

# Winter and the Water Element

Our Water element organs (the Bladder and Kidneys) can help us learn when to hold, when to release, and how to trust life.

## January often arrives with mixed messages.

After the busyness of the festive season, there can be a genuine longing for deep rest. Not just a few early nights, but a more profound slowing - time to be still, to feel the body again, to let the nervous system settle after weeks of movement, people, food, and noise. And yet, this leaning into rest can feel surprisingly difficult.

There is often a subtle pressure to get going again: to be productive, to earn money, to turn indulgence into intention, family time into plans, rest into action. Even when the calendar says January, the wider world seems to whisper that it is already time to move forward.

Over the last ten days, choosing to rest more deeply has felt both necessary and quietly radical. Slowing down in this way has not always been comfortable. It has asked for trust - trust that energy does not disappear when we pause but gathers. That beneath the stillness of the darkest time of year, something is pooling, restoring, and preparing to move again in its own time.

It is from this place that the wisdom of the Water element feels especially alive.

## Water in the body and in life

In Traditional Chinese Medicine and Zen Shiatsu, winter belongs to Water. It is the phase of the year when energy naturally turns inward, when growth happens below the surface, and when the most important work is invisible. Winter is not a mistake or a delay, it is essential.

The organs of the Water element are the Bladder and the Kidneys. Together, they govern how we manage pressure, how we store and release energy, and how safe we feel in our bodies and in the world. They are concerned not with momentum, but with sustainability. Not with output, but with continuity.

Water, in this tradition, is not simply a physical substance, it is a way of being. Water teaches us about flow and containment, about knowing when to hold and when to let go. In our bodies, this wisdom lives in the relationship between the Bladder and the Kidneys.

## The Bladder: Flow and vigilance

The Bladder is often understood only in practical terms, yet in Zen Shiatsu it has a much wider role. It manages the movement of fluids through the body, but it is also closely linked to the nervous system and the whole of the back body. The Bladder meridian runs from the inner corners of the eyes, down either side of the spine, through the backs of the legs, and into the feet. Because of this, it is deeply connected to posture, to how we carry ourselves, and to how we respond to stress.

When our Bladder energy is balanced, our bodies can meet challenges and then return to ease, with ease. There is a capacity to respond and then soften. When it is strained, the system tends to stay on alert. Tension accumulates along the spine, the neck, the lower back, or the backs of the legs. There can be a sense of bracing or holding oneself together: as though it is not yet safe to relax.

Emotionally, the Bladder holds a very ordinary, very human form of fear. Not panic, but vigilance. The kind that keeps us scanning, preparing, staying ready. In winter, when the world is quieter and darker, this background tension often becomes more noticeable and our sleep may be lighter and our sense of rest may feel shortchanged. The body wants to slow down, while the mind insists on staying watchful.

## The Kidneys: Essence and trust

Working alongside the Bladder are the Kidneys, the deepest Yin organs of the Water element. If the Bladder manages daily flow, the Kidneys hold our reserves. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Kidneys store Jing (our essence) which is essentially the deep vitality we inherit at birth and draw upon throughout life.

The Kidneys govern growth, development, fertility, and ageing. They nourish the bones, the marrow, the brain, and the nervous system. They also support the breath in descending and anchoring into the body. At an emotional level, they house Zhi (the will) which is not 'willpower' in the sense of forcing ourselves onward, but the quieter capacity to persist, to endure, and to meet life steadily over time.

When Kidney energy is well supported, there is a sense of being resourced. Life may still be demanding, but there is an underlying feeling that we can meet it. When Kidney energy is depleted, everything can feel heavier. Fatigue becomes more than tiredness and rest no longer restores. There may be fear about the future, a loss of confidence, or a sense of being fundamentally unsafe or unsupported.

## Fear as a teacher

The emotion associated with the Kidneys is fear, but again, this is not simply anxiety. It is deeper and can be more existential as it is linked to our awareness and embodiment of survival, ageing, identity, and the unknown. When Kidney energy is strong, fear transforms into wisdom and discernment. When it is depleted, fear can quietly erode vitality, leading us to push ourselves harder just to keep going.

Winter mirrors this dynamic perfectly and so nature withdraws and growth pauses. The body naturally asks for more sleep, warmer food, fewer demands, and more quiet. When we honour these rhythms, we can protect our Kidney energy and support the nervous system. When we override them, the cost is often paid later, through exhaustion, anxiety, and a sense of running on empty.

Supporting the Water element in winter is not about adding more practices it can be simpler as it is about reducing unnecessary drain. Warmth becomes medicine, particularly for the lower back, kidneys, and feet. Nourishment matters not only in what we eat, but in how gently and regularly we take it in. Warm, cooked foods build reserves rather than stimulating short bursts of energy. Rest taken before collapse becomes an act of wisdom rather than indulgence.

Emotionally, Water asks us to allow fear, sadness, and uncertainty to be present without immediately trying to fix them. These emotions are not signs of failure; they are signals that the system is asking for safety. Slow, grounding touch (such as Shiatsu) helps remind the body that it is allowed to settle, that it does not need to stay on guard.

## The wisdom of Water

The Bladder and Kidneys together remind us that not all strength is visible. That rest is not a reward but a foundation. That vigilance has its place, but it is not meant to be a permanent state. And that trust begins not in the mind, but in the body's experience of being held.

Winter does not ask us to withdraw from life. It asks us to listen more deeply, to move more slowly, and to care for what sustains us beneath the surface.

When Water is supported, resilience builds quietly. Energy pools. And in time, it begins to move again.

## Three gentle Water practices

Keep the back of the body warm and supported. A hot water bottle at the lower back or feet in the evening can be deeply settling for the nervous system and nourishing for Kidney energy.

Practise slow, conscious breathing with a longer exhale. Let the breath drop into the belly and imagine it resting there, rather than lifting up into effort.

Allow yourself one period each day with no input (no phone, no conversation, no task). Even ten minutes of true quiet helps Water energy replenish.

## Three reflective Water questions

1. Where in my life am I pushing, when something in me is asking to pause?
2. What helps my body feel safe enough to soften?
3. If I trusted that energy will return in its own time, what might I do differently right now?



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*Offered in the spirit of seasonal care.*