

## THE T'AI CHI IMAGES: A TAOIST MODEL OF PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC CHANGE\*

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The imagery of the T'ai Chi figure and its associated trigrams can serve as a model for understanding the processes of change within psychotherapy. The T'ai Chi figure expresses the themes of unity and completeness, the dynamic interplay and balance of opposite forces, and the cyclical nature of therapeutic change. The images and attributes of the eight trigrams provide insights into the processes within the patient, the therapist, and their relationship. The epistemological power of T'ai Chi imagery lies in its ability to embrace the subtle complexities of transitional states as well as interpretive subjectivity as the exploratory pathway into the intrapsychic world.

Almost 4000 years ago the Emperor Fu Hsi, founder of the first Chinese dynasty, created the T'ai Chi figure. Based on Taoist philosophy, the figure represents the interactions of the two fundamentally opposing, yet balancing principles of nature: yang (positive, masculine, strong, light, heaven, rising) and yin (negative, feminine, weak, darkness, earth, falling). At specific positions around the T'ai Chi figure lie the eight trigrams that represent all the possible triadic combinations of yin (— —) and yang (—). Each trigram is associated with a symbol and imagistic attributes. All possible dyadic combinations of the trigrams (and of the associated images) in turn lead to the 64 hexagrams that comprise the *I Ching*, the classic text of Taoism.

The imagery of the T'ai Chi captures the essence of changing transitional states. The ancient scholars believed these symbols could be used to understand the complexity and subtlety of all processes of change—be they natural, social, or psychological.

Here I propose the imagery of the T'ai Chi and its eight trigrams as a framework for understanding the psychotherapeutic process—in essence, as an imagistic model of psychotherapy. Being a distinct process of psychological change, psychotherapy falls within the realm of the Tao, the archetype of all processes of change that is expressed in the imagery of the T'ai Chi. The T'ai Chi figure and its trigrams encompass the various microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects of change in psychotherapy. It embodies the process of insight, the transitions in emotional states, and the metamorphosis of the self. It applies to the experiences of both the patient and clinician, and to the various transformations of the relationship between patient and clinician.

I place special emphasis on the imagery of the T'ai Chi. The T'ai Chi figure is a

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distinctly and uniquely visual representation of how change occurs. The trigrams also, with their associated symbols and attributes, express ideas through visual imagery as well as through a variety of other imagistic modalities—kinesthetic, auditory, tactile, even olfactory and gustatory. For instance, to understand the trigram “Li” (fire) is to understand how fire looks, moves, smells, and feels. This style of thinking in images is quite different than the verbal modes that dominate western cognitive styles. Language tends to represent experience in an abstract, logical, objective, and linear fashion. However, imagery—a sensory-perceptual, composite construction—has two distinct advantages: it more effectively captures the emotions of an experience, and it more efficiently encodes the multiple, complex meanings of the experience. As such, imagery plays a crucial role in the organization and transformation of the self (Suler, 1989, in press a). As an affective, holistic vehicle for understanding processes of change, one image is worth a thousand words—and is therefore a worthy method of exploring the multiple (perhaps infinite) determinants of the psychotherapeutic process.

Some people may claim that explaining psychotherapy via the T'ai Chi would be a highly ambiguous endeavor leading to very subjective results. Interpretations of the T'ai Chi figure and its trigrams would seem to be as much a product of the interpreter's psychology as anything else. Indeed, negotiating the subtle intricacies of the psychotherapy process requires the capacity to cope with ambiguity. It is an art of ambiguity—and a crucial tool of this art is the ability to delve into both the subjective experience of the patient and of oneself as the clinician. As revealed by contemporary psychoanalytic phenomenology (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984), the psychotherapy process can only be understood as an intersubjective field where the cognitive-affective schemata of the clinician shapes and directs his exploration and articulation of the patient's inner world. Believing that one can rely on a completely objective theory is a self-deception. The advantage of the T'ai Chi is its ability to embrace the art of ambiguity and subjectivity rather than whitewash it with claims of supposedly pure objective theorizing.

