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From Symptom to Transformational Energy

Integrating Daoist Yin–Yang Perspective into AEDP's Practice

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Abstract: This paper integrates AEDP with Daoist yin–yang philosophy to clarify how healing arises through the dynamic interplay of opposites. Drawing on clinical experience in both Chinese and Canadian contexts, it positions AEDP's principle of innate transformance alongside the Daoist view that contraction (阴/yin) carries the seed of expansion (阳/yang), and flourishing (阳/yang) contains vulnerability (阴/yin). Theoretical connections are illustrated through Mitchell's "hope and dread," McGilchrist's "coincidence of opposites," and Gestalt figure–ground, all of which highlight the necessity of holding suffering and vitality in co-awareness. Clinical methods such as dyadic regulation, moment-to-moment tracking, and metaprocessing are presented as ways of cultivating experiential shifts without coercion, consistent with the Daoist ethic of 无为/wu wei. A cross-cultural vignette demonstrates how reframing 'sensitivity' as relational perceptiveness can foster core affect, transformational affects, and core state experiences. Implications for culturally responsive practice emphasize balancing yin and yang expressions of health, adapting AEDP's universals to culturally specific emotional languages, and training therapists to embody flexible pacing. The paper concludes that holding both symptoms and transformance creates reliable conditions for self-organizing healing to unfold.

Introduction: Encounter at the crossroads of east and west

For more than a decade of clinical practice in China, I worked primarily with clients in a culturally homogeneous context, applying Western psychotherapy models while adapting them to Chinese values and communication styles. More recently, my practice in Canada has brought me into contact with clients from diverse cultural, racial, religious, gender, and sexual identity backgrounds. This shift from a relatively uniform client population to a multicultural one has sharpened my awareness of how cultural worldviews shape both clients' presentations and my own therapeutic stance. As a therapist born and raised in China, trained in Western modalities such as AEDP and Gestalt therapy, I now find myself at a unique intersection of traditions. This position provides a vantage point for integrating distinct yet complementary understandings of human experience and healing.

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AEDP's central principle—that every person possesses an innate capacity for healing and growth—resonates deeply with Daoist cosmology, which regards nature as self-regulating and self-renewing. In Daoist thought, yin and yang are dynamic, interdependent forces that continually transform into one another: contraction (阴/yin) carries the seed of expansion (阳/yang), while flourishing (阳/yang) contains elements of vulnerability (阴/yin). This perspective provides a useful lens for understanding AEDP's State One (distress and defenses) and State Four (core state) not as linear endpoints but as complementary poles within a single living process. When therapists can hold both pain and possibility in awareness, they create the relational field in which accelerated change becomes possible.

In clinical practice, symptoms often occupy the foreground while transformational potential remains backgrounded. The yin–yang framework, supported by Stephen A. Mitchell's (1993) concept of "hope and dread" and Iain McGilchrist's (2021) articulation of the "coincidence of opposites," underscores the value of holding these poles simultaneously. Just as yin contains the seed of yang, moments of distress often hold within them the energy for transformation. By cultivating a therapeutic presence that embraces both suffering and possibility, therapists can foster the safety and openness necessary for change.

This paper examines the philosophical and clinical parallels between Daoist thought and AEDP, illustrates how yin–yang thinking can enhance therapeutic practice, and presents case material from cross-cultural work. Its aim is to contribute to the dialogue on integrating Eastern and Western wisdom traditions in ways that are culturally sensitive while also addressing universal aspects of human experience. To establish this integration, the paper first considers AEDP's model of transformation in relation to Daoist yin–yang, identifying their philosophical convergences as a foundation for clinical application.

