

Following the Rhythm of Life
The Spiel-Räume Concept
An Integrative Approach to Child Development
By Karin Kalbantner-Wernicke

Introduction

How many times have you watched or observed children playing and interacting in a playground, a home setting, school or shopping environment? How many times have you wondered what was going on in their minds and hearts as you observed their early social skills and play patterns? They are as distinct in their reaction to the settings and environment as adults are - only a little more expressive about it!

Some lead more, some follow, some are shy, some are bold, some have no sense of personal boundaries for safety while others are over cautious. Our traditional western explanation would be that we are all born different and we learn at different rates and adjust at different ages. But how do we explain the children that do not adjust by the recommended average age for maturation? How do we explain the children who don't grow at the "acceptable" behavioral, social, physical and mental development pace?

As a result of years of working with children placed in categories like this and experimenting with a variety of therapeutic methods, the Spiel-Räume Concept found its form. It is an approach to children's therapy that evolved out of a combination of Japanese and Chinese medicine and an array of western techniques. The fusion of east and west gave us room for a whole new view of what we have been trained to perceive as developmental disturbances.

The eastern influence with the use of the Chinese Five Elements lays the foundation for the Spiel-Räume approach. The concept of the Five Elements allows us to see human development as a cyclical process interconnected and dependent on the total environment one grows up in. This cyclical process is malleable and never stops seeking balance until we die.

We therefore interpret all difficulties in motor skill, perception, physical, behavioral and mental developmental patterns as expressions of this balance-seeking process. Using the knowledge of the Five Elements and western therapy techniques, playful exercises are created to offer new experiences to the children's environment. The children participate in activities that allow them new expressions. They are offered the 'playground' they need to discover and develop physically, mentally and emotionally.

The Five Elements are the key to the structure of this work. They describe every aspect of life as an expression of a dynamic process. From the change of the seasons in a year, to the biological, mental, emotional, and spiritual existence of human beings, the Five Elements weave a web that connects all levels of life. They reveal how a child is developing and guidelines for the therapeutic approach. Whether they are used in a therapy session, school or a home setting, the Five Elements serve to stimulate and maintain the inner balance of humans in their daily lives.

The Principle of the Five Elements

When a child is born into this world they are born with their senses wide open. They are unable to protect themselves from the highly advanced technology and fast paced lifestyles that consume most western families

today. Invasive and unnatural influences can disturb the fragile inner balance of a newborn and begin to alter the natural flow of development.

From the traditional Chinese and Japanese medical point of view, development is dependent on more than the physical body and brain. For millenniums eastern cultures have observed all phenomena of life to be an expression of a life force. This life force has a pattern and rhythm that flows in cyclical stages like the seasons on our planet. These stages are known as "phases of change" and in the west have come to be called the Five Elements.

The traditional Five Elements, *Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water*, are symbolic words used to represent natural stages of a cyclical pattern in life. Everything we observe in the universe can be described as part of this innate cycle and like the seasons, each phase has specific qualities or aspects that they express. The *Water* Element, for example, corresponds to the season of winter. All expressions of nature that emulate stillness, rejuvenation, hibernation, silence, and deep unconscious processes would be aspects of the *Water* Element.

The unfolding of all forms, events, and systems can be seen in the flow of the five phases on a macrocosmic and microcosmic level. Human beings become connected to the plants, animals, climate, and entire universe as this model creates a common ground through the natural order and expressions available in each of the phases. The Five elements connect our physical, perceptual and sensory levels of life to the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels of our being. This is how traditional Japanese and Chinese physicians see all physical and mental processes as the same when abnormal behavior, illnesses and disturbances occur. Emotional expressions like

laughter, fear, anger and sympathy are aspects that exist in the same elements as the various physical functions of the body and mental attributes.

