

# Chapter One

## Yin and Yang and the Five Phases

The concepts of yin and yang and the five phases were devised by the ancient Chinese as a method of defining and explaining the nature of all phenomena. As such they represent the Chinese conception of Nature and were fundamental to all natural sciences; not only medicine, but astronomy, calendrical science, geography, and agriculture made extensive use of and were strongly influenced by these theories.

Chinese medicine is a vast treasury of knowledge. It is the product of millenia of practical experience in dealing with sickness. Yin and yang and the five phases have played a major role in the development of medical theory and represent the mainstay of physiology, pathology, pattern identification, and treatment.

### Yin and Yang

The theory of yin and yang, derived from **agelong** observation of nature, describes the way phenomena naturally group in pairs of opposites — heaven and earth, sun and moon, night and day, winter and summer, male and female, up and down, inside and outside, movement and stasis. These pairs of opposites are also mutual complements. Chapter 5 of *Essential Questions*<sup>1</sup> states, “Yin and yang are the way of heaven and earth.”

### The basic principles of yin-yang theory

All phenomena in the universe may be ascribed to yin and yang (cf. Table 1-1). Each individual phenomenon possesses both a yin and a yang aspect. Yin and yang are natural complements in the sense that they depend upon and counterbalance each other. Further, they are mutually convertible, since either may change into its complement.

The following principles may be observed in the application of the theory of yin and yang to medicine:

### *Yin and yang as the fundamental categories of all phenomena*

In medicine, the concepts of yin and yang are generally used to categorize both anatomic parts and physiologic functions. For example, the back is yang and the abdomen is yin; the six bowels are yang and the five viscera are yin; qi is yang and blood is yin; agitation is yang and moderation is yin (cf. Table 1-2). Similarly, diseases may be categorized according to yin and yang. For example, exterior, **repletion**,<sup>2</sup> and heat disorders are yang, while interior, vacuity, and cold disorders are yin.

Pulses may similarly be categorized: floating, rapid, and slippery pulses are yang, while deep, slow, and rough pulses are yin (cf. Table 1-3).

### *Yin and yang are divisible*

Every phenomenon may be classified as yin or yang in contrast to another. Each yin or yang phenomenon itself possesses both yin and yang aspects that may be further divided in the same way. This process of division may be carried on ad infinitum. The *Inner Canon*<sup>3</sup> states:

Yin and yang can be divided down to ten, and then further down to one hundred, to a thousand, to ten thousand and to a number so great as defies calculation; yet in essence all these are but one.

Medicine makes extensive use of this infinite divisibility of yin and yang not only in anatomy, physiology, and pathology, but also in pattern identification and treatment.

### *Yin and yang are interdependent*

Interdependence is the notion that yin and yang are mutually indispensable and engendering. Yin exists by virtue of yang, and yang exists by virtue of yin. Hence it is said:

Yang has its root in yin;  
yin has its root in yang.  
Without yin, yang cannot arise;  
without yang, yin cannot be born.  
Yin alone cannot arise; yang alone cannot grow.  
Yin and yang are divisible but inseparable.

In medicine, the concept of interdependence of yin and yang is widely used in physiology, pathology, and treatment. Blood and qi, two fundamental elements of the human body, provide an example: blood is yin and qi is yang. It is said that ‘ ‘qi engenders blood, ’ ’ i.e., blood formation relies on the power of qi to move and transform the digestate; ‘ ‘qi moves the blood, ’ ’ meaning that blood circulation relies on the warming and driving power of qi.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, ‘ ‘qi contains the blood, ’ ’ i.e., it keeps the blood within the vessels. The functions of engendering, moving, and containing the blood are summed up in the phrase, ‘ ‘qi is the commander of the blood. ’ ’ Conversely, qi is dependent on the provision of adequate nutrition by the blood; thus it is said that ‘ ‘qi has its abode in the blood, ’ ’ and ‘ ‘blood is the mother of qi. ’ ’ Because qi has the power to engender blood, treatment of blood vacuity involves dual supplementation of qi and blood. Profuse hemorrhage, where qi deserts<sup>5</sup> with the blood, is first treated by boosting qi, since blood generative treatment should not be administered until qi is secured. Similarly, formulae used to treat qi vacuity often include blood-nourishing agents to enhance qi supplementation.

