

# Taiji: Quan and Yi (Handout 1)

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## Introduction

Yin (陰) and yang (陽) are at the heart of Chinese philosophy. They represent the idea of polarity. Yin is dark, soft, close and passive; yang is light, hard, open and active. But yin and yang are not in conflict, like day and night they work together – and together these two basic forms of energy create everything that we know. Chinese martial arts, medicine and the whole range of Chinese health exercises all make extensive use of the idea of yin and yang.

Taiji Quan (太極拳) is a form of movement based directly on the principles of yin and yang. Originally, this is a martial art and, in simple terms, yin is defence and yang is attack. In this workshop we explore a number of aspects of yin and yang: most generally, the physical movements, represented by quan (拳) meaning “fist”, are the yang pole, the external manifestation of the practice. In contrast, the mental aspects of the practice, represented by yi (意) meaning “thought”, are the yin pole, the internal component.

## Metaphysics

The Yijing (易經), usually called the Book of Change in English, is a philosophical system based on the principles of yin and yang. This workshop describes the different kinds of movement in Taiji, using the symbols of the Book of Change. The basic progression is shown in Figure 1. At the outset, the universal origin, is Wuji (無極) meaning “without polarity”, symbolized by the empty circle at the top of the diagram. This is the state before there is any polarity, before yin and yang have come into being. In the next step, Taiji arises (太極) meaning “great polarity”, and yin and yang come into being, but they are not separate. Finally, at the bottom of the diagram, yin and yang separate, symbolized by the two lines, the broken line on the right is yin and the solid line on the left is yang.

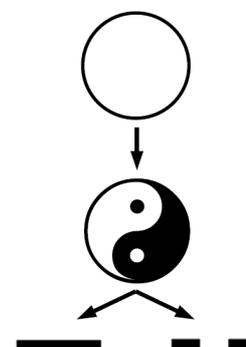


Figure 1: Wuji Gives Rise to Taiji

In terms of movement, Wuji is the basic standing posture, upright but relaxed. This is the state we seek before there is any movement. When we practice standing in Wuji we are learning to put the body into a neutral, relaxed but alert state. This stillness is the foundation of all the movements that we know. The next step is the Taiji diagram, now yin and yang have arisen and we have movement. This movement could be Wave Hands in Clouds, the waist is turning and rotating, but the weight is still equal in both feet. Finally, yin and yang separate and we have all the variety of movement that we have explored.

## The Trigrams

All of the movements in the practise balance the energies of yin and yang in different ways. The basic patterns of yin and yang are represented in the Book of Change by the trigrams as shown in Figure 2. Remember that an open line is yin and a solid line is yang. In the following discussion we explore how different forms of physical energy – jin (勁) – relate to the symbols – gua (卦) – of the Yijing.

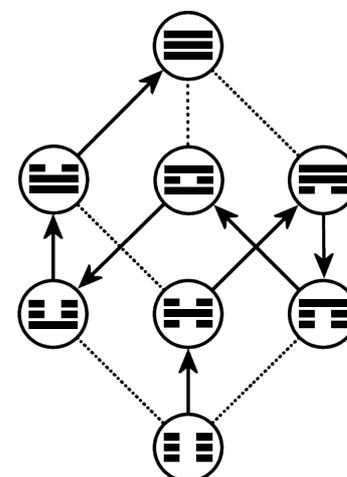


Figure 2: The Trigram Cube

☷ At the base of the lattice is the *Receptive*. This is pure yin, empty space – it imposes nothing and allows everything. It is the place where we should start every journey, with no preconceptions. This is calm emptiness, the state of mind we should seek when practising Taiji

movement. As an exercise, this is Wuji standing. Traditionally, this symbol is the earth, supporting everything without discriminating.

☰ The most important axis in the body is the spine, and this is explored in movements connected to the symbol *Flow*. These energies come through the body twisting and turning, uncoiling and releasing, rotating through the waist. The symbol shows a yang line in the centre of two yin lines – the spine in the centre of the body. Wave Hands in Clouds is an excellent exercise to practice this energy. Traditionally, this symbol is rushing water, flowing around every obstacle.

☷ Without a good connection to the ground, movement cannot be stable. The *Root* gives that connection. In this symbol the yin at the base emphasises the relaxation in the feet, the yang above is the weight of the body pressing down through that soft connection. This energy forms part of every exercise that we practice, but is developed most through extensive standing. Stepping must also take account of the Root, moving it relative to the centre. Traditionally this is wood, the roots gently but firmly penetrating deep into the ground.

☶ The next symbol in the path is *Binding*. The yang line at the top marks the limit of the symbol, controlling the yin space beneath. This trigram symbolises all the locking and controlling techniques, the manipulation of the opponent's structure to bring their options to an end. We explore this energy by finding the limits of our own movements, learning to understand the anatomy of our own joints; that understanding is then applied to an opponent. Traditionally this is the mountain, a place of stillness and retreat from the world.

☲ In this symbol the two yang lines on the outside stick to the central yin line, drawn inwards by the space. This is called *Cohesion* and it symbolises all the sticking and adhering energies. We practise this using the partner exercise Sticky Hands, learning to follow the movements of a partner. This trigram is also symbolic of clarity and understanding, bringing mindful awareness to movement. Traditionally this is fire, as fire illuminates, this brings understanding; and as fire clings to its fuel, it is sticking.

☳ This symbol is *Shock*, it is an explosive expression of energy, representing all forms of release: pushing and striking. The power comes from the single yang line at the base, the yin space above is what allows its free expression: when generating energy, relaxation is vital, everything is soft except for the instant of delivery. Traditionally this is thunder, which shocks and arouses those who hear it.

☵ The *Reservoir* represents the accumulation of energy through persistent practice. Such practice cultivates a reservoir of internal strength, which can then express itself through movement. The two strong yang lines at the bottom show this accumulation, whilst the soft, open yin line at the top is what allows the energy to be expressed. We train this energy by persevering in the practice. This is also the buoyant energy used to ward-off and redirect an opponent's attack. Traditionally this is the lake, a deep and quiet reservoir.

☰ Finally, when everything is yang, the *Creative* emerges. This is a pure energy, so substantial that it is without gaps. This is the source of all form, all pattern. It is creative perfection that holds the answer to every question. We train this energy when we practice linked patterns of movements, particularly when improvising, combining each of the individual energies into a continuous flow. Traditionally this is heaven, persistent and continuous, guiding everything, reaching everywhere.