

The Alchemy of Chi

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Tai chi chuan has been said to be a superior martial art, an excellent exercise, a mode of moving meditation, and a practice that enhances well-being on a deep level. Less has been said about its kinship to spiritual alchemy, but this last aspect is, perhaps, tai chi's most important gift to the practitioner.

The Tai Chi Symbol and the CNS/ENS

To begin to understand how tai chi promotes spiritual alchemy, let's first look at the taijitu—the famous tai chi symbol—and its relationship to the physical mechanisms that enable the production of chi and, eventually, spiritual alchemy.

The taijitu normally is depicted as a static circle divided by a wavy line, with the area on one side of the line colored white and the other side colored black. (Figure 1) The larger portion of each side contains a spot of the opposite color. The two halves often are referred to as “fish,” and the spots of color as “eyes.” The bounding circle represents the totality of the universe—of reality. The white half, called yang, is indicative of energy or motion, while the dark half, called yin, is the space into or the matter upon which that energy or motion acts. The mutual interaction of the positive and negative forces of yang and yin—in differing strengths, amounts, and distribution—spawns the manifestations of multifold reality.

But the taijitu only seems to be static. In reality, it depicts a snapshot of motion, with the movement spinning clockwise, in the

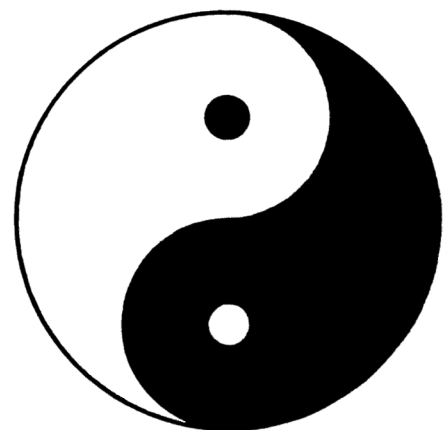


Figure 1 The taijitu depicts the major forces of opposition and cooperation that underlie the functioning of reality.

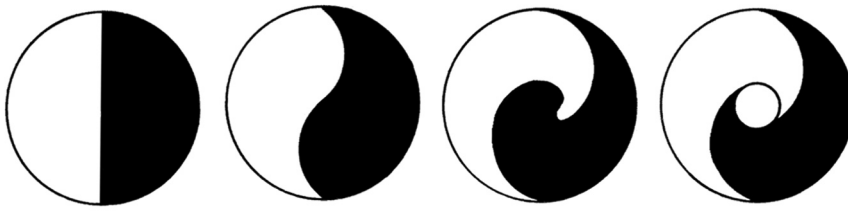


Figure 2 The tai chi symbol does not depict a static state but dynamic movement much like a spiral or vortex that spins around a central point.

direction of the yang fish’s head, round and round within the bounding circle. The greater the velocity of the spin of the two fishes, the more the spin will create a vortex at its center, much like hurricanes, tornados, or water spinning down a drain. (Figure 2)

Normally, the taijitu is depicted as in Figure 2, with the yang fish at the top, head to the right. But in reality, the spin can be reversed, with the yang fish’s head pointing to the left and the spin revolving counter-clockwise. When the spinning is reversed on every complete spin, the wavy line forms a figure eight. (Figure 3)

Although the Chinese who created the tai chi symbol could not know that an elongated figure eight laid on its side eventually would be used as a symbol for infinity, it is interesting that the infinity symbol crops up here within another symbol for the eternal void. Nor could they know that, centuries later, this figure eight also would depict an important aspect of tai chi chuan: the constant twisting and reversing hip/waist motion of the tai chi chuan exponent when viewed from above that is so important to the martial functioning of this art. What they must have known, however, was that the tai chi symbol describes something even more important: the two physiological structures that form the Microcosmic Orbit, which is the principal circuit for the creation and flow of chi within the body.

The two physiological structures that make up the Microcosmic Orbit are the Governing Vessel, which runs from the perineum, up the spine, and through the top of the head to the hard palate, and the Conception Vessel, which runs down through the front of the body to the perineum. As I show in my book, *The Wellspring: An Inquiry into the Nature of Chi*, chi is the flow or pulses of electromagnetism that accompany the sequential firing of electrical impulses or signals along nerves. The electrical flow or pulses are generated in a power center called the tantien, located in the area below and behind one’s navel. Most of the flow is channeled upward through the spine and brain, while some of it is channeled into the limbs at nerve centers located along the spine: into the legs at a location that corresponds to the sacral plexus and into the arms at the brachial plexus.



Figure 5 If the taijitu reverses on every other spin, it creates a figure eight.

