



# The trigrams Mountain to Marsh

Anastylosis of the Fat Monk

**By Xiaoyao Xingzhe**

I wound my way up the hillside trying to guess how long it had been. The ache in my legs said a long time. Was the fat monk still fat? Was he still at the Daoist monastery I was climbing toward?

**A**ROUND ME THE spring flowers were just becoming fragrant, and the joy of growing life lifted my spirits. So did the thought of my old friend up ahead. Things had not been easy in the intervening years; much had happened and life had pared away many of my illusions.

“Like polishing iron to make a mirror,” I had said to the fat monk once.

“In your case, more like polishing a stone,” he replied, but his chuckle had softened the

observation. Now I thought he might well have been right. Much as I had tried to put all he had suggested into practice, I could not feel that I had made any progress at all. My passions still raged out of control, and my ego still seemed to force me into the most ridiculous situations.

Halfway up, I paused to catch my breath. What if the monastery was closed, as it had been during the Cultural Revolution? The place had been boarded up during that time, chill and cold. But soon after resuming my climb I turned a corner and found the little pool fed by a tiny waterfall. Goldfish glinted in the morning sun as they darted through the limpid depths. A few steps more and the uplifting fragrance of incense!

I stood before the massive double wooden gate, looking at its demon-faced doorknockers, and hesitated. Suddenly I was not so sure I could face the mirror that

had always been held up to me, the mirror that seemed to show some deformed and depraved monster from which I recoiled in horror. I looked back at the path down the hill.

Then on impulse I lifted my hand and, grasping the knocker, gave a resolute bang on the gate. I could hear the sound echo through the woods behind me, and die away. After a long time, the huge wooden doors gave a creak and slowly opened a crack. The old gatekeeper looked up at me around the wooden edge. His old wrinkled face was something Time had dragged downward like melting slag. But when he saw me the melting seemed to reverse for a moment. You could not call it a smile, really, but rather a momentary pause in an otherwise inexorable avalanche.

“My friend, the fat monk ... Fatty ... is he still here?”

The old gatekeeper closed his eyes, shrugged, and gestured toward the rear of the compound.

My heart was pounding as I approached the old familiar doorway of the library. I found myself holding my breath. I looked through the opening and saw, not my fat friend, but a young thin monk straightening books and dusting. My chest deflated with a sigh of disappointment. The young monk's Daoist habit was proper, almost severe, and the face he turned toward me held no hint of welcome.

“Is ... Fatty ... still here?” I stammered.

He frowned and blew out an audible breath. His look around at the books said as plain as words *can't you see I am busy?*

“I don't know any Fatty,” he said. “He must have moved on, moved to another monastery.”

“He used to be in charge of the library here. It was not that many years ago.”

The young monk's face changed. His eyes darted here and there. Finally he looked at me again. “You need to speak to the Abbot,” he said. His chin trembled.

“Take me to him!” I said. The firmness in my voice surprised me. He shook his head, lifting his hands in refusal. I grabbed his elbow and pushed him out the door, then pointed him toward the rear of the compound. “Go!” I ordered.

With promptings and proddings from behind he led me through the maze of

passageways until we climbed the steps leading to the veranda that rose high above the compound. When we knocked on the door to the Abbot's room his thin arm was shaking in my grasp, and when a deep voice roared “*Who?*” from within he broke away and ran.

The sound of his feet clattering down the steps left me facing the wooden door alone and a bit shaken. Was there a new Abbot? There must be, and he must be truly fierce. But there was no other way. To find my answers I must face ...

The door creaked open. Outlined in light from behind, a dark and immense figure stood there, silent... waiting. Then, the figure spoke.

“OMG.”



After an hour spent catching up on all the old news, I had learned that the fat monk was now the acting Abbot, the old Abbot having retired into seclusion for a time on a mountain in the next province.

“Congratulations!” I said.

“Hah! That's a laugh. Making me acting Abbot is his idea of a punishment,” he said with a wry face.

“Why the terror tactics?” I asked.

He grinned. “Several reasons, as usual,” he said. “One, I get left alone to attend to more important things than who stole who's laundry. Two, they have the chance to learn how much their inner state is influenced by the actions of those around them, and to decide if they really do want their feelings blown about like a leaf in the wind.”

