

HUUF TALK NOVEMBER 10, 2019

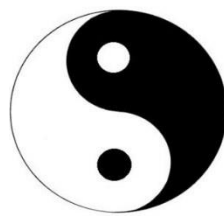
Yin and Yang/Feminine and Masculine:

Restoring Balance in Our World

Margaret Emerson

Five years ago, right around this time, I was walking along Jacoby Creek Road and conceived of the idea of getting together with Laotse and Ralph Waldo Emerson to talk about some things. I had just reread the eight translations of the *Tao Te Ching* that I'd accumulated over thirty-five years. During that time, I'd been studying and teaching Taoism, T'ai Chi, qigong, and meditation. I read the translations all at once—chapter one in all eight, then chapter two in all eight, and so on. In this way, Laotse came *alive*. I felt like I was getting to know him personally, and the differences in translations forced me to use my intuition to find my own sense of what he wants to say to me. Ralph Waldo (Waldo was his preferred name) is a relative of mine, so I had been reading him intermittently since grade school. I kept seeing parallels between them, and decided to invite Waldo to the party. What do age and time matter? Laotse was 2,500 years old, Waldo was over 200, and I was 65. All three of us were eager to talk, and we were all good listeners.

The writing of my book, *Laotse, Waldo, and Me*, took me to a place I didn't expect to go. (Isn't that one of the gifts of writing? It not only clarifies what we're thinking, it *evolves* our thinking.) Looking back, every chapter led to the final one on Balance. From our initial conversation about the Tao, to chapters including The Sage, The Inner Guide, Wu Wei (or effortless effort), Illusions, and Unlearning, each section was a stone laid to build a foundation for my new understanding of the concept of balance in human life.



The Taoist symbol of balance is beautiful and strong. If we spend time with it, it teaches us about the constant dance between polarity and unity. We call it yin-yang, the Chinese call it *t'ai chi*. The black represents yin/feminine characteristics and the white yang/masculine characteristics.

At first it surprised me—because it seemed unbalanced—that Laotse repeatedly describes the Tao *itself* as female. Laotse uses the word “Female,” as well as “Mother of All Things,” “primal mother,” “the feminine,” and “Mystic Female” to characterize the Tao.

He calls the Tao the “valley spirit”¹—the valley symbolizing the receptive female or yin (while its opposite, the mountain, represents the assertive male or yang). Laotse advises being *aware* of the male (the white, the light, the mountain), but stresses the importance of *keeping to* the female (the black, the dark, the valley).²

And the *Tao Te Ching* is strewn with other yin (feminine) images. Water is a recurring example: “The best of men is like water,”³ Laotse tells us, and “There is nothing weaker than water / But none is superior to it in overcoming the hard.”⁴ Water is a model of Wu Wei, the doctrine of effortless effort and a yin approach to life. It mates with gravity, harmonizes with it, and wouldn’t bother trying to flow uphill. We can observe water and learn how to get where we want to go with the least possible effort, making nature our ally.

Emerson perceives the Over-Soul (which is what I interpret as his name for the Tao) as subtle and quiet, having essentially yin characteristics. Likewise, Laotse describes the Tao as mild, bland, and unobtrusive. He believes it is by keeping to the feminine that we are able to return to our Edenic home in the “Primordial Nothingness,”⁵ the “Uncarved Block”⁶—the Tao.

How could the Tao be female? How could it be yin? It gives birth to yin and yang; it contains them; but it precedes these distinctions. Why would Taoists have what seemed to me to be a one-sided perception of something that has no sides?

I initially explained this emphasis on the feminine as a subconscious reaching for a kinder, gentler way of being than the constant instability and violence of Laotse’s time. (Even then, by the way, he could see that intellectual and technological advances were far outstripping any moral

progress.) So seeing the Tao as female would be like Christians looking to the Virgin Mary for comfort and help instead of appealing to an angry, vengeful God. But my thinking deepened and I realized this is a supremely important and complex concept.

Waldo says everything we need comes to us. In the midst of my writing, Tom Torma gave me a book called *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture*. One glance told me it would be enormously important to my thinking and writing. It's a response by Chinese scholars to Riane Eisler's 1987 book *The Chalice and the Blade* and I knew I had to read her book first.