The relationship of each Element to each other is like the seasons in the year. They produce and give birth to each other, control each other's climate, effect each other's crops, flow continuously into one another with no real beginning or end. They express themselves as fully as possible to produce a fruitful and bountiful year. In essence, They control, monitor, adapt and support each other every time the full cycle flows. The quantity of the harvest in the fall is dependent upon the expressions of all of the other seasons in terms of rain, sunshine, heat and hibernation.

Symbolically, it is the same for how human beings develop and express individuality. All of the aspects of the Five Elements that we emulate through our behavior, physical health, mental and emotional states is dependent on how we adapted in the experiences of our life, and what expressions were available in each of the phases of our developmental cycle. This is a very powerful process in our life because as all of the phases are balancing each other through their available expressions, they are bringing us to our center and balance, making our lives more whole and round. Through this harmonious play they give us the ability to express all of the aspects of our being and individual vitality.

By knowing the characteristics and functions of each of the five Elements, we can see developmental disturbances and illnesses in a different way. We can let go of old judgements about unwanted behaviors and symptoms and begin to see them as individual expressions struggling to find a balance. We can recognize that the Five Elements are in everything in our daily lives.

The seasons have an influence on our appetite, our skin, and our emotional and energetic levels. Therapy takes a different direction when we look at balance and health arising out of an interaction of five phases on multi-dimensional levels. We all experience the seasons in our deepest mind. We all experience the dance of our own five phases. But because of our individual adaptations to the environment we experience and move in those rhythms and cycles in our own ways.

The Five Elements in Children's Lives

Imagine the following situation:

- 5 year old Kathy does not like to move around very much in her kindergarten classroom. When she has to take place in activities that require large motor skills she is very anxious and over-cautious. Her movements are slow and contemplated 10 to fifteen times before she participates in physical skills and activities. Most of the time, she plays self-absorbed in the doll corner of the classroom and when other children take her toys does not try to defend what she is playing with.
- 8 year old Sebastian has a recognizable stuttering pattern that began when he was three. He used to be a very a vivacious child with a lot of friends, but now in school he withdraws into himself more and more to get away from the danger of being talked to. His joy and playfulness has diminished and he appears sad most of the time.
- It is impossible for Moritz to wait his turn when the class is doing activities. By the time the second or third person has gone he forgets completely his place in line and rushes forward to take a turn. Once

he has started the project, he loses interest within 5 to 10 minutes. It is difficult for him to finish any project without the assistance of a teacher. He is also easily influenced by others creativity and quickly leaves his own ideas to follow someone else's plan.

- Little Manuel is not interested in any tactile activities like playing in the sandbox and baking sand cookies in his kindergarten class. He avoids hugging and cuddling from his mother and she often feels rejected.
- 5 year old Catherine always feels like she has to use the toilet without any real need. Her bladder always has the sensation of being full, even there is only a few drops of urine. Her teachers comment that when she is doing a project she never gives up, no matter how long it takes or the number of times she has to repeat the steps to complete the activity. She is always the last to finish and always wants to skip snack time or playtime to complete her projects.

All of these examples show signs of mental, physical or psychological imbalances regardless of the developmental difficulty presented. Western terminology would classify these behaviors and put them in categories. From the Spiel-Räume point of view, these behaviors are unique and a cry for help from the children to find a way to express a life energy that is moving in them. The behaviors are expressions of the Five Elements themselves, but they are limited expressions because of some disturbing influence experienced in the child's life.

The living environment is different for every one of us and life seldom evolves without circumstances that disrupt the natural unfolding and expansion of the Five Elements. If an element is lacking in a child's life or not being allowed to be expressed, the child will adapt by producing a mental, physical or psychological behavior that represents the missing or blocked Elements.

To illustrate this concept, let's look at the *Wood* Element and how it works in this process. There are basic characteristics for each of the elements that are important in the natural development of a child. The *Wood* Element attributes consist of everything that has to do with the development of movement. When a child first starts moving they must connect the body to the mind - plan their movements so that they can crawl, scoot, turn over, pick up objects or move things in their environment. How a child physically moves, develops gross motor skills, and coordination are primary developments in the phase of *Wood*.