“What is the alternative?” I asked. I was really puzzled. Surely you could not control how people act around you?

“Why, you create a gap,” he said. “You can make an interval between the impact of the outside influence and your reaction to it. In that interval you have a moment to decide your response.” He looked hard at me. “*Response*, mind you. Not reaction.”

My mind was invaded by large letters MIND THE GAP. I shook my head to clear

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it. The letters remained. I realised that I saw them every day at the train station in my own city. Now I remembered how the fat monk had told me *the teaching is all around us, informing us silently, if we only pay attention.*

“... and that is the thing about feelings,” he finished saying.

“What is?” I had been thinking and not listening.

He looked at me as if I was dim-witted. “Like I said, even though we call them ‘feelings’, we hardly ever take time and really *feel* them. If we did, they would convey to us a tremendous amount of useful information.”

There was silence for a while, then the Daoist got up to make some tea. I looked out through the windows of the room onto the cultivated fields on the hillside at the rear of the monastery where I had once laboured with a mattock, rooting out the previous year’s husks and remnants. Now the hillside was newly hoed, ready for the spring plantings. The smell of fresh earth came through the window.

I thought about the girl Xiaojing, but asked about Shijie, the fat monk’s friend and teacher of a Daoist group that operated in the guise of a herbal cuisine restaurant. He said the restaurant was closed and her group of students disbanded.

I was shocked. “Why? What happened?”

He looked at me, surprised. “What do you mean, what happened?”

“I mean, why did she disband the group? Was something wrong?”

He frowned. “No, not at all. The job was done. Those students had learned what they needed. Certain faculties had been activated, certain sets of skills embodied. After that they scattered.” He gave a satisfied nod.

I shook my head. It seemed so strange. In my experience once a successful group was established it would go on and on until it broke apart from dissent or dissatisfaction. I chewed my lower lip in thought. Perhaps this way of deliberate termination was better. I told the fat monk what I had been thinking.

“Indubitably better,” he said. “Don’t forget, this is not a social club we are talking about, this is a specially designed teaching group. Its membership is carefully selected, like a musical ensemble, each personality bringing a certain quality, a specific resonance that, when fed with a current of...” here he hesi-

tated, “let’s just say energy, will respond with a type of... vibration—no, that’s not quite right. Ai-ya, don’t you know how hard these things are to express accurately? You really have to feel it for yourself. Language cannot handle the subtleties, that is why symbols are used so often.”



Ah, the perfect segue, the opening I was waiting for. I was there to ask about symbols. I had reached a brick wall in my own investigations. The most problematic was the abstruse line system of the *Yi Jīng*: the *Book of Changes*. Unfortunately that very line system was the basis for the deepest expression of Daoist alchemy, the books *Cān Tóng Qì* (Unification of the Three) and *Wù Zhēn Piàn* (Understanding Reality). Without a personal understanding of the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yi Jīng*, one was limited to relying on the explanations of others.

“The *Yi Jīng* is the basis,” he said. “It is all in there, but of course in highly symbolic language.”

“You mean it is not a manual of divination?”

“Well, anything can be used for divination,” he replied, “but that is not its only purpose, or even its prime purpose.”

“You think the Confucians locked it into that role?”

“Yes, but for good reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to look at history,” he said. “Zhāo Zhèng burned all...”

“Who?” I asked.

“You know, Qín Shǐhuáng, the first emperor, who united all of China around 220BC. He ordered the burning of all books except those about divination, medicine and farming.”

“So, you mean that ...”

“Yes. By making the *Yi Jīng* a ‘divination classic’ the absolutely crucial information it held regarding subtle differentiations of energetic qualities was saved for posterity.”

“But how did they know in advance to do this?”

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■ His entire Fat Monk series is available to download for free at: [thefatmonk.wordpress.com](http://thefatmonk.wordpress.com)

“They probably used divination.”

I could not tell if he was joking or not, the light from the window was behind him. Anyway, something else had occurred to me. “That Qin Shihuang was a bad man, totally evil,” I said. “The cruelty he showed in the building of the Great Wall, and he buried scholars alive.”

