

Which Way is the Energy Going? Are You Burning Yourself Out?

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One of the simple methods that I use to define Yin/Yang theory to patients is to ask the question, "Which way is your energy going?" Let's go with the idea that energy moves from your skin inwards, towards your "self" and organs (yin) and outwards from your skin towards "others" the world, (yang). What percentage of the energy in your life goes in each direction? If you wrote a list of all the things you did this week or any typical week, for others, and a list of all the things you did for yourself, which list would be longer, have required more of your time or been prioritized higher? The answers might surprise you and it's a worthy exercise.

If you are like most of us, and most of our patients, too much is going away from the self (Yang) and not enough is coming in towards the self (Yin). What does that inevitably result in? Yin deficiency. If yin isn't nourished, if it starves, if it is used to create yang, (an ineffective but common use) it vanishes. And what does acute and then chronic yin deficiency look like? Empty heat which, over time, can become full heat. Both syndromes cause inflammation. And what, according to modern medicine, is one of the major causes of biological aging and the root of chronic disease? Inflammation! So there you go. Simply, creating Yin deficiency syndromes with giveaholic behavior is a good way to get sick and die young.

We may have good reasons for this warped pattern which have nothing to do with our own choices. In my case, the reason is a sick daughter. Ten years ago, a car accident caused her third brain trauma. I have struggled with her conditions and the tremendous complexity involved in managing her care. The neurologists, endocrinologists, orthopedists, cardiologists, internists, physical therapists, acupuncturists, osteopaths, naturopaths, and herbalists who have worked with her all agree, she is an extremely difficult case. So much so, that after 10 years of trying to heal her, we still don't have enough diagnostic info to fully understand her condition. Anyone would admit, especially any parent, that a child's suffering is a strong motivation for directing more energy out than in even if it's self destructive.

Yet, a reason as good as mine should not give me permission to continuously drain my chi. Nor should the truly insurmountable difficulties in your life justify your doing that because it's not healthy and your body will rebel. You will, at some point, begin to burn out, get sick or not be able to function.

We must have the courage to look at the bottom lines of our lives and ask, "which way is my energy going in my marriage/partnership, in my practice, in my friendships, with my parents and siblings, in my home environment?" If the percentages are off, you have to do something about it. If your love affair is draining, you have to admit it, discuss it and correct it. Maybe you have to get rid of it. If your patients are too demanding and your work isn't sufficiently rewarding to compensate you, you need to step back and analyze how you do things at the office. You may need to redesign the boundaries you

set and say "no" more often than you are used to or comfortable with. Sometimes, to avoid burn out you have to take bold steps.

Now may not be the time to lighten up on the gas pedal. Maybe it's full speed ahead for a while. But continually running at this pace in order to create healing or goodness in the world can be a big mistake. Not only does it ruin you, but it contradicts what you tell your patients or your kids. You aren't walking your talk. If this is the situation you are in, for heaven's sake, get treated and plan an end, or "break" date that you stick to.

The creativity that is needed for life change does not come from inside the problem. It comes from outside. When you remove yourself from a circumstance is when you see it more clearly.

An Example

I lead a mentorship group for acupuncturists and recently was asked by Meredith, a colleague, which way she should go with her practice. Things were running too well and, as a result, she was burning the midnight oil to keep up. She either had to hire more staff, running a more complex machine, or lower her workload, fit her practice into a time slot that was more comfortable, accept generating slightly less revenue and enjoy the freedom of fewer employees. She knew that finding and hiring the right staff person could be difficult and training takes more energy than it gives. If she hires someone easier, with more experience, she has to pay them more than someone with less job knowledge who requires more from her up front. Obviously, this is a complicated decision with many moving parts.

She had been pondering this for months, Meredith said, and the more she thought about it the more confused she got and the more factors there were to consider. As time went on, she was less certain of everything other than her fatigue. I suggested she get away. Take a break, a vacation or retreat, and stop thinking about it. Leave her practice behind and let the answers come while she was hiking, reading, sight seeing, tai chi-ing, whatever. If she allowed for quiet in her mind (yin) so that creativity and clear thinking (yang) could return, the solution would pop up one day without her noticing. The answer would just be there.

No matter how well you are compensating for life's challenges, they may cause you to lose your optimal balance point anyway. Why don't you take a moment right now, before you turn the page and read the next fascinating ad or article, to list the categories of your life and conclude which way the majority of your energy is going in each? Are you truly living an energetically balanced life, the life you would want your patients or kids to live? Could you improve the Yin/Yang dynamic by monitoring how much receiving and giving you are doing? If you avoid this question long enough, eventually you will have to choose Yin over Yang, stillness over movement because that is what life will force you to do.

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