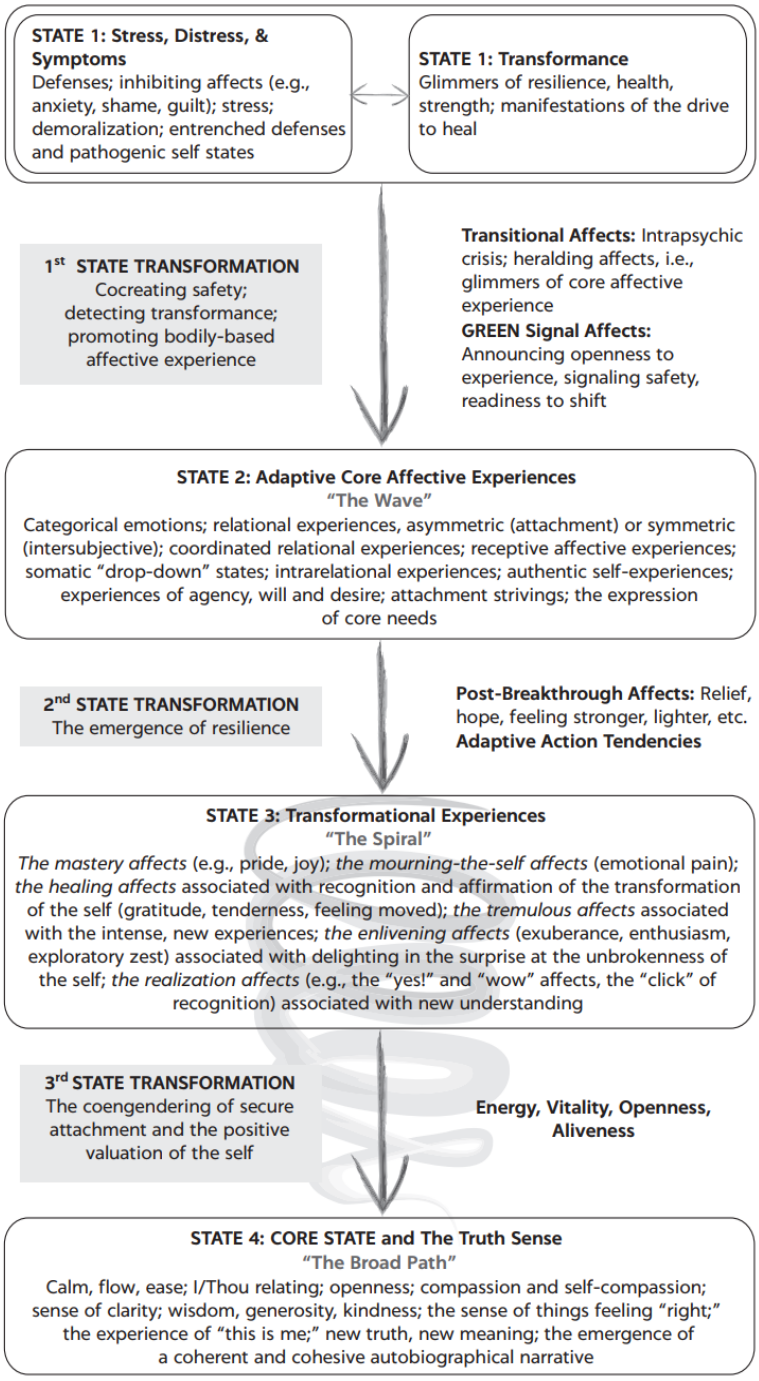
To lay the groundwork for the integration, it is important to first examine the central concepts of AEDP's model of transformation alongside the Daoist view of yin and yang, identifying the philosophical parallels that support clinical application.

AEDP and Daoist yin–yang: Shared foundations of transformation

AEDP rests on the premise that every human being has an innate capacity for healing, resilience, and flourishing. This intrinsic motivational force, termed *transformance* by Diana Fosha (2000, 2021), describes a deep-seated drive toward vitality, authentic connection, and emotional truth. Transformance is not a rare occurrence emerging only under optimal conditions; rather, it is a universal property of human experience, persisting even in the face of profound trauma, loss, and suffering.

In clinical work, transformance guides the therapist's dual attunement: while acknowledging the presenting symptoms, defensive strategies, and dysregulation that characterize State 1 (See Figure 1), the therapist also actively attends to the underlying adaptive strivings and capacities for transformation that coexist with distress. This perspective reframes symptoms not as static deficits but as expressions of vitality constrained by defensive necessity. By maintaining simultaneous awareness of both the pain and the potential for healing, therapists create a holding environment in which transformance can emerge.

Figure 1. *The Phenomenology of the Four-State Transformational Process in AEDP*



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Holding both the reality of suffering and the presence of transformative potential is a foundational AEDP principle. Such a stance parallels Fosha's (2009) emphasis on the inseparability of suffering and healing, where the very intensity of emotional pain can point to the depth of a client's capacity for transformation. Pain and the possibility for healing are inseparable in human life. The intensity of distress can be understood as an indication of the underlying drive for change, much like a seed of growth contained within the darkest moments of struggle. By working with both aspects of the client's experience, the therapist fosters safety, mutual recognition, and the conditions for accelerated change.

Yin–Yang concept in Daoist philosophy

In classical Daoist thought, the yin–yang framework offers a profound lens for understanding the interplay of distress and transformation. As described in *Dao De Jing* chapter 2, apparent opposites are mutually defining and arise in relational dependence:

Being and non-being create each other;
Difficult and easy support each other;
Long and short define each other;
High and low depend on each other.

This ontological principle asserts that no quality exists in isolation; instead, each is born from, shaped by, and sustained through its opposite.

Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing* extends this principle to cosmology:

Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to the myriad things.
The myriad things carry yin and embrace yang, and through the blending of these energies, harmony is achieved.