Wood can express itself in balanced or unbalanced forms. A child's movements in a balanced state are flexible and harmonic, They show the ability to control their body and have well-developed gross motor skills. The unbalanced expressions show difficulty with gross motor skills, appear physically unskillful and clumsy, and may be inhibited or hesitant about movement. The perception and orientation is good in a balanced state, but distorted for a child with unbalanced *Wood* expressions. From a behavioral level of expression, a balanced child is creative, hungry for action and discovery. They are able to think strategically and plan purposefully. They can orchestrate a whole group of children in an imaginary game finding a happy place for all while including themselves. An unbalanced child needs to

control everything but will stand aside and not be a part of the directions they are commanding. They can be irritable, aggressive, destructive, very excitable, offended easily, and in extreme imbalances has no interest in anything and becomes apathetic. To sum it up we can say that a child developing in a balanced phase of *Wood* can be seen with good leadership qualities, while the unbalanced expression of this in a child often turns into an instigator leading loyal friends into trouble without involving themselves. Each one of the children listed in the example given earlier represent an unbalanced state of one of the Five Elements. Using them as an example we can look at some of the basic developmental characteristics each phase supports.

WOOD: This element is responsible for the development of planning and movement, coordination, and gross motor skills. It expresses itself in a desire for action and joy of movement, a craving for discovery and adventure as well as systematic thinking and planning of ideas.

****Kathy shows expressions of *Wood* through her anxiousness and over-cautious attention to movement and play activities in her kindergarten class. She shows no desire to adventure out into the classroom and instead remains self-absorbed and incapable of even protecting what she is playing with when a classmate takes her toys away.**

FIRE: This element finds its expression in the experience of togetherness and the feeling of "us". It represents partnership and the ability to form relationships. The development of verbal communication comes through *Fire*,

and a general vitality that expresses itself with enthusiasm and a joy in living and all of life's experiences.

******Sebastian's *Fire* expresses itself in the lack of joy and an overall demeanor of sadness in his life. The stuttering is an imbalance in the physical developmental stage of the *Fire*, which has affected his ability to develop and participate in relationships.

EARTH: *Earth* develops a centeredness and inner calmness that allows one to feel at home with oneself and to find a personal point of view. An ability to concentrate, not lose focus, and an energy to complete an idea or project from beginning to end arises out of this place in life. This phase brings nourishment for the body and soul, and allows one to develop a carefulness and attentiveness to objects, self and others.

******The unbalanced expression of *Earth* in Moritz shows up in his inability to complete a project or stay focused in his own ideas. He appears to be lacking in a general calmness and has difficulty staying attentive to classmates as he rushes ahead of them when waiting his turn for a project,

METAL: The Element *Metal* supports the development of all self-awareness and gives us the ability to recognize and respect our own boundaries and the boundaries of others. Our sense of self respect, respect for others, and social abilities evolve in this phase, and out of this comes tolerance, acknowledgement and a deep appreciation of all situations in life.

******Manuel has no interest in activities that develop physical awareness through the skin or touch. This is because children discover self-boundaries and self-awareness through activities that make them experience their own

body and environment through the skin, touch, and the space around them. Children with an unbalanced expression of *Metal* feel uncomfortable when these senses are stimulated. The avoidance of hugging and cuddling from his mother is not because he doesn't desire this contact; it is because something about stimulating the nervous system in this way makes him feel uneasy.

WATER: The Element *Water* gives us an ability to accept, adjust and flow with whatever is happening in our life, and a quality of readiness, and courage to take on new situations. It supports the ability to listen, relax, contemplate, and be still and silent so one can come in contact with the deepest parts of themselves. This phase also gives us the patience and persistence to stay with whatever situation is presented to us.

