

# Summer Self-Care: The Fire Element

May 5th- August 7th 2018 (peak Yang on Summer Solstice 6/21)

*Background: Chinese Medicine and Daoist philosophy look to nature to understand health and harmony. The ancients witnessed that all living things are dynamic and interdependent. The seasons progressing naturally into one another is the basis of the Five Element Theory. The five elements, or active phases, are Water (Winter), Wood (Spring), Fire (Summer), Earth (Late Summer), and Metal (Fall).*

**Summer** is related to the **Fire Element** and **Supreme Yang Qi**. It is the height of activity in Nature. Following the rains of winter and spring which prepare the earth, the brilliant sunshine of summer allows nature to flourish with color, heat and light. While our natural environment blooms before our eyes, we tend to lighten up as well: spending more time outside, engaging in recreational play, wearing lighter and brighter clothing, enjoying social gatherings, and pursuing creative endeavors. This expansive, mature qi of summer is more forceful than the tender, young qi of spring. Therefore our work in summertime is to tend this great blazing Supreme Yang Qi so it does not become destructive. Healthy Fire brings stability and a sustaining sense of joy and enthusiasm for life. It opens the heart, lights up the eyes, connects us with our intuition and creativity, and inspires us to communicate warmly with others. Imbalances of the Fire Element can result in excessive or deficient conditions. When Fire becomes excessive it can show up as hyperactivity, aggression, mania, inflammation, hypersexuality, anxiety, profuse sweating, high blood pressure, insomnia, constipation (too dry), agitation, disproportionate laughing or joking, bright red complexion or even cardiac arrest. When Fire becomes deficient it can show up as fatigue, low blood pressure, lethargy, sluggish digestion, diarrhea (too wet), chills and numbness, pale complexion, lack of humor or depression.

In the human body, the Rising Yang Qi of springtime now expands fully into the chest, arms, hands and head. Summer is the time of the **Heart Network** which includes the Heart, Small Intestine, Pericardium (the membrane enclosing the heart), Triple Warmer (which regulates body temperature and metabolism), blood, blood vessels, sweat glands, tongue and facial complexion. The function of this network is to circulate blood flow, regulate our heating, and cultivate empathic virtues-- all having to do with the giving and receiving of warmth. In the ancient Chinese texts, the Heart is compared to a supreme monarch who is responsible for maintaining peace and order. It houses the *Shen*, the spirit or consciousness of one's being.

In summertime, we nourish the Heart Network by getting outside more, increasing physical activity, socializing, being playful, loosening up, expressing our appreciation to others and engaging in creative expressions of our spirit. The ancient text ***The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*** states: "The three months of summer are called the time of splendor and growth. At summer solstice *yang qi* reaches an apex and *yin qi* emerges; *yin* and *yang* commingle and all living beings prosper. *Yang qi* energizes all phenomena and *yin* gives them shape. Because of this *yin/yang* commingling, all things flower and fruit."

## How to Be Healthy and Joyful During the Summer

As we tend and temper our inner fire during this season, here some tips to help us along the way:

- \* *Healthy Fire gives us a steady, warm joy and enthusiasm for life*
- \* *Healthy Fire allows our relationships to have a smooth and measured flow: Trust builds steadily, communication is clear, appreciation and love are expressed and grow overtime*
- \* *Healthy Fire expands time rather than frantically and urgently speeding it up (in contrast to over-excitement and obsessive enthusiasm)*

**Engage your senses:** As summer brings bright colors, sounds, and fragrances, be open to this abundance! Go outside barefooted in the grass, dirt or sand and feel the textures that greet your

soles. Go to a garden or park and listen to the sounds of the birds, bees, and children playing. Smell the flowers- the smells of summer- and take time to allow them in. Taste the fresh fruits and vegetables of the season, and savor their unique flavors.

**Have Fun:** Make room for more creativity and recreation. Loosen up, lighten up and play!

**Increase Exercise / Activity:** A healthy heart needs regular exercise and one of the best cardiovascular exercises is walking. **Walk an hour a day.** Walk fast enough to break into a light sweat, but don't overdo. Build your exercise routine gradually. Other great summer activities include: swimming, jogging, hiking, biking, gardening, dancing, practicing yoga and qigong.

**Relax:** Balance activity (*yang*) with relaxation (*yin*). Take time each day to simply Be. Meditate, take a nap, lie in a hammock, gaze at the clouds, observe the stars, listen to the ocean waves.

**Drink lots of water:** The sun pulls the moisture from our pores, so it is important that we rehydrate. Sip eight to ten glasses of water throughout the day. Add some lemon for flavor, but **no ice**. Flower teas including chamomile and hibiscus are great for the summertime.

**Eat:** Because summer is hotter and we are usually more active, we need a diet that keeps us cool and light. It is recommended that we eat lots of vegetables and fruits, some seeds, nuts and grains, and fewer dairy products and meats (especially red meat). Reduce or eliminate consumption of refined foods, alcohol, caffeine and tobacco. Most raw foods are cooling and moisturizing, so you can eat more salads if your digestion is strong. If your digestion is weak, cook your vegetables lightly by steaming or blanching them. Beneficial foods to eat in the summer include: all fruit with pits, melons, strawberries, tomatoes, citrus fruits, cabbage, cucumber, sprouts, asparagus, bamboo shoots, bok choy, corn, snow peas, white mushrooms, spinach, romaine, summer squash, seaweed, mung beans, duck and fish. Cooling culinary herbs include cilantro, mint and dill. If you want to increase your digestive fire, add to your diet: whole grains, cauliflower, mustard greens, endive, escarole, watercress, curry powder, ginger and cayenne.

**Trust Your Heart:** The Heart rules intuition and our ability "to know without knowing." As you go through your days, pause to listen to your Heart's intelligence.

**Love Yourself:** Self-love is the the foundation on which we cultivate compassion-- the virtue of the Fire Element. It is hard to be loving toward others when our internal landscape is full of conflict. Bring awareness to your this internal landscape: Do your internal voices shout at you or speak to you with a harsh tone? Do your internal voices speak to you gently, as a mother might speak to her child? Self-love is turning toward the parts of ourselves that we are ashamed of and greeting them with compassion. Self-love is taking care of ourselves as much as we care for others. Self-love is making healthy diet and lifestyle choices. Self-love is engaging in activities that foster our whole being. Self-love is choosing relationships that feel good. Some suggestions to cultivate self-love include: notice when you are comparing yourself to others and redirect, take yourself out on dates, write down the things you appreciate about yourself, greet yourself with open curiosity, practice flowing qigong sets.

**Bring Awareness To Your Speech:** In Chinese Medicine, the Heart opens to the tongue which is the vehicle for speech. Words communicate the feelings of the heart and the content of the mind. Take time to attend to the quality of your words-- their pacing, tone and content. Is your speech hot with speed, volume, abundance, urgency, harshness, excitement, joy? Is your speech cool with monotony, hesitancy, long pauses, soft tones? Notice how speaking makes you feel.

#### **Sources:**

*Wood Becomes Water: Chinese Medicine in Everyday Life* by Gail Reichstein, *Qigong Through the Seasons* by Ronald H. Davis, *The Way of the Five Seasons* by John Kirkwood, *The Way of the Three Treasures* by Liu Ming, *Staying Healthy With the Seasons* by Elson M. Haas, M.D.