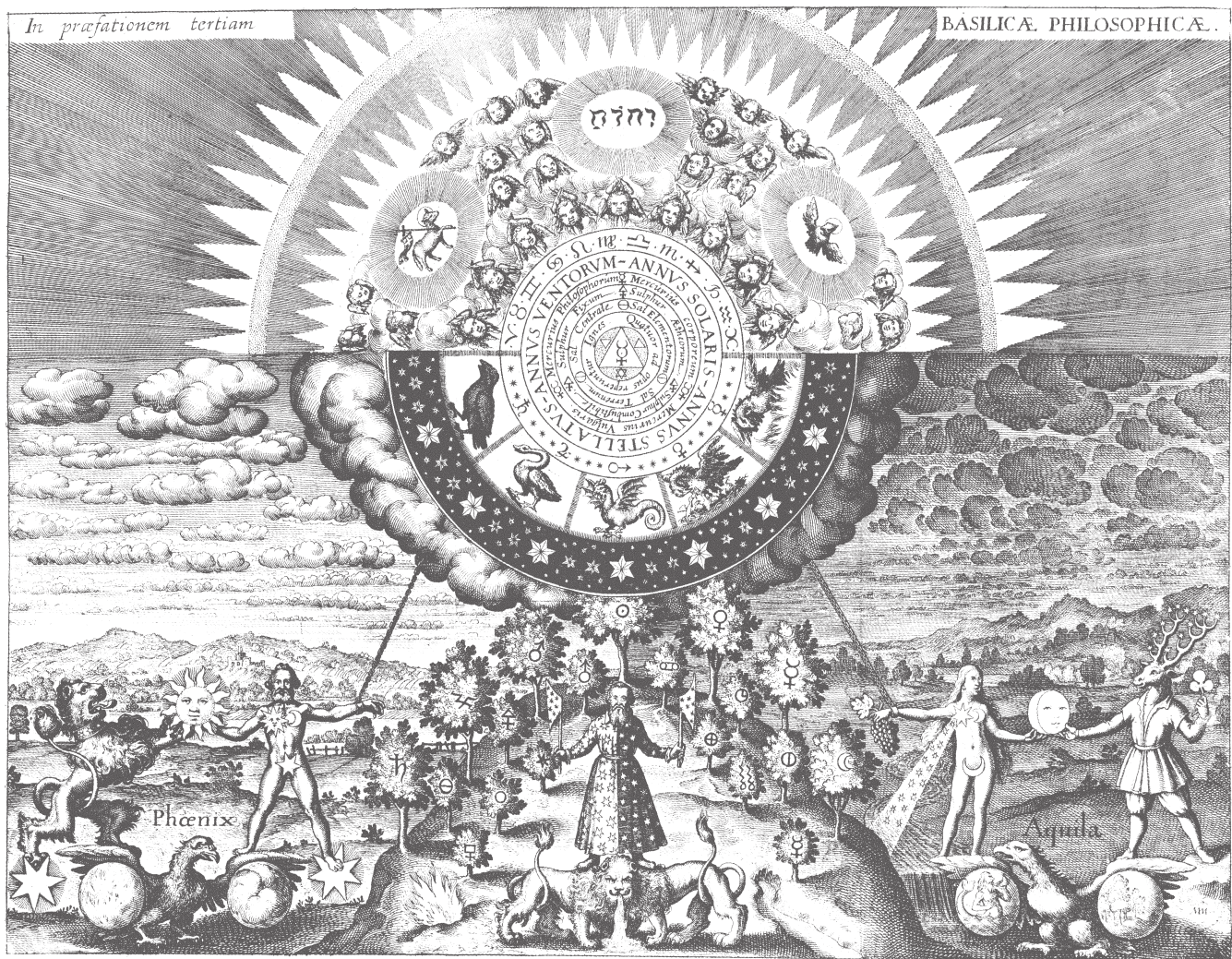


# YIN AND YANG REVISITED

by Peter Deadman



The things that are in the realms above  
Are also in the realms beneath. What  
Heaven shows is often found on earth.  
Fire and flowing water are contraries,  
Happy thou if thou canst unite them<sup>1</sup>.