Most people understand that the combined elements of the Central Nervous System (CNS)—brain and spine—contain most of the body’s nerves, but many do not realize that the intestines contain more neurons than the spine and entire rest of the body put together, not counting the brain. This places the major mass of this neural complex—called the Enteric Nervous System (ENS)—right in the tantien. In short, the ENS undoubtedly *is* the tantien. Along with the esophagus and stomach, the ENS forms the Conception Vessel, which is the yin portion of the Microcosmic Orbit, while the spinal column and brain form the Governing Vessel, which is the yang portion. And again, chi flow is the electromagnetic flow or pulse that accompanies the flow of bioelectricity through the Microcosmic Orbit and the twelve additional chi channels—called meridians—that run through the arms and legs (three in each limb). The totality of the chi “circulatory system” is referred to as the Macrocosmic Orbit.

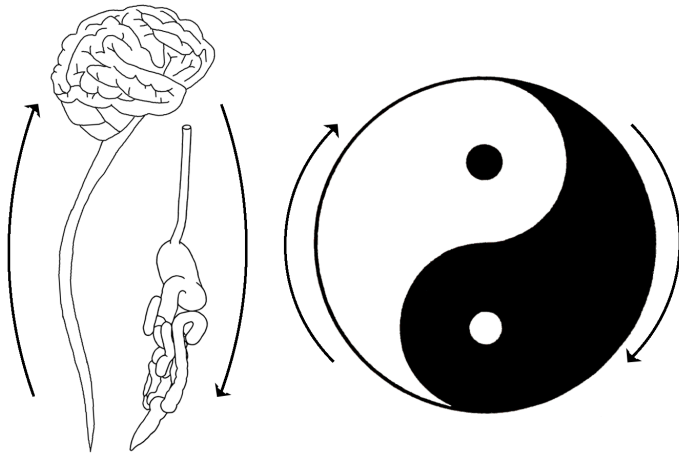


Figure 4 There is an amazing correspondence between the tai chi symbol and the composite physiological elements of the Microcosmic Orbit, including similarities in appearance, orientation, and direction of energy flow.

At first glance, it's difficult to discern commonalities between the CNS and the ENS, but a little closer look reveals an important similarity: Both the brain and intestinal mass exhibit intensely convoluted folding of the tissues. The reason for this in both instances is to increase the surface area of these organs. In the case of the brain, it is believed that the folding increases brain power, while the extensive folding of the intestines, and especially its lining, increases the surface area available for the completion of digestion and the absorption of nutrients. (1)

All this folding makes these two major nerve centers bear an uncanny resemblance to one another, but perhaps more to the point is the fact that, when we regard ourselves as thinking beings, we tend to “feel” that the seat of our consciousness resides somewhere inside our heads—not at any specific location, perhaps, but at some locus that shifts position slightly within our heads depending on circumstance. Likewise, when practitioners of chi-enhancing exercises experience themselves as motile beings, they tend to “feel” that the seat of their chi resides in an equally nonspecific but centralized locus within the mass of their gut. After all, the iconic image of the master meditating on his navel isn't an amusing aspersion to one who understands that the navel is the slightly off-center bull's-eye of the tantien.

If we map the circuit of the taijitu onto the circuit of the microcosmic orbit, their relative shapes and positions give us a very interesting visual image. (Figure 4) The central nervous system is a mass (brain) with a tail that descends (spine), while the enteric nervous system is a mass (entrails) with a tail that ascends (stomach and esophagus). Together they form a sort of rough tai chi symbol that is properly displayed, with the body of the yang fish (CNS) at the top and the body of the yin fish (ENS) at the bottom. Or rather, it is the tai chi symbol that is properly drawn and oriented to depict the physiological structure of the Microcosmic Orbit.

Add the idea of spinning, and the symbol actually depicts the chi flowing through the Microcosmic Orbit in the proper direction. In addition, the fishes' eyes can be seen as symbolic of the physiological attachment of the tail end of each fish—or nerve center—within the mass of the opposite fish: the tongue touching the hard palate and the tailbone connecting with the end of the intestinal tract through the intervening tissue of the perineum. Or, the eyes could symbolize the seed of awareness within each fish of the existence of the other. In any case, nothing is ever completely and totally yin or yang—at least not within the reality in which we live and within which everything is relative.

