

Seasonal adaptation: how the human body changes through the seasons of the year.

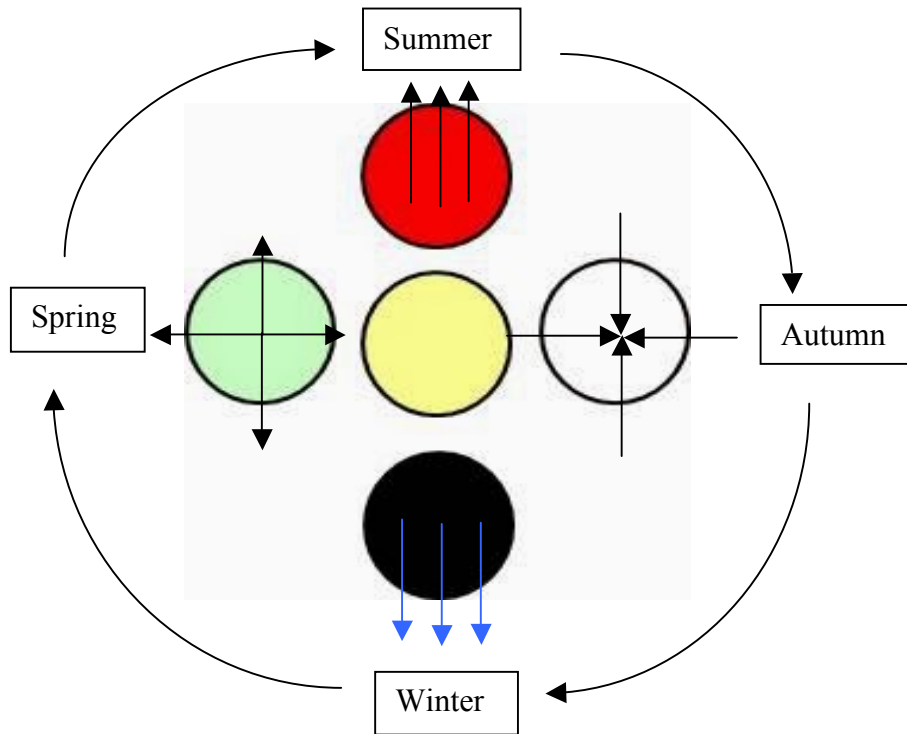
In temperate countries we are used to the four season climate. It would seem simple that as the year changes so does our body and that the effect of different temperatures and pressures of the climate would cause the body to adapt to these conditions. However it is rare that we ever notice these patterns, we can now change the heating systems of our homes to be an even temperature all year around. What we are attempting to do through using our heating systems to gain constant warmth is I feel, a harking back to our old ancestral past when we all lived in constant warmth of the rainforest, tens of thousands of years ago. However the colder climates that homo sapiens were confronted with in their migrations way from the warmer lands meant that at least some physiological adaptation had to happen. Although none of us could survive the extreme cold without clothes, some of us are more adapted to the cold than others. This may well be a connection to Neanderthal lineage among us, for those group of humans truly had much more of an ability to deal with the cold than homo sapiens. Homo sapiens had their mental-analytical brain, but physiological adaptation was much less effective than that of the Neanderthals to the cold, who likely had thicker skin and fat layer, different kind of blood that could run hot in the cold, more course hair on the body and a rugged, more powerful bone structure.

Yes it is true that our primate cousins are well-haired but there hair is very suited to act as an sun umbrella and raincoat more than an insulator, for what need would there be of this in their tropical natural habitat? This is much like our head hair; it is a myth that heat loss is mainly through the head. It is possible that the body structure of the Neanderthals were edging towards true adaptation to the cold, similar to there major prey of the wooly mammoth and wooly rhino, however there just wasn't time for full adaptation before they died out (with their food) as the ice age became more potent.

