

## WINTER WATERLAND

by Gary Piscopo, ND, LAc

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the Five Elements are a system that helps bring order both to the many facets of life and to the medicine itself. For example, each element has a corresponding emotion, part of the body, and season.

Winter is the time when the Yin energies are at their zenith, embodying the qualities of dormancy, receptivity, and introspection. To harmonize with winter, one needs to mirror this seasonal relationship of Yin and Yang in their own life. That is, cool on the surface of the body and warm at the body's core, external stillness balanced by internal activity.

In Five Element theory, the season of winter is related to the Shen and Pang Guang (roughly, the Kidney\* and Bladder) organs, the emotion of fear, and the taste of salt. The Kidneys in Chinese medicine differs dramatically from their Western counterpart. The Kidneys are the root of all the Yin and Yang present in the body because they store the Jing or Essence. Essence differs from Qi in that it is both the basic substance of the life force and the energetic component responsible for development. It is the Jing that moderates growth, reproduction, and the speed of aging. Beyond storing the Jing, the Kidneys dominate water metabolism, control the bones, and generate the brain. It is said that the Kidneys "open to the ears". It is interesting to observe that the ability to listen is enhanced during the icy, silent months of winter.

The Water element is difficult for the American lifestyle because it challenges many of our cultural beliefs. For example, the element of Water is concerned with listening to our intuition and natural rhythms. Our culture, however, is strongly focused on the external and the rational. Nowhere is this more evident than in our diet. The value of food in the West is judged by its external characteristics: the proportion of macronutrients, the number of calories, whether it is processed or organic, etc. The result is a distorted relationship with our food. Our diet reflects the

dictates of the marketplace and the fast-food pace of our sleep-deprived lives. The Water element, in accordance with Chinese medicine as a whole, counsels that what is best for us to eat is determined by who we **are**. The same salad that can be beneficial for someone with Yin Deficiency can be inappropriate for another with Internal Cold.

For seasonal balance, the emphasis in Winter is on using foods with a higher caloric content, as well as foods that are cooked longer and at lower temperatures (as in a crock pot). For those who eat animal products, the heavier meats can be rotated back into the diet. Other options include warm hearty soups and stews, whole grains, root vegetables, and steamed winter greens. Salty and bitter foods are indicated because they promote the inward, centering quality which harmonizes well with the winter season. However, since the standard American diet already has an overabundance of salt, this emphasis might be better served by including more beneficial sources of salt (such as miso, soy sauces, and seaweeds). Bitter foods include romaine lettuce, rye, and dandelion greens. People who are deficient, cold, and dry in nature should limit their intake of bitter foods.

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One further consideration for the winter is to eat and act in ways that nourish the Jing. The winter was the traditional time when Chinese families would prepare and consume the ginseng root, which benefited the Kidney Yang. While a blanket recommendation to follow this ancient tradition cannot be made, given the level of adulteration and the amount of poor quality ginseng currently on the market, there are other options available.

First, begin to eliminate factors that deplete Jing and lead to premature aging. These include

overwork; a diet high in greasy, processed foods; high levels of stress; and recreational drugs such as alcohol and tobacco.

Second, to balance the highly Yang nature of modern life, observe a time each day devoted to Yin. The defining characteristic of this quiet time is increased intimacy, either with oneself or with others.

Finally, create a diet that allows aging with grace and vitality. While this will differ from person to person, some general suggestions include micro-algae (such as spirulina), organic seeds and nuts (and their oils), cold water fish, and high quality soy products.

During this international season of holidays and family gatherings, the fruits of winter, acknowledged and accepted into one's life, are truly the gifts that keep on giving.

*Chinese organ names are capitalized to indicate their difference from the Western physical organs.*





