



4D acupuncture anyone? – Acu. Article March 2026

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(speaker at Conference 2025 – **Five Element Acupuncture is not just for hippies and loons**)

Looking at the acupuncture forums and requests for hints, tips, and treatment ideas, I realised something was generally missing. As five element acupuncturists, the thing we rarely publicise – and the point of this article – is that there may be other skills out there that perhaps you are unaware of. Skills that could help confirm a diagnosis, or even – brace yourselves – detect pre-pathological states in our patients. Skills that offer a more nebulous, less binary way of reading what we see and hear in our treatment rooms.

I spoke about this at the BAcC conference last year – ‘Five Element Acupuncture Isn’t Just For Hippies And Loons’, but in case you missed it, welcome to the borderlands of the four-dimensional world of the five element acupuncturist.

I graduated in the very early 1990s from the College of Traditional Acupuncture (CTA), before the BAcC was a twinkle in anyone’s eye, as the College of Integrated Chinese Medicine (CICM) was born, and long before The Acupuncture Academy (TAA) was even a dream. Over time – and having studied TCM myself alongside others far more worthy than me (John and Angie, thank you!) – I came to realise that the truth probably lies somewhere in between. That perhaps there is a space where our heads and our hearts can really work together.

Firmly rooted in the magic of the elements, I’m fortunate to live and work then in a glorious, multifaceted diagnostic world. The way my patient moves, how they smell, the sound of their voice, and their energetic presence all shade, colour, and inform my understanding of the balance – or imbalance – of their Officials, Elements, and organs.

I have limited space here, and there is so much I could share about diagnosing using Colour, Sound, Odour, and Emotion, so for now I will focus on one skill, Odour. I will share with you the remarkable story of ‘The Woman Who Smelled Parkinson’s’.

First publicised in 2017 in the *New York Times* and other broadsheets, more recently explored in scientific papers and research, there was global fascination with one woman’s extraordinary olfactory prowess. And as often happens when science ‘discovers’ something new, something that Chinese medicine has known all along, the five element family smiled and gently rolled our eyes. ‘Oh bless’, we thought.

Les Milne was an anaesthesiologist working in Macclesfield, and at 28 he developed a distinct and unpleasant odour that only his wife, Joy, could detect. By his early thirties, she described it as almost

unbearable. Seventeen years later, at the age of 45, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and sadly he died at 65.

What made this story extraordinary was Joy's observation that at their weekly Parkinson's support meetings all the other sufferers smelled the same. When researchers at the University of Manchester later investigated this, Joy was able to identify clothing worn by people with Parkinson's with 100 per cent accuracy. Even more astonishingly, she identified one person who had not yet been diagnosed but who went on to receive a diagnosis nine months later.

Joy described the smell as thick, greasy, and musky, and in five element terms, we recognise a variation of the odour which we call Rancid – a less pleasant manifestation of Rancid that indicates ill health or a more seriously out-of-balance Official.

Why is this interesting then? Well, any five element practitioner will know that Rancid points toward the Wood element and the Liver, and those of you trained in and practising TCM will already have made the obvious connection between Liver pathology and Parkinson's disease.

From our five element viewpoint, this odour will indicate either Wood as the causative factor, or alternatively as what we might call an 'element in distress' – not necessarily the primary imbalance, but an element/Official that is clearly struggling.

So why this particular odour then? One possible explanation lies in the gallbladder's relationship with the metabolism of fats, making a greasy or 'off-fat' smell less surprising. In the same way, the odour associated with Metal is Rotten, with one out-of-balance variation being distinctly sewage-like. Metal and Large Intestine, anyone?

Joy also described her husband, long before diagnosis, as becoming uncharacteristically irritable too. So we have Rancid as the Odour then and Anger as the Emotion; two legs of the five element diagnostic stool for a five element practitioner, bringing the Wood element sharply into focus. (Incidentally we capitalise diagnostic terms – Anger as the emotion/energetic isn't the same as being angry then.)

Of course, I am simplifying. But this is the multidimensional world that we 'hippies and loons' happily and joyfully inhabit. Over years of practice, we learn to pick up on the subtlest signs and signals our patients offer us, and how to use them intelligently, compassionately, and effectively to inform our treatment choices.

The saddest part of this story for me is that a well-trained five element practitioner would have detected that odour far earlier; perhaps even before pathology revealed itself, and possibly alongside a corresponding Wiry pulse quality. And who can say where early recognition and skilled treatment might have led?

Too far? Not far enough. Consider the Red that leads us toward Fire as our CF, and read the Heart manifesting in the complexion. We think about Putrid linked to the Water element – often hitting us like the smell of urine – paired with Fear as its Emotion. And we remember the adrenal glands perched neatly on top of the kidneys and intrinsically linked with the urinary system.

So maybe, as a collective, we have been onto something all along? In diagnosing through Colour, Sound, Odour, and Emotion, perhaps we are simply learning to listen to what our patients' bodies are telling us loudly and with every fibre of their being?