

MetroWest T'ai Chi

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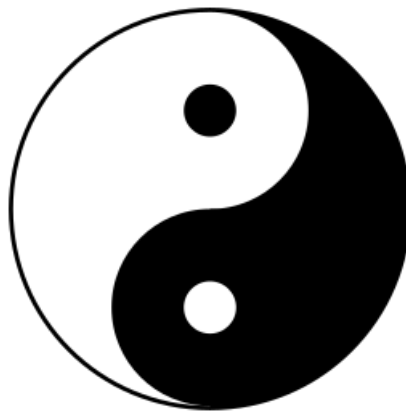
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Yin and Yang

The Guiding Principles of Harmony and Transformation in T'ai Chi

Many people are familiar with the terms "Yin" and "Yang" and most people have at least seen the symbol that represents them. But what do those terms mean, what is the significance of them, and how do they relate to T'ai Chi.



The Taiji symbol. ("Taiji" is the same word as "T'ai Chi".)

Taiji

The term Taiji¹ means "Supreme Ultimate" or may be translated as "The Great Polarity" depending on how you actually translate it. Both translations contribute to the understanding of the philosophies related to this symbol.

In Taoist origin philosophies, the Tao gave birth to Wuji. (In other words, the Tao - the everything - gave birth to Wuji - a kind of emptiness that contained everything without polarity, without expression.) Then the Wuji gave birth to Taiji. (Thus the Wuji gave birth to the expression of Yin and Yang, or complementary polarities.) Even with explanations that can all sound pretty cryptic. Chinese philosophies are often meant to be that way, forcing us to explore the concepts on our own, thus gaining a greater internalized understanding of them.

Maybe a better way of expressing this would be to say that in the universe, there is a state of everything-ness. But if we just perceive of it all as an everything-ness, our perception would be

¹The term "Taiji" is the more current transliteration while "T'ai Chi" is an older form of transliteration. I use "T'ai Chi" because it is more popular and more recognizable.

bland and empty because we can not distinguish one thing from another. If we introduce the idea of complementary polarity, it gives our perception color, depth, richness.

One important note is that Yin and Yang are not considered opposites that are exclusive from one another. Yin and Yang are complementary qualities that flow from one to the other, that build one upon the other, that contribute to the other, that contain the other. One cannot exist without the other. If you look at the symbol, you will notice that "swimming fish" have a sense of flow from one to the other – when you reach the extreme of one, it is transformed into the other. You will also notice the "eye of the fish" - it's opposite contained within.

So the polarities of Yin and Yang introduce a way to distinguish qualities within the universe. Yin and Yang are not things in and of themselves, they are qualities, or aspects of things and they are relative to each other. Water is considered more Yin than fire, however water can be destructive giving it a Yang quality. Day is more Yang than night, however day can be divided into morning and evening (Yang and Yin). As we exert ourselves more (Yang) we become more tired (Yin).

Qualities of Yin and Yang

Below is a list of qualities that can be attributed to Yin and Yang. Keep in mind that "things" listed in the table are meant to express the qualities rather than catalog an item as either Yin or Yang.

Yin	Yang
Water	Fire
Moon	Sun
Night	Day
Earth	Heavens/Sky
Retreating	Advancing
Absorb	Attack
Internal	External
Stillness	Movement
Down	Up
Rooting	Rising
Soft	Hard
Cold	Hot

This is just a brief sampling. This list could be, quite literally, endless.

How does this apply to T'ai Chi

The practice of T'ai Chi (the exercise, not the symbol) is made up of a constant flow between Yin and Yang. We advance, we retreat. We expand, we contract. One foot is substantial, one is insubstantial. We are rooting, we are rising.

We can find layer upon layer of these qualities within one another. In other words, an advancing move will include both a Yin and a Yang quality. Maybe the Yin arm will contain a Yang hand which may contain a Yin expression of energy which may rely on a Yang quality to give it substance.

By becoming aware of the Yin and the Yang of T'ai Chi we can become aware of a much deeper dynamic, transforming the movements into something more than just movements. If we open our awareness to the changes and flows within us, to the qualities of our experience, we can find that T'ai Chi is much more than a dance made up of steps and weight shifts and arm placements. We can discover that it is a dance of ever changing, ever transforming energies seamlessly flowing from one quality to the next.

That's too much! My mind is exploding.

Yes, I get carried away sometimes. So let's bring it down to a simple awareness that you can bring into your practice. Just be aware of your weight sinking down through your feet into the ground. As a general rule in T'ai Chi we are shifting our weight to one foot or the other. We usually shift to about 100% weight on the back foot and usually to about 70% weight on the front foot. Except for the closing and opening moves, we never want to find ourselves at 50/50 weighting. The foot with the weight in it is considered the "substantial" foot and the other is considered the "insubstantial" foot.

At some point when you are practicing, put your awareness on your feet and just feel the shifting and changing from substantial to insubstantial. Don't worry about getting the moves just right - just feel the change. By opening your awareness to this, you will discover a greater sense of flow in the movements and throughout the form.