The presentation of yin-yang theory in contemporary books on Chinese medicine tends to be fairly conventional, and varies little from book to book. It is mostly pragmatic in approach and is, understandably, limited to those aspects of theory which are applicable to medical practice. Yet yin-yang theory has relevance to every aspect of human exist-

ence. If health is defined as a state of harmony of yin and yang, we have to consider the meaning of such harmony within all the dimensions of a human being - physical, energetic, emotional and spiritual. This is a short and personal reflection on some of these aspects.

One of the simplest, and yet most powerful, qigong practices is Zhan Zhuang, or 'standing like a tree'. With the feet planted firmly on the ground, the toes gripping lightly, Yongquan KID-1 contacting the earth, the practitioner stands quiet and still. The knees are relaxed and thus bent, and the tailbone tucked in by gently tilting the pelvis so that the lumbar curve is somewhat flattened. In this position, the



practitioner is 'sitting', with the weight of the whole body sinking down towards the earth ("What is firmly established cannot be uprooted"). At the same time, the spine is lengthened, the fifth lumbar vertebra gently lifted from the sacrum and then each successive vertebra also lifted from the one beneath it, right up through the lumbar and thoracic spine and neck. The chin is tucked in and the skull is gently lifted upwards from the seventh cervical vertebra, and this rising movement through the spine finds its culmination and expression at Baihui DU-20 which is thus lifted towards the heavens as though an invisible hook had descended from the sky to connect with Baihui and was gently pulling it upwards (to avoid the tendency to tilt the head backwards unintentionally when extending the neck, it may be more helpful to imagine sky hooks attaching to the occiput). Thus within one posture, sinking down towards the earth and rising upwards towards the heavens are brought into harmony. The sinking qi below penetrates deep within the dark earth, like the roots of a giant tree seeking yin nourishment, penetrating even as far as the centre of the earth. The rising qi ascends towards the bright sky, far out into the universe, like the crown of a tree seeking yang light. A perfect expression of "feet on the ground and head in the clouds" or "fullness below and emptiness above".

Everything that is heavy sinks to the feet, like shaking a sack of grain, and then is absorbed into the earth; everything that is light naturally ascends. Reciprocally, it is the rising towards the heavens that allows the bright yang qi to descend and penetrate the body, whilst the sinking towards the earth allows the deep yin qi to be drawn upwards in yin-yang harmony. The body is still, relaxed and open so that all the channels are free for the mingling and circulation of these energies. This reflects the basic yin-yang principle "in all stillness there must be movement and in all movement there must be stillness".

When we talk of the yin qi of the earth in this context, we think of a nourishment that comes from deep within the earth, and rises upwards, as well as a cleansing process whereby pathogenic qi sinks downwards and is dissipated. The earth is the embodiment of physical substance or matter and the word "matter" has its roots in the Latin "mater" meaning "mother" - the primary symbol not only of nourishment, but also of receiving and processing that which is discharged, as the earth itself will absorb and transform dead and rotting plants and animals.

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;  
 What is her burying grave, that is her womb;  
 And from her womb children of divers kind  
 We sucking on her natural bosom find<sup>2</sup>.

Making contact with what is deep, nourishing, dark and hidden can connect all of us, male and female, with the wisdom of the unconscious, symbolised both as feminine, and as deep and below, in religion and myth. Many ancient stories tell of journeys to the underworld to seek wisdom or



to reclaim the feminine, for example that of Orpheus who had to descend to the underworld to reclaim his wife Euridice.

In the early Greek and pre-Christian period of Western religious history, yin earth and water belonged to the goddess, who was worshipped in caves (the entrances to the underworld), grottos, valleys, pools and ponds. Indeed in certain traditions of Christianity, it is said that Christ was born in a cave, symbolic of the union between sky god and earth goddess<sup>3</sup>. The Tao Te Ching, that revolutionary text in a world of male power says "The valley spirit never dies: It is the woman, primal mother"<sup>4</sup>.