Yin and yang are not static categories of "negative" and "positive" but dynamically interdependent, mutually generative processes. Yin contains the seed of yang; yang contains the seed of yin (See Figure

2). Over time, each transform into the other into an unending cycle, reflecting the Daoist view of reality as fluid and ever-changing (Ames & Hall, 2003; Robinet, 1997).

Figure 2: *Yin-Yang Symbolic Meaning*

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This cyclical interpenetration suggests that any given state, whether characterized by contraction, vulnerability, and stillness (yin) or by expansion, vitality, and action (yang), always holds within it the potential for its complement. From this perspective, change is understood not as the elimination of one pole in favor of the other, but as the cultivation of their ongoing interaction, allowing the two forces to work together in a way that fosters balance, harmony, and adaptability.

Keeton and Fu's (2019, as cited in Scarfe, 2023) process-relational reading of the Dao De Jing, yin and yang are not static opposites but complementary poles that "flow back and forth into-and-through each other" in an "endlessly flowing rhythm-pattern" (p. 146). This view resonates with AEDP's assertion that adaptive and maladaptive states are dynamically interrelated and mutually transformative when brought into relational engagement.

Integrating AEDP's Four-State model with the yin-yang cycle

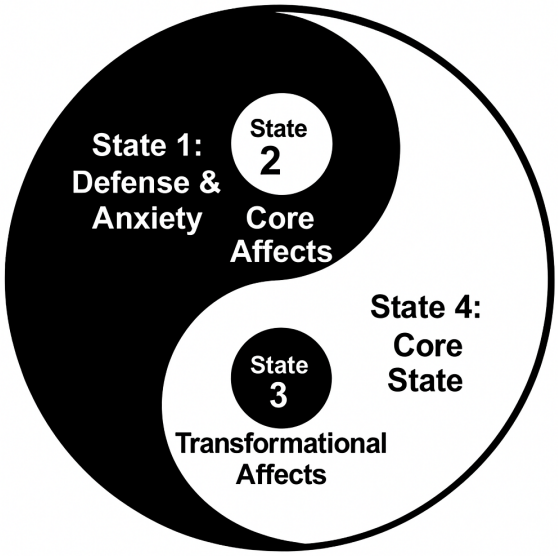
Applied to psychotherapy, and specifically to AEDP, the yin–yang framework offers a culturally resonant bridge for understanding transformation. The suffering, defenses, and dysregulation of State One (Fosha, 2000) can be understood as yin in its contracted, inward form, inherently containing the potential for the openness and vitality of State Four, which parallels yang in its expansive, outward expression. Conversely, Daoist thought and clinical experience remind us that even in moments of flourishing, vulnerability and receptivity remain present, echoing the black seed within the white field of the yin–yang symbol (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 42).

In Daoist philosophy, yin–yang is grounded in the polarity of 有/You (being) and 无/Wu (non-being), which arise in mutual dependence (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapters 2, 11, 40; Ames & Hall, 2003). Non-being is not absence but the generative space from which being emerges, just as distress may conceal the potential for transformation. This reflects the Daoist principle of 反/Fan (reversal) (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 40), where each extreme naturally gives rise to its opposite. Applied to AEDP, this perspective suggests that defended, contracted states already contain the possibility of core state vitality, and flourishing states remain interwoven with vulnerability. The therapeutic task is not to eliminate one pole but to hold and work within their interplay, allowing each to give rise to the other (Robinet, 1997; Liu, 2017).

When both poles are held in awareness, the AEDP therapist embodies a Daoist-informed stance. Rather than striving to remove distress in pursuit of an idealized state, the therapist engages with the dynamic balance of opposites, supporting the natural transformation of symptoms into strengths. *The goal is not to move clients unidirectionally from State One to State Four, but to facilitate their interaction until a generative rhythm of contraction and expansion, vulnerability and vitality, emerge.* As Ames and Hall (2003) emphasize, the interplay of opposites is not static equilibrium but a dynamic process in which each draws energy from the other.

Mapping AEDP's states (Figure 1) onto the yin–yang cycle (Figure 2) illustrates this movement. State One, marked by symptoms, defenses, and dysregulation, parallels the yin pole in its heaviness and inward collapse, yet like the white seed within yin, it conceals vitality. State Four, AEDP's core state of openness and calm (Fosha, 2000), parallels the yang pole, yet the black seed within yang reminds us that vulnerability and suffering remain integral to flourishing

Figure 3: AEDP's *Four States Integrated with the Yin–Yang Cycle*



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In practice, this mapping underscores transformation as cyclical rather than linear. Within suffering lie the seeds of growth, and within flourishing resides vulnerability. As the Dao De Jing states:
Being and non-being give birth to each other" (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 2), "All things carry yin and embrace yang; through the blending of these energies, they achieve harmony.
(Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 42).