I was aware from studying art history in college and from reading *When God Was a Woman* by Merlin Stone a few decades ago that humans hadn't always lived in an unrestrained patriarchy as we do now. Eisler describes a Neolithic culture ("the chalice") that lasted from about 10,000 BCE to about 3,500 BCE in Europe. It was what she calls a "partnership" culture—a society in which the sexes are linked instead of ranked, a very equalitarian society with an emphasis on mutual dependence and sharing. These prehistoric cultures harvested wild and domestic crops and kept domesticated animals; they had highly developed arts and crafts and paid attention to the design and decoration of their clothing. They did not make weapons. Nomadic patriarchal tribes ("the blade") gradually invaded and subsumed the chalice cultures. That's where we've been for the last 5,500 years—in what Eisler calls the "dominator" culture in which men dominate women, children, other men, and (we know now) the planet.

Eisler's findings spurred Chinese scholars to research their own Neolithic Age to discover if a partnership culture had existed in China as it had in Europe. Sixteen authors—archeologists, historians, and philosophers—published their findings in 1995, in time for the World Conference on Women in Beijing. Eisler was invited to write the foreword to *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture*.

China did indeed have an ancient and long-lived goddess-worshipping partnership culture. Not only did it exist in the Neolithic, but it stretched into the first dynasty—the Xia (2070-1600 BCE). And there are, today, *living examples* of the partnership model in Yunnan, the mountainous province in China's southwest corner. The rugged, inaccessible terrain has made it possible for isolated pockets of this culture to survive. The Musuo people worship a supreme goddess and their society is matrilineal, communal, and equalitarian. The seminal

feminine/masculine, yin/yang relationship—sex—is purely consensual, free-flowing, and can be either short- or long-term. No individual is dependent on any other individual for economic support or help in raising children. People live in clans and the village really does raise the children. Unlike today's patriarchal Chinese society, there is no such thing as mercenary arranged marriage, abandoned children, children born out of wedlock, or unwanted widows.⁷

Mr. Wang Bo, a philosopher at Beijing University, concludes that Taoism has its genesis in these feminine-based societies. He names the core values of the Xia Dynasty: esteem for kindness, honesty, and trustworthiness; a love for simplicity, frugality, and plain living; and an attraction to water and the color black⁸—both yin elements. (The Chinese have positive associations with black and to this day wear white to funerals.) These are the same values upheld in the *Tao Te Ching*. Mr. Wang Bo also notes that Laotse interprets the Tao *itself* as feminine.⁹

Knowing about the Neolithic matrilineal, equalitarian societies made Laotse's nostalgia for a Golden Age, what he called the "Grand Harmony,"¹⁰ seem more realistic to me, and even *real*. He describes this as a time when people led simple, agrarian low-tech lives and were good without *knowing* they were good—no self-conscious self-righteousness. Some scholars think Laotse's Grand Harmony harked back to a time of unusual peace and prosperity that occurred around 1000 BCE—500 years before he lived. But I think he was harking back a lot further than that—to the Xia Dynasty and to the Neolithic. Taoism preserves the idea of *a real possibility for us*—a civilization in which the feminine principle, embodied in all genders, takes the lead and the masculine principle acts *in the service of* all those qualities we associate with females—compassion, cooperation, and humility.

In the latter chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*, Laotse lays out how the feminine principle applies to governments. Rulers are advised to take on the female role by leading from behind—tuning into and being guided by the opinions and feelings of the people. The humble role works best in dealing with other governments too. Powerful countries win the loyalty of weaker ones by being gracious and avoiding bullying, aggressive behavior. A humble stance disarms hostility between opponents. Only a solid rooting in the Tao can prevent a strong country from falling into dangerous arrogance.¹¹

In a confrontation between countries, Laotse knows that remaining tranquil and compassionate is paramount. A government resorts to violence only when all other options are exhausted, and must be reserved in the fighting. Soldiers return from war as if returning from a funeral—lives have been lost. There's no spiking the football in the end zone. Opponents are not demonized. Demonizing others causes a country to lose its very soul; it becomes its own enemy.¹²

Every chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* advising us how to live urges us to lead with the feminine—lead our own lives and be an influence on others guided by the character of yin, not yang. We cannot be yangless. That side of us has to be well developed, no matter what our gender, so we can have agency within ourselves and in the world. Yet *the organizing principle is yin*.

