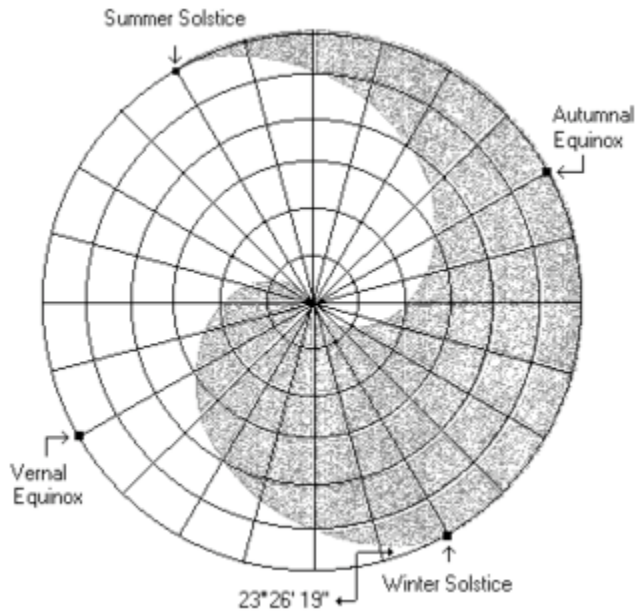


Green Meditation – an online retreat led by Clark Strand

Week 1: The Recovery of the Dark



The symbol at the left, sometimes called the Tao and sometimes the Yin-Yang symbol, is a good place to begin our retreat. It expresses the essential character of Green Meditation and offers ancient guidance on how it might still be practiced today.



No one is quite certain when the Yin-Yang symbol originated. Archaeologists claim to have found it inscribed on oracle bones from around 1,000 B.C.E. Others (mostly scholars associated with Taoist or Buddhist studies) will insist that it originates sometime during the Sung or Tang dynasties since this is where the first scholarly discussions of the symbol occur. Still others have speculated that it is an ancient (perhaps prehistoric) astronomical diagram recording the movements of the sun and earth as they pass through the cycle of one year. You can go [here](#) to see one explanation of how ancient Chinese astronomers might have derived the symbol, charting the course of the sun by following the shadow of a stick placed upright in the ground over the course of one year.

The point here is not to establish the antiquity of the symbol, however, but to show that the reality it symbolizes is as ancient as the Earth itself. To contemplate such a symbol is therefore to explore the roots of our own consciousness as a species. To explore the dynamic rhythms embodied in its pattern of darkness becoming light, light becoming darkness, of light in darkness and darkness in light, is a form of meditation that predates virtually every other religious teaching and religious text.

And what ancient meditation teaching is preserved in this symbol? As I see it, there are four teachings, corresponding roughly to the four seasons and the four times of day.

(1) **The summer solstice** begins just to the left of the top of the symbol. In terms of the yearly cycle, this represents the maximum duration of light--in other words, the longest day and the shortest night. In terms of the daily cycle, it represents the point at which the influence of light and the discriminative, "high-definition" consciousness it fosters and enhances (some would say *demands*) are at their peak. At such moments, darkness is *inevitable* (i.e., following the circle clockwise, it is already beginning to grow) and *implicit* (note the small circle of darkness enclosed within it).

(2) **The autumnal equinox**, which begins halfway along the darker, Yin side of the circle, marks the transition from longer days to longer nights in the yearly cycle of seasons. In the daily cycle, it represent twilight and dusk. This is the moment when daylight is beginning to loosen its hold over the world. In prehistoric times, human consciousness followed suit. We settled down for storytelling, sex, prayer, sleep, dreaming, and Green Meditation--activities defined by intimacy and augmented by the fact that clear visual boundaries were being reduced or finally all but eliminated. In modern times, this is when we begin to turn on supplemental lighting of one kind or another--reading lights and bedside lamps; porchlights, streetlamps, and the headlights of our cars. Store fronts are illuminated, as well as television sets and computer and cell phone screens. The latter are overlooked during the day, but at night they become yet another source of illumination, another way of pushing back the night.

