindrops and the trees. And yet we are separate and individual, the way there are individual trees and raindrops.

RM: Not all practitioners of acupuncture use The Five Element model. Please comment on that.

RJA: Very true. But that is the case with most healing disciplines—there are many schools. Take psychoanalysis, for example. A person could be a Freudian, a Jungian, or a behaviorist, but each one works for the appropriate patients in the appropriate situations at the right times.

With Five Element Acupuncture, there is an integration of body, mind, and spirit. It's all one. So when you go to a Five Element Acupuncturist, he or she will ask you about your family life, your childhood. . .right up to what you had for breakfast this morning. Because the more a practitioner knows about a patient, the more comprehensive the diagnosis and subsequent treatments will be. This means knowing where to look for inappropriateness or imbalances.

Sometimes when people leave me messages on my answering machine, I can pick up information about their state of health by their voices. There are vast differences just as there are differences between a lavender [*Lavendula angustifolia*] plant and a redwood tree.

Robert J. Abramson, D.D.S., M.D., M.Ac., in private practice in New York City and affiliated with Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Bringing Five Element Acupuncture to the West

The Teaching of Dr. J.R. Worsley

Jack Reginald ("J.R.") Worsley, Dr.Ac., M.Ac., N.D. (1923–2003) first learned of the *Tao* and the Five Elements from practitioners in Europe, as well as from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, during the 1950s. He later visited Asia several times to advance his studies. Dr. Worsley learned that, in Japan, the Five Elements had been the dominant underlying principle in Oriental medicine, which is largely based on Five Element theory.

He taught his students that it is nature that creates and maintains health and that the role of the practitioner is to facilitate nature. Dr. Worsley was a remarkable diagnostician who was able to identify the Causative Factor of the imbalance in a patient, whether the imbalance was at the level of the body, the mind, or the spirit. He empowered his students by demonstrating which acupuncture points could best enable a patient to return to balance.

Dr. Worsley emphasized that practitioners ought to make deep contact with, and enter into, the internal world of each patient. This meant paying attention to every detail presented by a patient and to assess which threads to follow. He also emphasized that each practitioner should develop a highly refined sensitivity to patients, which would lead to an intuitive knowing about them.

As a practitioner of the Five Element lineage, Professor Worsley taught his students to observe the nuances of change in a patient according to season, climate, and time of day. In Chinese medicine, the external causes of disease include all the conditions that we encounter—the weather; the food one eats; the shocks and/or the traumas one experiences; environmental toxins; lifestyle challenges; and other factors.

Dr. Worsley also taught that the majority of illnesses stem from imbalances in a person, which then affect spirit, mind, and body. Such imbalances may arise when a person is unable to change with the flow of nature because he or she has become attached to, or stuck in, a particular state. Five Element Acupuncture, as taught by Dr. Worsley, aims to diagnose and clear away these imbalances within the patient correctly.

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Article about Dr. Worsley

Wint A. The Spirit Moves On [book review]. Online document at: www.ejom.co.uk/backissues/vol4no3/feature2.html Accessed June 26, 2006.

RM: You are both an M.D. and a master of Five Element Acupuncture. Please talk a little about your practice and if you are able to integrate these healing systems.

RJA: Most of the time, when people come to see me, they come because something is wrong. Lao Tzu talked about preventive medicine—stopping things before they start. His view was: If you go to the doctor when you are sick, it is like starting to dig a well when you're thirsty. So the real basis of all medicine should be prevention. But, alas, most people go to practitioners when something is wrong.

My approach is always to talk with the person. Now it often happens that, even before the patient sits in the chair, he or she starts with: "Oh my left toe, doc! I have so much pain, it's incredible!"

About the *Tao Te Ching*

The *Tao Te Ching*, roughly translated as *The Book of the Way of Life*, is an ancient Chinese scripture. Tradition has it that the book was written around 600 BCE by a Lao Tzu ("Old Master"), a record-keeper in the Emperor's Court of the Zhou Dynasty. A careful reading of the text, however, suggests that it is a compilation of maxims sharing similar themes. The authenticity of the date of composition/compilation and the authorship are still debated.

This short work is one of the most important in Chinese philosophy and religion, especially in Taoism but also in Buddhism, because the latter was interpreted by Chinese scholars upon its introduction to China largely through the use of many Taoist words and concepts before developing into Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, upon first encountering it, Chinese scholars regarded Buddhism as merely a foreign equivalent of Taoism.

