



# Medical Acupuncture

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# A Five-Element Analysis Of The Grail Myth

Marcia A. Liberatore, MD

## ABSTRACT

A Five-Element analysis of the Grail Myth is presented with a discussion of the role of the Dao myth, The Law of Husband and Wife, and the Dantien. These are all related to a map of the spiritual journey that is akin to the journey toward balance and wellness.

## KEY WORDS

Five Element, Grail Myth, Chinese Medicine

## INTRODUCTION

In early China, Five Elements emerged as a way of characterizing the basic elements of external and internal energetics. It became part of the Chinese Medicine cosmology. Five Elements has been adapted as a primary treatment strategy by some modern-day acupuncturists (e.g., Worsley<sup>1</sup> and Jarrett<sup>2</sup>). Water, Wood, Fire, Earth, and Metal are represented in the outer world and in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of human being. The Five Elements reflect nature's holographic properties. If it were not for a unity underlying all the energetics, we might indeed experience only chaos. Jarrett discusses this: "The *Dao De Jing* describes the *Dao* as a unity in which all things are implicit in each other. This unity is unknowable by the human mind, which can only comprehend individual things and perceives the interpenetration of all things as chaos."<sup>2</sup> Five Elements is a helpful way to characterize and describe aspects of this unity referred to here as the *Dao*. The permutations of Five Elements in this arena are endless; I necessarily highlight only some of the more salient examples of Five Elements patterning.

Myths are the enduring stories of human energetic patterns. Joseph Campbell, a master of mythology, taught that myths are the guides for the individual disengaging from the social order for an experience of the divine, which is the underlying unity. A crucial point made by Campbell is that the mystic has been taught the mythological symbols that guide this experience. The psychotic will drown in the waters that the mystic swims in because the mystic is readied for what he encounters. Campbell's favorite definition of mythology was "other people's religion." His favorite definition of religion was "misunderstood mythology." Properly understood, symbols are interpreted as references to spiritual potentials. Symbols are not references to historical events. "Every mythology is interpreted on the simplest level as referring to historical events. The source is not historical; it's the poetical imagination of the human spirit and deep mystical experiences."<sup>3</sup> Think of the Five Elements as such: symbolic, poetic, and even pointing to deep mystical experiences such as an individual's experience of the *Dao*.

Campbell masterfully purveyed mythologies for their ability to speak to and move the human psyche. He called attention to particular Grail myths because he believed they demonstrated Western man's spiritual quest. The Parsifal tale originated in the late 11th to mid-12th century in Europe, and multiple versions of this myth survived. Campbell's favored version of Parsifal was written by Wolfram von Eschenbach, considered the greatest of medieval German narrative poets. He favored Wolfram's version because it illustrated the notion that one can reach spiritual realization outside of Christendom, which was the predominant religious

paradigm of medieval Western civilization. He referred to Christendom as the social order that created an enchanted way of socially accepted living, which simulated life and denied expression of individuals following their true nature. Parsifal was the one with a noble heart and character who ultimately dared to live his life according to his own nature. Problems resulted whenever he suppressed his natural sympathies and compassion and instead, followed what he had been taught.

Parsifal (other common spellings are Perceval and Parzival) has been translated as "perce a valn" meaning "pierce-through-the heart." Robert A. Johnson, one of the first Jungian therapists, wrote about the Parsifal myth in his book *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology*. He explains Parsifal's name as meaning "innocent fool." The name has a deeper meaning – he who draws the opposites together – and foretells his healing role, something like the meaning of the Chinese word, tao (dao).<sup>4</sup> Parsifal, as foretold by his name, follows the Dao. "The dao is the complete totality that encompasses and harmonizes all opposites."<sup>2</sup> These opposites are Yin and Yang, Black and White, Water and Fire, Kidney and Heart, respectively. Eschenbach translated the meaning of the name Parsifal as "through the middle, between opposites of black and white." Campbell described Eschenbach's own coat of arms, which was a black and white flag. He stated that his intent was to depict that which goes through the middle, incorporating both, not going to one side or the other. (Consider the line separating white and black in the Yin/Yang symbol.)

Due to space constraints, this brief summary does little justice to telling the full story of Parsifal and Sir Galahad told by Joseph Campbell.

