

By Sharon Weizenbaum

According to several Chinese-English dictionaries, the Chinese character 訣 *jué*, which appears in the title of the text the 輔行訣 *Fǔxíngjué*¹ means “rhymed or pithy mnemonic formula” or “tricks of the trade”. The character compound 輔行 *Fǔxíng* is translated as “assisting in action.” The *Fǔxíngjué* is then a text of “mnemonics to assist in action”. With what are these mnemonics meant to assist? The rest of the title: 臟腑用藥法要 *zàngfǔ yòngyào fǎyào* tells us that they are meant to help one with a method for using medicinals for the *zàngfǔ* organs. Just who are these pithy mnemonics meant to assist? In this quote attributed to the hermit Táo Hóngjǐng,² we can gain some understanding as to the identity of the projected audience:



Mnemonics for the mountain hermits

Five Phase herb associations of the FuXingjue

The hermit [Táo Hóngjǐng] states: All those generations of students of the Dào, they pursue eternal life. But first they must get rid of illness. Regardless of whether they suffer from long-standing ailments or seasonal trouble, they must rely on the single rule of supplementing and draining the five *zàng* organs. Taking numerous preparations of medicinal formulas, they must make their *zàng qì* balanced and harmonious, and only then may they advance to cultivate the Dào of internal visualisation. Otherwise the five *jīng* essences will not be joined, the Perfected One will be difficult to safeguard, and they will fail to enter the state of Perfection.

Even though taking medicinals and getting rid of illness may be associated with trifling affairs [compared to the lofty goals of seeking immortality], it is nevertheless the core to beginning one's studies. For all the various illnesses, after you have taken medicine to induce sweating, vomiting, or downward discharge, even though the evil *qì* has been balanced, the *jīng* essence *qì* has been carried off as well. This has caused the five *zàng* organs to be vacuous and exhausted, so that you must now take several preparations of supplementing decoctions in accordance with the pattern, to supplement them. Otherwise they will be laid waste over time or the situation will transform into a pattern of true detriment, with the eventual result of life being replaced with death! Vigilantly take the signs and symptoms of vacuity and repletion in the five *zàng* organs that are listed comprehensively below, so that you may be able to discriminate between them and make no mistakes.³

SO WE CAN see that the proposed audience is “all those generations of students of the Dào”, in other words, Daoist practitioners. This is a simple mnemonic designed to help these non-doctors take care of their own precious lives. Perhaps the entire

study of medicine, which would, most likely, have involved having access to and understanding such complex classics as the *Shanghan Zabing Lun*, would be out of reach for these Daoist practitioners. In addition, they may also be not inclined to interrupt their precious lives of practice towards the “state of

1. *Celestial Secrets: A Dūnhuáng Manuscript of Medicinal Decoctions for the Zang Fu Organs* by Sabine Wilms PhD, is a translation of this text, the title of which is 輔行訣臟腑用藥法要 *Fǔxíngjué Zàngfǔ Yòngyào Fǎyào*, abbreviated as “Celestial Secrets”.

2. Note that Wilms shows in *Celestial Secrets* that this quote was probably not from Táo Hóngjǐng himself but attributed to him as a common way to increase the impact of the words.

3. Ibid p. xciii.



perfection” with an in-depth study of medicine, yet, they needed something for self-care. In addition, learning about the body, healing, herbs and 五行 *wuxing*, the five phases and resonances between the body and the universe, was definitely high on their list.

Their interest in the interaction between *wuxing*, natural substances and internal organs was about understanding cosmic change in the service of awakening. Hence the compiler created this mnemonic. I point the reader to the introduction to *Celestial Secrets* for an in-depth exploration of these historical roots.

A mnemonic is a device to assist in memorisation, in this case for the *wuxing*. Putting the following material in this context is important as it shows us it was not created for doctors. It is a simplified version of medicine created to make treatment accessible to the Daoist practitioners, many of whom were isolated in the mountains. It is also interesting to note that most of the herbs we are discussing in this article are fairly easy to grow and abundant, making it possible for these Daoists to explore the nature of the universe through substances and be relatively self-sufficient in their self-care.