### *The T'ai Chi Figure*

The T'ai Chi figure is, most fundamentally, a circle. In fact, the precursor of the T'ai Chi is Wu Chi, the empty circle. As an archetypic, even mystical image, the circle symbolizes unity and completeness. Across all the numerous theories about psychotherapy, the most consistent, universal theme is the striving for wholeness within the self—whether we express that in terms of self-actualization, the integration of conscious and unconscious, or the harmonizing of cognition, affect, and behavior. The creation of the circle also draws the distinction between inside and outside—between what is the self and what is not. Surely, a goal of the psychotherapeutic process is to clarify who you are and are not—to delineate and bolster self boundaries. To progress from the static Wu Chi to the more dynamic T'ai Chi (to actually draw the T'ai Chi figure), one must create two circles within one. The complex constellation of personality dynamics bounded within self unity arises from

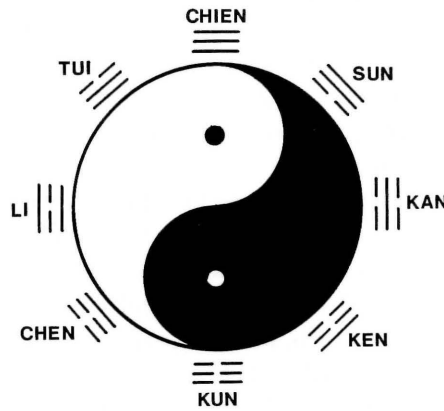


Fig. 1. The T'ai Chi Figure and the Eight Trigrams

	IMAGE	ATTRIBUTES
SUN	wind	gentle, penetrating, gradual, simple
KAN	water	depth, danger, profound, anxiety, mystery
KEN	mountain	stillness, waiting, stubborn, calm, resting
KUN	earth	yielding, nourishing, receptive, adaptive
CHEN	thunder	arousing, shock, inciting movement, activity
LI	fire	clarity, illuminating, intelligent, attached
TUI	lake	satisfaction, open, pleasure, joy, fullness
CHEN	heaven	creative, strong, firm, enduring

one's history of dyadic relationships. Psychology has long recognized that the self evolves through a series of interpersonal contacts with significant others. The dyadic relationship becomes internalized, represented within the self. So too psychotherapy establishes an interpersonal context between two people—an intersubjective whole—that sets into motion the unification of self and, ultimately, becomes embodied within that unity.

The circularity of the T'ai Chi—which is enhanced by the swirling movements of the dark and white fields—suggests that the psychotherapy process is cyclical, rotational. Here the eastern vision seems to contradict the traditional western concept of progress (both ontogenic and phylogenic) as being linear and directed towards a specific end-state. Surely, we wish to retain our belief that psychotherapy aims for a goal—namely the goal of alleviating symptoms and actualizing the self. But the T'ai Chi rejects the notion that this movement is a “marching straightforward” and rather points to the rhythms of circularity within the process of change and development. Newly uncovered issues in the course of psychotherapy must be cycled back and understood in the context of previously explored themes. The therapeutic process often spirals—alleviating the anxiety associated with a problematic issue frees the patient to become aware of another related but deeper issue, which then again leads to anxiety, which when worked through again leads to

yet another issue, and so on. That successful patients often regress at the end of therapy also suggests that symptoms have not vanished but rather play a new role within the intrapsychic system.

All theories about psychotherapy implicitly or explicitly emphasize the "going back" motion that is, paradoxically, required for the progression forward: It is implied in the ubiquitous prefix "re-" of such words as reverting, restoring, replacing, regressing, reviving. Psychoanalysis clearly endorses the need to move through the past in order to progress forward. The evolution of the self through insight was clearly and succinctly summarized by T. S. Elliot: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time." So too Lao Tsu, the founder of Taoism, described the actions of the Tao simply as "returning."

The dove-tailing of the black and white fields within the T'ai Chi expresses the mutual arising and inseparability of opposites, of yin and yang. Psychotherapy sets into motion this dynamic interaction of polarities; it frees the personality structure from the static tensions of intrapsychic conflicts and strives for the fluid harmony, symmetry, and balance of polarities. When distorted, warded off, or frozen in place by repression and a host of defense mechanisms, the diametric poles of the intrapsychic world lose their ability to give rise to one another. Opposites, Freud said, lie close to each other in the unconscious—and the course of psychotherapy steers towards the realization and actualizing of their mutual arising and inseparability. Love and hate, joy and grief, ambition and lassitude, hope and despair—all forms of "ambivalence" have meaning and definition due to the contrast of opposites. The infinite variety of polarities that are discovered in psychotherapy awakens one to the rich dynamics, depth, and subtlety of psychological life. The overall course of psychotherapy itself is a balance of diametric processes. It entails the "adaptive regression" of integrating fantasy, illogic, and emotion with practicality, reason, and rationality—a mixing of primary and secondary process, of destructuring and restructuring the self, that is the essence of creativity (Suler, 1980).