**Catherine expresses the *Water* Element physically with her constant sensation of having to pass water without any real need. She has the gift of persistence from water to a fault. The imbalance of this quality is her inability to be able to stop and start a project, something silent and steady captivates her focus.

In all of these examples it is easy to see how the Elements are expressed in balanced and unbalanced states. The lack of an ability to express qualities that are natural to the flow of an Element shows us that the phase is developing in a limited way. It is important to recognize that all of the capabilities and facets of any one Element are rarely blocked completely. The innate nature of the life force finds expression on whatever level is available. This is why we find some children highly adapted and charismatic in some stages of their development and lacking in others.

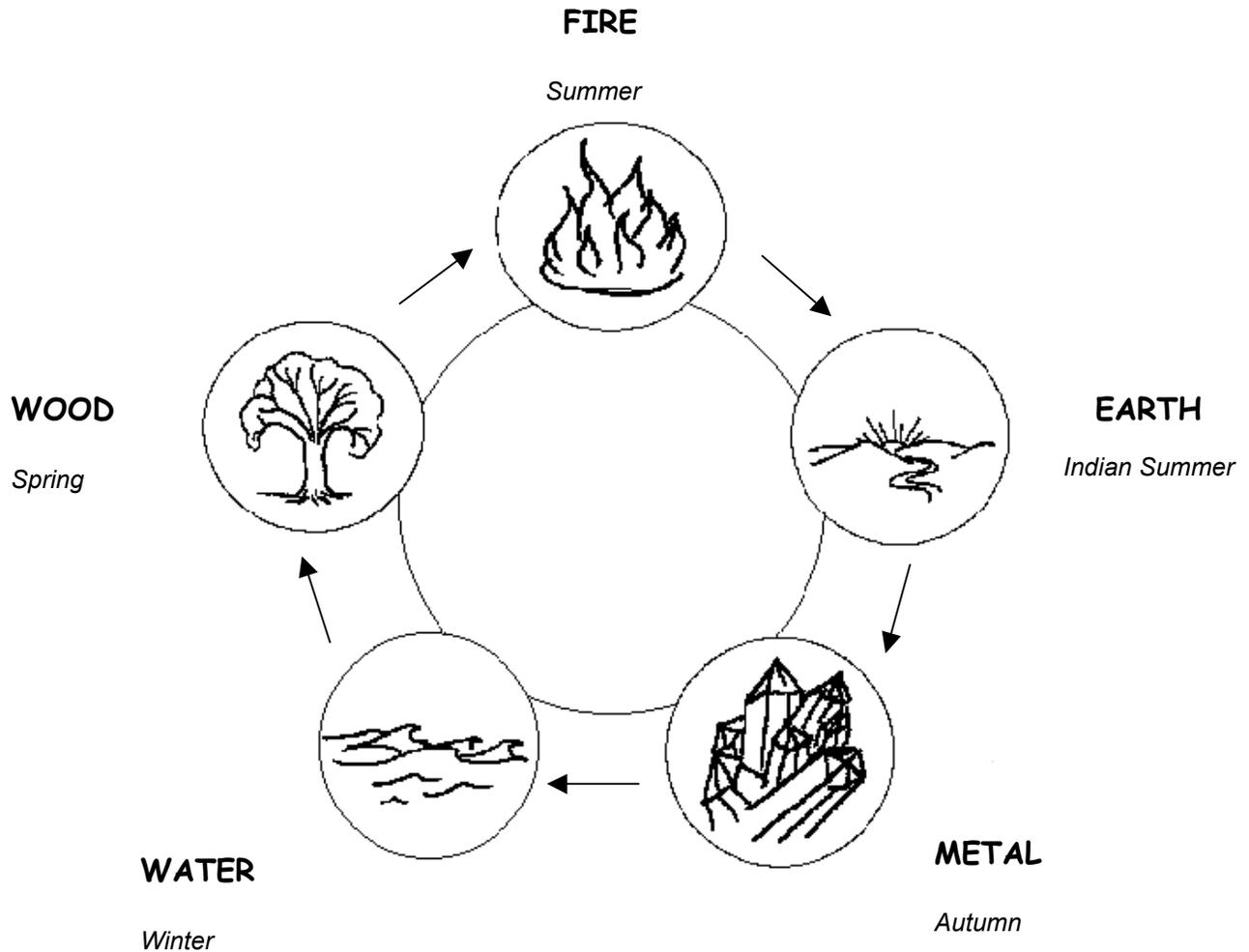
The Elements never stop seeking expression and balance. To feel at peace and whole in one's life is an unconscious motivator for most humans. Because the nature and purpose of the phases are to find and bring balance to our lives, they never lose their malleability. This is where the Spiel-Räume Concept finds the ground it stands on. The more room a child has to experiment and play with the expressions in each phase, the more socially, mentally, physically, and psychologically they develop. Now we are ready to show how we play with and expand the expressions of the Five Elements in our daily lives.