Hence, this text is a kind of basic toolbox for herbal medicine—like the toolbox in my garage that includes a hammer, nails, screwdrivers, wrenches and a saw, with which I can take care of most household repairs without having to call a carpenter or handy-person. However, to add an entire addition to my house or replace the roof, I’d need to be more of an expert or hire one with an entire workshop of tools I would not begin to know how to use. In this way, this text is sort of a *Herbal Medicine for Dummies* book that we could call *Herbal Medicine for Daoist Hermits*. These *for Dummies* books are not actually designed for dummies but rather for smart people who are inexpert. They are designed to make complex study, usually the realm of experts, accessible to ordinary people.

Of course, as one of the greatest medical thinkers and innovators in China’s medical history, Tao Hongjing, and those in his circle, cannot be thought of as ordinary people. This text truly is hugely innovative in the way that it looks at herbs and formulas through

the resonance of the five “dynamics” and associated organs, despite the simplicity and accessibility to its ingredients and formulas. In this time of division and civil war, religious institutions and monasteries were actually—just like in medieval Europe—the repositories of knowledge, education and, yes, medical innovation.

At the same time, the structure of the *wuxing* is still used as a handy way to categorise herbs and formulas for everyday use. To me, this points to the great usefulness of the *Fuxingjue* as a sort of basic structure for understanding the flavours of herbs in relationship to the *zangfu* organs and the *wuxing*.

In this article I look at the categorisation of the individual herbs in the *Fuxingjue*. Then, in part three, we will look at the formula structures and how they relate to the *wuxing*.

The Secret Tips for Helpful Action: The Key to Using Medicinals on the Zangfu Organs, (輔行訣臟腑用藥法要, *Fǔxíngjué zàngfǔyòngyàofǎyào*) is divided into six sections. Its order seems illogical to me. First should be the section on the flavours, as it lays out some basic principles of herb nature and correspondences that are then applied, albeit inconsistently, in the *zang* organ formula sections. Instead, this section is nestled between the first three *zang* formula sections and the spirit and dawning formula chapters with an additional *zang* formula section stuck on the end. This haphazard organisation is probably due to the text having been composed from different textual layers dating from different times and authors. To give it more continuity, I have ordered the sections of my series in this way:

1. On the six spirit and two dawning formulas (section 5);
2. On the five flavours and 25 medicinals (section 4); and
3. On the formulas for the *zang* organs (sections 1-3 and 6).

Previously, I indicated that the six spirit and two dawning formulas, as well as the ideas behind the formulas, had great clinical value for me. I placed these formulas first because they most interest me and resonate with my understanding of the *Shanghanlun*. In this second part, I discuss the section on the five flavours and 25 medicinals.

■ Sharon Weizenbaum has practised for 35 years in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. As well as being the director of White Pine Institute, she has a small homestead, Ancient Ponies Farm, where she raises goats, chickens, ducks, sheep and, of course, Dales ponies (which are really horses). She teaches a two-year Graduate Mentorship Program, helping practitioners develop clear diagnostic skills and facility with classic and modern herbal formulas. www.whitepinehealingarts.org.

“

The text is referring to a concept and action that is represented by the metaphor of “sourness” that goes beyond a mere taste.

Five flavours and 25 medicinals

This section begins with first correlating a flavour to each phase:

味辛皆屬木
All pungent belongs to Wood.
味鹹皆屬火
All salty belongs to Fire.
味甘皆屬土
All sweet belongs to Earth.
味酸皆屬金
All sour belongs to Metal.
味苦皆屬水
All bitter belongs to Water.

The correlation between flavour and phase is consistent with the *Nèijīng Sùwèn*, chapter 22 as the flavours that relieve an organ by giving it what it longs for and what supplements it. This chapter says:

肝欲散，急食辛以散之。用辛補之，酸瀉之。

The Liver longs for dispersal. Quickly eat pungent to disperse it. Apply pungent to supplement and sour to drain it.