## THE "GRAIL" LEGEND

Parsifal's father, Gahmuret, was the son of a king. (Inherited aspects relate to the *Jing*, the life's energy, what one comes into this life with [Water].) He declined sharing his older brother's kingdom because he wanted to find his own life adventure (decisionmaking regarding use of *Jing* to do what is felt to be right in this life [Wood]). His adventures took him to Baghdad and then deep into Islam, to a fabled land where all the people are black, the Land of Zazamant. There he met, helped, and then fell in love with and married the Black Queen of Zazamant. She forbade him to go into battle but since he loved battle more, he left her. After being abandoned, the queen gave birth to their son and named him Faiefiz (who was both black and white). She kissed the white spots of Faiefiz repeatedly, for they reminded her of her husband.

The Faiefiz character allows Eschenbach to open the story of Parsifal with this statement, "Life, and man's life, is both black and white.

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It cannot be all one or all the other. Irresolution, living your life irresolutely, tends to increase the black. Living with resolution and determination moves toward the white, but no matter what you do, it is going to be black and white and the world is going to criticize you. But, be resolute."<sup>5</sup> Eschenbach sought to depict the lack of resolution as black. Black (or blue) is indicative of Water and Kidney energy, which is Yin. The Kidneys store the *Essence*, also known as *Jing*, which is our undifferentiated potential bestowed through genetic lineage. It is the depths within us that we can never fully know, never fully realize or redeem. The white is that which we have fully realized, raised to consciousness and redeemed. Resolution is our decisionmaking powers regarding the use of *Jing* to do what is felt to be right in this life. (Wood as it relates to Metal: what is right vs what is wrong is Wood; good vs not good and saint vs sinner is Metal.) Irresolution in Eschenbach's context leads to one's destiny not becoming actualized, thus keeping our potential hidden, unexpressed, and unredeemed. Eschenbach espoused a hero who was resolute and did not vacillate. (Resolution as it relates to expressing one's destiny and not avoiding it because of perceived dangers or fears. This is Wood as it relates to Water.)

When Gahmuret arrived back in Wales, he learned of his mother's death and he became melancholic. He then decided to compete in a tournament arranged by the virgin Queen Herzeloitte, with her and her kingdom as the prize. Gahmuret set up his pavilion among the other princes of Europe and his was the grandest of all. While the knights were warming up for the tournament, a battle ensued and Gahmuret was the victor. Then Herzeloitte arrived to tell him he won, and that she was now his. Gahmuret informed her that the battle he fought wasn't an official fight, and that he was already married. Herzeloitte argued successfully that his pagan marriage should be abandoned in favor of a Christian one.

In a short time, Gahmuret learned that his dear friend, the Caliph of Baghdad, needed his help in battle. He joined the fight and was killed in battle. Herzeloitte was a widow when she bore Gahmuret's second son, whom she named Parsifal. Parsifal and Faurefiz were brothers, unbeknownst to themselves. (The Parsifal story usually begins with the story of Herzeloitte. Eschenbach added the piece about Parsifal having a half-brother who was black and white.)

Herzeloitte, in great sorrow, dismissed her court and moved into the forest, where she raised her son ignorant of his noble heritage in the hope that he would not die in battle as his father had. She even changed his name to Boniface. She raised him as a child of nature, void of culture. (Nature is more closely aligned with the *Dao* than are the many differentiated forms of culture.) She informed him only of God and the devil, and spoke nothing to him about his heritage. When he was 16 years old, 3 knights appeared and he thought they were angels, so he knelt and prayed for God's help. The knights informed him about knighthood and his heart rose in excitement, stirring his own knightly blood. His mother was not happy about this lesson or his interest in Arthur's court. (King Arthur is like an emperor. The Chinese thought of the Heart as the emperor energy, represented as Fire.) Herzeloitte made plans to disgrace Parsifal so he would return to her. She dressed him in fool's clothing and found him an untrained horse. With a javelin and his mother's instructions, he rode to King Arthur's court. Whatever his mother told him, he followed unquestioningly. Following this admonishment led to his many errors.