Another example of the interdependence of yin and yang, seen in the development of diseases, is the principle that “detriment to yin affects yang” and “detriment to yang affects yin.” Since “without yang, yin cannot be born,” when yang vacuity reaches a certain point, the production of yin humor is affected, and yin also becomes vacuous. Most cases of chronic nephritis indicate yang vacuity, and are characterized by **water-swelling** due to the inability of the kidney to transform fluids? However, when the yang vacuity reaches a certain point, fluid formation is affected and a yin vacuity pattern evolves. This demonstrates the principle of “detriment to yang affects yin.” Similarly, yin vacuity, when reaching a certain peak, lead to simultaneous yang vacuity, since “without yin, yang cannot arise.” What is termed high blood pressure in Western medicine usually corresponds to hyperactivity of yang caused by vacuity of yin. In severe cases, this condition may develop into a dual yin-yang vacuity, illustrating the principle that “detriment to yin affects yang.”

### *Yin and yang counterbalance each other*

The yin and yang aspects of the body counterbalance each other. A deficit of one naturally leads to a **surfeit**<sup>7</sup> of the other, while a surfeit of one will weaken the other. In both cases, yin and yang no longer counterbalance each other, and disease arises as a result. In medicine, the notion of counterbalancing is widely applied in physiology, pathology, and therapy.

In physiology, for example, liver yin counterbalances liver yang, preventing it from becoming too strong. If liver yin becomes insufficient and fails to counterbalance its complement, ascendant hyperactivity of liver **yang**<sup>8</sup> develops. In the relationship of pathogens and the human body, yang pathogens invading the body will cause a surfeit of yang, which may lead to damage to yin humor and the emergence of a heat pattern. Conversely, a yin pathogen entering the body will lead to a surfeit of yin, causing damage to the body’s yangqi and the emergence of a cold pattern. These processes are described in *Essential Questions* in the following way:

If yang abounds yin ails, and if yin abounds, yang ails; when yang prevails there is heat, and when yin prevails there is cold.

In therapy, if a disease is caused by the heat pathogen, it is treated with cool or cold agents according to the principle that “cold can counteract heat,” meaning yin agents combat yang pathogens. Similarly, disorders caused by cold pathogens are treated with warm or hot agents, since “heat can overcome cold,” or yang agents can combat yin pathogens. This is summed up in a guiding principle of therapy, “Heat is treated with cold and cold is treated with heat.”<sup>9</sup> It is most often applied in patterns of repletion characterized by a surfeit of either yin or yang.

In conditions caused by deficit of yin or yang, the opposing complement is no longer kept in check and becomes disproportionately strong. If yin is vacuous, yang is no longer kept in check and its strength will grow out of proportion to that of yin. Such a condition is at root a yin vacuity, manifesting itself as vacuity heat. For this reason, treatment by draining fire and clearing heat alone is not only ineffective but also detrimental to the patient's health. It is replaced by a method such as enriching yin and downbearing fire, or fostering yin and subduing yang, whereby clearing heat and draining fire are secondary to enriching yin. By supplementing yin, the yang surfeit will naturally diminish. This explains the principles, “**Where** cooling is to no avail, water is lacking,”<sup>10</sup> and “invigorate the governor of water to counteract the brilliance of yang.” In the reverse situation, where yang is vacuous and fails to keep yin in check, there is exuberant yin cold in the inner body, manifesting in such forms as **clear**-food diarrhea, daybreak diarrhea, and water swelling. Here, treatment should aim not simply at dissipating the cold pathogen, but also at supplying the yang vacuity through such methods as reinforcing yang, boosting fire, and supplementing qi. This demonstrates the principle “where warming is to no avail, fire is lacking,” and “boosting the source of fire to eliminate the entrenched surfeit of yin.”

