

The Yin and Yang of Climate Crisis

These are notes taken from *The Yin and Yang of Climate Crisis: healing personal, cultural and ecological imbalance with Chinese Medicine* by Brendan Kelly (North Atlantic Books, 2015). I highly recommend this book. I hope these notes will inspire insights, encourage action and that you read this great book. Thank you to Liza Dousson for suggesting *The Yin and Yang of Climate Crisis* to me.

Symptoms

“Symptoms of all kinds – from headaches to flooded rivers – are trying to get our attention and let us know that something is out of balance. The more severe a symptom, the more urgently the messenger is trying to deliver a message ...

“We assume we are separate from nature, our organs are separate from our other organs, and our body is separate from our mind and emotions. This separation makes it easy to see a headache as just that – a pain in the head. However, if we recognize that there is an inherent interconnection, both within us and within the wider world, then we have the opportunity to understand and address the deeper causes of symptoms ...

“Just as the planet is rapidly warming and destabilising, we as individuals are dramatically and unsustainably over-stimulated ... Chinese medicine’s long history – which has only recently been introduced to the West – has produced many different translations of the meaning of *Qi*. A scholarly and literary translation is ‘the finest influence of matter’, while a more general understanding is, ‘*qi* governs the shape and activity of the body and its process forming and organizing itself’ ...

“Yin in nature corresponds with cold temperatures, the winter season, moisture such as rain and humidity, and night. Yang corresponds to warm, summer, dryness, and day. Yin is also associated with water, and yang with fire ... Yin and yang are fundamental influences within us – yin is stillness, rest and inactivity; yang is movement, doing and activity ...

Warming significantly

“There is a nearly universal scientific consensus that the planet is warming significantly and rapidly as a result of human actions. It is likely that this will continue to contribute to more violent storms, dramatic melting of glaciers, increased floods and drought, and general disruption of climate stability.

“The holistic thinking of Chinese medicine allows us to recognize the connection between the data collected from the tundra, the tropics, and more temperate locales... Trees have the ability to absorb heat, because compared to us humans, trees are recognized to be Yin in nature ... For Chinese medicine, trees and forests are not only Yin in their ability to help cool the planet, they are also Yin in their stationary nature ...

“About 720 million acres have been deforested in the past 20 years alone. Translating this massive number into something we can comprehend, 720 million acres equals just

under 1.1 million square miles of forest lost – approximately the size of California and Texas combined, or the size of France and Sweden together ...

“From the perspective of Chinese medicine, a frozen state is more Yin, while something which is thawed is more Yang... The melting of frozen soil in the bogs... can be understood as the movement from a colder, Yin state to a warmer, Yang state. In other words, this is another decrease of Yin and an increase of Yang ...

“When we believe that doing is better than not doing, we are orienting towards the Yang. When we say that more is better than less we are also orientating towards the Yang. When new is better than old, we are again orientating towards the Yang ... The consequences of our individual and cultural overvaluation of Yang and undervaluation of Yin has reached such an epidemic level that they are now affecting the entire planet ...

“This place of balance is not a fixed location, but rather is continuously moving, based on the many variables that create health. Personal health and environmental sustainability are not specific dots on a static, two-dimensional map of wellbeing ... The Yin creates the Yang, while the Yang is an expression of the Yin. The rest, relaxation and contemplation that are the Yin, allow us to promote and sustain health ...

Yang is sunshine, warmth...

“From a more literal, Western, biological view, human life began in water, and from a more metaphorical, Chinese medicine perspective, healthy action originates from Yin ... Even in our era of climate instability, Yang is not bad. After all, Yang is sunshine, warmth, summer, activity, and growth. These are fundamental aspects of nature and essential parts of our lives ... When there is balance in our own lives, we will have a sense of engagement even when resting, and relaxation when active ...