The imagery of the T'ai Chi figure reflects specific insights into how the opposites interact. For example, at that point when the yang culminates to its fullest magnitude (the top of the figure), the first traces of yin appear. The reverse (the bottom of the figure) is also true. In psychotherapy, the intense peaking of an emotion or behavior may mark the subtle transition to an opposing emotion or behavior. Joking that rises to a burst of laughter then turns to tears. A narcissistic patient builds to a full-blown devaluing of the therapist before the first signs of idealizing the therapist surface. The T'ai Chi figure also shows that the heart of the yin territory contains a dot of yang, and the heart of the yang contains a dot of yin. In psychotherapy, embedded within an emotion, thought, or behavior, is its opposite. A patient enthusiastically brings the therapist a gift for her office, but it is obviously the wrong color. A patient refuses to talk, but always comes to his sessions on time. As noted by Eigen (1986), during the most intense psychotic episodes there remains a hidden, sane part of the schizophrenic that sits back and observes the decompensation—and within normal people there lies a

deeply buried “psychotic” core.

There is one final duality expressed by the T'ai Chi figure that is not immediately obvious—perhaps because it is so basic. The figure is drawn on a blank page; it arises from a contentless background, from emptiness. A creative tension exists between form and formlessness. In psychotherapy, periods of entering blankness and void—when feeling stuck and there is nothing to say—mark a transition into a zone of pure potential. It is not static emptiness, but an emptiness replete with vibrant possibility: Something previously hidden always surfaces. As stated by eastern philosophy, the definition and features of the self are rooted in selflessness, in no-self (Suler, 1989b, in press b).

### *The Trigrams*

To use the images and attributes of the eight trigrams to understand the psychotherapy process, clinicians may rely on their own intuitive knowledge to explore their meaning and application. The image of “thunder,” for example, stirs a variety of intuitive associations and affects. The attributes that traditionally have been assigned to the images can serve as guidelines for this associative process. The trigrams may be particularly relevant when their imagery appears in the thoughts of the therapist or patient—in dreams, memories, or metaphoric expressions.

For an additional source of information, one may also double each trigram—thereby turning it into a hexagram—and locate it within the *I Ching*. For each hexagram, the *I Ching* offers a description of its associated image as well as interpretations of that image, its inherent dangers and opportunities, and “judgements” as to what course of action is most wise. Note, however, that doubling a trigram endows it with extra layers of meaning. In addition to the two classic English translations of the *I Ching*—the Legge (1964) version and the popular Wilhelm/Baynes (1967) volume—other contemporary translations are available.

To employ the T'ai Chi images, one enters them as a “transitional space” (Winnicott, 1971). They serve as an intermediate zone between the subjective and objective, where reality and creative imagination intermix. On the subjective side of this space, the T'ai Chi encourages one to playfully shape the image according to one's own ideas and wishes. On the objective side, it presents images from nature that convey archetypic meaning and universal truth. No matter where we go on this planet water flows downhill and fire produces light. These facts define a range in which subjective imagination and interpretation take action.

I will discuss the eight trigrams starting with Sun and proceeding clockwise around the T'ai Chi figure. All quotes are taken from the Wilhelm/Baynes (1967) translation of the *I Ching*.

*SUN* (Wind, also called The Gentle):

Sometimes the most effective interventions in psychotherapy are those that are subtle and gradual—like a gently penetrating wind. This gently penetrating approach is particularly important in the beginning phases of therapy. The *I Ching* suggests that even the rigid and immovable slowly yield to such a force as long as the

force is persevering (which gives it power) and guided by a clearly defined goal so it always works in the same direction. So too in psychotherapy patients with rigid defenses or severe characterological disturbances slowly respond to the therapist's enduring attempts to penetrate to a deeper level of understanding the patient's symptoms—as long as that effort is evenly delivered, tempered by patience, and thoughtful in purpose. Kohut's (1977) persevering attempts to understand and cure patients with profound narcissistic disturbances—those who previously had been considered “unanalyzable”—were a testament to the spirit of Sun. The gradual, inconspicuous results of gentle penetration, according to the *I Ching*, may not be striking to the eye—but they are often more enduring and complete than rapid, surprise attacks (“success through what is small”). However, the *I Ching* also warns that gentle penetration can be pushed too far or repeated excessively, which results in exhaustion, humiliation, or crippling doubts.