The constitution of the Sage is yin on the outside and yang on the inside. Laotse describes her as authentic, unpretentious, self-deprecating, gentle, easy-going, and nonconfrontational; she guards her three treasures—love, don't overextend, and don't try to be first. It takes real fortitude to live out these traits, to forge against the current of a mainstream society that doesn't value them and misperceives them as signs of weakness. The Sage is brave without knowing she is brave because she is only instinctively adhering to her nature. Isn't this the ideal? To accept being true to oneself as a *given*—even under united opposition. The Sage's hardness supports her softness. She has “belly”; she has hara, as the Japanese refer to it.

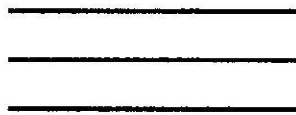
When the world talks about “strong man” leaders, they're talking about the weakest of people, people without character, who are overcompensating by being belligerent and violent. Laotse says that “Who is calm and quiet becomes the guide of the universe.”¹³ If the universe will only recognize them.

My surprise at Laotse's describing the Tao as female reminded me of another revelation I ran across in the *I Ching*, the *Book of Change*. More than 3,000 years old, it predates the *Tao Te Ching*. Its authors perceived an unchanging pattern of change operating in the cosmos and in human affairs. They distilled these infinite permutations into sixty-four hexagrams—six lines stacked one on top of the other. The top three lines and the bottom three lines form distinct trigrams. Each line, each trigram, and each hexagram is a stage in a process and has its own personality and influence. Based on a binary system, a line is either broken (_ _) or

solid (_____). Because a broken line can morph into a solid line and vice versa, every part in the hexagram is a moving part.

At crossroads in our lives we can “cast” the *I Ching* using coins or yarrow sticks to determine which path is most in accord with prevailing circumstances and thus which path is most likely to lead to success. We may be advised to advance, retreat, or sit still.

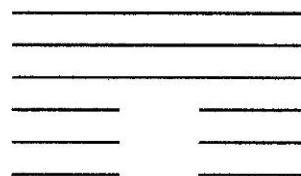
It’s Hexagrams Eleven and Twelve that puzzled me. The trigram known as Ch’ien, composed of three solid lines, symbolizes heaven, male, active, and yang:



The trigram known as K’un, composed of three broken lines, symbolizes earth, female, receptive, and yin:

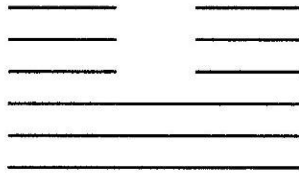


You would think that heaven over earth, yang over yin, would be an auspicious hexagram:



After all, when we stand outside, heaven *is* above and earth below. Yet it’s just the opposite. The name for this configuration (Hexagram Twelve) is P’i, meaning stagnation and obstruction. Because heaven naturally rises upward and earth naturally sinks downward, they pull apart, polarizing into extremes. There is no mingling, no intercourse, no communication between them; and therefore no harmonizing or balancing of yin and yang. Under these circumstances, mean-spirited people advance while superior people are forced to retreat. Hexagram Twelve is one of the least favorable hexagrams a person can draw.

The preceding hexagram, Eleven, reverses the trigrams, putting earth (yin) on top and heaven (yang) on the bottom:



It's called T'ai, meaning peace. Instead of pulling apart, yin naturally sinks downward into yang and yang naturally rises upward into yin. They mix and pervade each other, creating a balanced blend of yin and yang. This hexagram augurs the advancement of superior people while mean-spirited people are forced to retreat. It's one of the most favorable hexagrams.

I see now that Hexagrams Eleven and Twelve express what Laotse is saying throughout the *Tao Te Ching*: "The big and strong belong underneath / The gentle and weak belong at the top."¹⁴

At the close of my T'ai Chi classes, we bow and salute each other. In our tradition, the right hand makes a fist and on the left hand, the thumb is tucked in against the palm as a symbol of humility and the fingers are pressed together as a symbol of friendship. The left hand covers the right. Yin over yang. Trained martial artists know you don't approach people fist-first; you approach them with humility and friendship. And as Laotse recommends, you keep your weapons hidden.¹⁵

Building a society around the masculine principle while suppressing the feminine principle is unsustainable. It results in a progressively less humane and more destructive culture—destructive to all its members and their environment. Right now we're in the position of always trying (mostly unsuccessfully) to put the brakes on a rampaging yang and suffering its ravages. There's no chance for harmony or balance between yin and yang under these conditions. Without a lid, yang erupts, overflows like molten lava, wiping out everything in its path. For the United States, Donald Trump is the natural end-product. He's the perfect case in point to prove Laotse's argument that the proliferation of laws is a sign of the decline of a society: Trump violates conventional norms and restraints, so more laws will have to be devised to keep him and others from doing things people before him didn't need laws to persuade them to do.