In the course of time, the earth goddesses were supplanted by the sky gods through much of human culture. A typical myth marks this change: Greek legend telling how Hercules, the son of the sky god Zeus, wrestled with Antaeus, the son of Poseidon (god of the sea, springs, fountains, vegetation and nymphs). The giant Antaeus gained strength from the earth whenever he was thrown to the ground, and in order to defeat him Hercules had to lift him off the ground and crush him to death. Jehovah and Allah, the most powerful manifestations of the sky gods, sprang from the deserts of the middle east where dry earth, the vast sky and the unblinking sun dominate the landscape. Where the sky gods came to rule, what is yin and "below" came to be demonised as belonging to hell, spiritual darkness and despair.

The one-sided rejection of, and separation from, the lower in Judeo-Christian tradition is graphically described in Robert Graves' book *Hebrew Myths*:

God found the male Upper Waters and the female Lower Waters locked in a passionate embrace. "Let one of you rise" he ordered, "and the other fall". But they rose together, whereupon God asked, "Why did you rise together?" "We are inseparable," they answered with one voice. "Leave us to our love!" God now stretched out his little finger and tore them apart. The Upper he lifted up high; the Lower he cast down. To punish their defiance,

God would have singed them with fire ... The divided Waters then voiced their agony of loss by blindly rushing towards each other and flooding the mountain tops. But when the Lower Waters lapped at the feet of God's throne, he shouted in anger and tramped them under his feet ... Tehom (the Abyss, the Dark Night, the Lower Waters) has always since crouched submissively in Her deep abode like a huge beast, sending up springs to those who deserve them, and nourishing the tree roots"<sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting to compare this with the *Tao Te Ching*

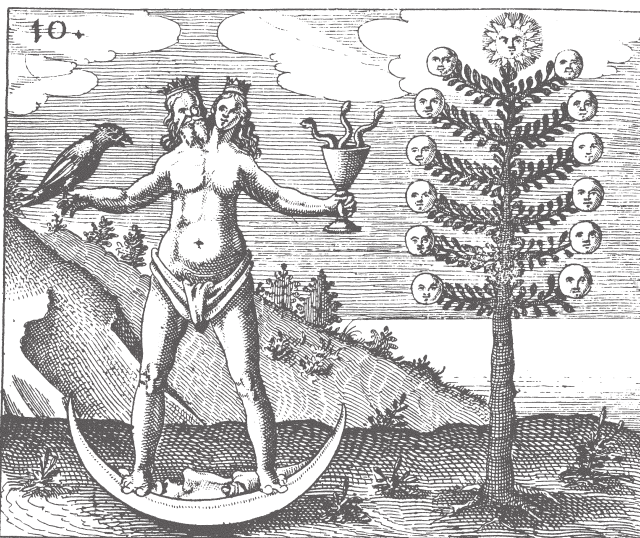
Opening and closing the gates of heaven,  
Can you play the role of woman? ...  
Giving birth and nourishing,  
Bearing yet not possessing,  
Working yet not taking credit,  
Leading yet not dominating"<sup>6</sup>,

and

Know the strength of man,  
But keep a woman's care! ...  
Know the white but keep the black"<sup>7</sup>.

Wisdom and inspiration come from both below and above, the inner and the outer, although they may be of a different quality. Earth energy embodies the wisdom of birth, nurture, unconditional love and acceptance, as well as the underworld, the interior, the unconscious and what lies hidden in the depths of the psyche. Sky energy embodies the wisdom of criticism and discrimination, vision, the power of the intellect, the conscious mind, the outer and the revealed. In shamanistic journeys, both the lower and the upper worlds are visited in search of knowledge, whilst the great European traditions of alchemy speak unequivocally of the male adept uniting with his "mystical sister" thenceforth symbolised as a hermaphrodite:

There are two fountains springing with great power,  
The one water is hot and belongs to the boy;  
The other water is cold and is called the virgin's fountain.  
Unite the one with the other, that the two waters may be one;  
This stream will possess the forces of each of them mixed together"<sup>8</sup>.