These passages reflect the Daoist conviction that yin and yang are mutually generative, each containing the seed of the other. As Robinet (1997) observes, their interpenetration is the very process through which transformation occurs. Ames and Hall (2003) further stress that opposites in Daoist cosmology are not adversaries to overcome but relationally defined aspects of a whole.

For AEDP, this means therapists remain attuned both to clients' distress and to their innate strivings for wholeness, creating conditions in which healing emerges organically. Both Daoist philosophy and AEDP affirm that transformation does not arise from eliminating one pole in favor of the other, but from their ongoing dynamic interplay.

Cross-theoretical resonances

Therapeutic transformation can be illuminated by perspectives from multiple theoretical traditions that conceptualize change as arising from the dynamic tension between opposing forces. This cross-theoretical dialogue reinforces AEDP's central claim that growth and healing emerge when therapists and clients can remain present with seemingly contradictory experiences rather than trying to resolve them prematurely.

Mitchell's hope and dread

Stephen A. Mitchell (1993), in *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, underscores the dual emotional forces that permeate the therapeutic encounter. Clients long for relief, growth, and fulfillment of unmet relational needs, yet they often fear destabilization and uncertainty such change might entail. Therapists, too, can share these ambivalent tensions. Hope encompasses the desire for relief from suffering, the aspiration for growth, and the longing to repair relational ruptures. Dread reflects the apprehension that change might bring destabilization, the loss of familiar identity structures, or the uncertainty of stepping into new relational terrain. Far from being contradictory, hope and dread are mutually constitutive, shaping the therapeutic atmosphere as a dialectic in motion. AEDP's emphasis on moment-to-moment attunement resonates here: transformation occurs not by silencing dread, but by holding it alongside hope, validating ambivalence as an authentic part of the client's experience.

McGilchrist's coincidence of opposites

Iain McGilchrist's (2021) concept of the "coincidence of opposites" broadens this understanding by situating psychological ambivalence within a philosophical and cultural framework. Drawing on both Western traditions, such as Heraclitus's assertion that strife and harmony are inseparable and Daoist principles, McGilchrist illustrates how contradiction is not merely tolerated but generative: opposites give life to each other, producing a higher level of integration. This idea directly parallels Mitchell's framing

of hope and dread.

The Dao De Jing (chapters 2, 42) similarly emphasizes that yin and yang are mutually generative, each containing the seed of the other. Transformation emerges not from eliminating one pole but from holding both in creative tension. Rather than viewing these as antagonistic forces, McGilchrist legitimizes their interdependence, providing a philosophical foundation for AEDP's clinical stance of engaging both contraction and expansion as necessary for transformation. This philosophical lens legitimizes the clinical stance of AEDP therapists who do not rush clients out of pain toward relief, but rather hold distress and vitality in simultaneous awareness, trusting that transformation arises through their interplay.

Gestalt's figure–ground principle

Gestalt therapy offers a parallel clinical metaphor in its figure–ground principle (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). In any given moment of experience, certain elements emerge into the foreground of awareness, while others recede into the background. For clients in distress, symptoms, defenses, and suffering often dominate the foreground, while resilience and transformational strivings remain backgrounded. Conversely, in moments of vitality and integration, vulnerability and fragility may fade but continue to exist as part of the whole.

The therapist's task is to sustain awareness of both poles, helping clients shift attention fluidly without dissociating from either. This complements Mitchell's and McGilchrist's frameworks: just as hope and dread coexist, and yin and yang interpenetrate, figure and ground shift dynamically rather than existing as fixed categories. Clinically, this echoes AEDP's practice of metatherapeutic processing, where therapists invite clients to notice not only the relief and expansion of change but also the vulnerability, grief, or anxiety that accompanies it. Awareness of both poles prevents fragmentation and supports deeper integration.

AEDP's transformance and the integration of opposites

AEDP consolidates these cross-theoretical insights in its principle of transformance (Fosha, 2000, 2021). By affirming that defenses and suffering coexist with an innate drive toward wholeness, AEDP embodies Mitchell's tension of hope and dread, McGilchrist's generativity of opposites, and Gestalt's figure–ground fluidity. Transformance reframes ambivalence as the very condition for healing, not an obstacle to being eliminated. In practice, the therapist does not push the client unidirectionally toward relief but instead helps them inhabit the dynamic interplay of contraction and expansion. Healing emerges when the client experiences distress and vitality together, metabolizing their interplay in relational safety.
Taken together, these traditions converge on a strikingly similar insight: change arises not from overcoming one pole of experience, but from engaging in their interdependence. Mitchell shows how hope and dread entwine; McGilchrist frames opposites as mutually generative; Gestalt emphasizes the shifting salience of suffering and vitality; and AEDP operationalizes these dynamics through its model of transformance. All converge with the Daoist yin–yang principle, which depicts opposites not as adversaries but as relationally defined aspects of a greater whole. This shared foundation strengthens AEDP's cross-cultural resonance, showing that transformation is best understood not as linear progression from distress to flourishing, but as the unfolding rhythm of opposites in generative interplay.