Many Chinese artists, including poets, painters, calligraphers, and even gardeners have used the book as a source of inspiration. Its influence has also spread widely outside Asia, aided by many different translations of the text into Western languages.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching

And then, for some patients, their pain is the last thing they mention. So, while we are all fundamentally the same, we are all totally different. That is one reason why Five Element Acupuncture is so powerful. As Carl Jung [M.D.; 1875–1961] said, you need to create a new treatment plan every time a patient comes to your office.

For the first visit, I allow an hour-and-a-half in which the patient tells his or her story. There is no desk between us, we are face-to-face, getting to know each other. Very often, people come to me or go to other acupuncturists, because these patients weren't helped by other treatments.

You asked about Western medicine. It is wonderful when used appropriately. The principal options are surgery, medication, and radiation, and there are times when these treatments are appropriate. Five Element Acupuncture says: "You know what? We will work with what you have. We will not inject anything or cut anything out. We are going to open up some channels."

There is a great quote: "There is no illness, only stagnation. And there is no cure, only the re-establishment of flow." This refers to *qi*, or the life-force, within each of us.

RM: Who said it? Lao Tzu?

RJA: I wish I could say I made it up! But I found it in an obscure book in a library long ago. But it says it all.

RM: Is there any part of your allopathic training that comes into your practice now? Or are you pretty much in the Five Element model?

**Editor's Note:* Traditional Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine conceptualize the organs differently.

[†]Moxa, or moxibustion, is a Traditional Chinese Medicine therapy that is often practiced with acupuncture. Moxa is the local and focused application of heat to acupuncture points using a compressed, powdered combustible substance (moxa; or the mugwort [*Artemisia vulgaris* herb]), which is burned at or near the points to be stimulated. (Source: www.scienceblog.com/community/older/archives/B/nih1490.html)

RJA: It's hard to separate out all of the things I do, because I see my activities as being part of a larger, integrative whole. But yes, I talk about blood pressure, lab values, and the patient's entire medical history. But I practice Five Element Acupuncture.

Also, Five Element Acupuncture is not symptom-based. That is, if a patient comes in with a sore back, he or she may expect me to take a look. I will examine the back but Five Element Acupuncture is about bringing the whole person into an appropriate balance, from an energetic point of view, so I will also examine the entire person.

I will begin with a treatment called tapping or draining Aggressive Energy. So I am assessing the status of the Five Elements within the patient and finding the Element that has the most, or earliest, damage. That will be the primary imbalance, and this is what Dr. Worsley referred to as, "the Causative Factor."

For example, if you look at the wheel of the seasons and we have a dry Winter, or lack of the Water element, this will affect every other season. The crops won't be that good so, therefore, the harvest won't be that plentiful. So the Causative Factor is a lack of Water.

Each element has the ability to influence the others—this is what I look for. I determine the Causative Factor by assessing a person's color, sound, emotion, and odor to find which Element is primarily out of balance.

Each of the Five Elements has corresponding organ systems. For example, the Fire Element is the Heart, Small Intestines, Triple Heater, and the Heart Protector.* Wood is the Gallbladder and Liver. Water is the Bladder and Kidneys. Metal is the Large Intestine and Lungs, and Earth is the Stomach and Spleen.

The acupuncture treatment I do is based on what the Causative Factor is. The actual needling takes a fairly short period. The person is not going to be lying there with needles in her or him for 20 minutes. The technique is in and out. The goal is to remove the blocks and open the channels. What helps the process is that people innately want to get better, and nature strives for balance.

RM: Let's get back to the patients and arriving at a diagnosis. If I were to come to you with a problem, you would be evaluating a spectrum of variables. So I might have too much Wood in one aspect of my health, or not enough Water in another? Is that right?

RJA: [laughs] Yes, that's right. You're a practitioner! I'll give you a degree!

RM: Do you use other adjunctive therapies in addition to acupuncture, such as herbs, for example?

RJA: I do prescribe some Chinese herbs and use moxa[†] when appropriate. I also recommend some homeopathic remedies, which are gentle. I discuss diet with the patient, and whatever substances and medications they are taking—and why they are taking them. We always come back to what is appropriate for this patient.

RM: In Five Element acupuncture, is the needling technique different from other forms of acupuncture?

