

Listening to the Elements

by Nick Pole



A woman hurries into your treatment room twenty minutes into her appointment time, apologising crossly and visibly troubled at being so late. She had too many things to sort out at work. She runs her own business and takes her employees' problems seriously. It happens...you smile and shrug, but it calms her not a bit. Her frown bores into you like a pointed gun, her frustration transferred to you now, for not really listening. What do you do? You remember your basic training, of course. Dropping your awareness into your belly, you imagine yourself immovably connected to the Earth beneath you. It makes an immediate difference. Her frown softens, she sits down and this is what she says: "I don't know about all that stuff about differences between men and women, but I do think that women are much better at feeling guilty when they're not able to give everyone the attention they need." What a wealth of diagnostic information in one sentence! Thanks to your conscious connection to one of the Five Elements, her Ki has started to move - the treatment has already begun!

In learning about the Five Elements in Chinese Medicine we get used to thinking about them in terms of symptoms and illness, and maybe also as caricatured personality types, neediness with Earth for example, or uncontrolled laughter with Fire. But each Element has resources to offer – very simple, very elemental and very powerful ones – which you can use as you listen to a client before and after a treatment, as well as using them to influence the client's Ki during the Shiatsu itself.

Listening with a particular Element quality means embodying that quality through intention, breathing and Ki. Each Element gives you a kind of filter through which to

see what is going on with your client's energy. With any particular client there may be two or three Element filters to look through, each one giving you a different perspective and bringing different information to the surface. There are a huge range of possibilities to play with, but just looking for one key quality from each Element can make a real difference to the way you experience your client's energy field and to your client's experience of being with you as a practitioner.

Metal

If the Metal Element, for example, relates to personal space and respecting boundaries, try visualising their space as a circle around them and notice how big or small it seems to be. If necessary, move back a little, or forward, until you feel you are at the distance that is most comfortable for them. At the same time notice how they are breathing and when they take a deeper breath in or out, do the same yourself, imagining more space inside your lungs. They will almost certainly not notice you doing this, but at an unconscious level they will feel that they are being given the space they need to be heard.

Earth

A second crucial quality of good listening is 'presence', or what is normally called 'just being there'. For me, this relates to the Earth Element. Imagine you are a mountain rooted in the earth. You are not going anywhere in a hurry. Let go of any thoughts about making something happen. In fact, when you are listening like this, it is not even necessary to pay too much attention to what is being said. If your head is busy making judgements or trying to think of what to say next, then you are not really present. Be daring enough to stop concentrating on the

/// What I love about working with the Elements in this way is the moment when the Element just takes over and for a moment or two you are Earth, or you are Metal and you can see the client's Ki instantly respond. ///

words occasionally – what you need to hear will reach you anyway. It takes a little getting used to, but being really present for someone in a strong and centred way allows them to be much more present for themselves.

Water

My third element of good listening is stillness and relates to Water. Still water reflects the slightest vibration. Try filling a cup to the brim and walking a few steps without spilling a drop. Notice how your attention becomes focused 100% on the water in the cup, and how it helps to feel still inside, even as you move. This same quality of stillness inside is what allows you to be truly sensitive to what your client is communicating. You notice the minute details of voice tone, emphasis, facial expressions and gestures that convey so much of someone's real meaning – it's what makes listening come alive between two people.

Wood

There are so many qualities associated with the Wood Element: strength, flexibility, focus, vision and growth, for example, but as the practitioner how do you embody a quality that can help a client connect to their own internal Wood resources? After talking to colleagues in the professional parallel-universe of executive and life-coaching, I realized that if Wood is about growth and purpose then it all comes down to how much I believe in the client's ability to achieve whatever it is they want from the Shiatsu. As a client myself, when the practitioner I am with really seems to believe in my ability to develop and grow, it makes it easier for me to acknowledge my 'stuckness' or frustration, and to unlock the creativity I need to move on. Belief relates to the idea that a small seed can

grow into a mature tree, given the right conditions and a bit of luck. When you listen to someone in this way, the questions you ask will be ones that help them to stop thinking about problems (which they don't want) and to start thinking positively about what it is they do want. So how do you believe in someone? Belief can't be manufactured, but one useful thing to do is to check for any subtle prejudices you might be harbouring (we all have them) which make it hard to believe in this person's potential. The second thing you can do is simply to be open to the idea that they can achieve whatever they want to achieve. To make this part of your relationship with them consistently over time can be very powerful. Research has repeatedly shown that a teacher's expectations of a child can dramatically affect that child's performance. The same goes for you and your belief in your client.

Fire

Finally, the Fire Element is about a glowing, meditative openness of heart and the quality that seems to come from this is 'acceptance'. If you are having trouble accepting something about your client then there will be a block in any progress you can make together. The trick here is to apply the quality of acceptance to yourself – to accept that not being able to accept something is perfectly acceptable! Ultimately, the Fire Element for me, more than any of the others, is about realising that there is no real separation between client and practitioner. This goes far beyond words – and so it should – the real qualities of the Elements are, after all, elemental and infinite.

What I love about working with the Elements in this way is the moment when

the Element just takes over and for a moment or two you are Earth, or you are Metal and you can see the client's Ki instantly respond.

In the world of business, listening is considered a "soft" skill, which seems ironic. You often read statistics on how many working days are lost each year from back pain or repetitive strain injury; I wonder how many millions of pounds worth of business are lost every day from not really listening. A little listening goes a long way, and if you get into the habit of giving people some space, being present, paying 100% attention, believing in them and staying as open as you can, both to your client and to yourself, then you will find it harder and harder to ignore this softest of skills.

Nick Pole, MRSS(T) is based at Medical Alternatives in north-west London and also provides Shiatsu and NLP for the staff of St Mary's Hospital, Paddington. He graduated from the Shiatsu College in 1989 and specialises in teaching advanced communication skills for Shiatsu and Acupuncture practitioners. The next BETWEEN YOU & ME course will be 19/20 November in London.