The process of transformation: Holding and integrating opposites

Daoist philosophy offers a profound lens for understanding transformation through the principle of reversal (反), which teaches that each extreme contains the seed of its opposite. The *Dao De Jing* (chapter 40) states that "reversal is the movement of the Dao," suggesting that when phenomena reach their peak, they naturally give way to their opposite. This cyclical rhythm reflects the yin–yang dynamic, in which contraction inherently carries the potential for expansion, and flourishing holds the possibility of returning to stillness. Transformation, in this view, does not unfold through the eradication of one pole but through their rhythmic interplay.

In AEDP, this principle is enacted clinically as the therapist helps clients bring implicit strivings for growth into awareness, even when obscured by defenses or dysregulation in State One. Distress and vitality are understood not as separate domains but as interdependent aspects of experience (Fosha, 2000, 2021). When both poles are engaged experientially, symptoms can give rise to strengths, and defensive constriction can open into vitality. This dynamic mirrors the yin–yang cycle, where each pole contains the seed of its opposite and transformation arises from their mutual influence.
The Paradox of Change, articulated by Beisser (1970), resonates deeply with both Daoist thought and AEDP practice. Genuine change, Beisser argues, arises not through striving to become different but through fully inhabiting one's present reality. Clinically, this means that therapists do not push clients away from distress toward vitality. Instead, they cultivate conditions in which both can be held together, allowing transformation to emerge organically. This stance aligns with Fosha's principle of transformance, in which the therapist resonates simultaneously with the client's suffering and their innate strivings for wholeness.

The Daoist principle of 无为/wu wei, often translated as "effortless action" or "non-interference", further illuminates this process. Wu wei is not passive withdrawal but a disciplined attunement to natural rhythms. As recent scholarship emphasizes (Xu, 2024), wu wei entails two complementary orientations: first, yielding to the unfolding of the system without premature interference; second, actively consolidating new patterns once they arise. Applied to AEDP, the first orientation corresponds to a non-pathologizing acceptance of defenses and a readiness to allow core affect to surface without coercion. The second orientation parallels the therapist's work of dyadic regulation and metaprocessing, where emergent adaptive emotions and relational experiences are deepened and integrated so that transformation becomes enduring.

This cyclical interplay can be further illuminated through wu wei as the experiential mode by which transformation naturally unfolds. Genuine change does not occur by forcing defenses aside or pushing toward vitality but by cultivating a state in which defenses soften, vitality surfaces, and reorganization arises spontaneously. In AEDP, this is reflected in the therapist's attunement to the client's natural rhythms, allowing core affect to emerge without coercion and then supporting its consolidation through collaborative reflection.

Taken together, these perspectives frame AEDP's practical methods, moment-to-moment tracking, dyadic regulation to maintain optimal arousal, and metaprocessing, as ways of rhythmically balancing contraction and expansion rather than moving the client unidirectionally from symptom to cure. By remaining present to both aspects of the client's experience, the therapist embodies a stance akin to Daoist harmony, fostering the mutual transformation of opposites. Healing arises not from eradicating distress but from inhabiting its interplay with vitality, allowing a dynamic equilibrium to emerge that supports integration, growth, and greater wholeness.

Clinical illustration: Cross-cultural application of yin–yang in AEDP

By examining the client's journey through both AEDP's state model and the yin–yang framework, the preceding case illustrates how theory can be operationalized in real-time clinical decision-making. The dynamic interplay of contraction and expansion, vulnerability and vitality, was not only evident in the client's inner experience but also actively shaped the therapeutic process. This practical application sets the stage for a closer look at the mechanisms of transformation, examining how holding and integrating opposites creates the conditions for change and how this stance aligns with both AEDP principles and Daoist philosophy.

Case background

The client, a 28-year-old cisgender gay man of Palestinian heritage, immigrated from Mauritius to Canada two years prior to therapy. Raised in a conservative Muslim household, he identified himself as agnostic, expressing belief in the soul and spiritual forces without affiliation to organized religion. His early environment was marked by persistent bullying for feminine mannerisms, color-based discrimination from family due to his darker skin tone, and the emotional distance of a strict father who rarely offered warmth. Although his mother was more caring, she frequently criticized his ideas and seldom validated his decisions

During adolescence, the client came to identify as gay, an orientation that was rejected within his family context. At the start of therapy, he presented with low self-worth, significant social anxiety, fear of judgment, relational isolation, and intermittent suicidal ideation.