(3) **The winter solstice** begins along the bottom of the symbol, where darkeness reaches its yearly maximum. The days are short, the nights long. As with the summer solstice,

here the transition is both *inevitable* and *implicit*. The light is coming, and the light is already here, already awake within the dark. In the Bible, the Song of Solomon commemorates this moment with the verse "I sleep, but my heart is awake" (5:2). In the yearly cycle of ancient holidays, it is celebrated with "festivals of light" such as Hanukah, Halloween, and Christmas. The Buddhist tradition celebrates it on December 8th in commemoration of the Buddha's enlightenment. On that day Zen monastics the world over meditate all night long, hoping perhaps to catch a glimpse of "the light inside the dark" that Shakyamuni witnessed with the appearance of the morning star. This is the bio-spiritual moment reserved for Green Meditation, the time of day and the time of year when it is most easily to be had. At midsummer the meditation periods are shorter, more dreamlike, and more relaxed. In winter they are long and dark, and therefore the light that shines out of them is unusually bright.

(4) **The vernal equinox**, which begins halfway through the lighter, Yang side of the circle, marks the seasonal transition from shorter days to shorter nights. In the daily cycle, it represent the hours just before daybreak and dawn. The night was a spiritually eventful time for ancient people, filled with messages and intimations, and with anticipations of the day to come. The night provided healing and renewal through sleep, guidance in the form of dreams, and inspiration and ecological connection through that unique form of meditation which opened naturally out of the gaps between periods of sleeping when the mind was, paradoxically, at its most alertly tranquil and most tranquilly alert. The hours before dawn were a time to gather that spiritual energy for the day's activities. They offered a spiritual vantage point from which to chart a course through the daylight world ahead. Ancient people understood that the spiritual eye was dimmed by daylight. Rooted in a tradition of Green Meditation measured in millions, not thousands of years, they mostly likely saw the tyranny of discriminative consciousness coming long before

they saw its benefits. The various spiritual traditions which have come down to us today can all be seen as an attempt by ancient people to preserve the twilight world of spiritual and biological interconnectedness in a species intent upon dragging every aspect of reality into the full light of day.

This is where we stand now as a species. We have lost the "walking rhythm" of consciousness on our journey through deep time. To explain our predicament in terms of this Yin-Yang symbol, we could say that, not only are we favoring our light (Yang) foot in that journey, causing us to limp--we have also eliminated the light within the dark and the dark within the light, so that now our world is, quite literally, reduced to black and white. We work for eight hours, and sleep for eight hours (if we're lucky), and the other eight we illuminate with so much wattage we can no longer even imagine, much less find, the path through deep time that becomes visible only by starlight. Green Meditation is a way of recovering that path, beginning with a recovery of the dark.

PRACTICE:

Green Meditation begins with the recovery of the dark. But this is not always as easy as turning out the lights. As modern human beings, we have compressed and consolidated our sleep, like our work day, into convenient 8-hour blocks. Unfortunately, when we sleep this way the experience of darkness is lost.

To begin to recover that experience requires some patience over a period of about one month, gradually "unfolding" the darkness like opening the segments of a Japanese fan. We begin by establishing a "Buddhist sabbath," one night each week when we reduce the artificial illumination in our homes to a minimum, or perhaps get by with a candle or an altar lamp. Doing this increases our awareness of the dark and tends to invite an

earlier bedtime. This, in turn, makes it more likely that we will awaken to darkness during the night. That “awakening” is the beginning of Green Meditation.

Select a day for your “Buddhist Sabbath” and begin turning down the wattage on your life. Let this weekly experience inspire you to notice opportunities for reducing unnecessary light during the other six days of the week. Flip the lamps off when you leave one room, and when you enter the next, ask yourself how much light is really necessary. Whenever possible, get by with daylight. Position your desk or chair beside a window. Observe the transitional moments of dawn and dusk, letting these experiences recalibrate your consciousness. If you let it, the dawn will wake you in such a way that you carry a bit of the darkness with you throughout the day for use as an advisor. The dusk will make you simpler and somewhat sleepy, purifying the light of consciousness for its journey through the dark.

GREEN MEDITATION TEXT:

“Light and darkness are a pair,
like the foot before and the foot behind in walking.”

—from “Sandokai,” by 8th century Ch’an master Shítóu Xīqiān

TROUBLESHOOTING:

If turning off the lights and retiring an hour or more earlier than usual does not cause you to wake to darkness during the night, you can set an alarm to go off after about four hours of sleep. If you choose this option, know that your eventual goal is to wake up naturally about the same time every night. Eventually this will happen, provided you reduce the artificial lighting in your house a little further each week, recovering an hour or more of darkness by the end of March.