

The Grass and The Concrete; Anger and the body-mind - an Oriental view *

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by Andrew Scott

What is the problem with anger? Is it that *getting* mad is somehow equated with *going* mad; that feeling anger is somehow dangerous or wrong? We know that anger can be destructive and self-destructive, as too many battered and abused people will testify. We are perhaps less ready to acknowledge that anger can change things, sometimes in creative and positive ways. Jesus was angry when he overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple. And isn't anger at injustice what lies behind Oxfam, or Amnesty International and thousands of other *life affirming* groups? So how can we reconcile these contradictions between the creative and destructive expressions of anger and what does Oriental (1) philosophy and medicine have to say on the subject? Here I offer my understanding of the Oriental approach based on my experience as a shiatsu practitioner and teacher. I want to look first at the theory then at the symptoms of anger in the body-mind. Finally I will look briefly at the treatment and management of anger.

Oriental Theory: the Five Elements

For me, one of the most fascinating things about the study of shiatsu and Oriental medicine has been that it is grounded in our experience of the natural world. (This is in stark contrast to the specialised and alienating jargon of Western medicine.) A good example of this is the so-called Five Elements theory. In this system the universe is seen as a constant interplay of 5 transformations of *Ki* or life energy called Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood. Each Element is associated with a movement of energy, a season, a taste, smell, and colour etc. and with the organs and meridians of the body. Each Element is also associated with a characteristic emotion.

Just as in nature there is the cycle of the seasons that expresses the changing movements of energy, so in humans there is a complex relationship of checks and balances between the Five Elements and this is seen in the health of the body and mind.

For example, the Fire Element expresses the idea of summer, when energy is naturally in its most expansive and vibrant phase, and is associated with the colour red and with the idea of warmth. Fire is part of human experience too, not just in summer but throughout the year. It shows in our sociability, our communication, our capacity for joy; not surprisingly, it is associated with energy system of the Heart. What this means in practice is that a person with a Fire imbalance may have heart or circulatory problems or their disharmony may manifest at an emotional level. They may be lacking in Fire so that they are unable to feel or express warmth or they may be so consumed by Fire that they are talkative and excited to the point of hysteria. It may be surprising that in the Five Element system anger is associated not with Fire but with the Wood Element. Why should this be?

The Wood Element

Carola Beresford-Cooke (2) brilliantly describes the Wood Element as being the nature of the plant world. Grass growing through concrete or a tree growing out of a wall is expressing the same irrepressible urge to grow and develop as the luxuriance of tropical rain forest - or the weeds in my neglected garden. Think of the life force that produces an enormous oak from a tiny acorn or the sheer persistence of bindweed that appears each year despite my attempts to eradicate it! The Wood Element is particularly associated with spring; it is an energy that is creative and prodigious and will not be denied. The direction of this energy is upwards like the new growth of spring.

Wood energy is about harmony too. Walking through a woodland you sense harmony despite the competition between individual plants for light and space. Trees, saplings, forest floor plants, mosses, lichens and fungi all exist together with the animals in a *community* that works, in which each group needs the others to thrive as a whole.

It is not just in plants that you find Wood energy; humans have it too. You can see it in our plant-like flexibility and adaptability, and our ability to coexist with others. You can see it in our creativity and humour, our ability to organise and to get things done. Above all the Wood Element is seen in our primal urge to grow and develop.

(1) I prefer to talk of the Oriental approach rather than Chinese because although derived from traditional Chinese medicine the philosophy is also found in Japanese and Korean systems.

(2) Shiatsu Theory & Practice by Carola Beresford-Cooke, Churchill Livingstone

What does this have to do with anger? Well, the human urge for life and self expression is so strong it cannot bear obstruction. If events, or authority figures, do obstruct it the result is anger, frustration or impatience. This force can be seen in children who, when denied something they really want, vent their frustration in lusty howls of rage: I want it and I want it now! This feeling is familiar to adults, even if social convention denies us the pleasure and release of a tantrum. Instead we have the office sticker: "Stress - the conflict created when the mind overcomes the body's irresistible urge to choke the s**t out of somebody who desperately deserves it". Self control has a price!

In the Oriental view anger is part of a scale of emotions that also includes frustration, irritability and impatience. I think it is helpful to understand how this fits into the holistic approach of the Oriental system. The Wood Element is associated with the Liver and Gall Bladder organs. These are not just organs of digestion, they have a much wider function in Oriental medicine. The Liver is said to govern the smooth flow of Ki, to rule the tendons and muscles and to store the Blood. Ancient texts describe the Liver as the 'general' and the Gall Bladder as his 'adjutant' because of their role in organising and directing human energy. It is because of these functions that there is the connection to the tendons and eyes. It is the tendons which hold us together physically, and control our movements, our actions and our physical responses. Without the eyes, which integrate the outside world and our interior vision, there can be no planning to direct our actions.