“He was certainly capable of brutal acts,” the fat monk said. “But the long-term consequences of those acts are interesting to contemplate.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for example, one thing he did—again, very brutal—that few seem to give him credit for, was to threaten with death or dismemberment anyone who used any *other* character system but the one that he had established.” He looked at me pensively. “You do know that there were six other states that he conquered, and they each had their own writing systems, right?”

“Um ...” I hadn’t. “But so what?”

“Think about it. By that one act he unified the language, well, the written language anyway, of the whole region. Without that apparently brutal command, China could well be like Europe is now, many different countries each with a different language, each acting without common purpose.”

“Getting back to symbols,” I said. “You’ve talked a bit about the hexagrams of the *Yi Jing*, and more about the trigrams, but I still can’t quite get how they work.”

“You have to do some thinking on your own,” he replied. Then he laughed at the look of dismay on my face. “But I might make it easier. What is the problem?”

“I think it goes right back to basics: why the trigrams are made up the way they are, with combinations of the solid and broken lines.”

Let’s go back even further,” he said. “You have a single solid line: *yang*. A broken line: *yin*.”

“Ok, why?”

“Yang is the Celestial. It is one single thing, an indivisible essence, hence, a solid line. The break-away from that single essence is earth, yin, and yin-Earth is the ten thousand things, all separate. Earth can be divided, ploughed, for example. Hence, a broken line.”

It made sense.

“Don’t forget in creating this system of

symbols we are looking for a way to describe the qualities of a situation. So we need more than just ‘one’ and ‘two’, or ‘yes’ or ‘no’, or ‘on’ or ‘off’. We need to add some complexity. So we will add another solid or broken line above the basic yin or yang line which is our foundation.” He took out some paper, and wetting a brush in ink, drew the following.



“Now we start to have a combination of qualities: pure yang on the right, pure yin on the left, and two types of mixture in between. Pure yang is called old yang, and pure yin is old yin, and...”

“Why?” I interrupted. “Sounds ageist to me. Why should old be pure?”

The fat monk looked at me with a pained expression on his face. “This is why you don’t make much progress,” he said. “You get stuck on irrelevancies.”

“Irrelevant!?” I got fired up. “What could be more relevant than the struggle to free society from the oligarchy of the aged? To allow youth the freedom to... hey... what are you doing?”

He was packing up his paper and brushes. “I am going out on inspection. I’ll be back when you have freed yourself from the tyranny of the masses.” The way he said it ran together the words so it sounded like “them asses” and I knew—for we had discussed this before—that he was referring to the numerous petty selves within each of us that could swing into action at any time and take over the running of an individual mind.

“Wait!” I said. “I’ll go with you.”

“That would defeat the purpose, don’t you think?” he said, but his tone was not unkind. “But if you wish...” He was walking out the door as he said this, and I hurried to catch up with him.

“First stop, the kitchen.”

Why was I not surprised?

When we got to the dining hall, it had that feeling of abandonment that normally busy places acquire when they are empty. At the far end of the hall a young novice monk



wielding a mop had his back to us.

The fat monk called out a question in the local dialect and the young monk gestured toward the rear; we found Cook sitting at a small desk working on a list. “Abbot!” he said, standing up. Then he smiled broadly when he saw me and grasped my hand, saying “Xiaoyao! What wind blew you here?”

I gave him my news and then said I had come to ask about the *Yi Jing*. His eyes lit up.

“Cook loves the *Yi Jing*,” the fat monk said. “That is one reason we came here first. He has a rare old set of yarrow stalks that he uses, they are very *ling*.”

*Ling* literally meant “a soul” or more abstractly “that which can make the insubstantial substantial”, but in this context meant “highly efficacious in mysterious ways”.

Cook told me that he had studied with a famous fortune teller when he was young and that—while there were the usual methods of handling people and managing their responses that go with that profession—there was also an indisputable sense of accuracy in the hexagrams that resulted from the manipulation of the stalks. “Why don’t you come by my room later tonight and I will do a reading for you?”

I agreed and we left the kitchen to continue the inspection.

After traipsing all over the monastery for what seemed like hours, making observations and corrections here and there, he led me up the path to the hill that looked over the lake where we had a welcome rest, assuming a cross-legged position on the ground. He refused to talk, sitting silently and very still. Whenever I would try to engage him in conversation he would point with his chin outward, toward the lake, or point with his finger upward toward the sky, then put it to his lips.

