Introduction to Energetics and Herbal Actions

Herbal Energetics:

"Energetics are a method that is applied by herbalist to match herbs to people (instead of herbs to disease) that is based on the concepts of temperature and humidity." Rosalee de la Foret

Other areas of Energetics look at relaxing/stimulating and excess/deficient. These concepts of hot/cold, dry/damp, etc. can be applied to both people and herbs. The goal is to create a balance within the person using the correctly matched herbs.

People are different and herbs can have different affects on each of us depending on our constitutions. Learning and understanding each person's unique quality along with learning the specific qualities of the herbs we use will make our remedies more effective. When there is an imbalance in a person it can cause disease and disharmony in the body. We can use herbs and food with appropriate qualities to help tip the scale and bring the body back to balance. In order to find and obtain this balance we first need to be aware that all people are different and each of us have our own constitution. In order to appreciate these difference and apply them to our work we can look to different traditional medicine systems that use a classification system to better organize and understand the various patterns of different constitutions. Although we are all different, our bodies and the way we present illness or react to medicine will follow a certain pattern to some degree. Keep in mind these are just guidelines and are by no means the one and only way to classify these topics. Learning these different patterns within an already established system will give you the language that will help you understand a complex system and is just one more tool in your tool chest that will help you apply herbal medicine.

Yin and Yang

In TCM everything is categorized in relationship with Yin and Yang. Two opposite but complementary energies that make up the entire universe. They are interconnected and cannot exist without the other.

Yin: dark, cold, passive, negative, female, moves inward and descends, heavy, interior, psychological, introspective, parasympathetic, sour, bitter, salty, winter.

Yang: light, active, hot, positive, male, outward, ascending, exterior, physical, extroverted, aggressive, assertive, sympathetic (nervous system), spicy, sweet, summer.

Tridosha Theory

In Ayurveda, people are looked at in reference to the Three Doshas; Vata, Kapha, and Pitta. Just like in TCM this theory extends to all material and spiritual planes of nature. In the body Tridosha relates to metabolic balance. Vata is nerve energy, Pitta is catabolic fire energy, and Kapha is anabolic nutritive energy. When all three doshas are functioning properly and in equilibrium within the body, physical and emotional health are at their optimum.
Vata: cold, dry, light, subtle, mobile, rough, clear and changeable. Vata is the driving force behind the other two and is the most powerful but it also has the strongest potential to create disease.

Pitta: moist, hot, brilliant, piercing, clear, subtle and oily. It is responsible for heat (fire) in the body and governs body heat, temperature, and all chemical reactions.

Kapha: moist, cold, wet, heavy, slow, dull, static, smooth, dense and cloudy. In charge of substance, weight, stability, growth and building, tissue repair and inhibiting heat in the body.

The Four Humoral Temperaments

The four humoral temperaments comes to us from ancient Greek medicine and has deep roots in western herbalism. The humors refer to fluids of the body that correspond to certain trait and inclinations towards disposition, wellness and imbalance.


Choleric: hot and dry; tense. Yellow bile/liver. extraverted, leaders, see patterns and how things fit together, organized, practical, pragmatic, self motivated, confident.

Phlegmatic: cold and damp. Phlegm/mucosa. introverted, thoughtful and feeling oriented. Compassionate, empathic, sensitive to energies around them, patient and committed, trustworthy, kind, get works done without seeking credit.

Melancholic: cold and dry. Black bile/spleen and lymphatic. deep thinkers, deeply perceptive, idealistic, loyal once respect is earned.

Signs of Disharmony

When the body is out of balance because of to lifestyle or illness, it will present symptoms of this imbalance. As herbalists we can uses these signs to choose our remedies and support the body in returning to balance.

**Signs of Heat:** high fever, thirst, red face, aversion to heat, restlessness, irritability, burning sensation, red eyes, scanty dark urine, yellow discharge, strong odors, loud voice. Tongue: yellow coat

**Signs of Cold:** pale, fatigue, lethargy, frequent urination, body aches, clear or white mucus, fear of cold, loose stools, undigested food in stools, lack of appetite, hypoactive, poor circulation, sleep a lot, crave heat. Tongue: Pale

**Signs of Dampness:** Excessive fluids, excess discharges (eyes, skin, nose, colon, vaginal) heavy limbs, edema, chest fullness, sluggishness, achy, heavy, stiff joints, nausea. Tongue: thick coat

**Signs of Dryness:** Dry rough skin, dry throat, nose and mouth, dry stool, unusual thirst, dehydration. Tongue: Dry
Taste of Plants

**Sweet:** Neutral to warm. Nourishes, rejuvenates and tones all body tissues. Builds and strengthens, moistens and soothes. Generally are tonic herbs. Used to support immune function, build strength, soothe burns and inflammation, moisten dryness, heal wounds. Adaptogens, immunomodulating, demulcent, Yin and Blood tonics, vulnerary.