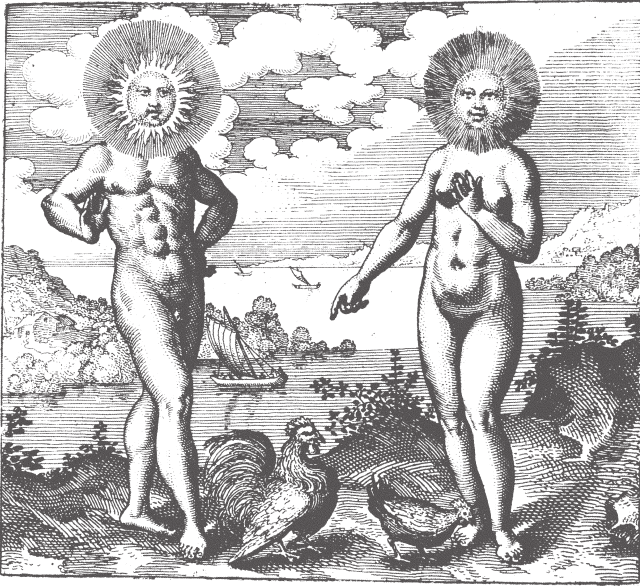
It seems to be true, however, that in cultures dominated by the sky gods, the spiritual journey may be seen in a one-sided way, climbing upwards to ever brighter and lighter realms of pure spirit, escaping from darkness and materiality. Likewise, most teachings on the attainment of happiness, health, and escape from suffering, focus only on enhancing the light and the positive. What is dark, buried and in the unconscious, is often ignored and rejected, because of course these are frightening realms.

Harmonising yin and yang to become a whole human being means facing up to the shadow and descending into the hidden dark realms of the earth/unconscious to seek nourishment, just as much as seeking to climb to the realms of heavenly light. Whether standing in simple qigong, or seeking to heal disease and pain in ourselves or others, wholeness means harmonising above and below, light and dark, the inner and the outer.

And "as in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm". If harmonising yin and yang may be seen as the path to wisdom and integration within the individual, it may also be seen as a way to heal the human race at a time when our ability to survive long-term is in question. From an age ruled by the feminine goddess of earth and nature, human culture - or at least the now-dominant western part of it - moved to the age of the masculine sky gods, which has tried to control and subdue the natural environment to a degree that now threatens our very existence. Yin-yang theory says "when any tendency reaches its extreme, it transforms into its opposite". Now too yang, we need to turn again towards the power of yin, to find sustainable balance.

### Notes and References

- 1 *Aureus tractatus de philosophorum lapide* quoted in *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, Johannes Fabricius, Diamond Books, 1976, page 166.
- 2 *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare.
- 3 The earliest non-scriptural reference to the birth of Christ is found in Justin Martyr, an early church father, and is dated about A.D. 140. He stated that Christ was born in a cave. Origen said the same in A.D. 248 as did Jerome, one of the most brilliant scholars of the early church.
- 4 *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 6, translated by Gia-Fu feng and Jane English, Wildwood House, 1972.
- 5 From Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (London: Cassell, 1964; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 40.
- 6 *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 10, translated by Gia-Fu feng and Jane English, Wildwood House, 1972.
- 7 *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 28, translated by Gia-Fu feng and Jane English, Wildwood House 1972.
- 8 *Atalanta fugiens*, Michael Maier (1568-1622). Quoted in *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, Johannes Fabricius, Diamond Books, 1976



***Illustrations***

- 1 *Basilica philosophica* by Matthaeus Merian, published in *Opus medico-chymicum*, Johann Daniel Mylius, 1618.
- 2 "The Earth is its nurse". From *Atlanta Fugiens*, Michael Maier, 1618.
- 3 From *Philosophica reformata*, Johann Daniel Mylius, 1622.
- 4 "The Sun needs the Moon as the cock needs the hen". From *Atlanta fugiens*, Michael Maier (1568-1622).