Parsifal became the Red Knight by killing the defiant Red Knight of King Arthur's court and taking his suit of armor and horse. (Red is the Fire color.) The Red Knight's horse took him to Gurnemanz's castle, and Gurnemanz taught him knightly ways. He later met Condwiramurs and saved her from an arranged marriage. Unlike other marri-

ages of his day, he married for love outside of the Church (love, relating, pericardium [Fire]). He was seeking his mother when he encountered a lake with a boat carrying 2 men fishing. One of these men was the Fisher King. He looked so sad. Parsifal asked for a place for the night. The Fisher King directed him to his castle, which was the Grail castle. Those who had been readied for are the only ones who saw this castle. Parsifal had been readied because of his loyalty to his marriage, his courage, fearlessness, and resolution in combat.

Parsifal was received into the castle by a great procession and saw the wounded King, Amfortas (an old French word meaning infirmity). This King had not earned his post; he had inherited it. He was wounded when he encountered a heathen seeking the Grail. The heathen pierced him through the genitals. (Fisher King, inherited position, and genitals all refer to aspects of Water energetics.) With that spear, the King lost his spiritual and biological virility. The King killed the heathen. Here, biological Nature (the heathen in this story) and Spirit (the infirm made ruler in this story, representing the ecclesiastic element) collided, creating the Wasteland. The King returned to his castle and he was brought to behold the life-sustaining Grail, which was a stone.

Parsifal witnessed the Grail brought forth and placed before the sick King. Although Parsifal took note of the sorrow, he held back from asking questions due to Gurnemanz's instructions not to ask questions. Everyone in this ceremony was hoping Parsifal would ask the question that would relieve the spell and heal the King. Asking the question would have inferred that Parsifal had sympathy and compassion for the King's plight. Parsifal failed to ask the question. Therefore, at the end of the evening, the King announced it was time for bed. When Parsifal awoke in the morning, there was only silence and the castle was empty. He had to put on his armor without help. He mounted his horse and crossed the drawbridge, which was abruptly drawn. Parsifal heard a scornful cry from the battlement instructing him to ride on.

In that scene, Parsifal had encountered the spiritual challenge of asking the right question, which is also the Bodhisattva realization. The Grail was a grace-bestowing medium, which was in the hands of the infirm ecclesiastic element in Parsifal's day. He had the opportunity to win this medium and become the Grail King if he communicated his compassionate aspects. Parsifal had not asked the question despite his nature prompting him to because of social rules he was taught, applying them without true discernment. He allowed the social ideal (Confucianism) rather than his nature (Daoism to prompt him, and the result was persistent desolation.

Parsifal rode forth after renouncing the god of his mother and his culture. This was the start of the Grail quest and his Forest Adventures, which he experienced as the desert of his soul. Parsifal wandered for 5 years with a false pride (excess Wood and Fire) and an attitude of hatred and rejection. He had not been able to find the Grail castle but in the process, he was being primed and readied.

Parsifal was informed that no one could return to the Grail Castle. He was told that the question must arise spontaneously on the first opportunity; a second opportunity was never granted. Parsifal vowed to find a way to do the impossible task, no matter what others believed (decisionmaking that determines destiny [Wood]).

Parsifal rode a short distance before encountering a knight with glorious metallic armor. This knight was from the Orient; Parsifal had never come across such a display of power. The 2 went into battle, each calling out the name of their ladies. Parsifal was winning with the petition for Condwiramurs' protection until his sword broke on this foreign knight's head. At that point, the Oriental knight elected to speak with Parsifal, since there was no honor in fighting a man without a sword.

When they talked, they realized they were brothers. Here Eschenbach pointed out that the 2 men fighting were one, as the sons of Gahmuret. (Campbell points out that this scene depicts the 2 children of the Hebrew world, Islam and Christendom, fighting.)

Parsifal had encountered his half-brother Fairefiz. Fairefiz requested to hear Parsifal's name, but Parsifal declined to tell him until Fairefiz tossed his sword away because he did not wish to appear to give his name out of fear. Fairefiz admired Parsifal's fearlessness. Fairefiz tossed his sword away and announced his name. When Fairefiz removed his helmet, he revealed his mottled face. Fairefiz invited Parsifal to visit his armies and Parsifal invited Fairefiz to first visit King Arthur's court.