心欲爽，急食鹹以爽之。用鹹補之，甘瀉之。

The Heart longs for softness. Quickly eat salty to soften it. Apply salty to supplement and sweet to drain it.

脾欲緩，急食甘以緩之。用苦瀉之，甘補之。

The Spleen longs for relaxation. Quickly eat sweet to relax it. Apply bitter to drain it and sweet to supplement it.

肺欲收，急食酸以收之。用酸補之，辛瀉之。

The Lungs long for contraction. Quickly eat sour to contract it. Sour supplements it and pungent drains it.

腎欲堅，急食苦以堅之。用苦補之，鹹瀉之。

The Kidneys long for hardness. Quickly eat bitter to harden it. Bitter supplements, and salty drains it.

In this layer of the text, the *Fuxingjue* is not explicit that these are the flavours that supplement the phase, only that they are correlated with the phase.

It continues with the herbs for each phase within a phase. I want to emphasise that, although the *Huangdi Neijing* discusses correlations between flavours and phases, it does not give herb correlations. For me, it is important to understand that the concept of flavour in the *Huangdi Neijing* goes beyond what something tastes like. For example, in chapter 5 of the *Huangdi Neijing*, the text tells us that “The eastern direction engenders wind, wind engenders Wood, Wood engenders sourness; sourness engenders the Liver.” Clearly the text is referring to a concept and action that is represented by the metaphor of “sourness” that goes beyond a mere taste. This direct correlation of flavour and phase to actual herbs is a much later addition from more than half a millennium later. Therefore, the *Fuxingjue* takes that which is classically more metaphorical—flavours, and turns this into something concrete—actual herbs. By concretising the principles of the *Huangdi Neijing*, we run a risk of missing some of the deeper meaning of the classical text. This important and rich discussion is beyond the scope of this article. I only ask the reader to keep in mind that these ideas below are a medieval development of and interpretation of classical principles and that the classical principles are far more expansive in their meaning. This organisation below should be seen as a device for aiding memory and not as profoundly “true”. In other words, it is not true that *Gui Zhi* (Cinnamomi Ramulus) is “the Wood herb of the Wood phase”. It is only true that we can place it here to help us remember some of its actions.

■ All pungent belongs to Wood. *Gui Zhi* constitutes their ruler, *Hua Jiao* (蜀椒 Zanthoxyli Pericarpium) constitutes Fire, *Gan/Sheng Jiang* (Zingiberis Rhizoma/recens) constitutes Earth, *Xi Xin* (Asari Herba) constitutes Metal, and [*Fu Zi*] constitutes Water.

■ All salty belongs to Fire. *Xuan Fu Hua* (Inulae Flos) constitutes their ruler, *Da Huang* (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma) constitutes Wood, *Ze Xie* (Alismatis Rhizoma) constitutes Earth, *Hou Po* (Magnoliae officinalis Cortex) constitutes Metal, and *Mang Xiao* (Natrii Sulfas) constitutes Water.

■ All sweet belongs to Earth. *Ren Shen*

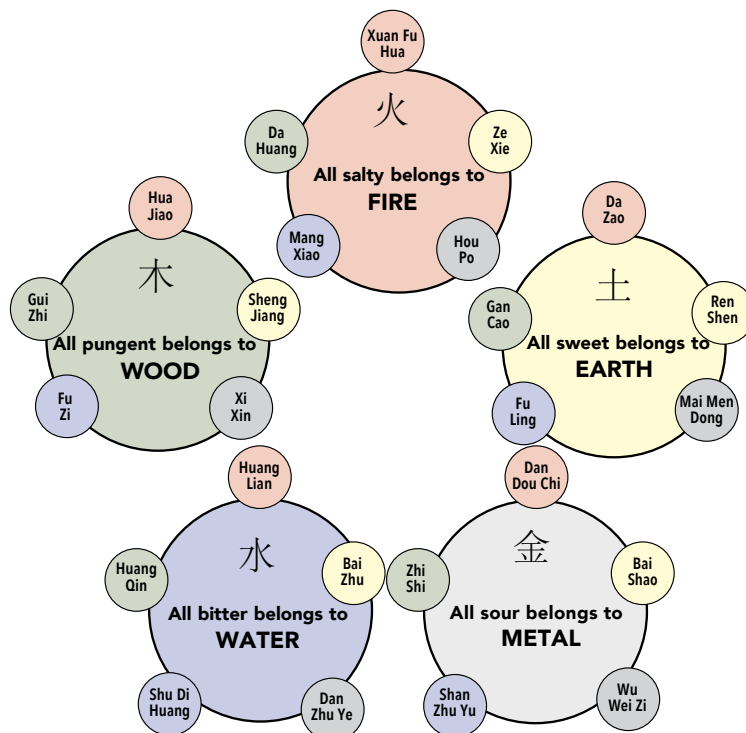
(Ginseng Radix) constitutes their ruler, *Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix) constitutes Wood, *Da Zao* (Jujubae Fructus) constitutes Fire, *Mai Men Dong* (Ophiopogonis Radix) constitutes Metal, and *Fu Ling* (Poria) constitutes Water.

