



The 5-Element Approach to Yoga: Summer by Laura Santi

Watching a butterfly on a summer's day, taking in its dizzy, giddy, crazy up and down pathway going-no place-in particular – that will give you a feeling for one aspect of the fire energy. But Fire is also the rhythmic mesmerizing beat of your favorite drum, your heart.

Fire/summertime starts May 5th, according to the way in which Chinese medicine observes the changes in nature. Life-force energy is in full expansion phase. At the summer solstice, June 21, the energy shifts back to contraction phase and fire ends.

Fire is a little different than the other elements in that there are 4 aspects to it and therefore 4 meridian paths, all on the arms. There is the heart, rhythmic and steady, guarded by the Small Intestine meridian, and the protecting and regulating needs of the heart, overseen by the other two meridians, the Pericardium and Triple Heater. In health, fire gives joy, propriety of speech – knowing just the right thing to say to set people at ease or make good conversation, freedom of self-expression, and healthy sex life. In poor health symptoms can range from shoulder problems, upper back problems, neck pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, sadness, mental confusion, lack of sexual fire or too much fire. But mostly fire is about love. Love is an energetic state, not a physical thing, and it isn't so much a part of our physiology as a

flow through us from the heavens - if we are open - hence the focus in summer yoga is on a state of mind as well as the physical body.

I talked about Spring wood-time yoga as a practice focused on stretching, strength building and doing many different poses. Summer's practice is more about fun. A practice to imbibe the qualities of the season and live according to its wisdom might focus on the spirit level - have fun with your practice, play. Some poses that will work the fire energy include Sun Salutes. It has all the Fire qualities in one vinyasa: there is the rhythm of repetition of a varied set of poses, and then the play aspect - possibly holding one of the poses longer - or doing it twice if you feel like it, or stopping in mid stride to work something else that appeals at the moment, and of course wearing pink leggings. That's optional. But I had to include a joke here because fire energy is about joy and love.

What other poses cultivate summer energy? Anything that stretches and uses the arms, like Cow-face, would be fire cultivating. Anjali mudra, keeping attention on the heart area itself, working the upper back and neck, is another way. Cobra pose, where you are opening and stretching the heart area up to meet the sun, would cultivate fire energy.

Using voice in some way, maybe with chanting or mantra with your practice will cultivate fire. The tongue is the root of the heart; so using voice will vibrate that chakra and shake up its energy. Poses that stretch and tone the arms and shoulders, where the four meridians of fire flow, like Crow pose, will help balance and propagate fire energy.

The 4 fire meridians are, not to burden you but its kind of nice to know: 1. Small Intestine - pinky finger along the arm across the shoulder blade up the neck to the ear. It is the bouncer for the heart. It sorts the pure from the impure to insure nothing enters the heart that will harm it or the love flowing through it. 2. Heart – from the heart it emerges at the armpit, zooms down the arm to the palm and your pinky: the place where love flows through us from the heavens, and where we keep memory. Yes Chinese medicine understands physiology very differently than western medicine: the brain is called a “Curious organ” and doesn’t have many attributes assigned to it.... 3. Triple Heater - ring finger up the outer arm and neck into the hypothalamus, the regulatory mechanism of the lower brain, then sidling up the cheek. It controls things like the balance of hot and cold and fluid distribution. 4. Pericardium: Begins next to the breast’s nipples, zooms up to go down the arm across the palm to the middle finger: the gatekeeper to the love flickering and sometimes flaming up and consuming us, inside the heart.

Therapeutic yoga has a premise that yoga practice should be at 80 % of what your body can do. That allows for the mind to be conscious, present, and a part of what is going on. So, in summer yoga play not like a puppy plays - to the point of exhaustion - but play with awareness and intent. Chinese medicine says too much joy scatters the “shen”, the spirit of the heart. But if you practice with a conscious

mind your joy will ride shotgun with your spirit and you’ll be just fine. ॐ

This excerpt of a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay personifies fire, I think:

*The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.*

Enjoy your summer and have fun with your practice!



Laura Santi is a longtime student of Swami Chetanananda’s and is a trained healer in the 5 Element style of Acupuncture, homeopathy, nutritional response testing and hatha yoga. Laura currently focuses her artistic training and talents on her first passion, art, painting Buddhist thakgas and Hindu deities.