

## Going Back to the Theory of *Yin* and *Yang*

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When I was a student of Chinese medicine and starting my internship, I was struck with the overwhelming amount of signs and symptoms that patients were presenting to me during their initial interviews. It was too much for me to piece together the head cold with the indigestion, the skin rash with the depression, the nightmares, lack of sleep and anxiety, and all the rest. When I confronted my teacher about this confusion, she told me, "Everything you need to know, you learned in the first semester at school. When in doubt with a patient, go back to the theory of *yin* and *yang*, and it will make sense to you." What does this mean? *Yin* and *yang* is more than a symbol about the interplay of black and white within a circle. It is a complete world view, developed over many centuries and in many countries, that culminated into a complete, and yet simple, understanding of the universe.

The ancient scholars studied the world just as the scientist of today still do. Their curiosity took them to a realization that had eluded Western science until the discovery of the theory of quantum mechanics and Einstein's theory of relativity ( $E=mc^2$ ). The ancients understood that matter (*yin*) and energy (*yang*) were inter-related and interdependent. Indeed even the word we now call "*yin yang*" is essentially the same as that fundamental equation of Einstein's: matter equals energy.

These philosophers realized that all things, whether they were energy or matter, underwent change and transformed. They understood that nothing was an absolute or a fragmented part of everything else. They realized that everything was interconnected. They studied and learned from their observations that this constant change or transformation was uniform, consistent and predictable. Within this transforming change was found the fundamental theories of cause and effect, the ordered structure of the universe displayed in the atoms that make up our elements and period charts, and the movements of time and space, itself. This understanding of the universe became the philosophical foundation for their knowledge, medicine, social order, family relationships, personal happiness and religion, as well as their relationship to the universe and god.

The realization that everything in the universe is in relationship with everything else is the expression of the concept "*yin* and *yang*." The original characters in Chinese for *yin* and *yang* are characters that mean the shady and sunny sides of the mountain, respectively. The *yin* and *yang* qualities are expressed from the relationship of the mountain and the sun. The shady side of the mountain (*yin*) exists because there is a sunny side (*yang*). There also cannot be a sunny side without a shady side. This relationship places all things in a great continuum of equilibrium. All things in the universe strive for balance and stand in relationship to each other. An example can be seen in the concepts of hot and cold. These concepts can only be understood as a relationship. Something is hotter than something else, or another thing is colder than something else. These differences we understand as temperature. Something is hotter or colder by the relationship of what is around it. Given enough time, these temperatures will eventually balance themselves out.

Holistic medicine is the treatment of disease with the understanding of *yin* and *yang*. Put another way, it is the treatment of disease with the understanding that everything in the body is in relationship to everything else in and around the body. Holistic medicine understands that one cannot treat the head, for example, without it affecting the rest of the body.

The human body is a functioning example of *yin* and *yang*. Everything maintains what we have come to call "homeostasis," or a naturally occurring healthy balance. The reality is that there is no stasis, but instead a constant balancing and rebalancing that occurs without our being aware of it. This is the continual transformation of the principle of *yin yang*. From the flow and ebb of our various hormones to the regulation of our blood pressure, the body is in a flux of balance. So when our blood pressure climbs too high, there are sensory nerves that monitor and regulate the rate of the heart beats and contraction, the elasticity of our arteries and the depth of our breath, whether deep or shallow, fast or slow. Indeed the very words *fast*, *slow*, *deep* and *shallow* express the concept of *yin yang* in ourself.

What we call *disease* in Chinese medicine is the loss of this subtle and constant balance of *yin* and *yang*. We often refer to an excess of *yin* or an excess of *yang* as the root of a particular illness. Someone can be too hot or too cold, as far as their metabolism is concerned. What holistic medicine seeks to accomplish is returning the body to a healthy balance of *yin* and *yang*. The idea is to return the body to being in relationship with itself. This is the primary function of acupuncture and herbal medicine. Each is utilized to produce an effect that assists the body in balancing the *yin* and *yang* within itself, thus restoring health.

While this may sound like fancy words to explain a fanciful theory, it can be utilized to understand how an illness is afflicting a body and how it can be affected to bring about a healthier balance. Returning to the high blood pressure scenario; when the body has high blood pressure, we understand this as an excess of *yang* within the body, or too much energy. We attempt to determine why the body is out of balance. Often we will use acupuncture point or herbs to increase the *yin*. By increasing the *yin*, we are able to downregulate the increased *yang*. By increasing the *yin* and downregulating the *yang*, we return the body to a better relationship and thereby return the blood pressure to normal levels and restore health.

When we view our world through the philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, we begin to understand that the natural and normative state of our lives is found through this relationship of constant balance and rebalance. By seeing balance and rebalance in our lives, we tap into the fundamental pattern of creation. If we force ourself to levels of extremes, there must be a rebalancing to compensate. Whether we or the universe do this, we will still be balanced. Even an illness in the body can be seen as an expression of this rebalancing, although one that causes disease. What we cannot do is stand in absolute to a universe that is relative by its very nature. The choice of view is ours.

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