

Earth Water & Yin-Yang Kai-He: Primer

In Taiji, the ideas of yin-yang and kai-he (open-connect) can guide our practice to help us feel more grounded, balanced, free, and integrated. People gradually experience these benefits from Taiji permeating their daily life activities and even challenging situations calling for peak performance.

By combining these traditional Taoist/Taiji ideas of yin-yang and kai-he with simple science, it can be easier to appreciate how widely applicable these benefits are. As we will discuss here, we'll see yin-yang in our interaction with the earth and kai-he in the quality of water. This way, we can more readily understand how yin-yang and kai-he can help everyday life, which makes it easier to experience the life benefits of Taiji.

Earth & Yin-Yang

One way to understand yin-yang is by looking at the meaning of the Chinese characters. Yin-yang (陰陽) can depict the shady side and sunny side of a mound, representing how seemingly opposite aspects (such as brightness and darkness) can be complementary and can even arise together. This is a way that yin-yang serves as a reminder of natural balance.

We can feel this yin-yang effect in everyday life, such as standing on earth. Falling down and rising up are opposites, yet, when we feel both fall and rise as we stand, we can stand with more ease. We're feeling how we are standing together with the earth—with earth's gravity and earth's support.

Without yin-yang to guide us, we may tend to focus on resisting falling, instead of doing together with the earth. In horse stance, for example, we can stand longer more comfortably when we feel yin-yang of lay down and support. Our weight pushes the ground and the ground pushes back equally and oppositely. The fall and rise we feel in the horse stance is one example of action-reaction, which says that, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

With the guidance of yin-yang, we can know and increasingly feel how free-fall gives the support at the soles of our feet. This can encourage us to feel more of a sense of letting go as we stand. At the same time, though, we will be experiencing a greater sense of grounding. The freedom of letting go and the grounding of connection are happening together as one yin-yang.

In daily life, we can feel this letting go as laying down a burden. For example, if we are carrying around a cup of tea and then we lay the cup on a table, there is naturally a sense of laying down into support. We could also feel this in our shoulder area. Just as we would lay down a cup of tea on a table, we can also let our shoulders lay down onto the support of our torso. This is how yin-yang can help us release tension in our shoulder area while working on the computer, for instance.

Once we are beginning to feel laying down the burden in our shoulders and feet, we can expand this feeling throughout our body. After all, the yin-yang of action-reaction is going on everywhere as lay down and support throughout our body. As we'll see, we can also feel this pervasive yin-yang of letting go and grounding as parts of a waterlike flow which is open yet integrating.

Water & Kai-He

In Taiji practice, our movements become more fluid and also more integrated so that we feel our movement as flowing like a great river. Taoist and Taiji ideas sometimes draw inspiration from water, with encouragement to be more like water. Water is so free. It's so responsive.

This quality of water is pervasive in other things, such as our body, as we'll see through the Taiji terms of kai-he (開合). *Kai* can mean "open," while *he* can have the meaning of "connect" or "integrate." These qualities are apparent in the freedom of water and integration of river.

When a raindrop falls into a river, the ripples propagate as the water around the raindrop responds, then the water around that responds, and so on. It propagates smoothly through these successive nearest-neighbor interactions.

From science, we can also know that our movements are not different. Our body is also *kai* like water and *he* like river. Interaction between any two parts of our body is happening through successive nearest-neighbor interactions, like ripples and water waves. This nearest-neighbor interaction, called the principle of locality, applies in physics. (This includes gravity in general relativity and effects—not interpretations—in quantum mechanics.)

For example, if we are making a circular movement in a silk-reeling exercise, each small part of our body is free and open. By feeling this *kai* of our body, we also feel more of our whole body participating in the integrated movement, which is *he*. As a result, our movement can manifest more power while feeling flow and ease.

With the guidance of kai-he, it can be easier to uncover the feeling of refined water quality in our movement, helping us feel releasing like water and connecting like river. We know from simple science that there's practically no end to how much we can release to the refined and free nature of our movement. Because Taiji practice helps us to feel this, it can help us feel more ease and flow in daily life activities, such as walking and standing.

Yin-yang Kai-he Living

Even when we stand while waiting, we can practice and apply yin-yang kai-he and experience the benefits in our everyday life. How nice it can be to use the odd moments of waiting as a chance to feel how letting go and grounding arise together. As we've seen, the yin-yang of action-reaction is going on everywhere from our head to our feet as we stand. It's going on as this cascade of laying down into support all through our body. We could even imagine a waterfall cascade, such as the free-fall of water around our shoulders and body in a shower, so that we could let go a bit more into laying down the burden. With the reminder of yin-yang, we can more readily enjoy this letting go while feeling more grounded at the same time.

Just as letting go comes with grounding, we can also remind ourselves with kai-he how releasing comes with connecting. As we've seen, any two parts of

our body are connecting through all the refined nearest-neighbors laying down and responding to each other. This is like the cascade line of a current in a river. There are refined, continuous cascade lines from our fingers all the way to our toes. While walking about in daily life, we can let ourselves practice, feel, and enjoy this ease of release and integration in our body.

The benefits of feeling more free and open yet also more integrated can be extended to our mind as well. For example, refined cascade lines in our body can include our nervous system, which can be seen as a part of qi. By applying yin-yang kai-he to simple physiology of how our body and mind functions, it can be easier to feel the body-mind connection, as further discussed in [the Way of WaterRiver primer](#).

Sometimes in life we may feel as though we're stuck or separate in our body and mind. By understanding and practicing yin-yang kai-he, though, we can find and uncover the freedom and togetherness of our experience. While we practice feeling this in Taiji forms and exercises, we can also practice and apply yin-yang kai-he in any situation, whether a mundane activity or a great challenge. In this way, the benefits of Taiji can come to pervade our lives.

Wonchull Park
Mackenzie Hawkins
November 1, 2021

— For *Tai Chi foundations classes* that use this primer as a supplement, visit wuweitaichi.org/tai-chi-foundations-classes

—For a free PDF of *Way of WaterRiver: Mutual Ease Flow for Stress Release and Responsive Performance*, visit www.wuweitaichi.org/primers

—Please email Mackenzie Hawkins at jmhawkin@alumni.princeton.edu or Wonchull Park at wpark@princeton.edu with feedback and questions.

Copyright © 2021 Wonchull Park and Mackenzie Hawkins