The point is that our want for constant warmth is a natural thing, however our adaptation and acceptance of the cold weather actually helps to strengthen our bodies. If our bodies can keep warm in cold temperature then they can do well anywhere. An example of this is taking a tropical fruit tree to northern Europe and attempting to grow it there....it will wither and die in days. Whereas if you take an apple tree from Germany and plant it in the Brazil it may well survive. The point is that there is more acquired strength from being able to survive the cold than there is from being in the warmth. There is no good or bad about this. Humans in general prefer living in the warmth with more nakedness! This is simply the nature of the body. However as some of us are located in the colder areas, we have become resilient as a result. This is all.

As the seasons change our whole body adapts to the changes. One of the key adaptations is the breath. As we go through the seasons our breath changes. It goes from the fiery upper body breathing of spring/ summer to the deep lower body breathing of autumn and winter. These things are not thought-out ideas they are just what happens instinctively. If we go through the seasons and follow the flow of them then our bodies adapt well.

Let's look at the seasons and the energetics associated with each one:-



In the above diagram the four seasons rotate around a central point, the earth itself. Each season has a particular energetic quality....let's consider how each season affects the physical body:

Spring season:

In the spring as you can see the energy is pushed outwards from the centre. This is an increase of the quality of yang energy or the archetypal masculine energy of light and outward-moving energy. This is to do with growth and pushing upward, in fact in all directions but especially up. The breathing in spring is a strengthening of the in-breath, we want to breathe in more. The in-breath is dominated by a pulling sensation from down in the lower abdomen, this region begins to contract and it pulls the abdomen inwards, as this happens the chest expands out. This is the strong breath, a filling of the chest and breathing in the spring air. By the way, the "spring" of the day is dawn, so this will also be true that the breath we take in the dawn will be from the chest. This kind of breathing pushes the energy up and out to the pores of the skin, we sweat a little. The smell of this season is associated with the pungency of green lushness and flowering plants starting to release their potent perfume. This season is in definitely spicy, the sense of smell is strong as is the sense of sight, and all the senses are about simulation. The pulse of the heart reflects this pattern and starts to push outwards from the depths of its winter sunken state. We call the pulse "wiry" because it is pushing through the winter coolness of our body surface and opening out into the spring warmth, the pulse hits the fingers like a wiry string when we feel it at the wrist or at the neck. The muscles swell with blood, the male and female sexual organs are simulated too and we naturally want to find sexual expression. Spring is

definitely the most arousing time of the year. There is also a fastness and assertiveness, a snappiness of the energy which is about beginning things and moving things that have been stuck for a long time. This energy can seem “aggressive” but it is natural for the energy to flow into powerful expression and it only becomes “aggressive” if the flow is impeded in any way. This energy must come outwards...so beware! The spring energy is the creative energy of the body. The spring is to do with the blood the muscles and the energy of the liver.

Summer season:

The summer is the climax of the energy as you can see the energy pushes all the way up and out of the body. Our breathing at this time is very much upper body based and what was started in spring now pushes right out to the surfaces. The sweat comes out of our body as we breathe like this, our heart beating hard with the heat of the sun, we cool down through sweating. Our pulse is faster than in spring and the heart energy pushes right up and out so we can feel the pulse easily on the superficial level of the skin. We call this pulse “Big” in Chinese medicine as it has the full out pushing of the energy of the heart and lungs working together. Again the lower abdomen contracts and sucks in air from above using the chest and rib cage fully. This allow heat to vent from the body and clear from the insides so it doesn't over heat. This is the heart opening time of the year and so the lung helps the heart's energy radiate out, the heart acting like the sun within the body. As far as activity of the body goes, the spring and moving into summer is the peak of activity for the human being and is when our expression moves from the assertiveness of spring to a joyous expression of life in the summer. Humans generally love this type of temperature the most. We are of course adapted to many different temperatures now but our origin is from this natural easy and relaxed expression of the heart. People who still live in the heat and have done so for millennia are often renowned for having “heart full” expressions and this is why. Also living in this type of temperature and expression makes life easier on the human body as the temperature is supporting our body heat, we do not have to battle the cool elements, but overheating and anxiety and the energy of the heart being overwhelmed is something else.