*KAN* (Water, also called The Abysmal):

During the course of psychotherapy the patient will encounter danger—intrapsychic danger. How the mind deals with danger is the subject of the trigram Kan. The *I Ching* warns against two possible reactions: the temptation to immediately escape (the “flight into health” in psychotherapy), and the opposing tendency to grow used to the danger and conform to it in a non-productive, harmful way (as in pathological adaptations to anxiety). Comparing danger to a ravine or abyss—which can be a metaphor for the unconscious—the *I Ching* suggests that one imitates the actions of water. It does not shrink away from any dangerous spot, nor does it tarry precariously in any one location. It infiltrates and fills every depression, remains in the situation until a way out shows itself, and then moves on. While proceeding along the line of least resistance, one must thoroughly explore the meaning of every danger that is encountered, and then continue downward. Although the movement of Kan uncovers danger and anxiety, it is also the path of insight into deeper, more profound mysteries.

*KEN* (Mountain, also called Keeping Still):

At times in psychotherapy nothing seems to be happening. The patient appears stuck, blocked, stubborn in the face of the therapeutic process. Some clinicians believe that the essential therapeutic task is always the analysis and chipping away of the mountain of “resistance.” Yet moments of inaction may mean more than simple obstinacy stemming from a tight knot of intrapsychic defenses. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Kohut, 1984; Weiss & Sampson, 1986) suggests that what appears to be resistance actually may be the patient's deliberate pausing, unconsciously, before moving to a deeper level of exploration. In this stage of waiting the patient may be “testing” the clinician to determine whether the therapeutic relationship is safe and secure enough to continue. The hesitation implies an intrinsic need to move forward; as stated by the *I Ching*, rest is a state of polarity that always posits movement as its compliment. Inaction and stillness may also constitute a stage of assimilation in which prior therapeutic gains are being consolidated. The image of the mountain signifies that movement has reached its normal end; it's stillness

represents the end and beginning of movement. Lastly, according to the *I Ching*, stillness may be a "resting in what is right"—a meditative focussing of one's thoughts on the immediate situation at hand, an inner calm that allows one to see one's situation clearly.

*KUN* (Earth, also called The Receptive):

At the fullness of yin and darkness, positioned at the bottom of the T'ai Chi figure, Kun can represent the unconscious in its purest archetypic form. Rather than being simply a reservoir of repressed affects and memories—as conceptualized by Freud—Kun more represents the Jungian vision of an unconscious that is nourishing and adaptive. According to the *I Ching*, these beneficial attributes of Kun can only be actualized through a dynamic interaction and balancing with its opposite trigram, Chien, which is the force of The Creative ("heaven") that gives shape and direction to all things. Standing alone or in opposition to Chien, the yielding influence of Kun can be harmful. Ideally, Kun is the receptive space in which the creative force of Chien takes its action—a kind of "pre-psychological" space that precedes and enables the building of intrapsychic structures. Not unlike the creative interaction of unconscious and conscious in "adaptive regressions" (Suler, 1980), Kun must be activated and led by Chien in order for the psychological world to unfold and thrive. The creative and receptive complete each other. Dipping into this unconscious precursory realm during the course of psychotherapy may stir anxiety and a sense of danger. Fear and resistance will be common reactions to the possibility of entering a place where psychic structures are destructured in order to be restructured, where receptive yielding to hidden forces must supersede deliberate conscious strivings. However, self transformation requires a moment of devoted "letting go."

*Chen* (Thunder, also called The Arousing):

According to the *I Ching*, sudden forces "moving upwards from below" can cause fear, terror, and trembling. At the peak of such moments of shock, presence of mind is easily lost; one is robbed of reflection and clarity of vision; opportunities for constructive action may be overlooked. In psychotherapy, these sudden forces may be the unpredicted eruptions of repressed affects and memories that lead to panic, confusion, and acting out. However, the *I Ching* notes, the shock is only momentary, and ultimately can induce productive movement. "Fear brings good fortune." Once the ordeal passes, there is a sense of relief as well as reverence for the manifestation of these forces. The therapy patients' sudden experience of the unconscious often arouses awe and respect for their intrapsychic life and for the psychotherapeutic process. To gain from the shocking experience, the *I Ching* suggests that one remains still until composure and clarity of mind is restored. One must attain some degree of distance and "move to higher ground." In psychotherapy, this is accomplished by stimulating the patient's observing ego and providing a holding environment in which the therapist's composure helps sustain the patient's ability to endure and assimilate the experience.

*LI* (Fire, also known as The Clinging):

Intelligence, like fire, can quickly exhaust itself without clinging to a stable source

that sustains it. In psychotherapy, intellectualizations quickly fail if they are cut off from one's core emotional dynamics. For patient's to achieve an enduring clarity of mind that illuminates their experience of the world and themselves, a stable, secure sense of self first must be established. Intelligence and clarity in thought and perception depends on this underlying, cohesive self. According to the *I Ching*, attaining this inner "seriousness" and "composure" preserves the brightness of mind needed to come to terms with the innumerable impressions that pour in from the outside world. For psychotherapy patients, it is the clarity to see their transferences and parataxic distortions for what they really are.