Balance works in mysterious ways. On the face of it, it may seem unbalanced to prioritize either yin or yang. But all we need to do is look around us to see that organizing around yang results in ruinous imbalance.

Yin has to lead and direct yang. That's how balance—and the preservation of harmonious life—is achieved.

Sometimes I think the human species peaked in the Neolithic Age. It seems so improbable that we could get back to Laotse's Grand Harmony. To start, there are too many of us, and most of us don't live in small villages. Knowledge and science have exploded and we are gluttons for higher and higher technology. We have no restraint, no morals or ethics to guide or rein in our intellectual and material appetites. Like children, we are unable to regulate ourselves. And we're becoming further and further estranged from our own holistic nature and the natural world around us. Instead of living in the Grand Harmony, we're living in what Laotse calls "the great hypocrisy."¹⁶

Without a sea change, we're on a course to bomb or global-warm ourselves back to a more primal state. And if we do, is there any guarantee we would remake our societies on the partnership model instead of the dominator model—especially under such harsh and traumatizing circumstances? Maybe this is our life cycle. Humans will keep being who they are, acting out their fate, like all flora and fauna. Population growth magnified by science and technology, followed by population collapse brought about by a tearing away from our roots in the Earth and the Tao. Are we doomed to endlessly ride the same Ferris wheel? Change will happen. Do we have the compassion, wisdom, resourcefulness, and resilience to make it a life- and love-enhancing one?

I see some reasons for optimism. The Women's March was born in and fueled by outrage, yet it upheld love and peace. It was the perfect example of yin leading, supported by yang. The world recognized and joined in, and continues to in succeeding Marches. The instinct for self-preservation has catalyzed millions of humans across the planet to demand the return to a balanced, sustainable partnership culture. It's natural that women will be taking the lead now, joined by people of all genders who comprehend the flip that has to take place. *In its most extreme state, yang gives rise to yin. In its most extreme state, yang gives rise to yin.*

The #MeToo movement—the outing of so many men in government, industry, academia, and private life for sexually harassing and abusing women—is a welcome sign of genuine revolution. I'm continually astounded by the sudden about-face of society—not only *believing* survivors of sexual assault, but exacting serious *consequences* for perpetrators. The confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court

was a last-ditch pulling out of all the stops by an angry, besieged patriarchy, and will further awaken the sleeping dragon. The zeitgeist is indeed reversing, and I believe the trend will gain momentum over the next generations.

The LGBTQ movement is also part of the feminine tsunami. It is the feminine principle at work in the form of noninterference—Wu Wei—allowing people to be who they *are* instead of mindlessly, cruelly flattening them into the cookie-cutter shapes of patriarchal convention—extreme male or extreme female. One of the precious gifts of the LGBTQ movement is that it frees everyone to be whatever combination of masculine and feminine they want, at any given time. Who's to say who's a man and who's a woman? The Goddess is never just the Goddess; the God is never just the God. We can't afford to be separating, segregating, and dividing ourselves anymore. We just don't have time for it. We need all hands on deck if we're going to make this historic transformational effort and turn the Titanic.

Because it enfolds all the other movements for human rights, human dignity, peace, and love, the global upwelling of the feminine spirit gives me hope.

Notes

1. Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, transl., *Tao Te Ching*, (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1972), Ch. 6.
2. Lin Yutang, transl. and ed., *The Wisdom of Laotse*, (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1948), Ch. 28, p. 160.
3. Lin Yutang, Ch. 8, p. 76.
4. Lin Yutang, Ch. 78, p. 306.
5. Lin Yutang, Ch. 28, p. 160.
6. Arthur Waley, transl. and ed., *The Way and Its Power: Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, (New York: Grove Press, 1958), Ch. 28, p. 178.
7. Min Jiayin, ed., *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture: Gender Relations and Social Models*, (Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 1995), pp. 230-231.
8. Min Jiayin, pp. 590-591.
9. Min Jiayin, p. 592.
10. Lin Yutang, Ch. 65, p. 285.
11. Laotse, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 61, various translations.
12. Laotse, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 69, various translations.
13. Lin Yutang, Ch. 45, p. 223.
14. Lin Yutang, Ch. 76, p. 305.
15. Lin Yutang, Ch. 36, p. 191.
16. Jonathan Star, transl. and ed., *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2001), Ch. 18, p. 31.