It is important to note the difference between the natural flux of yin and yang and a surfeit of one or the other complement. The natural flux of yin and yang refers to their normal relationship in the human body, which is one of constant fluctuation, rather than a rigid, immutable balance. “When yin rises, yang ebbs,” and “when yang swells, yin subsides.” This constant fluctuation is apparent in all the body's physiologic functions, such as fluid production and metabolism, the role of the five viscera in storing essential qi, and the role of the six bowels in conveyance and transformation of digestate. By contrast, ‘deficit’ and ‘surfeit’ denote the disturbance of the normal relative balance and failure to rectify the imbalance immediately. This is known as imbalance of yin and yang, which is the underlying cause of all disease.

### ***Mutual convertability of yin and yang***

In medicine, examples of yin-yang conversion are found mainly in pathology, where yang patterns can develop into yin patterns and vice versa. In practice, this means that heat patterns can either turn into or develop from cold patterns, and vacuity can give way to, or supercede, repletion.

For example, infectious hepatitis in its acute icteric phase is associated with damp-heat symptoms such as yellowing of the face and eyes, fever, nausea, vomiting, pain in the lateral **costal** region, oppression in the chest, dyspeptic anorexia, and a thick, slimy tongue fur. However, when the condition becomes chronic and develops into liver cirrhosis, the patient will show symptoms of vacuity such as spiritual lassitude<sup>11</sup> and general

lack of strength, dizziness, a dull pain in the chest and lateral **costal** region, no enjoyment of food, and a dark, red tongue. This indicates that the condition of repletion has turned into one of vacuity. If the condition develops further, stagnation of water-damp gives rise to **ascites**, manifesting as distention and fullness in the chest and abdomen, showing that the condition has reverted from vacuity to repletion. However, the resultant condition of repletion is different from the original one. In the initial condition, although pathogenic qi is strong, correct qi is still relatively unaffected, whereas in the resultant condition, pathogenic qi is exuberant in a body left frail by serious damage to the correct qi.

Cold-heat and vacuity-repletion conversion are subject to specific variables such as the strength of the patient's defenses, the nature of the pathogen, and choice of treatment. For instance, wheezing dyspnea (**asthma**)<sup>12</sup> may change from the original cold pattern to a heat condition, owing to repeated contraction of exogenous pathogens. In cases of pyelonephritis, the original disorder, which in Chinese medicine is expressed as damp-heat in the lower burner, may, owing to unthorough treatment, resistance of bacteria to drugs, or repeated relapses, develop into insufficiency of kidney yin, manifesting as yin vacuity fire effulgence, a form of vacuity heat.

## Medical applications of yin yang theory

The preceding explanation of the basic concept of yin and yang uses Chinese medicine as its general frame of reference. The following is a systematic analysis of the application of yin and yang in Chinese medicine.

### *Yin-yang analysis of anatomy*

Chinese medicine sees the human body as a whole, the component parts of which may all be analyzed in terms of yin and yang. For instance, the upper part of the body is yang and the lower part is yin; the exterior of the body is yang by contrast to the interior, which is yin. The surface of the body may be further divided, the abdominal surface being yin, and the back being yang. The internal organs may be divided into the five viscera, which are yin, and the six bowels, which are yang. *Essential Questions* states:

As to the yin and yang of the human body, the outer part is yang and the inner part is yin. As to the trunk, the back is yang and the abdomen is yin. As to the organs, the viscera are yin whereas the bowels are yang. The liver, heart, spleen, lung, and kidney<sup>13</sup> are yin; the gallbladder, stomach, intestines, bladder, and triple burner are yang.

Each of the organs itself has a yin and a yang aspect: there is heart yin and heart yang, kidney yin and kidney yang. The two primary elements of the human body, blood and qi, may also be thus categorized, blood being yin

and qi being yang. As to the channels, those passing over the back and the outer face of the limbs are yang, while those running through the surface of the abdomen and the inner face of the limbs are yin.<sup>14</sup> *Essential Questions* emphasizes the importance of yin and yang when it states, “The physical manifestation of human life cannot escape the duality of yin and yang.”

