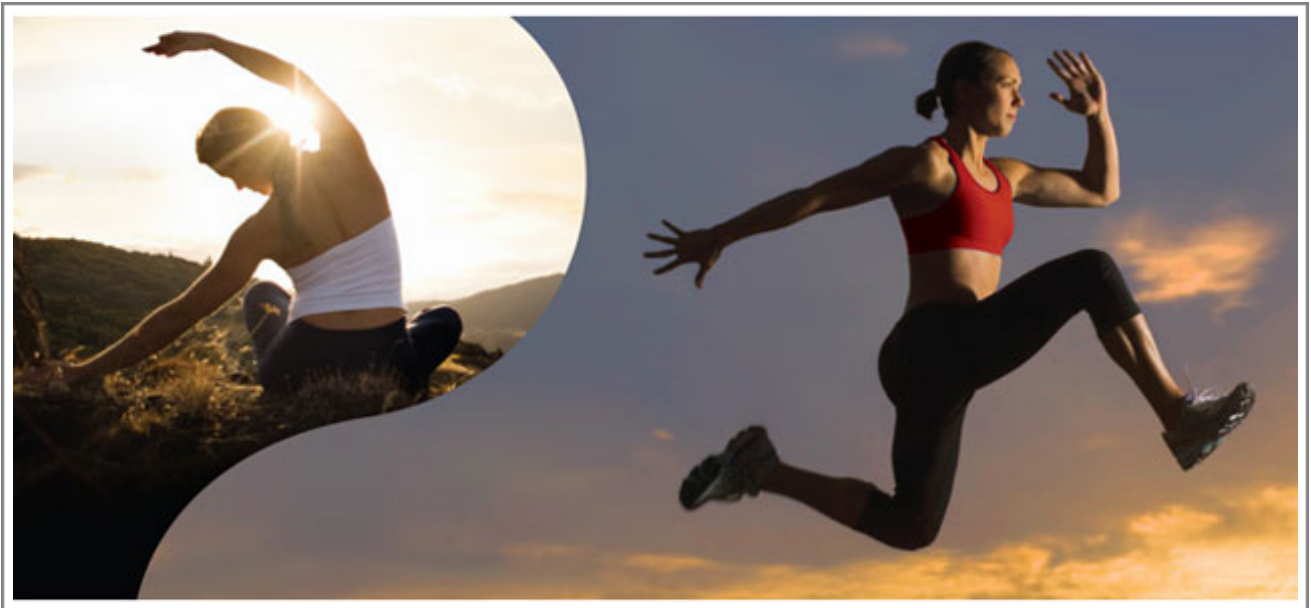


## Yin-Yang Fitness: The Best of Both Worlds



**Many fitness enthusiasts and athletes are now blending Eastern and Western exercise techniques for better results, including mind-body health. Find out why this fusion works so well — and how you can create a harmonious fitness mix for yourself.**

In Chinese culture, the yin-yang symbol represents the interaction between two opposing forces: dark and light, cold and hot, soft and hard, feminine and masculine. Almost everything, from food to environments to individuals, can be described as having both yin and yang properties, and exercise is no exception.

If you start each day with restorative yoga, stretching and sun-saluting to your heart-chakra's content, chances are you lean toward "yin" exercise. If, on the other hand, you prefer to run several miles a day, lift weights multiple times a week, and have a shelf of workout logs dating back to 1998, you're probably more a "yang" exercise type.

To the yin-style exerciser, working out is a cup of chamomile tea. To the yang, it's a triple espresso. Neither approach is wrong: Exercise can stimulate you as well as relax you, and wind you up as well as calm you down. The problem is that, in isolation, both approaches have their limitations. Without some fire and force in his program, the super-yin yoga junkie can wind up lacking in muscular and cardiovascular endurance. Without some flow, ease and recovery time, the super-yang fitness nut is bound to get injured, burned out — or both.

