

Slow Down Before You Burn Out: *How to Find Balance Using Ancient Chinese Principles*

By Amanda Lewis, L.Ac.

So many of us feel chronically busy—almost as though we just can't stop. Why is it so hard to really relax? From the perspective of Chinese Medicine, in order to maintain stability in the outer world as well as in the body, there must be a healthy balance of both yin and yang activities. For many of us these days, the dynamic is clearly more heavily weighted toward constant movement. Disproportionate activity is considered excess yang, which over time can lead to a significant depletion of yin.

The Basics of Yin & Yang

The theory of yin and yang is a conceptual framework used for observing and analyzing the material world. One of the oldest Chinese classic texts, the *I Ching*, also known as *The Book of Changes*, states that: "Yin and yang reflect all the forms and characteristics existing in the universe." The theory does not refer to any concrete objective phenomena. Rather, it presents a method for observing and analyzing. The terms 'yin' and 'yang' refer to the two opposing principles observed in all relational phenomena, such as hot & cold, night & day, and masculine & feminine. They are simultaneously opposite and interdependent in nature.

The yin-yang nature of a phenomenon is relative, not absolute, because it is based on change. Yin may change into yang and vice-versa, and any phenomenon may be infinitely divided into its yin and yang aspects. Day is yang while night is yin, however each can be further classified into more subtle categories of yin and yang.

In the natural world, **yin** is related to: solid matter, water, cold, night, darkness, and downward & inward movement, or contraction. The opposites of these are **yang**: insubstantiality, subtle phenomena, fire, heat, daytime, light, and upward & outward movement, or expansion. By paying attention to our environment, we can develop a greater sensitivity to natural patterns of change and harmonize our lives according to those changes.

In the body, the organs that are dense, store vital substances, correspond to structure, produce fluid or blood, and have an overall cooling function are yin, while yang organs are hollow, tend towards warmth, transform food and drink, they're constantly filled and emptied, carry out the processes of transformation and emptying of wastes, and correspond to function. Yin is the stable structure through which yang transforms as dynamic movement.

Physiologically speaking, functional activity is yang, while nutrient substance is yin, and they act together always to protect the body and to maintain relative balance in the body as a whole. Yin processes are like the parasympathetic nervous system, which correlate to what is commonly known as the "Rest & Digest" processes. Yang processes are like the sympathetic nervous system, or "Fight or Flight." We are built to be in Parasympathetic mode 95% of the time, only going into sympathetic mode in emergency type situations. Otherwise, we're always on red

alert and in a constant state of emergency. The main point is that yin and yang are dynamic elements of a complete system: they are complementary but opposing forces that must work together to be in balance.

The Need for More Yin

While yang is always important in any relationship, current Western society overemphasizes the yang aspects of performance and efficiency. We overeat, move fast, and focus on the product, not the process. The value is to do a lot—often without necessarily doing it well. We want the bullet-point, text message, high-speed version of everything so we can move on to the next thing. But just being busier doesn't mean our experiences are more meaningful or rewarding.

On the other hand, yin is qualitative. It allows us to feel into situations so that we can sensitively respond and engage with them. In order to understand something, you have to listen and be in touch with it. And while it's possible to be attentive and act quickly, often times this doesn't happen. We privilege our own singular aims at the expense of more comprehensive solutions. Immediate, extreme independence supersedes real lasting interdependence.

But in order to function and be productive we must have enough energy or fuel, which comes from yin; adequate food, water, rest, and breath are essential for every activity. Otherwise, we deplete our yin and get stressed, sick, asocial, or disengaged, which can lead to many types of imbalances.

Chinese Medicine stresses balance as the universal key to good health. Balance between rest and exercise, in diet, in sexual activity, and in climate. Any long-term imbalance in any of these can become a cause of disease. Too much rest and not enough exercise, or too much exercise and work, or not enough sex and an unbalanced diet, or an unbalanced emotional life and extreme climactic conditions—all these can become causes of disease.

“Balance” is relative to every individual. What is too much exercise for one person may not be enough for another. What may overeating for someone engaged in mental work in a sedentary job could be too little food for someone engaged in heavy physical labor or athletics. Trying to conform to a rigid prescribed state of balance will likely just lead to greater imbalance!

Self-care: They Key to Cultivating Yin

The key to cultivating yin is self-care! Specifically, we can engage more regularly in naturally healing activities, such as acupuncture, yoga, Qi Gong, exercise, meditation, Tai Chi, conscious eating, and gardening.

In many Eastern traditions, the first priority in healing is awareness, or a relaxed focusing of the mind. In Chinese medicine they say that a strong bright spirit is what leads the healing process against disease; if we give ourselves the opportunity, we can better understand the nature of our own ailments and have the intuition and strength to work with them.

Here are some practical ways of cultivating yin that can make a big difference:

1. **Space:** Create a quiet space for yourself alone. It doesn't have to be fancy. Just find a spot that's easy to get to, set it aside, and make it yours.

2. **Time:** Set aside regular time for reflection, meditation, walks, or journaling. Shorter, but more frequent is often better than longer and less frequent.
3. **Interpersonal:** Regularly engage in meaningful social activities.
4. **Diet:** Nutrition plays a major role in how yin and yang are created, patterned, and utilized. Follow dietary recommendations that work for you, and try to stick with them.
5. **Sleep:** Get More.
6. **Water:** Drink More.
7. **Breath:** Deeper, Slower.
8. Remember that it's usually the smaller, simple things we do or say to one another that are meaningful. Big dramatic changes aren't always necessary or realistic: think globally, act locally.

Integration of Yin & Yang

While yang seeks to transcend the limitations of a situation, yin seeks to honor all its details. To transcend our limits requires that we fully embody all the various aspects of ourselves: we recognize them, include them, bring them together in balance, and thus create a more inclusive whole. Whatever we're excluding is therefore our limit. Including more details doesn't just mean having more things or being busier: it means using what you have well.

When taken to the extreme, yang is like fission—it burns everything up. You may try to go beyond the details by disregarding them entirely, but you end up not getting very far because you use up all your fuel, which is yin. On the other hand, extreme yin is like fusion. You become so immersed in the details that healthy boundaries are lost. By totally identifying with a situation, you get stuck there and cannot go any further.

How can we recognize if our yin and yang are in balance? If we're too yang, we might not even know we're out of balance, but everyone else probably will! If we're too yin, we may be so sensitive that everything knocks us over.

True balance is the ability to move flexibly through changing circumstances using what's already available to us, as individuals and as a human family. By more fully honoring our intricacies, we will be able to delight in greater freedom.

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