A Round Table party was prepared and Kundri, the sorceress who had scorned Parsifal when he first failed the Grail task, was now weeping and begging Parsifal for forgiveness for her prior words about him. She prophesied that he would become the Grail King. He had achieved this recognition not by direct quest but through his character and his one-minded resolution, and through his loyalty to Condwiramurs. Kundri entreated him to come to the Grail castle with a male companion. Parsifal chose Fairefiz. (Campbell pointed out that many Christians never get to the Grail castle but Fairefiz, a Muslim, did.) The 3 of them rode to the castle where they were received and brought to see the Grail King. Parsifal promptly asked the question healing the Grail King and making Parsifal the new Grail King without inheriting the wound. (Campbell points out that the unwounded Grail King does not easily tire, giving an optimistic image of the potential powers of man; think of the Dantien.)

Parsifal went to find Condwiramurs, but stopped first at the hermit's place where Parsifal had once confessed his hatred of God. The hermit recognized Parsifal's change of heart and declared that Parsifal had worked a miracle through using his own will to change laws that society had accepted as a divine decree. The hermit proclaimed that Parsifal showed that his hatred had invoked God's hatred and a change of heart had invoked God's love. He acknowledged that Parsifal's integrity invoked his destiny, one that was never thought possible before. (This is like the billions of years that plant life existed before the first flower appeared. The *Dao* unfolds new possibilities in the evolutionary plan when we are true to our innermost natures.)

## SUMMARY

Leon Hammer gives a succinct summary of Five Element energies as follows: "In short, concerning the evolution of the life force or the 'Dragon Rising': the power is Water, the direction is Wood, the bonding is Earth, the expression is Fire, and the expansion/transformation is Metal."<sup>6</sup> It is not within the scope of this work to discuss all the possible Five Element interpretations. For example, there is controversy regarding determining someone's Constitutional Factor, since a valid argument against such a determination is that it is a gross over-simplification. Yet such a determination forms the basis of many Five Element treatment strategies. "At its core, each of the Five Elements has a quality of destiny that encompasses the process of life transformation for individuals manifesting the corresponding constitutional type."<sup>2(p151)</sup> To oversimplify matters, perhaps Parsifal's constitutional factor was Small Intestine. He needed to sort things out concerning the validity of what he was taught and learn when to apply his teachings. He needed to release the poison of hating God (having an adversarial relationship with that which was greater than himself and his understanding).

The element Fire is associated with joy, red, scorched, expression, laughter, and summer. Although Fire is a Yang element, there is always Yin within Yang and Yang within Yin. Then, there is always a relationship among Yang or Yin elements, such that something may be Yang

in comparison to one thing and Yin in comparison with another. On the Yang side of Fire is the Heart and Small Intestine energies. On the Yin side of Fire is the Heart Protector (Pericardium) and Triple Heater (San Jiao) energies. Heart Yin is responsible for insight and conscious awareness of heaven's will. Heart Yang involves expression.<sup>6(pp174-175)</sup>

The key theme for Parsifal was appropriate communication. Fire controls the power of speech and the tongue. When he was told not to ask too many questions, he was initially unable to distinguish when this was appropriate. When it stifled the expression of compassion for the Fisher King, he was effectively cut off from his internal source of warmth. "Communication in a way that rectifies the heart is the fulfillment of destiny for small intestine constitutional types. Only through the realization of this virtue can they ever experience true connection with self and others."<sup>2(p217)</sup>

Indeed, the relationship of Parsifal to the Fisher King can be likened to the Heart-Kidney axis. When Parsifal allowed his Heart, the Supreme Controller, to express its innate compassion, overriding the mind's training not to ask too many questions, he then released the groaning suffering of the Fisher King and his kingdom. Jarrett describes compassion as "an act that relieves suffering."<sup>2(p202)</sup> He points out that only "when our mind is able to spontaneously acknowledge and act on the truth within our heart is healing complete."<sup>2(p207)</sup> Parsifal's Small Intestine imbalance stemmed from his hatred of God. Jarrett writes, "Bitterness, the flavor associated with Fire, is also the emotional correlate of the toxicity that results physiologically if the small intestine does not perform its function of sorting properly."<sup>2(p214)</sup> Only after Parsifal converted his Heart, releasing bitterness, was he able to attain the Grail. In expressing compassion, Parsifal performed "the inner alchemy that empowers each human being to become an effective agent of change in the world."<sup>2(p198)</sup>