Often the difficulty with living in this temperature is that our bodies don't recover from the high of the heat as there is no cooling winter to balance it, hence it could be said that this speeds up the life process of the human being. Those who live in the cooler temperatures can often live a very long time. The smell of the summer is the burning smell and the heat of the summer is associated with the salty flavour which is like the taste of our sweat and is in itself the active simulator of the heart. This is why we are salty in the summer as the body wishes to push out all unnecessary salt as there is an abundance of heat already in the body, salt heats up the body. The summer is to do with the heart and the rising energy of the body. The summer is associated with the noon of midday.

Autumn season:

The energy of autumn sees the body drawing its energy just like the sap in the trees. The arrows on the diagram could be misperceived as “contraction”, actually the energy doesn't contract. Contraction is an activity that is associated with the energy of spring, it is active and energetic, in autumn the energy sinks and condenses and draws inwards, it doesn't contract. This is a time when we start to look in towards into the darkness. In any given day the evening would be considered the “autumn” of the day.

The leaves fall off the trees in autumn and we can smell the rotting and fermenting of the earth, we can also see that this time of year is associated with dying. This death is not really a linear point, this is just that the human condition fears the “self” dying. In natural fact death is just part of the cycle of life and it is merely another aspect of transformation no different from any other aspect of the seasonal cycle. Spring has to die for summer to occur, just as summer has to die for autumn. In each breath there is an out-breath which is death and an in-breath which is life, also the heart will stop for a moment after each beat. The last out-breath we ever take is followed by an in-breath that we never see but this is because this breath is not of the body but of the whole of nature.

The autumn is to do with the lungs themselves. Whereas spring is about the energy of the in-breath from the chest and so is summer, autumn is different. It is about the letting-go of the chest and the sinking of the energy into the lower body. The chest in autumn is no longer the focus of breath but it sinks down to the lower abdomen. The chest drops downward and there is great power in the out-breath. We start to breathe more from the diaphragm as it opens and the navel region becomes the focus of the breath, much like we see when an infant or animal is at rest, the belly expands in and out. Autumn is the same. The pulse of the heart also changes, as the energy starts to come down and inwards we call the pulse “floating”, this means that the energy is going back inside the body but is not quite there. It is deeper than the “Big” summer pulse but it is floating on the surface of the body just before it dives downwards in the winter time. As this happens we might let go of old emotions, there is a feeling of “loss”, not in the idea of anything “good” or “bad” but simply loss and calmness as we move into the winter hibernation state. There is a darkness to the clouds and the sky at this time, the visuals and smells of spring are now less potent, we can smell less overall, we can taste less and we can see less, the body energy is going inwards and we are about to move into the hibernation. This too might be considered very much like the dying process where gradually the physical form breaks down and forms the earth and the sky once again as the body is transformed into the next aspect of existence, entirely new each time. It is always a recycling. Sourness is associated with the autumn, that is the same quality of astringent condensing of energy which autumn is by nature.

Winter season:

The winter is the seeding. Just like when a seed energy is held under the ground in the snow so the winter energy is like this. As we can see from the diagram the energy is going downwards after having gone inwards in autumn. The sinking energy is what winter is all about, going to the base of existence. The breath at this time is deep and slow and the breath is low in the body as the heart energy is at its lowest and the circulation at its slowest. This is the kind of breathing monks often use to calm the mind. The pulse is slowest at this time and the quality of the pulse is called “sunken” or “stone” this means that like a stone in a pool the pulse has sunk right to the base. We can only feel the pulse if we press deeply into the body tissues because the energy is storing itself there, protecting the vital organs from the cold. The surfaces need to be wrapped up warm in order for them not to be affected by the cold. This time the mind and upper body area are very tranquil and calm and the lower body has all the power. The breathing is centered deeply from below the navel diaphragmatically and the breaths are deeper and slower in the wintertime. This is the midnight of a day cycle. The winter nights are dark and slow and the day’s heat is minimal. At this time

there is conservation of all output, in the autumn and winter we don't sweat, we hold onto the energy for the beginning of spring. The smell associated with the winter is the putrid smell of fish which is to do with the further breaking down of materials from the rotting smell of autumn. The taste associated with winter is bitter, which is the coolest taste there is. It sinks the energy downwards. The kidneys are associated with this season.