The visual similarity between the physiological constructs of the central and enteric nervous systems and the yang and yin fish of the tai chi symbol is too remarkable to be coincidence. The creators of the tai chi symbol

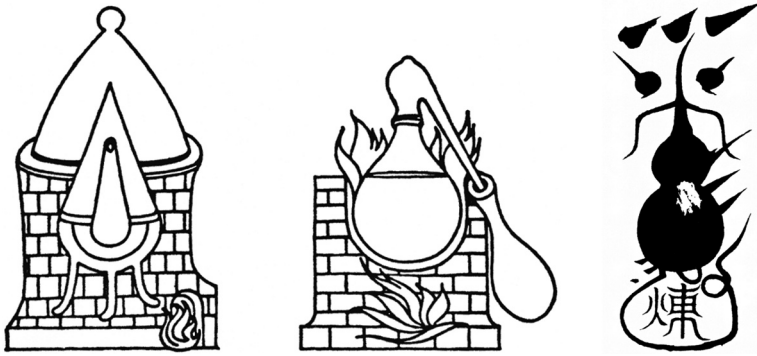


Figure 5 The similarities between the athanors of classical Western alchemy (left and center) and the Talisman of the Ruler of the South (right), an ancient Taoist symbol used in refining spiritual energy, are remarkable.

must have drawn it as a sort of esoteric guidepost to help initiates who seek to strengthen and mobilize their chi. In this, they were in line with a tradition in the West that arose completely separately but that had similar aims in mind: alchemy. And indeed, some of the precepts and practices of both arts overlap, and both frequently resort to symbolic representation to transmit their truths—symbolic representations that often have been distorted by those unaware of their true import.

Alchemy

Ultimately, chi enhancing exercises can be thought of as true alchemy. That is, in addition to being physical and mental disciplines, chi-enhancing exercises also are part of a more esoteric practice designed to induce spiritual awakening.

Most people look on the alchemist as a primitive chemist who attempted to distill a concoction of sulfur and mercury to create either gold or the fabled Philosopher's Stone—a substance believed to have the power to transmute base metals into gold or, in some traditions, that could be consumed like a drug to achieve enlightenment. Contrary to these popular misconceptions, true alchemy has nothing to do with metal, and even less with chemistry, and it does not produce a pill that can be consumed. Instead, the various elements, metals, and processes are really metaphors behind which ancient alchemists hid the truth of their research and methods, either out of fear of religious persecution or to keep the secrets of true power hidden from the unworthy. Later men, ignorant of the allegorical and metaphorical nature of the descriptions, took them as literal recipes and techniques and attempted to use them to transmute lead into gold, eventually developing the modern science of chemistry.

The classical description of alchemical work is that the alchemist mixes mercury and sulfur in a retort called an alembic or athanor (Figure 5), and repeatedly heats and cools the sulfur and mercury mixture with a fire underneath. After enough cooking and cooling, the refined result rises up the spout of the retort and is emitted as gold or as the Philosopher's Stone. From the viewpoint of modern chemistry, this description is ludicrous despite the fact that its misguided founders did their best to achieve these results.

Looking past the surface, however, the description begins to make sense. Sulfur is symbolic of the spirit, or active aspect of nature, while mercury is symbolic of the soul, or passive aspect of nature—the yang and yin. They also signify the Governing and Conception Vessels, respectively. These two aspects of nature—or major energy channels of the body—generally are present within the human being in an unrefined and separated state. However, when the mind and breath are concentrated in the tantien, as with the abdominal breathing techniques of meditation and chi-enhancing exercises such as chi kung or tai chi, a heat is produced in the body that is both physical and psychic. This is the fire that repeatedly heats the abdominal area—the tantien—

which is the retort or athanor in which one refines the active and passive aspects of one's being. The gold or Philosopher's Stone that is the refined product of alchemy is not a precious metal or a pill, and the base metal from which the gold is transmuted is not lead. Instead, the gold is enlightenment, transmuted from base nature.

Over time, with continual practice, the heat refines and condenses the conflicting aspects—the yang and yin—within the human being into a unified whole, producing a more powerful chi. Little by little, as the chi strengthens and its flow through the Microcosmic Orbit increases, coalesces, and comes under conscious control, its powerful pressure can be encouraged to rise through the Governing Vessel, which is the spout of the retort, opening the chakras, or power centers along the spine, as it rises. The sequential opening of the chakras enables or activates a form of energy that is higher than chi—spiritual energy. This spiritual energy also circulates through the Microcosmic Orbit along with the chi, and eventually, it fountains out of its bounding circuit through the crown chakra (Thousand Petal Lotus, or fontanel), linking one directly with Creation and resulting in enlightenment.

So chi-enhancing exercises are, essentially, methods of achieving health and well-being through refinement of body, awareness, and will by means of particular physical exercises that use the mechanism of abdominal breathing to strengthen and mobilize the chi and to induce and empower spiritual energy, hopefully leading not only to physical well-being and personal empowerment but to higher states of consciousness.

Pure alchemy in a run-on sentence.

Notes

1 Gershon, Michael D., MD, *The Second Brain: A Groundbreaking New Understanding of Nervous Disorders of the Stomach and Intestines* (Quill, 1998), p. 83.