How we express anger

It perhaps becomes clearer why anger is so physical. Anger "knots the Ki" and instead of energy flowing freely the result is physical tension: we tighten our muscles and get headaches, or we tighten our chests and shallow breathe. Even in English to be liverish means "displaying a sour disposition; peevish, cross". If we are lucky we are able to get things 'off our chests' fairly quickly, we express ourselves and matters are resolved. Or perhaps not.

There is nothing wrong with anger; it is natural, inevitable and often *appropriate*. The stress of modern life, with its deadlines and pressure, blocks our flow and challenges our growth, creativity, and humour. How is it possible not to be angry sometimes? A more important question is how do you express your anger? To return to the grass and concrete analogy we used before, how the anger manifests, and where, depends on the balance between the strength of the Wood energy and the force of repression (i.e. the thickness of the concrete).

If the energy is strong enough the anger will surge upward and manifest as a short outburst. This is usual situation for children whose feelings are close to the surface and where the 'social concrete', if you like, is thin. As we get older the concrete gets thicker; we learn to master and control internally our feelings and our temper. Or the repression can be external in the form of parents or an authority figure such as the teacher or the boss. The result can be termed an anger problem; as Teeguarden puts it:

"To have an anger problem is to feel anxiety about the presence of anger - one's own anger or someone else's - or to have difficulty expressing angry feelings. Often anger is confused with aggression, so that it is hard not only to express anger but to be self-expressive in general. The main alternatives are being non-expressive or explosive. It takes time and work to learn assertiveness skills and to overcome the anxiety that arises with letting more of oneself show...." (3)

Men are sometimes afraid of anger because of its power; often they fear the possible consequences of aggression and many have learned to hold anger, and indeed all emotions, in check. Women have been socialised into not expressing anger too ("nice girls don't do that").

In the Oriental view there is disharmony when an emotion is either constant or absent; both are unhealthy. Someone who is always angry clearly has a problem, and so do those around them especially if the anger is explosive or violent. In the clinic it is a pattern we recognise as Liver Yang Rising. The upward force may show as violent headaches, eye problems, a red face or high blood pressure, and there may be insomnia. It's not a healthy picture in the long term.

But equally someone who says they are never angry may have a problem too. Is it possible? If the frustration is not being expressed, is it repressed and held internally? It is as if the concrete is too thick, the grass cannot grow through and instead the shoots will grow horizontally first. In shiatsu we often see repressed anger exhibited as blockages at the internal horizontal planes of the body. Ancient writings describe symptoms such as "plum stone throat" which feels as if there is something that stops you expressing yourself, or the jaw is clenched and you grind your teeth. Alternatively, the energy that gets stuck in the Liver may 'invade' the Stomach causing digestive problems or affect the nearby diaphragm and cause shallow, constricted breathing. In the clinic these are just some of the many common patterns we call Liver Ki Stagnation.

(3)* Joy of Feeling by Iona Marsaa Teeguarden, Japan Publications

Managing anger

So what can we do? A shiatsu treatment is individual and will vary according to the symptoms. However the treatment could focus on the Liver meridian and include movement and stretching techniques to disperse tension held in tight knotted muscles, and diaphragm and joint releases. Almost certainly deep breathing would be important with the aim of relaxation; avoiding getting tense and stressed out in the first place is crucial.

There are several ways we can treat ourselves. Learning to relax is vital and whatever works for you is good (except that getting drunk or stoned is not a good idea - in the long term it doesn't work). What does work is exercise, especially dance, yoga and stretching which release stagnant Liver energy and encourage the smooth flow of Ki.

Diet can be important too; avoid too much fat, alcohol and caffeine all of which damage the liver. Try to eat more dark green leafy vegetables (yes cabbage is good for you!) and sour flavours (lemon juice, apple cider vinegar) which reinforce our Liver energy.

Finally, as Teeguarden suggests, perhaps we need to consider how we express ourselves. Assertiveness training is useful for both men and women so that we simply make our needs known. Perhaps anger arises because we are not allowed, or do not allow ourselves, to express our 'woody' natures. Not wood as in wooden and inexpressive but the opposite - the creative, adaptable, dynamic, gentle Wood energy of our plant nature. If this is your situation, perhaps you can change it? Maybe you had a creative hobby which has been allowed to lapse, or perhaps there is one you have yet to discover? Or maybe you need ? Have fun finding out!

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Brief Biography

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