YIN AND YANG: A BASIC INTRODUCTION

By Marc Ryan

Chinese Medical theory, though scientific in its own right, is built on a foundation of ancient philosophical thought. Many of these ideas are based on observations of natural phenomena and are the reason why Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has remained a truly holistic approach to health and well being.

The Theory of Yin and Yang is one such philosophy. It is said to date back nearly 6,000 years to the third or fourth millennium B.C. and is attributed to an enlightened philosopher named Fu Shi (also credited with creating the I-Ching or Book of Changes). The basic premise of yin and yang is the notion that the only constant factor in natural phenomena is universal change. In other words, nothing remains the same; no disease, no condition, no emotion, no treatment or diagnosis, absolutely everything is in a constant state of flux and, therefore, subject to the laws of change.

Yin and Yang are metaphorical images used to express these constantly transforming interactions. They have no fixed, precise definition. Rather, they describe two broad categories of complementary concepts which include the relationships of positive and negative, dynamic and inert, creative and destructive, gross and subtle, and kinetic and potential. This is quite similar to the notion of dialectics as expressed in Western philosophy. Within dialectics the whole is the sum of its parts and in turn part of the sum of a greater whole. As these various components interact, things become their opposites; i.e., variables become constants, causes become effects, and the process of creation leads to destruction. Furthermore, this idea is demonstrated in modern physics where subatomic interactions are the result of ever shifting polarities and constantly vacillating magnetic attractions and repulsions.

The entire universe may be viewed as the interplay and alternation of yin and yang. Originally the Chinese characters for yin represented the moon and yang represented the sun. Gradually these terms were broadened to include yin as night and yang as day, yin as winter and yang as summer, and yin as female and yang as male. In fact, there is nothing which cannot be viewed from the standpoint of yin and yang.

Yin is that which maintains and endures, it is nourishing and supports growth and development as well as being something contracting and moving inward. It also includes the following:

- Earth
- Autumn
- Cold, coldness
- Moisture

Yang is that which is creative and generating, it develops and expands; it is dynamic and full of movement. It also includes the following:

- Heaven
- Spring, summer
- Heat, warmth
- Dryness
It is important to remember that yin and yang are not static concepts and that they are constantly influencing and determining one another. There is always some measure of yin within yang and vice versa. To use the analogy of a hillside; during the day the sunlit side of the hill is yang within yang, while the shaded side is yin within yang. Conversely, at night the moonlit side of the hill is yang within yin while the dark side of the hill is yin within yin. In this fluid model it must be understood that neither yin nor yang can ever exist without the other. In fact, extreme yin will engender yang, an example of this can been seen in the popular expression "the darkest hour is right before the dawn". Naturally, the opposite is also true.

These types of relationships become significant when they impact the body's anatomy and physiology and it is precisely these designations that are used in the diagnosis of imbalances in TCM. For a TCM practitioner, the name of the disease is of secondary importance. The primary key to the proper diagnosis of syndromes is the identification of the condition in terms of yin or yang. In order to understand what this means let us examine these concepts in the context of human life.

Beginning at conception the sperm, which is yang, unites with the yin ovum and a new life is formed. As that life develops and progresses the energetic stages of youth are yang; whereas the later years are yin as life slows and becomes more deliberate. Each stage is also relative to the others and contains a measure of both yin and yang, just as the aforementioned hillside is an expression of yin within yang, etc. For example, the quick growth of early childhood is yang within yang and the transition from middle age to old age is yin within yang.

We can also see this philosophy expressed in everyday life. In respiration, the expansion of inhalation is yang while the emptiness which results from exhalation is yin. In digestion, the yin substance of food is transformed by the metabolic activity of yang. It is then converted into Qi (yang) and Blood (yin). Qi and Blood interact with one another using this paradigm. Qi moves Blood, yet Blood is thought to be the "mother" or source of Qi. Within the body yin is expressed as the material basis, the tissue and substance without which the transformation of yang would not be possible.

The physical body itself expresses this model. The lower part of the body which connects to the earth is yin while the upper body and extremities are yang and free to move. The front, which can easily be protected, is yin while the exposed back is yang. The internal organs, which are enclosed and protected, are yin relative to the surface of skin and muscle which are yang. In addition, the internal organs can be further differentiated into fu (yang), which are the "hollow" organs that are involved with digestion and elimination, and zang (yin) which are involved in assimilation and storage. Each zang has a corresponding fu organ which it is paired with and while these connections are not recognized in Western medical terms, they are often utilized in the treatment of disease in TCM.

Finally, disease and disease progression can be viewed using this paradigm. If the body's yang is weak it will be unable to ward off the invasion of a pathogen. If the yin is weak there will not be enough nourishment and support for the yang and the result will be the same. Expressed in other terms, without the substance, the active immune system is weakened and without activity the substance becomes vulnerable. Therefore, if yin is deficient over time then yang also becomes deficient and vice versa. Not only do yin and yang balance each other, they mutually generate one another. It is precisely this balance that the TCM practitioner uses various treatment strategies to restore. The idea is to reestablish the body's innate ability to maintain health and defend itself from disease.

The nature and progression of disease can also be understood using this pattern. When a disease develops rapidly, it is in the acute or yang stage. As it progresses and becomes more chronic, thus it enters the yin stage. Usually, acute diseases affect the surface or superficial aspects of the body while chronic diseases have already overwhelmed the body's defenses and gone deeper into the
interior. In addition, regardless of location or duration, disease can be classified by its affects. Extreme, severe symptoms are considered excess and are consequently yang. In contrast, mild or diffuse symptoms accompanied by weakness are considered deficient and are therefore yin. With regard to diagnosis, that which is internal, cold, deficient or chronic is considered yin. That which is external, hot, excess or acute is considered yin. When conflicting signs are present it usually points to a more complex condition and the TCM practitioner must evaluate all the symptoms together to determine the appropriate treatment strategy.

In summary, it should be evident that the designations of yin and yang are universal and extend into every aspect of life. Because of its ubiquity, this theory is a very useful tool for understanding natural phenomena and therefore can be an indispensable diagnostic aid. While this is an ancient paradigm it is not primitive and though simple it can be developed into surprising complexity. The only limitation of the application of this universal truth is one's own perception and imagination.

References:

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