Examples: ginseng, ashwagandha, slippery elm, licorice, astragalus, flax seed, marshmallow, Solomon's seal. Most whole food sources are considered sweet including: whole grains, beans, meat and dairy.

**Sour:** (TCM-cooling, Ayurveda-hot) improves digestion and enzyme secretion, supports the liver, high in antioxidants, invigorates the mind, and dispels gas, astringent; contracts and strengthens bodily tissues.

Example: rose hips, hawthorn berry, cranberry, sumac, sorrel, fermented foods, yogurt, lemon, vinegar.

**Salty:** cooling/warming, moistening/drying. In small amounts it moistens tissues by helping balance fluids but large amounts encourage retention which can cause edema. Salt can dissolve cysts, act as a laxative, restore electrolyte balance and increases appetite. Minerals, nourishing herbs, diuretic, hydration, nourishes kidney and bladder, strengthen teeth and bones.

Examples: plants high in minerals: nettles, plantain, seaweed, cleavers, celery and ocean fish.

**Bitter:** cooling and drying, increase secretions in digestive tract, improves digestive function. Aides in detoxifying and elimination in the body including removing cholesterol from blood. Tend to have a downward energy. Use with signs of heat, excess and dampness. Can help balance blood sugar levels and address insulin resistance. Help stop sugar cravings.

Examples: dandelion, gentian, Oregon grape, goldenseal, chaparral, artichoke leaf, kale, arugula, fenugreek, mugwort, turmeric, horehound, yarrow, boneset.

**Pungent/spicy:** warming, drying, stimulating, diffusive, improve a sluggish digestion and circulation, brings on a sweat, increases metabolism. Carminative, stimulating diaphoretic, stimulating expectorants, stimulating diuretics, antimicrobials.

Examples: garlic, ginger, rosemary, cayenne, cinnamon, mustard, angelica, pepper, oregano, thyme.

Herbal Actions in Western Language

-Adaptogens: "Hormonal modulating action increases the body's resistance and endurance to a wide variety of adverse influences from physical, chemical, and biological stressors, assisting the body's ability to cope and adapt" - James Green.
Adaptogens help the body cope and respond to stress. Generally have a sweet taste, building and nourishing. Helpful to use with fatigue, adrenal support, thyroid issues, low stress tolerance, low immunity, longevity, and deficiency.

Examples: Ginseng, Eleuthero, Ashwagandha, Astragalus, Rhodiola, Reishi, Licorice, Schisandra berry, Tulsi.

-Alterative: "Promote a healthy and balanced state of functioning by supporting the liver, kidneys, lymphatic & immune system and adrenals" Jim McDonald.

Generally support overall health by improving metabolic processes. Known as "blood purifiers" in older terms. Alterative move fluids and promote secretions in the elimination organs such as liver, lymph nodes and kidneys. Mostly they are cooling. Often used for a long period of time and with chronic conditions such as inflammation, chronic fatigue, impaired immune function, eczema, swollen glands and acne.

Examples: Red clover, Red Root, Burdock, Nettle, Yellow dock, Oregon Grape, Dandelion, Calendula, Sarsaparilla.

-Astringent. Dry, draw and shrink swollen tissue. Contracts and tightens. High in tannins. Astringents are drying locally but moistening constitutionally. They stop bleeding, help heal wounds, reduce inflammation and swelling (great for sore throats), stops diarrhea, tighten spongy gums, useful after a long labor.

Rose family characteristics: regular flowers with 5 sepals, 5 petals, usually with numerous stamen. Oval serrate leaves. page 100 in Botany in A Day

Examples: Rose, Wild Geranium, Agrimony, Potentilla, Oak Leaf and Bark, Raspberry Leaf, Sage, Uva Ursi, Sumac Berry, Black Berry Root, Red Dock

-Carminative- Also known as digestive aromatics. Often high in volatile oils. Generally warming, with the exception of some mints, help kindle the digestive fire. They promote digestion, relieve gas and bloating, soothe stomach, relieve spasms by warming and bring blood to intestines. Use with signs of coldness, food stagnation, nausea.