### *Yin-yang analysis of physiologic activity*

Yin and yang provide a general method of analyzing the functions of the human body. These are seen in terms of four categories of movement: upbearing, downbearing, issue, and entry. Upbearing and issue are yang, while downbearing and entry are yin. These movements serve to explain the interactions between blood and qi, and the organs and channels.

Physiologic processes are explained in terms of the natural flux of yin and yang. *Essential Questions* states:

Clear yang issues from the upper portals, while turbid yin issues from the lower portals; clear yang effuses {issues} through the striations, while turbid yin goes through {enters} the five viscera; clear yang fills the limbs, whereas turbid yin passes through the six bowels.

This explains how yang, the clear light qi of the body, ascends up to and out of the clear portals, passing outward to the surface of the skin and strengthening the limbs, and how yin, the heavy turbid qi of the body, flows in the interior, its waste products being discharged through the anus and the urethra. The four movements are considered to be interdependent and mutually supporting. Thus *Essential Questions* states, “Yin is in the inner body and protects yang; yang is in the outer body and moves yin.”

### *Yin-yang analysis of pathologic change*

In medicine, morbidity is explained in terms of yin-yang imbalance. Both pathogenic and correct qi can be analyzed in terms of yin and yang. There are both yin and yang pathogens. Yin pathogens cause a surfeit of yin, which manifests as a cold pattern; yang pathogens produce a surfeit of yang in the body characterized by repletion heat patterns. The “correct,” the body’s health-maintaining forces, comprise two aspects, yang qi and yin humor. Yang qi vacuity is characterized by vacuity cold patterns, whereas yin humor vacuity is characterized by vacuity heat. A vast number of diseases can be summed up in the following four phrases:

When yin prevails, there is cold; when yang prevails, there is heat. When yang is deficient, there is cold; when yin is **deficient**, there is heat.

The cause of these conditions is imbalance — surfeits or deficits — of either yin or yang.

## *General parameters of diagnosis*

Imbalance of yin and yang accounts for the emergence and development of disease. The essential nature of any disease may be analyzed in terms of yin and yang, despite the infinite number of possible clinical manifestations. Yin and yang form the basic parameters of eight parameter pattern identification: exterior, heat, and repletion disorders being yang; interior, cold, and vacuity disorders being yin. *Essential Questions* states, “Proper diagnosis involves inspecting the appearance and feeling the pulse and first differentiating yin and yang. ”

## *Treatment and drug use*

Because surfeit of yin or yang is the primary cause of any disease, treatment must involve restoring the balance by reducing superabundance and supplying insufficiency.

The nature and effect of drugs may also be classified according to yin and yang. For example, cold, cool, rich, and moist agents are yin, whereas warm, hot, dry, and fierce agents are yang. Agents pungent and sweet in **sapor** are yang, while those that are salty, bitter, sour, or astringent in **sapor** are yin. Agents whose qi and **sapor** are bland and mild are yang, and those whose qi and **sapor** are strong are yin. Agents that **upbear** and effuse are yang in nature, and agents that contract and astringe are yin.

Therefore, in diagnosis and treatment, it is necessary to identify yin-yang surfeits and deficits among the complex array of symptoms and determine the nature of the treatment. Agents must also be selected and used to make an appropriate synthesis of their yin and yang qualities. This means that a pattern due to a surfeit of yin or yang is one of repletion, and according to the principle of reducing superabundance, is treated by the method of drainage. A pattern essentially the result of a deficit of either yin or yang is one of vacuity, and in accordance with the principle of supplying insufficiency, is treated by the method of supplementation. If yin is in surfeit, the problem is one of repletion-cold, for which warm, pungent yang agents should be used to dissipate the cold. If yang is in surfeit, the pattern is one of repletion-heat, requiring cold, bitter heat drainers, which are yin in nature. If the pattern stems from an insufficiency of yin, yin-supplementing agents with a cooling and moistening effect are prescribed to nourish blood and fluids. Conditions stemming from a yang deficit manifest themselves as vacuity-cold, and are treated with yang drugs, warm or hot agents, to warm and supplement yang qi.