

Spring and the Wood Element

Our Wood element organs (the Liver and Gallbladder) help us learn when to stretch forward, when to pivot, and how to trust the direction of our growth.

Listening to the Liver and Gallbladder

There is a noticeable shift in light as the mornings stretch a little longer and birdsong begins earlier. And yet the arrival of Spring feels as though it is teasing us. The air can remain cold, the sky heavy and the ground is still reluctant to warm. We are offered glimpses of what is coming, but we are not fully there.

I notice a similar pattern in myself every year and I have a sudden desire to clean, to throw open all windows and clear cobwebs from corners that have been quietly gathering dust all winter. I find myself decluttering drawers, rearranging my office space, ridding what feels like “deadwood.” Old papers, unused notebooks, projects that no longer feel alive. There is something deeply satisfying about creating space energetically and practically. Yet alongside that urge is frustration with the lingering darkness and having to wait that bit longer. A sense of wanting the warmth to commit and arrive properly and stay! When the sun finally does appear, I feel it fully in my body with a kind of abandon and my shoulders soften, my pace and stride change. It is clear the light is returning, and it will come in abundance. However, I do not always enjoy the in-between but I know that it is from this place that the wisdom of the Wood element feels especially relevant.

Wood in the body and in life

In Traditional Chinese Medicine and Zen Shiatsu, Spring belongs to Wood. It is the phase of growth, direction, and emergence. Not the full bloom of summer, but the moment when life pushes upward through resistance. Wood energy is not passive: it stretches, reaches and finds pathways around obstacles and it grows where there is space and direction. In the body, it is said that the Wood governs the smooth movement of Ki and blood, nourishing our tendons and sinews, supporting our flexibility and coordinated movement. In life, the Wood relates to our vision and ability to plan and respond creatively when something shifts.

When Wood energy is balanced, we feel adaptable and are able to change direction without losing momentum: we feel motivated but not frantic. When it is strained, stagnation shows itself. This is something I am noticing clearly in my Shiatsu clinic this season. More shoulders are being held slightly high, as though bracing for something undefined. More hips feel a little reluctant to open and there might be more tightness along the sides of the ribs suggesting a hesitancy in rotation or turning. The shoulders and hips are major crossroads in the body. The shoulders bridge heart and action; the hips connect grounding and forward movement and these are places where direction changes: where we can pivot and where our bodies have choices. After winter’s conservation, these junctions can remain guarded, not because anything is wrong, but because growth requires trust.

The Liver: Flow and emotional movement

The Liver plays a central role in ensuring that energy moves smoothly throughout the body supporting our tendons, nourishing our eyes, coordinating rhythm and timing and allowing movement to feel coherent rather than scattered. In Zen Shiatsu, the Liver is deeply connected to how we experience flow - physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. When our Liver energy is supported, there is spaciousness and we can adapt when plans change as well as being able to see beyond immediate obstacles - a bit like having elasticity in our perspective. When it becomes constrained, frustration often rises. This frustration can be subtle: irritability at small delays, impatience with slowness and a tightening in the jaw. There might be a pressure across the shoulders suggesting a sense that something wants to move but cannot yet find its outlet.

In the language of the Wood element, anger is not a flaw, it is information.

Healthy anger clarifies boundaries as it can help us to say “no” by giving us the energy to protect what matters as though cutting through confusion. When anger is suppressed, it often turns inwards leading to a tightening of muscles, compression of breath often exhausting the system. When anger is misdirected, it scatters energy rather than focusing it. Spring can amplify this as whilst the world appears to be moving again and there is glorious light we can feel momentum all around us. Yet the body may not be fully ready. The gap between expectation and reality can create tension.

The Liver invites us to ask:

Where does movement genuinely want to happen?

And where am I pushing simply because the season suggests I should?

The Gallbladder: Design, courage and commitment

Working alongside the Liver, the Gallbladder is associated with decision and discernment. In the classical texts it is sometimes described as the official of judgement, not in a critical sense, but in its ability to weigh and choose. **If the Liver provides vision, the Gallbladder provides commitment.** When Gallbladder energy is strong, we can make decisions and stand by them and even complex choices feel grounded rather than chaotic. There is courage and steady willingness. When it is strained, indecision can take hold. We might circle the same thoughts repeatedly, doubting our instincts or even delaying action, not because we are lazy, but because something in us does not yet feel aligned.

Physically, the Gallbladder pathway travels along the sides of the body, through the hips, outer legs, ribcage, neck, and temples. These are precisely the areas that often feel tight during transitional seasons. There is something deeply symbolic about this as it is the sides of the body which help us to turn enabling rotation. When they are restricted, our ability to pivot is limited.

Emotionally, the Gallbladder asks:

Do I trust myself to choose?

Do I trust that direction will reveal itself as I move?

Supporting Wood energy in early spring

Unlike winter, which asks for conservation, spring invites activation, but perhaps consider this gently for now. Our tendons respond well to regular, moderate movement: walking, twisting, reaching, and opening the sides of the body encourage flow without forcing it. Fresh air and light help regulate our internal rhythms and even simple acts like opening windows or clearing physical space can mirror internal shifts. I notice that decluttering my office is not just about tidiness it is about making space! When I remove what feels lifeless, ideas begin to surface more easily and the act itself feels energising.

Wood also responds to freshness in nourishment as we can choose lighter meals, an abundance of green vegetables and naturally bitter flavours that stimulate and awaken. This is not about restriction, but about transitioning from winter's density into something more mobile. Emotionally, supporting Wood may mean noticing where frustration is pointing, so that we do not suppress nor let it dominate, but with a deeper sense of listening.

Sometimes the smallest clear action releases the greatest internal tension.

The wisdom of Wood

Spring growth is rarely smooth. There are false starts with cold mornings, brilliant bursts of sunshine followed by grey skies. Impatience and exhilaration in equal measure. Wood teaches resilience through flexibility, strength through adaptability and direction through listening, rather than force. When Wood energy is supported, movement becomes purposeful rather than reactive and we can begin to trust that clarity does not always arrive before action: **clarity arrives because of action**. Just as the sunlight will return in abundance (even when it feels delayed) growth unfolds in its own timing.

Three gentle Wood practices

1. Stretch the sides of the body daily reaching one arm overhead and breathing into the ribs.
2. Clear one small physical space this week and notice what shifts internally.
3. Take one small decision you have been postponing and move it forward gently.

Three reflective Wood questions

1. Where in my life am I resisting necessary movement?
2. Where am I pushing growth before it is ready?
3. What would trusting my direction feel like in my body?

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Offered in the spirit of seasonal care.