*Be silent.*

After a long while I settled. The sky moved slowly above us in soundless progression. Between the immensity of the earth below me, and the grandeur of the sky above, I felt at once part of both and yet from both painfully divorced at some essential level.

At that moment he turned to me and said “Now what was your objection?”

I frowned. I could not remember specifically what we had been arguing about. Anyway,

whatever it had been, it was not my only difficulty with the symbolism of the *Yi Jing*.

“Well, for one thing,” I said. “Some of the attributions don’t add up for me. The prime yang trigram, *Qián* (☰) symbolises the Heavens and the Celestial. But it is described as 建剛 *jiàn gāng*: strong and hard. How can that empty space in the sky be strong or hard? And what you were saying earlier about the use of a solid line to mean yang and a broken line to mean yin, now I am not so sure. Three solid lines to mean heaven is confusing, I think. It should be changed. A yin line should be solid, and the yin trigram, *Kūn* (☷) should be changed to have all solid lines.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you think it should be changed, do you?” Then he smiled and raised both hands palm up to his shoulder level. “Hey, we might be able to work something out. I mean, a solid line has meant yang for, oh, I don’t know... only a mere 25 centuries or so.”<sup>a</sup> He chuckled. “Let me call a few of my friends ...”

“But that is the problem,” I said, ignoring the sarcasm. “A solid line, I think, should mean earth.” I patted the earth. “Solid, see? And huge, so much bigger than the sky. Whereas the sky is empty.” I punched my fist up into the open air a couple of times. “How can the sky be strong and hard? THAT should be the broken line.”

I sat back, a bit smug. My logic was irrefutable. To my satisfaction, he sat there nodding his head. Then he looked at me and said “Yes, you are right, it is indeed the basic problem. Zhu Yuanyu has a commentary on the *Cān Tóng Qì*—I have mentioned it before, I think—where he uses the concept of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ to describe how original essence is taken over by life and confuses us.”

He shut his eyes for a moment, then quoted,

*In the realm of pre-manifestation, Qián (☰) which is essence, is the host, while Kūn (☷) which is life, is the guest. When the middle line of each trigram changes to make Lí (☲) and Kǎn (☵), unavoidably the guest becomes the host and the host turns into the guest... If only people knew that all they*

a. The cook told me later that even before “yin” and “yang” as terms came into use for the lines, the original attributions were “strong and hard” for a solid line and “soft and pliable” for a broken line.



Ante Babic’s  
**Tips for running  
a successful clinic**

When the patient brings in a large file of detailed medical history I always consider calming the spirit.

have to do is invert *Kǎn* (☵) and *Lí* (☲) again and suddenly the original *Qián* and *Kūn* reappear, the Essence which is *Qián* (☰) becomes the host as of old, while the Life that is *Kūn* (☷) returns to its place as guest.

He opened his eyes and said “I hope I got that right. Anyway, he goes on to say that the heart/mind<sup>b</sup> is originally the Essence/host<sup>c</sup>, while the body/Life<sup>d</sup> is the guest that has assumed the host’s position until we rectify things. We take the guest as the master and get turned around.” He rested his elbow on his knee and pointed a finger at me. “And right here that is exactly what you are doing, taking the broken multitude as the complete whole, the weak as the powerful, the tiny as the big...”

“Weak? Tiny?!” I said, with some heat in my voice. I had to defend myself. Pointing around me at the distant mountains and the huge lake in between, I said “How can you call this tiny?”

He looked at me, a tiny smile playing around his lips. “Someone once told me that ‘A man’s capacity is the same as his breadth of vision.’ You said just now that the earth is stronger and bigger than the sky.” He paused. “How big are the heavens?”

I knew from bitter experience that he could turn that deceptively simple question into a devastating rebuttal. So I calmed my breathing, shut my eyes and thought for a moment. Suddenly my mind expanded. I could see what he meant. I had been thinking only of “sky” as that thin bit of earth atmosphere, not beyond. My concept of “the heavens” ballooned outward until the earth seemed tiny, fragile, a mere point in the overwhelming majesty of the rotating solar system, which itself was a tiny group in a circling galaxy, which itself... I found I had my eyes squeezed tightly closed. I opened them and sighed.