Vignette 1: A sensitive boy

In our first session, the client described the roots of his deep-seated self-doubt: experiences of family and peer rejection, minority stress as a racialized immigrant, and heightened emotional sensitivity. While attuning to his narrative, I also held a yin–yang-informed stance, as described earlier in the paper, where contraction (yin) is understood as containing the seed of expansion (yang).

Client (C): (*Sitting stiffly, speaking quickly*) I have very strong social anxiety. It happens again and again, especially when I talk with people. I feel I am too sensitive. My sensitivity makes me anxious. Recently, it got so bad that I cannot focus, behave normally, or work. **[State 1: Stress and symptoms]**

Therapist (T): (*Sitting with open posture, soft and slower tone, warm voice*) I hear the anxiety often comes up for you. That must have been very challenging. You mentioned your anxiety is connected with being sensitive. Could you tell me more about what you mean by "sensitive"? How does it link to anxiety? **[Moment-to-moment tracking of client's posture, tone, and speed indicated high anxiety. Therapist responded with softer nonverbal signals for dyadic regulation. By reframing "sensitive" from a descriptive rather than judgmental stance, the therapist gently shifted the client from self-criticism toward self-exploration.]**

C: I can sense very quickly whether people are friendly or not. Even with strangers, before they speak, I can feel their energy. Sometimes people sound polite, but I feel they don't like me. Then I get anxious and cannot express myself freely. People think I am weird because "you cannot feel other people." But I really can.

T: I am impressed by your instinct. This kind of sensitivity is a gift, a kind of ability. Not everyone has it. **[Detection of transformance glimmers: reframing sensitivity as relational perceptiveness. Therapist affirms the client's SELF as a resource.]**

C: (*Eyes widen, surprised*) A gift? No one said that before. Others always say I'm too sensitive. I feel like a sensitive boy, and people don't like me because I overthink everything.

T: This ability not only lets you sense when people are unfriendly, but also when they welcome you. When you feel someone is friendly, how do you respond? **[Holding yin–yang balance: expanding the client's focus beyond anxiety to the generative pole of his sensitivity.]**
C: Yes, I can also feel friendliness. With you, for example, I feel you are welcoming. That makes me want to share my thoughts with you. **[The positive relational experiences with the therapist]**

T: I observed and sensed you can talk with me well, and I am grateful you are sharing your experiences with me. This helps me to get to know you better. **[I deliberately used the word of "sense" to validate his sensitivity, reducing client's shame. I, as a "other" to the client, I also can sense people, he is not weird.]** (Later, the client recalled benefits of sensitivity: empathy that helped him develop deep friendships, and an intuition for danger that once protected friends.)

T: At this moment, after you recall these examples, how do you see your sensitivity now? **[Metaprocessing]**

C: I think it really is an ability. Something unique. **[The client is integrating the shift in self-perception.]**

Therapist's initial yin–yang perspective

In this first session, the client's narrative centered on rejection and self-criticism, hallmarks of AEDP's State 1. Yet through a yin–yang-informed stance, the therapist recognized vitality within contraction. Sensitivity, though experienced as weakness, was reframed as relational perceptiveness, a seed of growth

embedded in pain. This parallels the Daoist metaphor of the uncarved block (朴/pu), symbolizing latent potential (Scarfe, 2023).

Adopting a 无为/wu wei stance of non-coercive pacing (Slingerland, 2000), the therapist tracked moment-to-moment shifts without over-directing. Defenses were validated rather than pathologized, and safety was co-regulated dyadically. Over time, grief and anger (State 2) emerged as vitality within suffering, followed by transformational affects such as relief, gratitude, and self-compassion (State 3), and moments of clarity and connection (State 4). This progression reflected AEDP's state shifts as a spiral, where each cycle integrates contraction and expansion at a deeper level of resilience.

The therapist also noticed countertransference marked by both hope and dread (Mitchell, 1993). Hope arose from sensing latent capacities, while dread reflected awareness of the fragility of self-worth. Applying the yin–yang frame allowed both responses to coexist without collapsing into either, modeling the same stance the client was invited to adopt.

