
APPENDIX F

A final word - spirituality

The words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are so commonly used that it can be hard to tease out their meaning, especially as they clearly mean different things to different people. As far as the word 'spirit' is concerned, it is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "the non-physical part of a person which is ... the soul." Tied up with the idea of spirituality, therefore, are assumptions which do not necessarily match my own – and perhaps the Chinese – view of self-cultivation.

Early human artifacts, for example the goddess figures found in late Stone Age settlements, suggest a time when the female, fertility, nature and the earth which gives birth to all things, were celebrated - and may even have played a dominant role - in religious belief. In ancient Greece, goddesses were worshipped in springs (which bubble up from below), in caves (gateways into the deep, dark earth), and in rich fertile woods. Celtic Neolithic passage tombs allowed the dead to be buried in womb-like chambers, in readiness for rebirth. One of the most famous of these, the 5,000+ year-old Newgrange in Ireland, was built so that the dawn sun at the Winter Solstice (the rising of yang at a time of deepest yin) shines along the vagina-like 19-metre long passage to illuminate the burial chamber. As Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence says to Romeo, "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb; What is her burying grave, that is her womb."

In the course of time, these yin earth goddesses were supplanted by the yang sky gods. A typical myth marks this change. Greek legend tells how Heracles, son of the sky god Zeus, wrestled with Antaeus, son of Poseidon (god of the sea, springs, fountains, vegetation and nymphs). The giant Antaeus gained strength from the earth whenever he was thrown, and in order to defeat him, Heracles had to lift him off from the ground and crush him to death. Jehovah and Allah, the most powerful manifestations of the sky gods, sprang from the deserts of the Middle East where the vast sky and unblinking sun dominate the landscape.

As the sky gods came to rule, the feminine, the material (from Latin 'mater' = mother), the physical, the tainted sensual body and the wisdom of the unconscious were all devalued. That which is yin and 'below' came to be demonised as belonging to hell, spiritual darkness and despair.

The one-sided rejection of, and separation from, the 'lower' in Judeo-Christian tradition is graphically described in Robert Graves' book *Hebrew Myths*.

God found the male Upper Waters and the female Lower Waters locked in a passionate embrace. 'Let one of you rise he ordered, 'and the other fall'. But they rose together, whereupon God asked, 'Why did you rise together?' 'We are inseparable,' they answered with one voice. 'Leave us to our love!' God now stretched out his little

finger and tore them apart. The Upper he lifted up high; the Lower he cast down. To punish their defiance, God would have singed them with fire ... The divided Waters then voiced their agony of loss by blindly rushing towards each other and flooding the mountain tops. But when the Lower Waters lapped at the feet of God's throne, he shouted in anger and tramped them under his feet ... Tehom (the Abyss, the Dark Night, the Lower Waters) has always since crouched submissively in Her deep abode like a huge beast, sending up springs to those who deserve them, and nourishing the tree roots.

It is interesting to compare this with the *Daodejing*.

Opening and closing the gates of heaven, can you play the role of woman? ... Giving birth and nourishing, bearing yet not possessing, working yet not taking credit, leading yet not dominating ... Know the strength of man, but keep a woman's care! ... Know the white but keep the black" ... The valley spirit never dies; it is the woman, primal mother. Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.

The spiritual journey is often seen as a one way path, climbing upwards to ever brighter and lighter realms of pure spirit, away from impure materiality. Many modern teachings on the attainment of happiness, health and freedom from suffering, focus only on enhancing the light and the positive in this way. What is dark and buried in the unconscious is ignored or repressed. Yet the unconscious is a powerful realm and will not be denied; if it is not embraced it is likely to hijack us in unexpected ways.

Wisdom and inspiration come from harmonising the dualities of darkness and light, below and above, the inner and the outer, yin and yang. Earth energy embodies the wisdom of birth, nurture, unconditional love and acceptance, as well as the physical body, the underworld, the interior, and what lies hidden in the depths of the unconscious. Sky energy embodies the wisdom of criticism and discrimination, vision, the power of the intellect, the conscious mind, the outer and the revealed. Becoming a whole human being therefore means embracing both yin and yang, finding nourishment in both.

And "as in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm". If harmonising yin and yang may be seen as the path to wisdom and integration within the individual, it may also be seen as a way to heal the human race at a time when our ability to survive long-term is in question. From an age characterised by the female goddesses of earth and nature, human culture - or at least the now-dominant western part of it - moved to the age of the masculine sky gods.

We have controlled and subdued nature to a degree that now threatens our very existence. Yin-yang theory says that when any tendency reaches its extreme, it transforms into its opposite. Now too yang, we need to turn again towards the power of yin, to find a balance that can restore and sustain our planet and the plants, animals and humans it provides such a beautiful home for.