■ All sour belongs to Metal. *Wu Wei Zi* (Schisandrae Fructus) constitutes their ruler, *Zhi Shi* (Aurantii Fructus immaturus) constitutes Wood, *Dan Dou Chi* (Sojae Semen preparatum) constitutes Fire, *Shao Yao* (Paeoniae Radix alba) constitutes Earth, and *Shan Zhu Yu* (Corni Fructus) constitutes Water.

■ All bitter belongs to Water. *Di Huang* (Rehmanniae Radix preparata) constitutes their ruler, *Huang Qin* (Scutellariae Radix) constitutes Wood, *Huang Lian* (Coptidis Rhizoma) constitutes Fire, *Bai Zhu* (Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma) constitutes Earth, and *Zhu Ye* (Lophateri Herba) constitutes Water.

This correlation of herb for each phase within each phase starts with the ruling phase and moves, according to the *sheng* generating cycle, through the phases. For the sake of clarity, I will call the umbrella phase the “phase” and the phase within this the “herb”. Hence, *Gui Zhi* is the Wood herb of the Wood phase, *Xuan Fu Hua* is the Fire herb of the Fire phase, etc. An acupuncturist will recognise the acupuncture logic inherent in the phase correspondences where not only does the channel have a phase correspondence, so do the points on each channel. For example, the foot *jueyin* Liver channel corresponds to Wood and on this channel, as with all of them, there are points corresponding to Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. LIV-1 is the Wood point on the Wood channel, just as *Gui Zhi* is the Wood “herb” of the Wood “phase”.

Since, according to the *Fuxingjue*, all pungent flavours “belong to Wood”, all of the herbs within this phase are pungent. *Gui Zhi* as the Wood herb of the Wood phase is the ruling herb of the whole phase. *Hua Jiao* (花椒 *Zanthoxyli Pericarpium*) is the Fire herb of the Fire phase, *Jiang* (ginger) is the Earth herb of the Wood phase, *Xi Xin* is the Metal herb of the Wood phase, and the Water herb of the Wood phase is not in the text though many commentators logically assume that



this herb is meant to be *Fu Zi* (Aconiti Radix Lateralis praeparata). From this we can create the mnemonic chart (above).

This is a cool idea, giving acupuncture hole-like assignments for herbs. The exercise is useful but also problematic for the clinical herbalist. What does it mean that a herb is a phase herb within a phase?

To understand this, let us start again with Wood. The visible part of healthy wood grows in an upwards and outwards direction, towards the sun, or towards Fire, the next element in the generation cycle. The pungent flavour represents and stimulates this up and out movement. *Gui Zhi* is made of wood, and is reddish brown, a mix of green and red, making it a herb that connects Wood with Fire. *Gui Zhi* enters the blood, helping it flow upwards and outwards, and blood is stored in the Liver, the *zang* of Wood. We can say that *Gui Zhi* brings the up and out quality to Wood so that it can move towards Fire in the generation cycle.