Cultural attunement

Cultural attunement deepened the work. Despite different religious and cultural backgrounds, the therapist and client shared an agnostic worldview and the lived experience of being racialized immigrant minorities in Canada. This recognition of both commonalities and divergences fostered cultural humility, resonating with AEDP's emphasis on undoing aloneness (Fosha, 2000, 2021). Cultural attunement itself became a yin–yang process, where distinct perspectives mutually informed one another, deepening safety and trust. From a cross-cultural perspective, this reframing carried particular significance. In his family and cultural environment, sensitivity had often been equated with weakness, especially for someone raised with rigid expectations of masculinity. As an immigrant negotiating minority stress in Canada, he had internalized the message that his emotional depth was a liability. Yet within therapy, sensitivity was not pathologized but recognized as a resource for attunement, empathy, and moral courage. Naming both the cultural denigration and the therapeutic revaluation of sensitivity enabled him to experience his inner world as less divided and more integrated. This process mirrored the yin–yang dynamic itself: holding difference and complementarity together as interdependent, rather than contradictory, facets of transformation.

Vignette 2: A newer self

Months later, after growing in confidence and establishing friendships, the client entered a romantic relationship. His anxiety resurfaced around commitment, especially given his identity as a gay man who had never sustained a long-term relationship.

C: (*Nervously*) I'm scared I will fall back into old patterns of anxiety, like before.

T: I hear your fear. At the same time, can we look together: how are you now different from the you before the therapy? **[Using the yin–yang perspective, the yin-yang cycle is spiral: State 1 to 4 is not linear. State 1 returns, but at a new level.]**

C: (*Thinking*) Yes, I am different. I work out regularly now, which helps my physical and mental health. I started acting classes, that's the thing I really love. I made some friends there. My teacher values me. At work, my leader gives me more responsibility because I can speak French besides English, so I might be promoted. I've grown, I'm better than I was before. Maybe that's why I attracted such a good boyfriend.

T: So many positive changes. I'm happy for you! And even in this anxiety, how is it different from before? **[Using the yin–yang perspective, the yin-yang cycle is spiral: Anxiety returns, but it should be at a new level. With the client, we explore the transformation in the vulnerability]**

C: Before, when I was anxious, I couldn't do anything—no work, no exercise, even wanted to die. This time, I still feel anxious, but I can keep working. I even pushed myself to go to the gym once this week.

T: Great! How do you feel seeing this difference? **[Metaprocessing]**

C: I feel more confident. Even in the before, I can manage myself moving from Mauritius to Canada, find a job and starting life here. I believe I can stabilize again now too. **[The client recognized his own resilience.]**

Holding both poles in awareness

Throughout therapy, the client's narrative was dominated by contraction—withdrawal, shame, and self-criticism. Yet the therapist consistently held awareness of the complementary pole of vitality, openness, and connection. By naming the inevitability of this polarity and expressing curiosity about it, the therapist invited exploration of transformational capacities, enabling suffering and strength to be experienced as dynamically interwoven (Fosha, 2021).

Spiral transformation: Yin–Yang cycles in AEDP

The return of anxiety in later sessions was not a regression but part of a new cycle within the yin–yang spiral. Vulnerability and strength were integrated at progressively deeper levels, illustrating how AEDP's state shifts are oscillatory rather than linear. Each return of contraction created an opening for expansion, cultivating resilience through repeated cycles. This process resonates with Daoist wu wei, where adaptation emerges through alternating movements of contraction and expansion (Slingerland, 2000). The Yijing further supports this view, portraying transformation as cyclical and non-linear, with oscillation and reversal (fan) as essential movements of growth (Zhang & Shen, 2021). Thus, AEDP's spiraling state progression can be situated within a broader philosophical lineage affirming that change unfolds through cycles rather than straight lines.

This framework echoes Daoist philosophy, where the principle of reversal (反) asserts that extremes give rise to their opposites (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003). Just as yin and yang are interdependent and cyclical, therapeutic change in AEDP involves recurring movements between distress and vitality, pain and transformation. These returns are not simple repetitions but higher-level integrations, more akin to a spiral than a circle.

When anxiety resurfaced after initial progress, it did not negate prior gains. Instead, it marked a new cycle in which previously inaccessible adaptive resources became available. What once felt overwhelming could now be met with greater self-compassion, co-regulation, and reflective capacity. This illustrates the spiral of 无为/wu wei, or effortless action, whereby adaptation arises through repeated cycles of contraction and expansion, allowing defenses to be respected while vitality gradually emerges (Xu, 2024).

Contemporary AEDP literature highlights this dynamic quality. Fosha (2021) describes therapeutic transformation as waves of regulation and dysregulation that reorganize core affective experience over time. Similarly, emotion-focused models conceptualize change as recursive rather than linear, where the re-emergence of distress signals new opportunities for integration (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006). The yin–yang framework deepens this observation by situating it within a philosophy of cyclical interdependence: each return of vulnerability carries the potential for greater vitality.