How the Spiel-Räume Works in Therapy and Everyday Life

Throughout this article we have talked about a cyclical pattern and order to the phases like the seasons. That order is shown in the diagram titled the "Flow of the Five Elements", and in it you can see the correlation of the seasons. The *Wood* phase expresses all of the aspects of life that spring exhibits, *Fire* expresses the summer, *Earth* the Indian Summer, *Metal* the autumn, and *Water* the winter.

Flow of the Five Elements

The Cyclical Pattern of the Five Elements in Every Day Life



Experience has shown the importance of following this natural sequence in the structure of a therapeutic session, a lesson at school, an activity in Kindergarten, and even group activities and rituals in everyday life. Events that follow the flow of the Five Elements feel whole and complete because they have a natural energetic pattern that we experience every year of our life. *Wood* has a defined beginning like the sprouting of seeds in the spring.

Fire has a feeling of rising energy and increased activity like the growth and activity of summer. *Earth* gives a feeling of centering with balanced energy like the presence of all the seasons coming together at one time in Indian summer. *Metal* feels like a decline of energy like in the autumn when the green of the leaves on the trees withdraws, changes color and falls to the ground. And *Water* a definite end like winter's appearance of death with the world covered in snow.

When this natural order of life is presented from beginning to end in the form of situations that correlate to each phase, no words are needed to express the end of a lesson. Children find by themselves the moment of good-bye. This clear structure allows children to feel and recognize their own inner order. When they are offered this protected space that is familiar, they also experience the security of their own inner order. New situations become the growing environment for developing balanced expressions of the Five Elements.

In the beginning of every lesson we have a 'preparation and welcoming ritual'. They are different for each group and their purpose is to create a gentle opening and bring the group into focus while stimulating circulation, metabolism and the energetic flow of each of the phases.

Next we begin by offering situations from each of the phases. In the *Wood* Element, we imagine that we are trying to stimulate the unfolding of a little plant that will grow during the lesson. This part of the lesson creates an environment for the group to start getting in contact with each other, to develop new ideas and engage individual aspects of their *Wood*,, to let-off steam and excessive energy for movement, to get really active and test

their own abilities, and to create an environment for experimenting, discovering and physically acting out their creative processes.

With the Element *Fire* the little plant comes into bloom. Situations that allow the group to come together and experience the collaboration of 'us' are offered. They focus on stimulating communication on all levels and a good emphasis on creating joyful, playful, and laughter filled opportunities that bring a vibrant, alive sensation to everyone in the group.

In the *Earth* stage of the lesson our plant bears the first fruits. There is more silence present in the group. They experience give and take in such a way that they offer mutual support to each other. The children learn to get in contact with their center and ways to improve their concentration. Situations that help them develop a sense of a common ground below their feet as individuals and as a group are used to emphasize this process.