The two characters that had puzzled me were now clear: 建剛 *jiàn gāng*. The “strength” of *Qián* was unquestionable in the face of its immensity. Compared to that, *Kūn*—earth—was tiny. And yet, without *Kūn*, without a receptive place to work, some

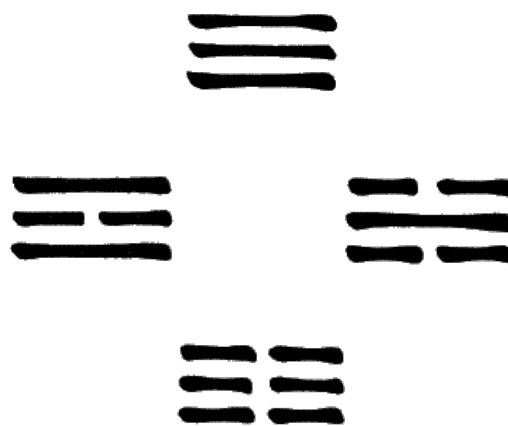
potential, some substance or ground to work on, all that “power” had no ability to configure anything. And, of course, “earth” meant all of the innumerable worlds of all the universes. This was the workshop of *Qián*.

I nodded. “Ok,” I said grudgingly, “I see what you mean about the unity and strength of yang, and even the pliability and receptiveness of yin.”

“Good,” he said. “But I want you to see this,” he pointed outwards with his chin, “and fix the image in your mind.”

I had been totally focused on my argument, and had not noticed the lengthening of the shadows as the sun slid down the sky. The west was an inferno of colour as the setting sun hung just above the horizon. Then the fat monk turned his head and looked east. A full moon was lifting over the hills.

“The heavens are fixed above,” he said, “for the purposes of this image, and the earth is fixed below. Thus the stage is set. Also you should see that what moves on this stage, what moves between heaven and earth, is the sun and the moon: the two extreme symbols of yang and yin. *Qián*, *Kūn*, *Lí* and *Kǎn*. All changes happen on this vast stage, set between heaven—*Qián* (☰)—and earth—*Kūn* (☷).”



“Notice how everything is a mixture of yin and yang, heaven and earth. This in-between area is where all this mixing takes place, the ‘Stage’ for the ‘Changes’. The changes are shown by the two trigrams *Lí* (☲) and *Kǎn* (☵). You could say that they are the ‘functioning’ of heaven and earth.”

“What?” I wrinkled my brow.

b. Heart/mind *xīn* 心

c. essence/host *Qián xìng zhǔ* 乾性主

d. body/Life/guest *Kūn mìng bīn* 坤命賓

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You said just now that  
the earth is stronger  
and bigger than the  
sky. How big are the  
heavens?



“The function of a stage is to make evident what might otherwise remain hidden.” He scratched his nose, frowned, then brightened. “Like a play. Without a stage, the play would remain hidden in the mind of the playwright.” He looked at me. “You get it?”

“Yes...” but he could hear the hesitation in my voice.

“Here, the principles of pre-manifestation (先天 *xiān tiān*) are being made evident, the principles of yang above and yin below, and their interaction in between.” He made an arc with his hand, encompassing the whole scene. “Here, before us, we can see multi-phased transformations of darkness and light set between softness and hardness. Original principles! That is why I wanted to fix in your mind that image of the sun and moon hanging suspended between heaven and earth. It is all there. And, of course,” he tapped his chest, “in here.”

I bowed my head in thought. After a while I nodded, and struggled to my feet, stiff after an hour or more on the ground. In one incredible motion the fat monk seemed to stand straight up from a crossed leg position, and took my arm to steady me. “You all right?” he asked with a concerned tone.

“Yes,” I said, shaking off his arm.

“Let me show you a quick way to buck up your energy,” he said. “An old Daoist trick.” He took a series of quick steps on his heels around the top of the hill. It looked indescribably ridiculous.

“Try it!”

“Actually...”

“Come on!” He gestured around at the empty hillside. “There is no-one here to laugh at you.”

I took a few steps on my heels. I didn’t notice much difference.