"The body responds best to a balance between 'hard' and 'soft' types of activity," says Gray Cook, MSPT, OCS, CSCS, author of *Athletic Body in Balance* (Human Kinetics, 2003) and *Movement: Functional Movement Systems* (On Target Publications, 2010). "In our culture, we love to specialize, but there's a dance of opposites occurring in any natural system, and it's to our advantage to get in step with it."

Like Cook, many cutting-edge coaches and trainers are moving away from the "all-intensity, all-the-time" model and toward a more integrated approach that blends the best of two worlds.

Call it yin-yang fitness: integrative exercise programs that combine the mind-body awareness often associated with "Eastern" methods with a more physical go-hard-or-go-home "Western" approach to build whole-person fitness from the inside out. And, it's worth noting that often a shift in perception is all that's necessary.

We'll take you through the essentials of these two different approaches and show you some of the newest and best methods for combining them into an optimal blend — one that delivers serenity, resilience and strength.

### The Western YANG Approach

Most of us are familiar with the Western approach to exercise: goal-oriented, intense, specialized. The core assumption in "yang" exercise is that exertion equals results.

Most commercial health clubs, with their rows of cardio machines and megatons of weights, are designed to encourage this attitude toward training, and the majority of personal trainers approach fitness from the "yang" angle — pushing their clients to challenge themselves by working hard and with singleminded focus. Even yoga classes tend to have a hardcore bent to them in this environment.

"The average exerciser in this culture goes to a workout class seeking a particular physical result," says Edward Yu, a Los Angeles-area Feldenkrais practitioner, martial artist and author of *The Art of Slowing Down: A Sense-Able Approach to Running Faster* (Art of

Slowing Down, 2010). “They want to lose weight, get stronger or master a particular skill. And they want to do it quickly.”

Mark Allen, a six-time Ironman Triathlon world champion and coauthor of *Fit Soul, Fit Body: 9 Keys to a Happier, Healthier You* (Benbella Books, 2008), is intimately familiar with this approach to training: “When I started racing, all I cared about was physical fitness. I lived by my training log and focused almost exclusively on wanting to be a champion.”

Even if you don’t have a competitive bone in your body, you’ve probably experienced a similar kind of focus during tough workouts, perhaps when trying to put up a new personal record in the bench press or beat your previous time on your neighborhood run. And that’s a good thing.

The yang approach can be time efficient and tremendously effective in reaching short-term physical goals. And the health benefits of the Western method are well documented. “Hard training helps you maintain your cardiovascular health and facilitates the release of human growth hormone, which helps maintain and build muscle mass. Since muscle loss is a biomarker of aging, you might say that a certain amount of intense exercise keeps you young,” says Allen. “But like anything, too much of a good thing can be dangerous, leading to injury, illness and burnout.

### When Is It Too Much YANG?

Taken to an extreme, a purely yang approach — exemplified by bodybuilding, crash diets and many super-intense workout systems — can become one-dimensional and even dangerous. Instead of enjoying their workouts, yang-style exercisers may try to work through extreme pain, blocking out important signs of distress and increasing their risk for injury. “The intensity junkie who thinks the only good workout is an extreme one is quickly going to wind up sitting on the couch with his knee in a brace, unable to exercise at all,” says Cook.

The tendency to focus on repetitive, physically punishing methods of exercise — at the expense of your own well-being — may well find its roots in some of our more deeply held Western values. “The ‘reductionist’ model that gave us the market economy and the Apple computer won’t work on the body,” continues Cook. “You can’t split the mind from the body, or divide yourself into muscle groups, work them in isolation, and expect to improve performance.” Allen eventually recognized the limitations of yang-only pursuits and sought the counsel of a shaman to find a way to balance his routine.

### The Eastern YIN Approach

At the other end of the fitness spectrum is the yin approach: internal, holistic, exploratory. Practices like yoga, Pilates, NIA, tai chi, qigong, Feldenkrais and some forms of dance and martial arts — all of which require full participation of body, mind and spirit — are classic examples.