In Five-Element acupuncture, the balance of energies between right and left pulses at the wrist must be assessed. If the pulse energy on the right is greater than on the left, that is considered an imbalance that needs urgent treatment, and it is called the Law of Husband and Wife imbalance. The left-sided energies reflect energies directed toward heaven (Husband), and the right-sided energies reflect energies directed toward Earth (Wife).<sup>1</sup> Consider the Five-Element concept of the Law of Husband and Wife according to Liu Yiming: "When the 'wife' follows the 'husband,' Water and Fire balance each other."<sup>1</sup> If we clear our minds of the modern ideas of chauvinism, perhaps a different understanding of these energetic patterns in relationships can be achieved. Especially once we recognize that all forms of energy are in each of us: Fire/Water, male/female, and their further permutations. Then consider that if the Heart is the ruler, and the will (Zhi, Kidney) follows the Heart, then balance is possible. Individual egotistically-centered Will is a weak voice in the jungle of evolution. There are multiple layers of meaning and interpretation possible for The Law of Husband and Wife.

When considering the Grail myths as symbolic maps of Western man's spiritual quest, we can see parallels to other journeys undertaken in life such as the intention to maintain or regain health, which are governed by principles of achieving and maintaining balance. One of the key balances is that of the energetics of Fire and Water. Jarrett said, "The foundation of human life has its source in the interpenetration of heaven and earth, and water and fire. For only in organic life can water and fire mingle without extinguishing one another. This is the inner alchemy that fuels the 'furnace of evolution' and, ultimately the ascension of the human spirit to heaven and immortality."<sup>2(p78)</sup>

For Eschenbach, the Grail was a stone that prevented death and could provide food and amplify baptismal waters. Those who know Chinese

Medicine can readily see the parallels of the Grail stone with the Dantien (also known as Mingmen Fires), which is the energy center located between the kidneys. The actual location is not material and is rather a representation of the transition from the Metal to the Water element according to the generative cycle. The Dantien or Mingmen “provides the mechanism for the infusion of all physiological dualities in a way that creates life and fuels evolution. All such dualities including water and fire...heaven and earth, Yin and Yang...reflect the loss of the Dao’s original nature as unity....”<sup>2(p78)</sup> Eschenbach called attention to this dynamic opposition when he recognized that life is both black and white.

How do Yang and Yin achieve balance? How do Fire and Water balance? In terms of dynamic opposites, Fire is Yang and Water is Yin. Hammer relates Yang as the “active impulse” and Yin as the “material acting out of the impulse.”<sup>6(p7)</sup> Heart energies relate to Fire, and Kidney energies relate to Water. When properly functioning, Water cools the Heart fire and the Heart fire helps the misting of the Water, so that it is available to the rest of the body. This dynamic allows genetic potential to become an accessible energy. In Five Elements, there is the recognition of a state of Heart-Kidney balance, which is considered a healthy condition. According to Jarrett, “The Heart/Kidney axis is the central axis of spiritual stability and power to which all other human facilities must align.”<sup>2(p.208)</sup> “The Fire element, in illuminating the depths of the Water element, reveals the nature of the inner truths that serve as the foundation for all insight and correct action in life. This is the inner alchemy that empowers each human being to become an effective agent of change in the world.”<sup>2(p198)</sup> Parsifal demonstrated this. He became an effective agent for change in the world once he chose to express compassion. He was the Red Knight of King Arthur’s court (Fire) who ultimately healed the wound of the Fisher King (Water).

Jarrett quotes Liu Yiming concerning our spiritual quest. Yiming advocates that we must “shed the dust of personal history.”<sup>2(p159)</sup> Parsifal did this in shedding his upbringing as a fool, though he was of noble blood. His story epitomized the Fire energetic of Small Intestine. He learned when and what to accept, and what to discard of his learned behaviors, and made it his goal to communicate compassion. In the process, Parsifal shed the dust of his personal history when he shed the god of his mother and his culture, and reconciled his relationship to that which is greater than anything known to the human intellect, which the Daoist would call the *Dao*. Christians would call

it God, and Carl Jung would call it the Self. When he reconciled his relationship to that which was greater than he was, he achieved the Grail. When one can ask to serve, to express compassion rather than ask for happiness, one has achieved the Grail. “The object of life is not happiness, but to serve God or the Grail. All of the Grail quests are to serve God. If one understands this and drops his idiotic notion that the meaning of life is personal happiness, then one will find that elusive quality immediately at hand.”<sup>4(p79)</sup> In other words, we put aside the little “I,” the small self, for expressing the big “I,” the Self, the Dao.

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