In the clinical case, the client's re-emerging anxiety was understood not as failure but as evidence of spiral transformation. Earlier work with grief and shame had expanded his tolerance for affective intensity, so when anxiety returned, it was accompanied by more openness and less dread. Through dyadic regulation, moment-to-moment tracking, and metaprocessing, therapist and client could witness how vulnerability and resilience coexisted. Sensitivity, once associated only with weakness, became both an entry point to suffering and a bridge to deeper empathy and strength.

Cultural resonance and humility

The therapeutic relationship was shaped by both differences and resonances. While the client's background as a gay Palestinian man differed significantly from the therapist's as a heterosexual Asian woman, shared experiences of migration and marginalization created points of connection. Holding both similarity and difference allowed cultural humility to emerge, which in turn strengthened safety for deeper emotional exploration. Cultural attunement became a yin–yang process, distinct perspectives informing and balancing each other, enabling mutual recognition across difference.

Implications for Cross-Cultural AEDP Practice

Integrating a yin–yang-informed stance into AEDP offers significant benefits for cultural sensitivity. Daoist thought, grounded in the interdependence of 有/you (being) and 无/wu (non-being), provides a philosophical foundation for understanding symptoms and transformation as mutually arising aspects of the whole (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapters 2, 11). Here, 无/wu is not mere absence but a generative space, akin to the latent capacity for transformation that exists within distress. This perspective invites nuanced attunement to cultural narratives, values, and relational dynamics, allowing therapists to meet clients without imposing a unidimensional view of either distress or change.

Clinically, a yin–yang frame counters Western privileging of "yang" (assertiveness, verbal fluency) by equally valuing "yin" (receptivity, restraint). This rebalancing legitimizes culturally diverse routes to health, including quieter forms of emotional truth and connection. A process-relational understanding of

yin–yang (Scarfe, 2023) further helps therapists recognize distress and vitality as dynamically interwoven, encouraging respect for culturally specific modes of resilience. The emphasis on cultural translation between East and West (Zhang & Shen, 2021) reinforces this point, showing that yin–yang can enrich Western therapeutic frameworks without reducing cultural specificity. As a flexible meta-language, yin–yang enables therapists to integrate diverse cultural narratives without imposing Western linear norms.

For therapist training and supervision, incorporating yin–yang and the Daoist principle of 反/reversal (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 40) fosters reflective practice that embraces complexity and resists oversimplification. Trainees can learn to hold both distress and vitality in awareness, to appreciate how cultural frameworks shape emotional expression, and to develop humility, flexibility, and curiosity—qualities essential for cross-cultural work. 无为/Wu wei ("effortless action") provides a guiding principle for pacing interventions: knowing when to step back and allow healing processes to unfold and when to actively co-create adaptive experiences. This stance supports sustainability of change while honoring cultural congruence.

Finally, yin–yang offers a powerful pedagogical tool. Mapping AEDP's States 1–4 onto the yin–yang figure provides a succinct visual schema for teaching AEDP's cyclical, interpenetrating movements of change. This model clarifies the spiral progression of transformation and supports trainees in recognizing that distress and vitality continually inform one another. Holding the whole, in both philosophical and clinical senses, thus creates conditions for transformation that transcend cultural boundaries while remaining attuned to cultural specificity.

Conclusion: holding the whole

The integration of Daoist yin–yang philosophy with AEDP underscores a central truth: symptoms and transformation are inseparable, dynamically interrelated aspects of the human experience. In Daoist terms, being and non-being arise together, and through reversal, each extreme gives way to its opposite (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003, chapter 40). This view aligns with AEDP's recognition that distress is not an obstacle to being eliminated but an integral part of the unfolding process of healing and growth.

Bringing Eastern and Western perspectives into dialogue enriches our understanding of the therapeutic process, offering a holistic framework for fostering change. The Daoist insight into the interdependence of opposites, along with wu wei's balance of non-interference with active cultivation, complements AEDP's experiential methods, yielding a cross-cultural approach that is both adaptable and grounded. This aligns with other integrative traditions, such as efforts to bring the Yijing into dialogue with Jungian psychology (e.g., Zhang & Shen, 2021), demonstrating that cross-cultural syntheses not only deepen theoretical grounding but also situate AEDP within a broader scholarly lineage of East–West integration.

Continued exploration of such integrative frameworks can enhance AEDP's relevance in multicultural contexts, encouraging therapists to work with openness, respect, and creativity. By holding the whole, attending to both suffering and vitality, contraction and expansion, being and non-being, we affirm the shared human capacity for transformation across the rich diversity of cultural worlds. Clinically, transformation accelerates when therapists stay with both, validating suffering while resonating with

implicit strivings for vitality. Culturally, a yin–yang stance honors plural ways of being while safeguarding AEDP's experiential, relational, and hope-infused core. By holding contraction and expansion, pain and possibility together, therapists foster conditions in which the human capacity for self-organizing healing can reliably surface and take root.

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