Although the herbs in the Wood phase are pungent, and those in the Earth phase are sweet, correlating nicely with the set rules, the other phases have inconsistencies:

“

Inconsistencies make sense when we consider that this chart is merely to be used as a memory device.

In the Fire phase, *Da Huang* (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma), *Ze Xie* (Alismatis Rhizoma) and *Hou Po* (Magnoliae officinalis Cortex) are not salty. In the Metal phase, *Dan Dou Chi* (Sojae Semen preparatum) is not sour. Neither *Zhi Shi* (Aurantii Fructus immaturus) nor *Bai Shao* (Paeoniae Radix alba) were considered sour until the *Ming Yi Bié Lù* (Miscellaneous Records of Famous Physicians) in 500 AD, further dating the *Fuxingjue* as a medieval text. In the Water phase, *Di Huang* (Rehman-niae Radix preparata) is not bitter.

These inconsistencies make sense when we consider that this chart is merely to be used as a memory device, and that a few exceptions are easy to memorise, especially if they make clinical sense, so the compilers were free to improvise. The exceptions can, with some creative thinking, make sense clinically:

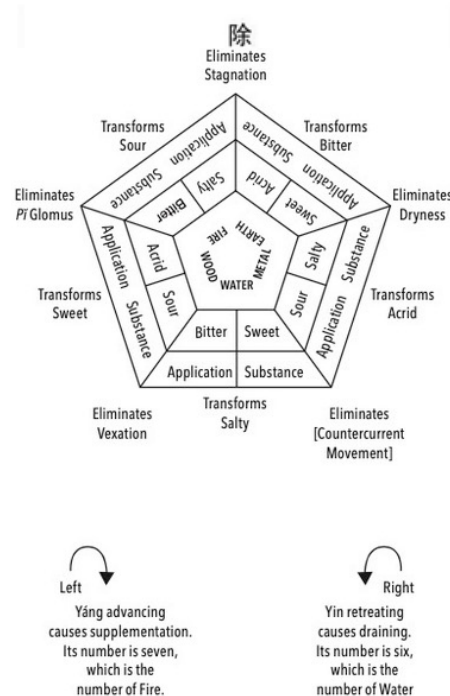
Da Huang, though not salty, is the Wood herb of the Fire phase: the yellow bitterness of *Da Huang* can cast it as a herb that cleaves through the earth, like the roots of a tree, allowing fire to descend away from the Heart. *Hou Po*, also not salty, is the Metal herb of the Fire phase: The pungent bitterness of *Hou Po* directs the Heart qi downwards, relieving pressure in the Lungs. *Ze Xie*, not salty, is the Earth herb of the Fire phase: *Ze Xie*'s bland coolness seeps damp, associated with Earth, and heat away from the Heart.

We could go through this exercise with each of the exceptions and find ways to make them work. The point is to have some little imagined drawers, organised by colour, into which to place the herbs for easy access.

Another difficulty is the fact that the herbs often have more than one prominent flavour as well as other important characteristics. In other words, the reason why one chooses a herb is not just related to one key flavour. Herbs and formulas are too rich with complexity to be simplified down to a single flavour. Herbs have temperatures, densities, and weights. They are flowers, seeds, roots, bugs and stones, and all of these natures are important for understanding their function and use. Imagine being a cook and only using a prominent flavour as your guide to creating dishes. Instead of adding a pinch of salt to your apple crisp, you may decide to add sardines! To be a cook or herbalist, one needs to know one's ingredients in all their complexity, as friends. We must be

careful when forcing things into categories for the sake of creating the chart. Of course, whenever a herb or formula, or anything, is categorised, we run the risk of myopically reducing our perception of it. Even the organisation of our materia medica can be problematic in this way. For example, many list *Sang Ye* (Mori Folium) as a wind-heat herb, whereas my obstetrics and gynecology teacher Qiú Xiàoméi, uses it as a primary herb for enriching yin, stopping bleeding and calming the fetus. This just points to the need for us to use the memory device of this chart lightly. We should let it help us, while not letting it hinder our broader-minded flexibility.

