

The Philosophical Basis of Taiji

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Introduction

Yin (陰) and yang (陽) are at the heart of Chinese philosophy. They are the foundation of the idea of polarity. In broad terms, yin is dark, soft, closed 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 combine and blend to 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, Taiji Quan is a martial art, brought to public attention when it was taught to the Imperial Guard by the Yang family in the nineteenth century. In this context, in simple terms, yin is defence and yang is attack. However, looking more deeply we can also say that the physical movements, as the external aspects of the practice, are the yang pole. In contrast, the mental aspects of the practice, are the yin pole, the internal component. The Chinese terms we might use here would be yi (意) meaning “thought” for the internal component and quan (拳) meaning “fist” for the external 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. The origins of this text go back to at least 1000BC, and it has formed a core component of Chinese thought ever since.

The basic progression is shown in Figure 1. At the outset, the universal origin, is Wuji (無極) meaning “without polarity”. This is symbolized by the empty circle at the top of the diagram. It 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”. At this point, yin and yang come into being, but they are not separate. They are so closely bound together, that they must be seen as a single force. 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. As yin and yang separate, the potential difference between them increases, and their relative energy grows.

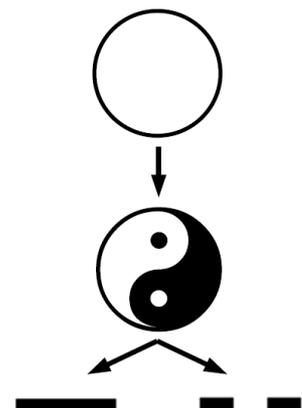


Figure 1: Wuji Gives Rise to Taiji and then Yin and Yang

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. In this stance we try and learn to connect ourselves to the ground, and to become aware of the spine as the principle axis of the body. The next step is the Taiji diagram, now yin and yang have arisen and we have movement. This movement could be Tiger Yawning or Cloud Hands. In these movements, the waist is turning and rotating, but the weight is still equal in both feet. The spine is upright, and forms the axis of the rotation. Finally, yin and yang separate and we have all the variety of movement that we may explore.