“Now do this,” he said. He took a step with his left foot, then struck the back of his calf muscle forcefully with the top of his right foot, then did the same on the other side. “This strikes the point *Chengshan* to stimulate the whole Taiyang channel,” he said.

“You sure you won’t paralyse yourself?” I said. He grinned. He remembered the “demonstration” of gongfu point paralysis he had given me on our second meeting.

I tried to imitate his movements. It did seem to give me a little bit more energy, although it

could just have been my imagination.

Just before we left the hillside, I looked back at the panorama that had been spread out before us. The sun was almost gone now, and the moon was rising resplendent. It reminded me of what he had said regarding the changeability of yin, yin as the multitude. Moon was the perfect symbol. The sun was always the same, rising in the east and setting in the west every day, even as it shifted along the horizon during the different seasons. But the moon changed constantly. I laughed to myself. *Constant changes*. The moon’s changes were indeed constant, predictable.



We were picking our way down the now dark path before I remembered what we had been arguing about in his room. “You were saying that two solid lines together were pure yang, and called *lǎo yáng*: old yang, and the same with yin, two broken lines were *lǎo yīn* old yin, which is pure yin.”

“Yes, and you had some weird point about ageism and...”

“Yes, never mind that. But why is pure yang and pure yin ‘old’?”

“Well, as you know, when things reach an extreme, they change. *Wù jí bì fǎn*, right?<sup>e</sup> Old yang is about to change into a mixed pattern: young yin—*shào yīn*—and old yin is about to change into young yang—*shào yáng*.”

“Oh.”

By then we had reached his room again.

He sat down at his desk while I fired up the stove and searched around for the tea-making implements. I looked over. He had pulled out a ream of paper, peeled off a piece, and was wetting his brush in ink.

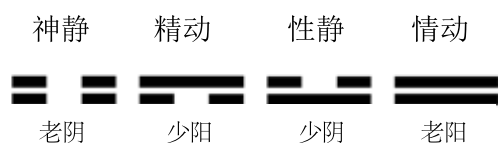
By the time the water was boiling for the tea he had drawn a series of solid and broken lines in sets of three.

I poured the boiling water into the pot, and carried the pot and cups over to the ledge by his desk.

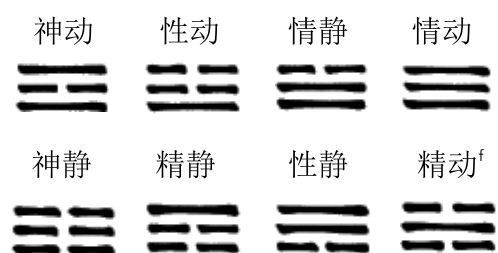
“Once we have the four basic yin and yang patterns,” he said, “of pure yang, pure yin,

e. 物极必反.

half-yang and half-yin, then we are able to discuss certain basic qualities, four types of situation: two extremes, and two types of mixture.” He showed me the first piece that he had drawn earlier.



“That can be useful, such as for describing the fundamental qualities of the four seasons, the four winds, or for any other circumstance which we have divided into four. But it really does not allow for anything beyond the basic ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘maybe yes’ or ‘maybe no.’” He put away that sheet and pulled out the next, which had eight groups of three lines. “If we add another line, however, we can really increase the flexibility and the level of complexity we can describe. Notice how we have the basic four patterns, and to each we have added a yang line and a yin line.”



I had poured out the tea, and served him his cup. He made a face. “You left it steeping too long... oh, yes, I forgot, you like it bitter.” He smacked his lips and said, “But that is another good illustration of an important topic.”

“What?” I said.

“You like it bitter because you have only learned to taste with your tongue.”

I pursed my lips, thinking. “Where else should I taste things?”

“Your body has many organs of taste, not just the tongue. I am sure you have realised how important the nose is for taste. The most subtle aspects of this tea, however, should be tasted with the throat. We have talked about how the word for sweet is a picture of the throat, right?” He drew the character with his finger: *gān* 甘. Then he went on. “There

f. 周易闡真, 刘一明.

are other locations around the body where the subtle perception and ‘tasting’ of various types of essence can take place, ‘organs’ if you will, dormant in most people, but capable of being awakened.”

With one hand, he rapidly touched a series of spots at different places on his body. I had the fleeting impression of a Christian crossing himself. Strangely, I had a fuzzy feeling of what he meant, like the vague stirring of a forgotten skill.