“Greenhouse gas emissions can be seen as both a literal and metaphorical example of hyperbusy people, a hyperbusy country, and a hyperbusy culture ... This consumerism decreases our sense of satisfaction and contentment, which in turn leads us to look for more stimulation and excitement ... Once these distractions are gone, we are back to where we began – an over-stimulated internal condition, with a lack of internal peace ... Always wanting more diminishes our own sense of Yin contentment and increases our Yang desires. Continuously wanting more... is not likely to create a balance within us. How do we hope to create a cooler planet, if we are over-stimulated internally?

“Working with many people who drink coffee reveals a clear pattern of its effect on our *Qi*. Coffee over-stimulates the whole body, and its heat is of a nature that can be difficult to clear ... Being tired in our over-stimulated, overly busy world shouldn't be surprising, as being entertained too much, buying too much, and travelling too much wears us out. Rather than running on the fuel of *Qi*, many of us are running on the fumes of heat ... Abundant *Qi* produces the sensation of strength and clarity, and simultaneously a feeling of peace and relaxation ...

“A common analogy for Yin's relationship to Yang is an oil lamp. The oil itself is the Yin, and the flame is the Yang. Without enough oil, the flame can't burn brightly. And when the Yin of the oil is gone, the Yang of the flame goes out ... One common metaphor in the Chinese medicine tradition is the Stomach as a cooking pot that needs to be maintained at a warm temperature to work effectively... With so many of us

drinking coffee, it can seem normal to be unable to sit still ... Harvesting and drinking our own dandelion tea helps cool us down and limits greenhouse gas emissions as well...

Patterns and tendencies

“In our era of climate change, it is of essential importance, for our individual and collective health that we understand that too much stimulation weakens the foundation of our wellbeing ... Rather than searching for some form of absolute truth – as is common in our Western culture and Western medicine – Chinese medicine’s inductive reasoning is looking at patterns and tendencies in our lives and in nature ...

“Taking the relationship between water and wood as an example, it’s clear that the melting of snow that usually accumulates here in Vermont in winter, helps create the growth of spring. We can also see this with houseplants or in our gardens. If you want a plant to grow, it’s essential that it gets enough water. Without the moistening, Yin effects of water, the Yang growth that is Wood, is unlikely to happen ...

“As always, the issue is one of balance, and it’s clear that we have become infatuated with the new ... Whenever we over-emphasise one aspect of our lives, or one aspect of a culture, there are inevitable consequences. Just as our cultural over-emphasis on the Yang of new and more has affected the ecological coolant of the planet, our over-emphasis on Wood is affecting the other phases ...

“To say that we have been using oil at a faster rate than it can be replenished is a huge understatement. What has taken millions of years to create, we have used up in less than two centuries ... We are infatuated with growth... Rather than a sign of progress and development, the quest for continuous growth – seen through the lens of Chinese medicine – is inevitably pathological and destructive ...

“Part of what Water does within us is root things down. When this downward movement is compromised, the naturally upward rising nature of Wood can become excessive ... the Five Phases tradition makes it clear that trying to keep something growing all the time is like hoping for it to be spring year round ... In our era of climate change, propping up the economy without examining our deep over-emphasis on Yang and Wood adds fuel to the climate fire ...

“We regularly hear reports about sometimes lethal anger in our schools and workplaces. In our new is better, bigger is better, continuous growth is possible culture, a large scale excess of anger is not only likely but may even be inevitable ... In our era of Wood excess, a more long-lasting and deep-reaching response is to wage peace. Part of the remedy for what ails us and what ails the planet comes from valuing quality over quantity. Part of the medicine we now need means connecting to something more transcendent than our individual lives ...

Heavenly Qi

“The Lung takes in what Chinese medicine calls the *Qi* from heaven...the Lungs take in this refined energy from the air with each breath we take. Heavenly *Qi* provides us with inspiration and a direct connection to the sacred. From this viewpoint, heaven is not some far off place that we might get to when we die – instead, we access heaven with every breath ...

“Old age is associated with the Metal as it is the stage of life when, hopefully, we can reflect back on how we’ve lived and the truths we’ve learned. Rather than being thought of as a time of loss of vitality and failing health – as is a common way to think about it in our country – old age is the time when we can contemplate what our lives mean ... The internal relaxation that comes from sitting quietly is part of the Metal. Just as walking through the woods in the fall can help us comprehend how Chinese medicine understands this season, quieting our minds and relaxing our breath can also allow us to experience this phase. The Metal is introspective and peaceful: it’s the sense of inspiration that comes with each conscious inhale and exhale of heavenly *Qi*...

