



## Autumn Equinox in the Chinese Medical Tradition

Across mid-latitude regions, the autumn equinox marks the decline of warm, light-filled days and initiates the slow march toward winter. According to Chinese medical theory, the season of autumn ushers in a waxing Yin phase as Yang energy retreats into dormancy. Rooted in ancient Taoist philosophy, Chinese medical tradition is based upon a close observation of patterns in the natural world. These cyclic patterns form the foundation of Five Element theory - an exploration of our relationship to the cycling of the seasons.

The seasons were traditionally divided into five phases, each with its associated element. The fifth season represented *late summer*, a transitional phase between the heat of summer and the cool, dryness of fall. In a broader sense, Five Element theory examines how our connection (or *disconnection*) to the cycles of nature impacts our physical and emotional well-being and has a profound effect on the health of the planet.

Yang energy is bright, warm, and expansive; in the natural world it manifests in the season of summer, in sunlight, and in growth and development. Yin energy is dark, cool and withdrawn; it is related to moonlight, the season of winter, and represents a drawing inward. Cycles of Yang energy engender communication and motion, while Yin phases require rest and introspection. According to Chinese medicine, learning to adapt to the rhythm of seasonal cycles keeps us in balance with nature - promoting wellness and resolving long-standing illness.

In the Five Element tradition, the element corresponding to autumn is Metal, the associated color is White, and the affiliated organs are Lung and the paired organ, Large Intestine. The dominant emotion of the Lung meridian is Grief, and the direction of autumn is West - associated with dreams and visions. If we look to the natural world for guidance as we navigate this seasonal transition, trees make an excellent study.

Every autumn we witness the seasonal shifting of Qi as we marvel at the fall foliage. As day length shortens, deciduous trees draw energy from the leaves, transferring this energy to the roots in the form of stored carbohydrates. Plant tissues that are unable to survive the winter must be discarded and sealed off to ensure the tree's survival. Autumn is the season of harvest and storage; a perfect time to consider which aspects of ourselves to nurture and which to abandon. Like the rise and fall of a cycle of breath, we may reflect and draw inward; then discard existing patterns that no longer serve us.

The lungs are extremely vulnerable during seasonal transitions, especially summer into autumn, and require extra care. Stay warm and keep moving; avoid overexertion and excess sweating. The best way to support the body's own immune system during the fall months is to eat foods that are in season, such as early harvest root vegetables. Meals should be warmer in temperature and in property; cook soups & stews and begin to incorporate warming herbs and spices. There are specific foods that directly support lung function including: almonds, daikon radish, turnip, parsnip, cauliflower, apple, pear, oats, onion, garlic, and white peppercorn. Daily intake of fermented foods will optimize gut flora to strengthen the immune system and boost digestion. Both acupuncture and herbal medicine may provide additional support during transitional phases. Acupuncture therapy, a holistic approach to diagnosis and treatment, restores the body-mind-spirit to a natural state of balance - and it is a safe and powerful healing modality.

I try to devote more time to self-reflection during seasonal shifts and find that it helps me consider the best path forward - especially when faced with obstacles. Revisiting the principles of Chinese medicine, now framed against the backdrop of a global pandemic, gave me pause. We bear witness as the seasons follow a natural order, with energy and forward motion. Conversely, many of us feel suspended in limbo. It has been an extraordinary six months, filled with confusion, worry, fear, anger, sadness, longing - and grief. In truth, the future hangs in a balance. However, our deep connections - to one another, to our animal companions, to our communities, and to the planet - remain a source of strength. As summer gives way to autumn, allow grief to be expressed; but remember to hold space for new dreams and visions.

*Wishing You a Safe & Happy Fall!*