*TUI* (Lake, also called The Joyous):

Similar to Li, Tui expresses the benefits of being sustained by a nourishing source. The lake is a refreshing, vitalizing force for all things surrounding it. So too in psychotherapy the development of a stable and full self structure nourishes the psychological life of the patient. The experience of openness, satisfaction, and joy, according to the *I Ching*, "rests on firmness and strength within." It is the development of a quiet, wordless, self-contained joy that thrives despite external circumstances and remains free of egotistic likes and dislikes. It is "the quiet security of a heart fortified within itself." Without this sustaining center, the *I Ching* warns, one is empty and easily tempted by "indulgences and lowly pleasures"—a situation that is reminiscent of Kohut's (1977) description of addictions, perversions, and other compulsions as attempts to fill narcissistic deficits in the self. The hexagram Tui—the lake resting on a lake—further suggests that one is sustained by being related to others. Two lakes connected refresh each other and do not dry up easily. For this reason the *I Ching* advises the cultivation of relationships with others and the need for interpersonal "encouragement." This advice echoes the psychotherapeutic principle of fortifying the cohesiveness of self structure through the development of what Kohut called "selfobject" relationships—a self-nourishing relationship that the patient develops with the therapist, and, ultimately, with other people outside therapy.

*CHIEN* (Heaven, also called The Creative):

Chien represents the primal, creative power that lends substance and form to all things. Whereas Kun (earth) provides the formless ground that is the origin of all states of being, the course of Chien alters and shapes all things until each attains its true, specific nature. This creative force involves continuous movement and development that endures through time. Along its path each thing receives the nature appropriate to it—what can be called "destiny." Humanistic theories of psychotherapy speak of the need to tap the forces of self-actualization that dictate what each person is destined, ideally, to be. Recent psychoanalytic theories (e.g., Kohut, 1977, 1984; Weiss & Sampson, 1986) similarly imply the importance of unlocking the internal, intrinsic drive towards the resolution of conflict and the development of self structure—a drive that, despite the deadlocks of pathological symptoms and unfortunate external circumstances, endures through time, lying in wait for the opportune moment—and the opportune therapeutic relationship—to continue its movement. The image of heaven may represent, in Kohut's terms, the fundamental

ambitions and ideals—the “internal nuclear programs”—that provide the “tension arc” of organizing, structuralizing energy for developmental movement. Many clinicians realize that the psychotherapeutic process is not so much the doing of something to make the patient change, but rather the unleashing of the forces of *chien* to allow development to occur spontaneously by its own accord.

### Conclusion

Circling around the T'ai Chi figure—from Sun to Chien—depicts a rhythm to the changes that occur within minutes or years during the course of psychotherapy. Going from the top to the bottom of the figure—the gradual immersion into the darkness of *yin*—corresponds with the working through of defenses, the anxiety-provoking descent into the unconscious, and the revelations of insight. The movement from bottom to top—the gradual ascent into the light of *yang*—corresponds with the conscious assimilation and application of those insights, which culminate in clear vision, joy, and the creative urge to further enhance the self—the urge that begins the cycle again.

A concluding summary of how the T'ai Chi relates to psychotherapy can be found in the three definitions of “Tao” suggested by Ch'u Chai in his introduction to the *I Ching* (Legge, 1964). The Tao is change and transformation; intransience; ease and simplicity. In psychotherapy, the complexity of intrapsychic dynamics and of the various changes and transformations that take place can be overwhelming. Yet beneath it all lies an unchanging force, an intransient principle that is both unique to each person and common to all. It is Tao as the internal force of gestation, the ordering process that is rooted in chaos and moves towards the unity of intrinsic potentials. It lifts the patient through change and transformation towards the actualization of the latent nuclear self. And although one struggles desperately through the complex maze of ceaseless transformations, the final therapeutic attainment is ease and simplicity. As depicted in the fluid form of the Tai Chi figure, the cohesive, adaptive self is one where the complex array of self structures and processes are joined seamlessly, effortlessly, un-self-consciously—like a pianist who performs his music without concentrating any deliberate effort or awareness on the movement of his fingers. This ease and simplicity enables the liberation of the intransient ordering process. Ideally, the psychotherapy process itself follows this path—the path known as “*wu wei*” where one can let things happen according to their own design.

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