

ACUPUNK

Field Notes of a Contemporary Alchemist

by Kaz Wegmuller, L.Ac.

Into the Yang

As we head into the summer, it's hard to feel separate from the explosion of life around us. Green leaves soaking up sunshine, flowers blooming everywhere, spewing their genetic matter out into the atmosphere to ensure that there is a next generation of flowers (and that many of us get sneezy, wheezy, and itchy-eyed). We too get that surge of life, love, lust, call it what you will – it's the *yang* rising in us as in the rest of nature.

When I was a child growing up in Japan, we celebrated the coming *yang* by going outdoors on the last night of winter and throwing handfuls of hard little soybeans out towards the street while shouting, "Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!" meaning something like "Devils OUT! Blessings IN!" Some years the neighborhood men would dress up like ogres and we would pelt them with soybeans, giddy with the feeling that with our violence we were somehow assisting the transition to sun and light.

As we approach the peak of summer, the *yang* energy grows daily, bathing us in more and more sunlight and heat. While Asian folk traditions equate *yang* with blessings and *yin* with devils, Chinese medicine characteristically preaches balance over absolutism. *Yang* energy has a tendency to flow upward and outward (witness the flowers and their pollen), and although it is fine to enjoy the *yang* coursing through our bodies, it is wise not to overdo it. Upward and outward pushed to the extreme can, in the human body, translate into having a stroke or throwing up. Too much activity during the hot months can consume our *yin* and literally "burn us out." Since there is a natural preponderance of heat, it is healthy to balance it with cooling foods like cucumber, mung bean soup, and watercress. This is especially true for people who suffer from "hot" conditions like acne or rheumatoid arthritis. Children, who tend to be quite *yang* to begin with, may become susceptible to fevers and diarrhea. To prevent these and other summertime health problems, they should be fed a bland diet with an occasional cooling treat like fresh sugarcane

juice or a few slices of watermelon. Overall, for everybody, moderation is the key to good health.

That said, summer is the time of excess. I feel like it's been one long party since it got warm in early May: birthdays, graduations, barbecues, concerts, a wedding. And, of course, there are more parties to come: Summer Solstice, Fourth of July, all those summer birthdays. Are the fun times ever going to end?

Seasonally speaking, the fun times do end. Which, for most of the world, is all the more reason to party all summer long, and into the fall harvest. When winter comes, it is the time to rest, to conserve our strength and nibble on the nuts, grain, preserves, and dried fruit we have saved (which is why the heavily commercialized stress-drenched modern Christmas, going counter-current to the natural seasonal energy, leaves us drained). Then, as the days start to get longer again, we celebrate the coming spring and look forward once again to the rising *yang*.

Yin to yang, yang to yin, the seasons provide the background and energetic charge to everything else in our lives. No wonder that an appreciation of seasonal changes underlies every celebration of every cultural tradition in the world: the seasons come before religion, came before there were human beings. Our planet was formed of the same hot stuff as the sun. As it cooled, a crust formed. On that very thin layer between the coldness of space and the warmth of our planet's molten core, an even thinner layer of life – the biosphere – emerged. We, and all of life with us, evolved in the ever-shifting play between *yin* and *yang*, between the vastness of space and the womb of the earth, between the fire of sun and the water of ocean, between the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Of course we celebrate the seasons; they are the crucible from which we emerged.

But, of all the seasons, summer is special. During the last Ice Ages, we survived a hundred thousand years with no summer. Imagine our ancestors, emerging from their caves that first warm day after countless generations of cold,

warming their bones in the sunlight, watching the first green plants poke out of the melting snow. Having lost summer once, we do our best to capture it when it comes around: in pickled peppers and home-canned tomatoes, in memories of summer romances, days at the beach, favorite vacations and camping trips. On Double-Five Day (the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, which usually falls in June), my daughter Sara and I collect mugwort leaves in the mountains, capturing their *yang* essence to burn

in the winter as moxa to strengthen my patients' immunity and ward off colds.

We will always yearn for the pure *yang* at the beginning of time, a dim memory of the cosmos prior to life, prior to matter, burning inexorably through all of our cells. In the summertime we come as close as we'll get to the to the great *yang* mystery of life and light, and we celebrate it. Happy Summer! May the devils stay out and the blessings keep pouring in.

Kaz Wegmuller is a licensed acupuncturist/herbalist and research administrator in Santa Cruz, California. He can be reached at weg@ucsc.edu. A version of this article originally appeared in the Santa Cruz weekly, GOOD TIMES.