“What places?” I said.

He looked down briefly, then up again. “Actually, ‘places’ is the wrong word. Thinking of them as concrete locations can cause all sorts of problems. They are more like convenient areas upon which one may focus attention for specific purposes and limited times.” He looked at me sternly. “Only under the supervision of a teacher. No experimentation!”

Despite repeated entreaties, he refused to say more. I sulked for a while.

He ignored me and went back to the illustrations on the paper. “I don’t have to tell you that these are the eight trigrams, the *bā gù*. Each has its peculiar quality and a range of associations that begin to allow for a whole symbolic language of quality and change. It is incredibly fascinating.”

I stifled a yawn. Just at that moment, it was so not “fascinating”. But I knew there was no diverting him, so I asked “Ok, what are the most fundamental qualities?”

“*Qián* (☰) is Heaven, *Kūn* (☷) is Earth,” he said, “we looked at that before, just like we saw that *Lí* (☲) is sun and *Kǎn* (☵) is moon. *Lí* also means fire, and *Kǎn* also means water.”

“What about the rest?” I said, to hurry him along.

“This one is mountain,” he said, pointing. “It is called *Gèn* (☶).”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why is it mountain, or why is it called *Gèn*?”

“Why does a solid line on two broken lines mean mountain?”

“Broken lines are yin, unmoving, earth. A solid line is yang, moving, living. Lots of earth with a film of living things on top is just like a mountain.”

“Ok,” I said grudgingly. But what about this one?” I pointed to the trigram that

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Your body has many organs of taste, not just the tongue.





looked like its opposite: a yang line then two yin lines above it.

“That is thunder, *Zhèn* (☳), activity in the midst of stillness, precisely the quality of a sudden thunderclap.”

I was beginning to get excited. “And I have heard that lightning starts in the ground. It looks like whoever designed these symbols knew that! But how is that even possible?”

“Settle down,” he said. “We don’t know what they knew. And as far as I understand it, lightning is actually the result of charges building up both in the heavens and the earth that meet. *That* attraction of opposites is perfectly consistent with yin-yang theory, as you would expect.”

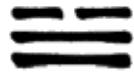
“Ok, what about this one?”

“That is *Xùn* (☴), wind. Now you think and tell me why.”

I looked at the trigram. One broken line and two yang lines above it. Broken is yin, stillness, I thought. Yang is movement. “Lots of movement over stillness!” I pronounced.

He grinned. “You’re beginning to get the hang of this. How about the last one?”

I grimaced. That was not fair. He was not even telling me the name or the association first. Ok, I thought. Let’s have a look anyway.



Two yang lines under a broken line. Lots of activity under a single film of stillness.

“A volcano?”

He smiled. “Not bad. Very close in one sense. But no.”

I thought for a long while. *Close to a volcano*. Finally I gave up. “Tell me, then.”

“It is *Dùi*, a body of water. It looks still on top but underneath it is totally fluid.”

“How is that close to a volcano?” I asked with outrage.

“Well, *Dùi* also means joy, and speech. That’s what I was thinking of with the volcano. Feelings get pent up and burst out in speech.”

“So these trigrams can each mean several things?”

“Lots! But you asked for the most fundamental, remember?” He pointed to *Xùn* (☴). “This is wind, as we said, but it also means vegetation.”

“How does that work?”

“Basic Chinese medicine theory. Didn’t you say you had friends who had taught you some basics?”

“Yes...” I admitted hesitantly.

“Well, wind is associated with wood, and both are in the east. Here we can see that lots of activity over a still foundation can just as well show the growth of vegetation as it can the flow of wind.”

“But wind is so much faster!”

“From one point of view,” he said, placing his hand on the desk, “say that of a being who lives for millions of years, the growth and decay of a mountain can look like an explosion.”

The sudden shift in viewpoint seemed to freeze my brain. He leaned over, and lifting one finger under my chin, shut my mouth.



We headed to the dining hall for some dinner, and while waiting for Cook to finish his chores, I said “You never described what you called the other two most important trigrams, *Kǎn* and *Lí*.”

“What about them?”

“Well, anything. The meaning of their names, for example.”