“If you tried to sit still and quiet your mind and had a hard time, you’re not alone. Our mental over-activity is at epidemic levels in our over-stimulated, planet warming culture. Similar to how the planet is warming quickly, our minds are over-heated. A common result of too much mental and visual stimulation – from computers, cellphones, or TV’s, for example – our organs heat up internally...

“When we choose to create systems based on a belief in continuous growth, we have to limit the Metal’s control of the Wood. In the context of our economic system, we’re hoping that it will be a sunny, warm, spring day every single day. When we’re only interested in the Spring of Wood and the Yang of warmth and sunshine, we avoid the autumn of Metal and the Yin of cold and dark. Yet, despite our avoidance, just as day becomes night and light becomes dark, spring and summer will always eventually become fall ...

Losing the sacred

“Part of the inevitable result of our overemphasis on the growth of the Wood is the loss of the sacred ... Continuing to live in a way that destabilises the climate would seem senseless if we recognize that rather than being connected to the planet, we are the planet itself ... In order for it to grow forever, the land can’t be sacred, the air can’t be our connection to heaven and oil can’t be the accumulated wisdom of the planet. For the Wood to continue to expand unchecked in the form of continuous economic growth, trees become resources, people become interchangeable cogs in the industrial system, and food is just another commodity to be bought and sold ...

“To help balance our over- infatuation with getting new things, the first step is to truly value the things that we already have. This could be a shovel for gardening, a well-maintained bike to get around town, or the laptop I’m using to write this book. When we appreciate the things we have, we need fewer things ...

“As with Water, Wood, and Metal, Fire has a well-developed sense of associations. Located at the top of the cycle, Fire is associated with Yang – it is the season of summer, the climate of warmth, the sound of laughter, and the emotions of joy, love, and sadness ... If we have too much Fire, we are burning too bright and hot all of the time internally...having too much Fire is not actually a sign of health ... Too much fire eventually creates sadness as the heart becomes over-burdened ...

“Many of the methods we use to communicate give us short-term stimulation rather than long-term warmth. While things like email, text, and tweets are ways to stay in touch, they don’t replace face-to-face and person-to-person interaction. They also can’t replace actual time spent in nature – seeing a picture of a beautiful sunset is not the same as the

actual experience. Real and meaningful communication is not merely words and images – it's also an exchange of emotions and *Qi*...

“Despite what we see in advertisements for cell phones and laptops, an electronic life cannot replace an actual lived life. The form and duration of electronic communication is, by its nature, short-lived and superficial ... It now seems as though it's more important to communicate electronically with people who are not near us, rather than be with the people who are sitting right next to us. In this pattern, experiencing things electronically is more interesting than experiencing the world personally ...

“Despite the claims that our technological world is bringing us closer together, in many ways it's moving us apart. The act of getting to know someone very well is not a quick process – it's one that requires a physical presence with a person... Our Fire phase, and our Heart in particular, is fed and maintained through meaningful interaction with people and with the world. Too much superficial communication results in heat and stimulation rather than satisfaction and meaning ...

The fire phase

“In looking at climate change through the lens of the Fire phase, it is urgently clear that we need to slow down and do less so we can begin to hear who we are. That we've lost a clear connection to our hearts is both a cause and a symptom of climate change ... The Fire's relationship to the Water is a critically fundamental issue. Often referred to as the Heart/Kidney Axis, it's considered by some scholars and practitioners to be the essential focus of all of Chinese medicine ...

“We have so lost ourselves in the mire of consumerism, newness, growth, and conflict that our planet may be at a tipping point. The dramatic changes we are seeing globally mirror the depth of our own lack of understanding of ourselves ...