Corrective exercise, foam rolling and dynamic stretching — all of which focus on improving movement quality rather than targeting muscles with ever more reps, sets, speed and mileage — could also fall into the yin category.

Presence and attention are key aspects to this approach, making a yin-style training session not just a workout for your body but for your brain and nervous system as well.

“Exercise offers all kinds of opportunities to experience something new and to learn from it,” says Yu. “When you forget about the end results for a while and instead just focus on what you’re doing, moment to moment, even simple movements — like the basic one-two punch in boxing — become fascinating and enjoyable.”

Taking the time to truly master — and not just approximate — athletic skills can also enhance one’s quality of life outside the gym. Yin-style movements can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, dispelling stress and leaving you calm and focused. Simultaneously, these movements also improve coordination, balance and control — physical attributes often lacking in people with sedentary jobs, even those who exercise regularly.

“A few decades ago, fit and active people took more walks, played more sports, and were generally more active than they are now — and those who lifted went to the gym on top of that. Their basic level of movement competency was higher simply because they moved more,” says Lou Schuler, CSCS, coauthor of *The New Rules of Lifting for Abs: A Myth-Busting Fitness Plan for Men and Women Who Want a Strong Core and a Pain-Free Back* (Avery, 2010). “Nowadays, the only exercise many people get is during their three hours a week at the gym — if that! So it’s vital that people spend time restoring some of those lost movement skills, as well as building muscle and strength,” says Schuler.

Moderating intensity, slowing down, controlling your breathing, and learning to move with grace, focus, accuracy and balance (rather than just pushing for more volume, distance, speed), can dramatically improve your fitness results. It can also lower your chances of twisting an ankle or pulling your back.

It doesn’t matter if you’re playing pick-up basketball with your buddies or tag with your grandkids: “Whether you’re a pro athlete, a kid in Little League or a grandmother, the best predictor of injury isn’t how strong you are,” says Cook. “It’s the quality of your movement.”

### When Is It Too Much YIN?

Like the compulsively yang approach, however, an excessive focus on yin-style exercise can also have its limitations. A total lack of outward intensity can limit your opportunities for physical challenge, leaving you ill prepared for certain athletic demands. That’s why even many yin techniques incorporate yang elements (like “working at your edge” in yoga). It’s also why a blend of yin and yang is emphasized by fitness experts in virtually every domain.

“When living in the modern world, it is important to maintain a balance between spiritual practices and taking care of the day-to-day needs of life,” says Brant Secunda, shaman in the Huichol Indian tradition and longtime spiritual counselor to Ironman Triathlon champ Mark Allen.

Some people — particularly those accustomed to sweating and gasping for air during exercise — may find the pure yin approach a little too low-key. Of his exploratory martial arts classes, Yu says, “Some people just run screaming. They think the classes are too slow, and they don’t hook into the learning process.”

Admittedly, progress in yin disciplines can be more subtle and gradual than many yang-centric exercisers are accustomed to: “People say to me, ‘I’m inflexible. Should I take yoga?’ I tell them, sure, that’s a great idea,” says Fawn Friday, RKC, NSCA-PT, a St. Paul, Minn., yoga enthusiast, kettlebell instructor and record-holding powerlifter. “But I also tell them to be patient. Yoga is great for flexibility and much more, but isn’t a magic pill. It’s a long-term practice, a discipline that you draw strength and focus from every day.”

## Find The Right Balance

Though most exercisers are drawn either to the intensity of yang or the calm and focus of yin, the most successful exercise programs draw elements from both camps. Using a more balanced approach, yin and yang complement and build on one another: The physical skill and control developed through yin training is enhanced by the force and power of yang training, and vice versa.