“That is easy in one case, a bit more difficult in the other,” he said, seating himself.

“Why is it difficult?” I took a place opposite him.

“Because I don’t know. We’ll have to ask Cook.” He poured us both some tea from the thermos on the table.

“Ok, how about the easy one?”

“Ok. *Kǎn* (☵), one yang line between two yin lines, is written like this: 坎.” He dipped his finger in tea and outlined the character on the tabletop.

“It is ‘water’, ‘danger’, ‘hidden’...”

I frowned. “I thought you said it was the Moon.”

“Yes, it is. Some explain it as the moon reflected in the water; that shiny yang line in the midst of the dark yin lines.”

“So what does that have to do with...”

“Remember Li Bo, the poet who died reaching for the moon in the water?” He

looked wistful, then grinned. “Of course, going boating while drunk is just asking for trouble. Still, it shows the idea of false-ness, depth, and deadly danger.”<sup>9</sup> He looked around. “Speaking of danger, we’d better ...”

We queued up, got some food and headed back to our table.

Sitting down, we ate for a moment in silence. Then I remembered.

“You were going to explain the name,” I said, my mouth full.

“Oh, yes. Well, look at it.” He sketched it again. “The word *Kǎn* 坎 is made up of two bits: *tǔ* 土 and *qiàn* 欠. ‘Earth’ and ‘lack’. What lacks earth? A hole.”

That rang a bell. I thought back. Yes, wasn’t the English translation for *Kǎn* (☵) “the abyss” or something?

He was still speaking “...and then water runs into it. A hole is also the most basic form of trap. Oh, and ☵ also stands for ‘ears’.”

I took our now-empty bowls up to the cleaning area where the novices had their sleeves rolled up, and had a look for Cook. He was still bustling around, probably organising the next day’s breakfast.

Back at the table, I said “He is still working. What about the other trigram, *Lí* (☲)?”

“I said I don’t know why it is called that.”

“But what about all the other stuff? What it stands for and things.”

“Well, you know it means Sun, fire, light, brightness, beauty, clarity and so on.”

“And that broken yin line in the middle?”

He looked at me reprovingly. “You told me that you had gone over all of that with the hermit one time when you met him in the woods, remember? He took you to this little cave, and you said the two of you had talked over the *Hé Tú*, the River Diagram, in detail. You even quoted what he said about fire being unable to leave its fuel, or something, as showing what that broken line in the midst of *Lí* meant.”

Oh, yeah. But that had been another time, another life. Just then we saw Cook approaching, carrying a tray. He set two steaming bowls down in front of us, and one for himself.

“Sweet azuki bean soup,” he said. “Taste it!”

It was thick, rich and delicious.

“A hint of aged mandarin peel,” said the fat monk, licking his lips. He lifted his spoon, showing off something white and round. “And lotus seed.”

“Yes, with some sago, a bit of longan, and sweetened with rock sugar,” the cook said.

He beamed at us while we finished the dessert. Then he looked serious, turned to me and said, “So where have you gotten to in your *Yi Jing* study?”

“Basically just the eight trigrams and their meanings,” said the acting Abbot. “But we both have a question. Do you know the origin of the name *Lí* for the trigram ☲?”

The cook squinted his eyes, thinking. “Actually, yes. I looked into that a while back. Yes, I remember. *Lí* 離 used to be the name of what we now call the *Huang Li*, the Chinese Oriole. According to the *Guì Shì Shūo Wén*, when this bird appeared in the springtime, it was the signal for the young women to leave their own homes and travel to the homes of their future husbands.” He took a sip of his red bean soup, then continued. “Eventually, the word came to be associated with ‘leave’ and another name was found for the bird. So just as the sun leaves the earth at dawn, in the east, this trigram is also associated with the east, the sun and leaving,” he finished somewhat breathlessly.

“Cook, you are a hidden scholar!” said the fat monk. “Are you all finished here?”

“Yes.” He looked at me. “Ready for your reading?”

I was suddenly and unaccountably nervous.

“Yes...” I faltered.



■ To be continued

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*So just as the sun leaves the earth at dawn, in the east, this trigram is also associated with the east, the sun and leaving.*

9. 一路明月照水中，只见影儿不见踪。愚人当财下去取，摸来摸去一场空。