The next device used in this section of the *Fuxingjue* is the following chart:



Note that this chart is in only some of the 21 versions of the *Fuxingjue*. As Dr Wilms speculates in her translation: “I have my doubts on whether this chart was actually even part of the original Dūnhuáng manuscript, or at least its earlier layers, based on the fact that these kinds of visual representations of cosmological, medical, religious or philosophical relations became popular only from the Sòng period but are not

found in earlier manuscripts. I consulted on this chart with the medical historian Vivienne Lo, who specialises in medical illustrations in early and medieval manuscripts, and she confirms my suspicions.”

However, let us assume for now, that this chart is part of the text and see what we can make of it. The elements in the chart are arranged according to the cardinal directions and the generation cycle. At the bottom, the north, there is 水 Water and then moving clockwise to the east there is 木 Wood, followed by 火 Fire, 土 Earth and finally 金 Metal. On either side of each element are the characters 用 *yòng*, on the left of the element, to apply or use, and 体 *tǐ*, on the right of the element, meaning substance or body and which placement seems related to the flavours pictured interior to them. For example, the 用 use for Water is related to 苦 bitter, and the 体 substance for Water is related to 甘 sweet. Exterior to each element is the flavour related to 化 *huà*, transformation. On each point of the pentagon are two characters starting with the character 除 *chú*, dispel. Starting at the top and going clockwise we have actions, to dispel stagnation, dispel dryness, dispel (blank in most charts but in some it is “reversal”), dispel vexation and dispel glomus. It is not clear what flavour is dispelling which pathology here, given that the 除 is placed at the points of the pentagon. Because the movement of the cycle is clockwise, my sense is that the 用 flavour is what is “used” or “applied” to dispel the pathology to the right. This means that sweet dispels dryness, sour dispels [reversal], bitter dispels vexation, pungent dispels glomus, and salty dispels stasis.

Following this order we obtain the following in translation (table below):

用 *Yòng* and 体 *tǐ* are terms familiar to

those who study religious or philosophical writing. They can mean function and essence or application and substance respectively. As Dr Wilms points out, the use of these two characters, as common Buddhist and Daoist philosophical terminology, date the *Fuxingjue* to the Song dynasty. We can see here that the *yong* flavours match the phase correspondences in the individual herb section: all pungent flavours belong to Wood, *yong* for Wood is pungent; all salty flavours belong to Fire, *yong* for Fire is salty; all sweet flavours belong to Earth, *yong* for Earth is sweet; all sour flavours belong to Metal, *yong* for Metal is sour; and all bitter flavours belong to Water, *yong* for Water is bitter. Given that these flavours, according to the *Huangdi Neijing*, also supplement the corresponding *zang* organ, some have assumed that the 用 flavour is the supplementing flavour and then extrapolated that the 体 is referring to draining.⁴ If this is correct then it seems reasonable to guess that the reason the terms 用 and 体 were used rather than 補 *bǔ* supplement and 瀉 *xiè* drain, relates to the religious occupation of those for whom the text was compiled: Daoist practitioners. When we look at the formulas to come in part three of this article series, we will see that the supplementing formulas use the corresponding *yong* flavour to supplement and the *ti* flavour for discharging. However, it is unclear why the compiler chose to use *yong* and *ti* here, and supplement and discharge elsewhere. This deserves some careful attention.

It is likely the flavour that 除 *chú*, dispels, is the 用 *yong* flavour of the previous phase. Following that logic we have bitter as the 用 flavour of Water, for dispelling

4. My class notes from study with Arnaud Versluys.

”

These kinds of visual representations of cosmological, medical, religious or philosophical relations became popular only from the Sòng period but are not found in earlier manuscripts.

ELEMENT	用 APPLY	体 SUBSTANCE	化 TRANSFORM	除 DISPEL
WATER	Bitter	Sweet	Salty	Vexation
WOOD	Pungent	Sour	Sweet	Glomus
FIRE	Salty	Bitter	Sour	Stasis
EARTH	Sweet	Pungent	Bitter	Dryness
METAL	Sour	Salty	Pungent	[Reversal]

“

Flavours do not match the flavour/phase correspondences in the Neijing. These correspondences are unique to the Fuxingjue.

vexation, pungent as the 用 flavour of Wood for dispelling glomus, salty as the 用 flavour of Fire for dispelling stasis, sweet as the 用 flavour of Earth to dispel dryness, and sour as the 用 flavour of Metal for dispelling reversal. Of course, this makes clinical sense.