“One simple remedy that we could all do is simply unplug – shut down your computer and cellphone from the internet – do it for an hour, a day, a week, or a month. Do it for even longer if you can ... If we're serious about addressing the root causes of climate change, we need to be willing to change. Another reason we're resistant to unplugging is that it can be uncomfortable, at least in the short term. We live in a Yin deficient country, which is part of a Yin deficient culture, which uses Yin deficient methods to communicate ...

“Because the way we currently live compromises our Yin – which is our sense of peace and satisfaction – it can feel unpleasant to just be ... Western medicine is based on the assumptions of Western culture, which often sees the world as a place of separation and conflict. As a result, it perceives organ as separate from each other, with a physical aspect of our lives being distinct from the mental and emotional aspects...

With the emphasis on compartmentalization and specialisation that is common in Western medicine, the focus is on waiting to treat conditions like cancer until after they have already appeared ... Based on the understanding that we are unique individuals, with a unique balance of Yin/Yang phases, what can be helpful for one person, might not be for someone else, or could even create health problems in others ...

“It is a significant issue with both our health and that of the planet, that Western science and medicine wait for the problem to occur before waiting and attempting to address the condition. This deductive reasoning – which had us wait until there was undeniable evidence that smoking causes cancer and that burning oil warms the planet – is actually a part of a cultural condition. In particular, it speaks to a worldview based on separation, in which we ignore a large picture in favour of focusing on issues in isolation ... Rather than waiting for the imbalance to occur on a large scale, it’s much more insightful to treat the condition before it’s a problem ...

“While exercise is undoubtedly important from both an Eastern and Western point of view, more is not necessarily better ... In a Yang excessive culture, something as health-promoting as exercise can be taken too far and instead promote sickness ... Too much vigorous exercise can contribute to, and even create, Yin deficient heat ...

Over-stimulation and tiredness

“In our country, which is so overheated that it’s destabilising the planet, many things that are considered usual are often pathological ... The amount of emails, texts and tweets many of us send and receive each day speaks to how over-stimulated we’ve become. And the use of the devices themselves also contributes to the buzz of a lack of coolant and too much warmth ... With all the over-stimulation and lack of Yin in the world around us, it also makes sense that so many of us are tired as well ...

“This dynamic of over-stimulation and tiredness is quite a common one in our era of climate change. Just as the planet is reaching its limit of what it can sustain, our *Qi* is similarly reaching its limit ...

“It takes fortitude to really examine what’s happening – to us as individuals and to the planet. It can be difficult to face the data on climate change: the rates of melting ice-sheets and de-forestation, the rise of temperatures, and the increase in storms, can seem like a continuous stream of bad news ... One important way to help the planet is to help ourselves. Understanding the balance of our Yin and Yang and the condition of our Five Phases presents the opportunity to recognize that the heat and lack of coolant that climate science is describing globally is happening within us as well. It also allows us to see that our cultural over-emphasis on Yang and under-valuing of Yin is affecting us and our organs ...

“We have a large-scale cultural over-emphasis on expansion and we’ve structured our economy based on our belief in continuous growth. We’re comfortable with waging medical warfare in how we treat conditions like cancer, and we’re encouraged to see nature as a place of continuous competition. In addition to this excess of Wood, our country lacks wisdom and is experiencing a significant deficiency of Water. Culturally, this translates to a lack of foresight, exemplified by continuously burning oil even though there are clearly negative consequences ...

“We’re taught that doing is better than not doing, more is better than less, and new is better than old – all of which speaks to our over-emphasis of Yang and devaluing of Yin. We’re also told that expansion is better than contraction, and that for the economy to be healthy, it needs to grow forever. Put simply, too much Yang and Wood simply doesn’t work – at least not if we’re interested in personal health, a satisfying life, and environmental sustainability ...

“The effort spent on advertising is an example of this culture-wide attempt to maintain our excess. The time and money directed towards convincing us that what we have is not enough is one way we are encouraged to cling to our Yang belief in more and newness at the expense of the Yin and satisfaction and contentment ...

“The transition from the Yang to the Yin is coming. The only real issue is how gracefully we’ll make the transition.”

With great gratitude to Brendan Kelly for allowing me to publish these notes.

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