Examples: Coriander, Fennel, Chamomile, Angelica, Bee Balm, Mints, Ginger, Cow Parsnip Seed, Cinnamon, Cumin, Dill Seed.

-Demulcent- Contains mucilage, a polysaccharides that when in contact with water swell up and create a slimy, slippery substance that soothes, coats and protects mucus membranes. Cooling and moistening. Demulcent=internal, Emollient=external. Have direct and indirect actions. Soluble in cold water. Use in conditions when there is too much dryness, cough, ulcers, inflammation, especially useful with digestive inflammation like gastric, colitis, diverticulitis, wound healing, burns, sore throat, expectorant, and UTI. Demulcent herbs; relax, soothe and protect
Examples: Marshmallow, Mallows, Yerba de la Negrita, Slippery Elm, Comfrey, Aloe, Flax, Chia, Plantain, Linden, Violet, Mullein Leaf (only to the lungs), Cinnamon

**Diaphoretic/ Antipyretic/ Febrifuge**- "Induces and increases perspiration, dilates capillaries, increases elimination through skin." James Green. These actions can occur by two different means.

- **Relaxing diaphoretic**- (antipyretic) works by dilating and relaxing pores so the body can release heat. Use when a person has a fever and feels hot but not sweating, restless, headache, uncomfortable. Cooling and relaxing.

Examples: Elder flower, Catnip, Lemon balm, Linden, Boneset

- **Stimulating diaphoretic**- works by increasing circulation to warm up body and push heat out. Use with a person who has a fever but feels cold, chilled, curled up. Warming, stimulating, pungent. Volatile oil create movement.

Examples: Ginger, Cinnamon, Cayenne, Osha, Monarda, Elecampane, Yarrow, Peppermint, Calendula

**Expectorant**- "Supports the respiratory system by assisting it to remove excess mucus" James Green

- **Moistening**- helps bring moister to lungs and thin mucus. Good for unproductive cough, when mucus is present but dried up, spasmodic cough no mucus present, symptoms of dryness. Cooling/neutral, moistening, relaxing, sweet taste.

Examples: Marshmallow, Slippery Elm, Licorice, Linden, Plantain, Mullein, False Solomon's Seal, Fenugreek

- **Stimulating**- stimulating and irritating causing the lungs to respond. Use with a productive cough with lots of mucus present. Do not suppress.

Examples of stimulating warming herbs: Ginger, Elecampane, Osha, Monarda, Garlic, Thyme, Horseradish, Cayenne.

Examples of cooling stimulating expectorants: grindelia, horehound, immortal, pleurisy root.

**Nerve**- affect the nervous system

- **Relaxing**- relax constricted tissues through the nervous system: Use with restlessness, stress, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, asthma, muscle spasm, insomnia. There are four categories of nervines: antidepressant, hypnotic or sedative, antispasmodic and nerve tonic


**Tonic** - Strengthen and tone tissue. Promote overall health. Low energy, deficiency. Tonics have specific systems that they are used with. For example there are liver tonics like dandelion and milk thistle. Nerve tonics like motherwort and milky oats. Kidney tonics like nettle and nettle seed. Heart tonics like hawthorn and linden. Etc, etc...

Further reading on these topics

Caldecott, Todd, *Food as Medicine*  
Mase, Guido, *The Wild Medicine Solution*  
Tierra, Lesley, *Healing with the Herbs of Life*

Tierra, Michael, *Planetary Herbolgy*  
Wood, Mathew, *The Practice of Traditional Western Herbalism*

Resources used to prepare these notes and corresponding presentation:

Avery Garran, Thomas, *Western Herbs According to Traditional Chinese Medicine*

Caldecott, Todd, *Food as Medicine*

Green, James, *The Herbal Medicine Makers Handbook*

Hoffmann, David, *Medical Herbalism*

Kress, Henrette, *Practical Herbs*

Morningstar, Amadea, *The Ayurvedic Cookbook*

Tierra, Lesley, *Healing with the Herbs of Life*

Tierra, Michael, *Planetary Herbology*

Websites and articles published online:

Mcdonald, Jim "Herbal Properties and Actions" [http://www.herbcraft.org/properties.html](http://www.herbcraft.org/properties.html)