One way of doing this is simply to include attitudes from both schools in your exercise program. “In the last few years, it’s become clear that short, intense workouts are the most effective and time-efficient way of building fitness. But the harder you work out, the more you have to rest and recover,” says Todd Durkin, MA, CSCS, coauthor of *The IMPACT! Body Plan: Build New Muscle, Flatten Your Belly & Get Your Mind Right!* (Rodale, 2010). “That’s why integrative, complementary exercise systems, which speed recovery and help you move better, are becoming ever more important.”

Durkin advises clients at Fitness Quest 10, his San Diego training facility, to include yoga or another restorative-type class once or twice a week, and to get some kind of soft-tissue bodywork once or twice a month. “I recommend the same thing to the stay-at-home parents and the pro athletes,” adds Durkin, whose clients include NFL stars Drew Brees and LaDainian Tomlinson. “Treat yourself like you’re world class.”

Surprisingly, learning to relax and focus through a yin practice can often be the very thing an athlete or exerciser needs to bring his competitive game up a notch. Friday, for example, says that her years as a yoga practitioner laid a foundation of body awareness, mobility and core strength that allowed her to go from rank beginner to elite powerlifter in just three years — a remarkable achievement in a sport that can take decades to master.

Similarly, Allen says his spiritual work with Secunda was the missing link that catapulted him to the top ranks of Ironman triathletes: “Before I started working with Brant, my training was too narrow and ego-driven. Through the spiritual work, I staked less of my identity on racing. Sometimes I’d even take off on a nine-day spiritual retreat with Brant at the height of training season,” he says. “I’d tell the other triathletes, ‘See you when I get back!’ They’d just stare at me.”

Finding that balance, though, doesn’t always have to mean stacking additional activities into limited exercise time. Sometimes all it takes is a slight shift in approach or perspective.

If you love yoga, for instance, but feel the need for more intensity in your exercise program, you might simply investigate more advanced classes, many of which require a blend of athleticism, flexibility and isometric strength.

On the flip side, if you’re a veteran iron-pumper who needs more balance but is worried about losing hard-won strength and muscle mass, consider looking into Olympic-style

weightlifting. These old-school variations on the snatch and the clean and jerk require not only strength and power, but also incredible focus and a full-body mobility and precision of movement that would do any dancer proud.

You can also increase the “yin” in your workouts by moving them outdoors whenever possible and simply paying attention to your surroundings. “Nature is incredibly healing,” says Secunda. “When Mark was racing in the Ironman in Hawaii, I told him to draw strength from the island itself. Nature gives us perspective and reminds us of who we are beyond the physical.”

The activity you choose may ultimately matter less than the way you practice it. A classically yin practice like tai chi may become infused with intensity and force; a typically yang-style athletic activity like powerlifting may induce an almost meditative state of clarity.

“Once, my yoga teacher asked me why I didn’t stay focused on mindful practices instead of getting involved in competitive powerlifting,” says Friday. “I joked it’s hard not to be in the moment when you have almost 300 pounds on your back!”

Yu agrees that the activity matters less than the approach. “One indication you’re on the right track is simply enjoying every moment of what you’re doing,” he says. “Regardless of the type of activity: Are you present in it?”

“We’ve strayed from how we used to look at exercise,” says Cook. “In the early 20th century, gym class was called physical culture: Moving well was thought to enhance your life, just like math and reading enhance your life. Now we play competitive sports in gym class and get on cardio machines in health clubs. As a result, we’ve gotten a little sloppy and a little lazy. We don’t work the mind and body together.” By focusing on a mixture of strength and suppleness, by learning to slow down before we speed up, by putting function before fitness, we can get it back.

“In the yin-yang symbol, there first appears to be a clear border between light and dark, hard and soft, masculine and feminine,” says Yu. “But there’s a little dot of the dark in the light and a little of the light in the dark: Every good yin practice has a little yang in it, and vice-versa. The two sides aren’t so much locked in conflict as engaged in an interdependent, symbiotic relationship, moving and swirling together and becoming one another. It’s not a static picture but a process of continual transformation.”