

Winter Season, Water Element Self-Care

November 7th 2017 - February 4th 2018, Winter Solstice 12/21 Yin Rules

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).

Winter teaches us that the way to fully enjoy the power of the season is to surrender to it and learn from it. Winter days are shorter, the nights are colder, the waters freeze, the earth lies fallow, and the trees store energy in their trunks and roots. Seeds, full of potency, lie waiting deep in the chilly soil while animals hibernate and live off the food reserves they gathered in the seasons before. Nature withdraws into a deep rest.

Humans need this deep rest too. It is stated in the ancient text *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine: In winter all is hidden. Winter is the season of retirement into depth, because of the cold outside. At this time you must not disturb or disperse the yang (active energy) so that you can allow the yin reserves (stillness) to be re-established within you. Disobey mandates of winter and it will bring harm to the Kidneys and reproduction.* Thus, we are encouraged to retire early, slow down, and make contact with our inner depth. Winter is a time for us to retreat, self-reflect and respectfully recall our ancestors. Yet in this age of electricity and holiday hype, this can be challenging. Even if we manage to lay low from the holiday frenzy, we find that slowing down can bring up undigested emotions like fear, grief and anxiety. During this time it is of the utmost importance that we treat ourselves kindly, bringing compassion to ourselves as we meet whatever arises in our experience. Winter offers us an invitation to be with what is. To let be. To notice what arises when we get still. To feel those experiences completely until they pass. We don't need to push them away or let them take over. Emotions are meant to be felt and not held onto. If we allow ourselves to be as we are, just precisely how we are, this season of darkness can be a great portal to light up our inner world.

In the human body, qi retracts from our extremities and moves into storage in our belly, bones, and Kidney Network. **The Kidney Network** includes the kidneys, urinary bladder, gonads, bones, marrow, brain and spinal cord which all pertain to the deepest aspects of reproduction, physical growth, and regulation of our fluids. In Chinese Medicine, the Kidneys store our life fuel Essence (*jing*), and therefore, can be viewed as a kind of bio-battery or pilot light for the body. They also house the Will (*zhi*), a profound aspiration of the whole being. When this aspiration is aligned with what is beneficial for life, we nourish Kidney Qi and can fulfill our destiny.

In the Five Element Theory, winter is associated with the **Water phase** which moves downward and inward. Water is the most *yin* and fundamental of all the elements, the point on the cycle which is both a beginning and an end. Water is considered to be the primordial substance from which all life on earth arose and to which it will return. Water is the most abundant compound on the earth's surface, covering about 70% of the planet and comprising about 70% of the human body. (The percentage is greater in newborn babies and less in aging bodies.) Water, with its properties of cohesion and finding the lowest place to rest, teaches us about finding our own coherent stillness and internal resting place. Water is powerful and adaptable in all the different forms it takes, from ice to liquid to steam. Like winter, Water both destroys and gives life.

Staying Healthy and Joyful During Winter

Sleep and Rest: Listen to your body. Take time to replenish your reserves, which will be needed during the surges of spring. Pace yourself. Sleep more. Try not to push through to a "second wind." Take time to be still-- rest or meditate to soothe your nervous system. Allow yourself more time to Be.

Nutrition: Nourish yourself with warm food and warm water. Winter sucks the moisture out of our bodies, so stay hydrated. Eat SLOW foods- seasonal, local, organic, whole. Minimize or avoid processed, packaged foods, and refined sugar, as they erode Kidney Qi overtime as well as cause inflammation. ***Cook foods longer at lower temperatures***-- this infuses the food with heat which keeps the body warmer during the winter. Great foods for the season include stews, bone broths, casseroles, root vegetables, whole grains, quality meats (especially lamb and chicken), dark leafy greens, walnuts, sesame seeds, and foods from the sea such as fatty fish and seaweed to nourish the endocrine system. If you are a vegetarian, eat more beans, nuts, and tempeh. Use warming spices such as ginger, turmeric, garlic, miso and cayenne. **Herbs** that nourish the Kidney network include nettles, marshmallow root, juniper berries, and flaxseed.

Keep Warm: Chinese medicine says that the neck, shoulders and ankles are vulnerable areas of the body through which pathogens can enter. Protect these areas by wearing scarves, warm socks and boots.

Consistent Gentle Exercise: Qigong, Tai Chi, yoga & walking increase circulation and safeguard qi reserves.

Keep a Journal: Your inner being comes closer to the surface in winter. Keep a journal to record your feelings, thoughts, and dreams. Don't analyze, judge or rush to make meaning, just record.

Sunning: For a few minutes, once or twice a day, stand or sit completely still facing the sun, closing and relaxing your eyes. Gently move your eyes back and forth slowly beneath your closed lids (to simulate REM sleep). *Never look directly at the sun.* Feel the warm, soothing sun rays penetrate your eyes, your brain and all the nerves in your body. This revitalizes your entire endocrine and nervous systems. After sunning, slowly open your eyes, allowing the colors and forms to come to you. You might feel like the world is darkened for a moment, but then the colors will appear more vivid. The body has produced serotonin, which uplifts your mood and will then produce melatonin, which naturally promotes sleep. (During winter days it's especially important to get outside when the sun is visible, even if it's shining through clouds. This will uplift your spirit during the dark months of the year.)

Fire Gazing: Fire can be a source of deep relaxation, meditation and contemplation, which support the kidney qi and adrenals. Practice gazing at a fire or candle flame. It is best to do this at night when you can turn off all other sources of light. Simply watch the flames with soft eyes, soft thoughts, and a soft mind. Let yourself drop deeper into the space that is below conscious thought. Whatever happens is fine. Don't try to make anything happen and don't try to make anything not happen.

Rub Your Low Back: Massage your lumbar spinal muscles to bring warmth and life to the kidneys.

Attend to your feet: Bring your attention away from your thinking head to your feet regularly throughout your day. Soak your feet in a basin of warm Epsom salt for 15 mins, especially before bed.

Kindness and Self-acceptance: As you practice being more and doing less, this can bring up discomfort, fear, repressed emotions and pain. Whatever it is you experience in your quietude, practice accepting what is present. Rather than wasting your energy resisting an uncomfortable feeling (and ultimately, feeling it anyway!), use your energy to accept what is. Remember, acceptance doesn't mean liking the discomfort. Acceptance is a willingness to feel a feeling just as it is, without analyzing, judging or trying to fix it. Each feeling and sensation that arises is an opportunity to practice acceptance-- accepting yourself just as you are in the present moment. This willingness to feel what is present is the portal inward to your own depth.

Sources:

Wood Becomes Water: Chinese Medicine in Everyday Life by Gail Reichstein / *Qigong Through the Seasons* by Ronald Davis
The Way of the Five Seasons by John Kirkwood / *Staying Healthy with the Seasons* by Elson M. Haas