With the *Metal* Element the seeds have grown and multiplied and the fruit is ready to fall from the trees. The importance of this lesson is to develop an awareness of each others space while being careful and respectful of each other and also themselves. From this experience it is easy for them to feel a sense of order around them and in themselves. Situations that bring acknowledgement of the group also help them to see how pleasant the little rituals of everyday life are.

In the last stage of the lesson the seeds from the fruit have found their place in the womb of the earth. They rest in the still, frozen ground and contain all the information for a new cycle. We have reached the *Water* Element - the experience is coming to an end. Because water gives us the ability to relax and regenerate, rest and silence are important. Listening to

someone in silence, waiting patiently in line, giving oneself the silence needed to feel the end are the experiences offered from this phase.

Theory in Action: An Example Lesson



With the example of one lesson we want to demonstrate the theory discussed above. The colorful pictures of the girls playing are related to this exercise.

The participants are five girls between the ages of 6 to 8 and one leader sitting in a circle around a pile of terry cloth string scraps picked up from a towel factory. What can they do with them? Quickly the girls come up with the idea to stretch the strings all over the whole room. Every child receives a thick ball of terry string and all the ideas of how they can fix the string.

The girls develop a plan by themselves and the atmosphere of *Wood* is apparent.

After sometime, moving through the room becomes more and more difficult because of the density of the strings. The girls climb upside down and through the strings as they throw the balls over the mesh to one another to continue the project. As the strings are used up they admire their work of art from different perspectives, like a bird from bars on the wall, sitting on a chair, or lying on the ground. There are a lot of new and interesting insights. Now they try to move within the filled room, creeping, crawling, and wriggling through, up and down. Ribbons with bells are hung in between; who can move through without the bells ringing? The children prove their sense of orientation and physical skills in a playful way and strengthen their quality of *Wood*.

Next they try to shake the whole creation. Someone comes up with the idea of 'the spider and the fly'. The spider is in one corner and the flies are tangled up in the spider's web. When everybody is ready, the spider rushes out. The flies have to get away as quickly as possible as the spider tries to catch them. Only creeping and crawling are allowed. After sometime, soaked with sweat and flushed, flies and spider are lying together in the web. They experience the element *Fire*.

With the girls still sweating and gasping the leader brings a big bunch of bright, shining scarves of different sizes and a box of cloth pegs. Together they think about what they can do with these things. They decide 'house building'. Every child selects a stack of scarves and without discussion every girl chooses a different color. Thus they build a red, yellow, green, orange, and blue house. Every child is careful of the distance they create to their

neighbor - much attention is paid to the walls. After the construction of their 'homes' the children ask for refreshments and meet for cookies in the 'village center'. With the building of the houses the children create their own place in the world from which they can start meeting on a common ground, this is the element *Earth*.

After this the girls decide it's time to return to their own houses. All walls are put into order again and if necessary get newly draped. Every girl sits in her own house and sees the others inside of their 'walls'. After sometime they want to make contact again, but how? One of the girls has the idea of sending an emissary. She runs to the supply closet and pulls out a hollow tube. Equipped with this she walks from house to house transmitting the message by holding one end of the tube to her mouth, while the other girl listens on the other end. Every girl wanting to send a message calls for the emissary tells her message and whom it is for. After sometime she also has to bring invitations for mutual visits.

The walls of the houses show their own boundaries and the boundaries of the others can be noticed. From experiencing these boundaries comes the desire to get in contact with the others and to communicate. The children figure out a way to be connected while separate from each other. They experience the element *Metal*.

During the various visits they decide they need to build a meeting house where they all can live together. The walls of the single houses are pulled down and used for making one large roof construction. Below this roof the children make themselves comfortable by creating a campsite. They snuggle up and the teacher's proposal of reading a story is cheerfully accepted.

With the story the afternoon comes to an end. The children find their own stillness and rest in the element *Water*.

We would appreciate if this article inspires you in your everyday-life with children. We are open to your thoughts and experiences as well as to questions. Please write to:

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