RJA: Yes, there are differences. The point location is quite similar but the needle technique is different. For example, we almost always start on the left side of the patient, which is the tonifying side. The patient's right side is the sedating side. We begin on the left side. We find the point, put the needle in the direction of the flow of the meridian, reach the depth, engage the *qi*, and then tonify, by turning the needle a half-turn clockwise. Then we pull the needle out and seal up the hole with pressure. By tonifying, we are opening up the channels.

RM: So you don't leave the needle in for a long length of time?

RJA: Rarely, but sometimes I will if it is appropriate. To leave the needle in, starting on the right side, has a calming or sedating effect. Sometimes a patient will come in and he or she is ready to explode (the pulse is plus, or excess, from a Five Element prospective) on a physical or emotional level. The patient needs sedation, so that is what I treat.

But, whether the person is being tonified or sedated, the practitioner must check the pulse, which is part of the evaluation process. Even if the patient has an acute physical problem, like a sore knee for example, there will also be an emotional component to the pain and mental and spiritual components to the pain. Similarly, if a person comes in with an emotional problem—angry or depressed or can't sleep—this may manifest on a physical level at times or on a spiritual level.

That is why the discussions are so important—because the emotional problem may be one from childhood or anxiety about the future. There are people who will carry around scars from childhood for more than 40 or 50 years, and that might be inappropriate for them. The emotional scars will prevent them from stretching fully, like a rubber band that can only go so far and then snaps back.

Five Element Acupuncture can cut right through a lot of stagnation. . . it's experiential. The first thing Lao Tzu says is: "The real *Tao* can't be talked about in words."

RM: How did you find out about Five Elements Acupuncture?

RJA: I started as a dentist in 1971. Right around that time I started doing acupuncture with a professor of mine, Martin Rubin [D.D.S.], at New York University Dental College, New York City. Back then, acupuncture was not well-known, but President Nixon had reestablished diplomatic relations with China and James Reston[‡] had come back from China and Chinese medicine was beginning to attract interest in the West.

Dentists were especially interested in acupuncture as a treatment for pain. As I recall, WNET, a PBS television station, showed people undergoing surgery with acupuncture as an anesthetic and this was fascinating to us. We were excited because acupuncture suggested there would be fewer risks or hazards, or expense, than with local or general anesthesia. But it never really took hold in the West. Western anesthesia is quite profound and safe.

But we did use acupuncture for head and neck pain, sinus pain, TMJ [temporomandibular joint] pain, and other musculoskeletal problems. In time, I came to realize that the kind of acupuncture I was doing was not completely satisfactory. It was symptomatic acupuncture (a "cookbook" approach). In fact, there were—and probably still are—books that you can look up a problem and the book will tell you where to place the needles.

This didn't resonate with me but, when I read about The Five Elements, that was something that made sense intuitively. Then I went to hear Dr. Worsley speak, in Philadelphia, and I thought: "This guy is saying what I need to hear." It was like water to a thirsty soul.

That was 1975, and I soon became his student and went to Royal Leamington Spa, [Leamington, Warwickshire, England], four or five times a year to study Five Element Acupuncture with Dr. Worsley. He talked about the *Tao* and the Universe and how love and compassion are essential to the healing process. He was able to diagnose a patient from across the room correctly! He set the bar very high and I thought: "This is the way I am going."

I began to practice Five Element Acupuncture a few days a week and dentistry a few days a week. But then an idea popped into my mind, and that was to go to medical school. I was recently married at that time and wasn't sure if my wife would be supportive of this idea but she embraced it fully. Because I was already a dentist, I received some advanced standing and went to Downstate Medical College [New York City], and did my internship at King's County Hospital, in Brooklyn, New York. In retrospect, it was the right thing to do.

After I received my M.D., I continued to go to England and Florida to study with Dr. Worsley. I learned a great deal from him and we remained the best of friends until he passed away in 2003. I learned much from Dr. Worsley; and my patients benefit from this remarkable healing system.

RM: Bob, thanks very much for an informative interview.

RJA: Thank you. □

[‡]While accompanying the President on a trip to China, Mr. Reston, a writer and editor for *The New York Times*, underwent emergency surgery and wrote about his experience of receiving acupuncture for postsurgical pain. See: Dean CF, Mullins M, Yuen J. Acupuncture. In: Novey DW, ed. *Clinician's Complete Reference to Complementary/Alternative Medicine*. St. Louis: Mosby, 2000:191–202.