As we can see there is a cycle of the body as it goes through the seasons. There isn't one kind of breathing or one kind of pulse or one kind of anything. As the year progresses the earth's natural energy field affects us and in the temperate region this is how it happens. We can see that as we go further north (or extremely far south) we will find that there is more winter energy and as we go more towards the equator there is more summer energy. Being in-between means we get the seasons of spring and autumn as well as summer and winter which constitutes the temperate regions of the world.

Each body is different, some people are more constitutionally summer-people meaning they have strength in their heart and others are more winter having strength in their kidneys, so everyone will have a different nuance of how the seasons affect the body. However everyone within their specific constitutions will always be affected somehow in the ways spoken about above.

Going with the flow of the seasons and being human:

As I said at the beginning of this article we are hot blooded and need the warmth because that is our origin. Most of us can't survive in our natural naked state in most of the places we inhabit (try it if you don't believe me!). The problem then is how we deal with the strength of coolness on our body. Overheating is a problem for many of us but often this can be remedied by actually doing more activity that will result in sweating out what we don't need, but cold is another matter. We need to be warm in the winter months so using the energy of spring and summer within the autumn and winter helps us to get by. We can use slightly spicy food to help us get through the winter, brandy in the winter time is all about warming the blood to help us get through those months. Also the use of cinnamon, ginger and cloves and other similar spices will help in the same way, all these things are pungent in nature. Using more salt in our food helps again to warm the blood and to help in the winter. We need to keep moving during the winter and autumn to keep the circulation going, taking in some of those spring-summer breaths every so often to push out the energy to the surfaces. Doing some skin brushing to help the circulation get to the outsides of the body and doing circulatory exercises that do not encourage a lot of sweating yet do move the energy are important. Good winter exercise is that which makes you feel very warm all over the body and gets just to the point of sweating but doesn't go over.

To cool off in the summer and spring we need to move and sweat. Its important to understand that when there is too much heat it means there is too much energy so this has to be siphoned off. Too much energy is a better state overall than too little because if you just move more you can clear it. However there is a flip side to this especially for those of us who live in the heat in that the body can easily get overheat and the coolant systems of the body can run low, we need then to use the energy of autumn and winter in the spring and summer to cool down. We can use sour drinks to

hydrate and bitter flavoured foods like bitter-melon, chicory and dandelion and numerous herbs that all have a bitter or sour flavor to cool down the body and calm down the energy. We can breathe deeply into the lower abdomen to bring the energy down from the heat and help us reduce summer anxiety and overheating or even heat stroke. Drawing the energy down and into the feet we can strengthen our lower body to anchor the energy of the heat rising up to the heat and upper body. All of these are how we can help to control overheating.

As you can see there is an instinct to go towards that which cures an excessive amount of seasonal energy if we listen to our bodies. The draw towards sour drinks in the summer and spicy flavour in the winter is simply natural we just have to listen to the body's own rhythm. This is a much more complex rhythm than it is for non-temperate dwellers but we can still do it using the resources we have. Notice however that for the temperate person we need considerably more resources in terms of external heating and some herbs and spices, often from far-off lands although some can be found close to home, than would the tropical dweller. This is because we have not yet adapted fully to be at home in these climates...we would need a lot more hair for that. If the Yeti do in fact exist it would be great to one day ask them how they survive the winter...although, in great wisdom they have decided to make themselves scarce.

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