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On acupuncture: Conversation between an acupuncturist and a curious friend
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[32-36]



Q: At this point it may be opportune to say something about *qi*?

A: I would begin with the ideogram, which always expresses the root of the essential meaning. The full character is formed by the radical *qi* 气 'vapour' and *mi* 米 'rice': therefore it contains both the idea of something impalpable that rises and diffuses and the picture of an element substantial for the daily life, as is rice in Chinese culture.

The term is generally translated as 'energy', but sometimes also as 'vital force'. Qi is the energy that moves and allows the life of universe and humans, from its condensing originate all the manifestations of the existent.

Qi is subtle substance, matter and energy at the same time, undifferentiated vitality and structured forms. Universe and humans are qi, as movement and transformations of the world shapes are qi. Qi manifests in denser forms such as the body and the various tissues, or thinner ones such as the mind, the emotions-feelings, the spirit. The human qi is part of the universe qi and is specific to the individual, constitutes the whole body and makes it function. There is no life without qi, qi moves, transforms, heats, activates and supports the various functions of the organism.

Acupuncture, meditative practices, life habits, all act on qi.

Q: And *yin* and *yang*?

A: Different cultures often tell the origin of the world in a very similar way: in the beginning there was something which was only one and without form, then separations occurred and this world was born. Taking shape emerges from a differentiation between opposite and complementary principles. Sometimes these poles are called day and night, some other times they are called heaven and earth, or one talks of time and space.

Chinese thought describes the universe birth as a process through from which from something which is only one and indistinct, with no change, no limit, no shape, becomes individuated as two moving opposites individuate, *yin* and *yang*, and this originates differentiation, the world marked by time and by the ten thousand forms and phenomena.

Yin and *yang* correspond to Earth and Heaven. The "Huainanzi", a daoist text dating around 140 BC, the same period of the "Neijing", describes the origin as: "Before Heaven and Earth took place, everything was amorphous, vague, empty, confused; call it therefore Supreme Beginning. *Dao* 道 appeared in the feeble and transparent; the thin, tenuous and transparent generated Space and Time; Space and Time generated qi. In qi appeared an edge; what was limpid and volatile dissolved and became Heaven; what was heavy and turbid condensed and became Earth."

Q: *Dao* is *tao*, the Way?

A: Yes, exactly, but let us expand upon to this later on, for now I would say more about *yin* and *yang*. Starting from the initial pictograms that – as usual – were much more naturalistic compared to the later ideogram: in '*yin*' we can recognize the clouds and in '*yang*' the sun with its descending rays. Therefore the two pictograms contained the idea of shadow and of light. Later on a hill was added to both of them, suggesting the shady and the sunny side. The two sides coexist; darkness and light are complementary and transform one into the other.



The three passages: from the initial pictogram (a), to the complete form (b), to the actual simplified form.

Q: The two ideograms hint at both a physical place as it is the hill and to the movement expressed by the shadow and sun cyclic alternating?

A: Correct, *yin* and *yang* are to be considered as reference emblems for all of the manifestations of reality, and that therefore organize what exists according to categories based on analogy. They are opposites, but have a complementary more than a conflictual relationship. They are manifestations of the same reality, they do not express categories with an ethical significance of good and bad. On the contrary they are based on each other, are interdependent, one cannot exist without the other. *Yin* and *yang* define through relation and contrast, they are not absolute entities, qualities, categories: any phenomena can be described as *yin* or *yang* only in relation to something else. Their polarity creates a dynamic balance, in continuous transformation: they originate one from the other and change one into the other.

Q: All this is represented in the symbol we all know?



A: Yes, the *taijitu* 太极图 consists of a defined space, contained in a circle, and as such no straight line can cross a completely white or black space. The image graphically illustrates the four characteristics of the *yin yang* relationship: opposition (black and white are opposite), interdependence (the white seed has its root in the black space and the black seed is born in the white space), complementarity (they are part of the full circle, linked by a curve line), and reciprocal transformation (when white grows, black reduces, and vice versa).

Yin and *yang* are the web of life, the origin of all what exists and of its transformation, as we read in “*Suwen*”, chapter 5: “*Yin* and *yang* are the heaven and earth *dao*, the frame of ten thousand things, the mother and father of change and transformations, the root of birth and death, the palace of the clear *shen*.”

The same chapter then talks about the close correlation between *yin* and *yang* and their presence within the other: “This is why the light *yang* became heaven, the dense *yin* earth. Earth qi rises as clouds, heaven qi descends as rain. Rain comes from earth qi, clouds come from heaven qi”. That is, clouds are in the sky, but are “earth qi” rising to the sky; rain falls on the earth, but it is heaven qi that comes down to the earth. Clouds are in fact vapour rising from earth thanks to the heat of sun that makes water thin, and rain falls from the sky because cold condenses the vapour.

Q: *Yin* and *yang* are qualities?

A: Yes, if we mean qualities of movement and function. *Yin* and *yang* define a system that is structured by correspondence and resonance.

The ideographic shadow hill-side representation implies darkness, night, moon, stillness. While the sunny side is also light, day, sun, activity.

Moist, soft, internal, cold, cool, dense are *yin* pole qualities, while dry, hard, external, hot, warm, thin are *yang* pole qualities. The shadow correlates with dark and dense and therefore with the more material and visible aspects, light is associated with bright, thin, and therefore with what is more immaterial.

In the Chinese dynamic perspective functional qualities and movement directions are fundamental: *yin* is stillness, going inwards, holding; *yang* is movement, going outwards, activity; *yin* concentrates, brings down, cools; *yang* expands, brings up, heats. Inner and stillness-*yin* nourish and store, fire and expansion-*yang* moves and transforms.

Yin generates *yang* and *yang* moves *yin*, *yin* allows *yang* to be born, *yang* lets *yin* to manifest.

D: Does all this concern medicine as well?

A: Correlative thinking that links qualities, concepts, functions, phenomena precedes the first medical text: for example the book “Cheng”, dating around 250 BC, already arranges binary oppositions and lists heavens, spring, summer, daytime, action, above as *yang*, whereas *yin* encompasses earth autumn, winter, night, stillness, below.

In medicine the *yin-yang* relationship is the foundation of physiology and pathology and it leads diagnostic processes, therapeutic principles and treatments. Generally, *yin* nourishes, *yang* moves, *yin* stores, *yang* transforms.

The body is *yin*-matter compared to function, which is *yang*-movement. The abdomen is *yin* in relation to the back...