Reading for November 10, 2019 HUUF Service

Based on Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*

Margaret Emerson

Every person in this room is saturated with the dominator culture and has been damaged by the dominator culture. Misogyny, racism, poverty, constant war, and environmental degradation, (among other pestilences), are all insidious symptoms of this root disease. The common denominator is the dominator.

As I prepared for Multicultural Transformation Day by reading Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, my reading was constantly shadowed by a growing awareness of how applicable DiAngelo's keen insights were to the dominator culture. I kept wanting to replace "white fragility" with "male fragility" or, more inclusively, "dominator fragility"—because we can all get sucked into the ubiquitous dominator pattern. The substitution fit, and making that substitution drives home the intransigence of the problem—*what we're up against* if we want to break down the dominator culture and replace it with a partnership culture.

On pages 123-124 of *White Fragility*, DiAngelo deftly exposes what people of color are up against when they challenge white supremacy. She enumerates the frustratingly clever ways in which whites sidestep and deflect any blame, any feelings of guilt, any discomfort, and any need to change. I'm going to *misquote* that list by substituting "dominator" for "racist" or "white." The version I'm about to read precisely reflects my own experience—the constraints operating on me (including, at times, here in the Fellowship). See if this sounds familiar to you:

The dominator culture's first rule is don't challenge us. If you choose to break that rule, then there is a host of other rules the dominator culture requires you to follow:

1. Maintain a calm tone. Being emotional invalidates the feedback and it can be dismissed.
2. The underlying assumption between you must be that the person you want to give feedback to is not actually a dominator.

3. Feedback must be given immediately. If you wait too long, the feedback will be discounted because it was not given sooner.
4. You must give the feedback privately to protect the person from any embarrassment. If you don't do this, you become the transgressor.
5. Be indirect. Directness is insensitive, will invalidate the feedback, and require repair.
6. The person must at no time be made to feel uncomfortable.
7. Highlighting the person's dominatoriness ignores the various forms of oppression that person has suffered and invalidates your feedback.
8. You must acknowledge that the dominator's intentions are always good and agree that those good intentions invalidate your feedback.
9. Suggesting that a dominator's actions have had a destructive impact means you have simply misunderstood the person. The dominator can then explain their actions until you acknowledge that you were the one who misunderstood—you were the one in the wrong.

DiAngelo asserts (and again I'm tweaking her language) that from the dominator's position of social, cultural, and institutional power and privilege, they should be able to handle feedback (meaning criticism). If they can't handle it, *it's on them* to build their receptivity and responsiveness.

If we actively intervene, no one will escape discomfort. Not the anti-dominators or the dominators (and we can all be intermittently one or the other). Dominators are fragile, brittle, and break easily. Their egos are inflated, but made of glass. When that glass shatters, they will make sure the shards wound people around them. They'll take their football and go

home or they'll be angry, resentful, and possibly vindictive toward the person who pierced their bubble.

In many ways, this Fellowship is a beacon of light in the search for another way of being, but we have our work cut out for us right here. We have to be actively anti-dominator in the way Robin DiAngelo exhorts us to be anti-racist. It's up to all of us to see it, call it out, intervene, and change our *own* behavior. This takes energy and flexibility.

On any given HUUF project, leaders will emerge and followers will emerge. Each one of us needs to be able to fulfill both roles and be ready to switch from leader to follower (from yang to yin) or vice versa when it's appropriate. What gender I present as is not important. Do I embody compassion, cooperation, and humility? How can I best serve? Practicing deep listening is crucial to knowing what's the appropriate role to play at any given time.

There's a difference between leading and dominating. It's on us to learn to make this distinction, to wrestle with our selves, our egos, our habitual ways of relating.

This is a very big boat that needs to be rocked—in the interest of preservation of so many species on this planet, including our own. We have to be brave and intervene against dominator behavior, regardless of what the fallout might be. We have to break the pattern. I think 5,500 years of this is enough.