

## ORIENTAL APPROACHES TO MASCULINE AND FEMININE SUBTLE ENERGY PRINCIPLES<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—According to ancient Indian and Chinese texts the subtle energy (*prana* or *chi*) flows through several thousand anatomically indistinguishable channels or meridians (*nadis*). Three channels are especially important (*ida*, *pingala*, and *sushumna*). The *ida* and *pingala* channels correlate with left and right uninostril breathing, respectively. Like yin and yang, they are considered to represent the masculine and feminine principles present in all creation irrespective of sex. From this perspective these principles are assumed to be present simultaneously in persons of both sexes. This suggests that any sex-specific effects of uninostril breathing may be associated with sex-based physiological differences, not with 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes of the channels (and the corresponding nostrils).

In the conventional model of Western medicine, a physician takes care of the physical health of patients while a social worker attends to their emotions and social relations, and a pastoral counselor provides spiritual guidance. Body, mind, cognition, emotion, and spirituality are often seen as discrete entities. In contrast, Eastern philosophies adopt a holistic concept of individuals and their environment (Chan, Ho, & Chow, 2001). Health is perceived as a harmonious equilibrium of the interplay of the two complementary aspects of the subtle life force, i.e., *yin* and *yang*, the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), the six environmental conditions (dry, wet, hot, cold, wind, and flame), other external sources of harm (physical injury, insect bites, poison, overeating, and overwork), and the seven emotions (joy, sorrow, anger, worry, panic, anxiety, and fear). This integrated body-mind-spirit model has been used to bring about a sense of well-being, positive mental health and balance, and hence to promote health and treat disease.

Hence it is important for researchers the world over, who are interested in mind-body interaction to know more about these ancient Oriental concepts, which are often inadequately understood. For example, a recent review of the sex-related effects of forced unilateral nostril breathing on the autonomic nervous system stated that among subtle energy channels, *ida* is considered the feminine principle, while *pingala* is the masculine principle, and

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*sushumna* is neutral (Dane, 2004). While these beliefs are accurately described, the inference derived from them needs to be clarified. It was reasoned that the “effects of unilateral nostril breathing on the autonomic nervous system for men, but not women, may be interpreted as breath flowing through *pingala* during energetic activation as described in ancient yoga texts” (Dane, 2004, p. 737). The idea that selective activation of a specific principle (masculine or feminine) may occur to a greater extent in men than in women (or in women than in men), is not in line with ancient Oriental beliefs. These beliefs are detailed below.

According to ancient Indian texts ‘the body’ consists of three parts, viz., the physical part (*sthula sarira*), a subtle or internal part (*sukshma sarira*), and the causal body (*karana sarira*), (Zarilli, 1989). The life force or subtle energy exists in the subtle ‘part’. This has been called *prana* (Indian texts) and *chi* (Chinese texts). The subtle energy is described as flowing through channels or meridians (*nadis*), which are different from nerve fibers and circulatory channels (Swami Niranjanananda, 1994). They have not been anatomically defined. Out of several thousand channels, three are the most important, i.e., *ida*, *pingala*, and *sushumna*.

Normally, subtle energy travels through either *ida* or *pingala* channels. Here, the concept of *ida* and *pingala* in Swara Yoga is similar to that of *yin* and *yang* in Taoism. However, if the energies can be brought together by traditionally prescribed practices, a more powerful, not neutral, but balanced force is generated (*kundalini shakti*), and the *sushumna* channel opens (Swami Muktibodhananda, 1999). This is essential for spiritual growth. When energy flows through the *pingala nadi* (and breath through the right nostril), it is recommended that tasks requiring vitality are undertaken. In contrast, when the energy flows through the *ida nadi* (and breathing is through the left nostril), it is believed to be the appropriate time to do peaceful and sustaining activities, e.g., beginning a course of study.

From this perspective these principles are assumed to be present simultaneously in persons of either sex which suggests that any sex-specific effects of uninostril breathing may not be correlated with ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes of the channels (and the corresponding nostrils). Hence, it would be less likely that activation of *ida* (the feminine principle) would occur exclusively in women or of *pingala* (the masculine principle) exclusively in men. It is believed that *ida* and *pingala*, like *yin* and *yang*, represent equilibrium in difference and unity in diversity (Sizoo, 2000). However, while *pingala* can be considered as the masculine principle and *ida* the feminine, the two like *yin* and *yang*, represent equilibrium in difference and unity in diversity (Sizoo, 2000). They are interdependent, interactive and equally valuable forces, which co-exist in all of nature, irrespective of sex.

This ancient view of the co-existence of these forces in all living beings

avoids accusation and exclusion, while it aims at self-discovery, self-reflection, and recognition of other human beings, of society, and of nature itself (Sizoo, 2000).

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