As for the 化 *huà* (transformation) we can see that the associated flavour is in a *ke* cycle relationship with the 用 flavour on the opposite side. For example, sour is the 化 transforming flavour of Fire and it is the same flavour that dispels reversal for Metal. In other words, sour supplements the phase that Fire controls, thereby making fire less able to control Metal. Hence, reversal is what happens when Fire is over-controlling Metal, and sour transforms this. Vexation is what happens when Earth over-controls Water and this is transformed by bitter. Glomus is what happens when Metal over-controls Wood and this is transformed with pungent. Stasis is what happens when Water over-controls Fire and this is transformed with salty. Dryness is what happens when Wood over-controls Earth and this is transformed by sweetness. One can see that this becomes mental gymnastics.

At the bottom left of the chart, the arrow moving clockwise tells us this direction is the yang supplementing direction and this direction follows the 生 *sheng* generation cycle. The opposite direction is the yin retreating direction which is 瀉 *xie*, draining. The chart also tells us that supplementation corresponds to Fire and draining to Water.

For me, this is where this chart gets interesting, especially in relation to the formulas we will discuss later. For now, I invite readers to consider supplementation and pushing a phase towards the next phase. For example, the pungent flavour pushes Wood towards Fire, as spring towards summer. Salty pushes Fire towards Earth. Sweet pushes Earth towards Metal, sour pushes Metal towards Water, and bitter pushes Water towards Wood. The pungent flavour induces an upwards, outwards movement that mirrors the movement of life in spring towards summer. Salty is a flavour that softens hardness. Imagine a tight bud of spring that must soften and open so a fruit can begin to emerge. Sweet is the flavour that is nowhere more distinctly expressed than in the ripening of fruit that moves it towards

autumn. Sour is contracting downwards towards the earth in the autumn as we move from ripe fruit to hard seeds; the opposite of spring in that it is moving downwards towards the earth and towards winter. Bitter hardens to the point of storage which prepares for the burst in the spring. For me, the 用 *yong* application of flavour, which is the supplementing flavour, means that these flavours push a phase forwards in the yang, clockwise, direction.

So we can see that the 体 flavour is the opposite of the 用. Perhaps here it is good to note that the 体 flavours do not match the flavour/phase correspondences in the *Neijing*. These correspondences are unique to the *Fuxingjue*. By looking at this chart, we can see that the 体 flavours as associated with the substance of the flavour and that they drain. Draining is yin, going counter-clockwise against the natural generation cycle movement. Draining then is not so much taking something away as it is keeping something in a phase longer and preventing it from moving to the next. Sour keeps Wood in Wood, retarding its movement into Fire. Bitter keeps Fire in Fire, keeping it from moving into Earth. Pungent keeps Earth in Earth, preventing it from ripening into Metal. Salty keeps Metal flowing rather than contracting into Water. Sweetness keeps Water in Water and prevents it moving into Wood. I invite readers to consider supplementation and drainage in this way as we move into part three of this series, where we will see how the formulas largely reflect this structure. By memorising such a chart, we will be able to see how some Daoist practitioners of self-cultivation could use it to understand the structure of the basic formulas they used.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this text is that it suggests how to organise a locally growable pharmacy and some basic medical principles to help ourselves. I imagine communities organising to grow enough of an assortment of herbs to treat most simple illnesses. Of course, an assortment for New England would be different than the assortment for El Paso, Texas, and the author of the *Fuxingjue* encourages us to think this way. It has inspired my community to start making gardens that cover the bases of the flavours so that we can have a basic toolbox for off-the-grid self-healthcare.



Ante Babic's
**Tips for running
a successful clinic**

Thinking trap:
I know it works in
practice, but does it
work in theory?