

## Review

# The clarity of one's mind – creating the foundation for strategic thinking

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### Abstract

Here, the authors examine the critical need for the clarity of one's mind so as to think well in strategic management, and make progress or bring growth to one's organization. In this paper, the authors also discuss various ancient Chinese concepts of *Tao* (*Yin* and *Yang*), how to attain clarity of the mind in a logical manner. The authors believe that all of us need to achieve a clear mind in decision making for ourselves; for the organizations and businesses we are in. The paper also examines the advantages and the benefits of achieving clarity of one's mind for oneself and applying this concept and clear mindset to the strategic thinking and management of his or her organization and business.

**Keywords:** Strategic Thinking, Clarity of mind, Intuition, Chinese Concepts of *Tao* (*Ying* and *Yang*) and *Chi*.

## INTRODUCTION

A strategic thinker helps a corporation/nation to establish the vision and to predict the shape of its future. Hence, a strategic thinker should be innovative and imaginative in his thinking and the role of strategic thinking is "to seek innovation and imagine new and very different futures that may lead the company to redefine its core strategies and even its industry" (Graetz, 2002). Intensified exploration of strategy from new directions is now coming together in this concept of strategic thinking (Abraham, 2005).

The authors believe that a clear mind is of ultimate importance for one to think strategically in helping the corporation/nation to prosper and move forward into the future. Interestingly, a case in point, in Singapore, after a period of campaigning, the day before the polling day of either the General Election or the Presidential Election is designated as a cooling-off day. It is the eve of the polling day when election campaigning is prohibited. This 24-hour campaign silence period is to give voters some time to reflect rationally on issues raised during the election before going to the polls (Singapore Government, 2011; 2011a). This is a single day for reflection or thinking through to allow an individual to have a cool head and

clear mind to make a crucial decision to vote for the preferred party or candidate the next day. In this respect, the authors also believe that clarity of mind is required in every decision-making process in order to reduce making mistakes. And besides, one would also want to be ethically correct and with clear conscience; to paraphrase what Mahatma Gandhi once said, a person is useless when he decides against the promptings of his own conscience.

### The Paper's Aim and Objectives

In this paper, the aim and objectives are to illustrate the paramount need for clarity of the mind to think strategically, and move forward. In doing this, it uses various ancient Chinese concepts of *Chi* and *Tao* (*Yin* and *Yang*) to attain a clear mind in decision making for the organizations and businesses. The paper also seeks to discuss ways of attaining clarity of one's mind as well as to demonstrate the importance and the benefits of such clarity of the mind.

### What Is Strategic Thinking?

Strategy was once seen as the art of planning and directing large military movements and operations of war.

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In business or in an individual's career and/or growth, a strategy maps out the future, setting out what products or services to be out in the market [as in the case of a business] (Ali, et al, 2001: 358) or simply what's to be done. Strategic thinking is thus a practical, informal yet organizing way of thinking to help oneself or an organization to look ahead into the future with the aim of achieving long term targets and goals. To enable an individual to be effective in strategic thinking, (s)he should have patience and not rush things and jump into conclusion swiftly, without having enough information to make a good decision on the matter. *Lao Tzu* (verse 29) points out:

*There is a time for being ahead,  
a time for being behind;  
a time for being in motion,  
a time for being at rest;  
a time for being vigorous,  
a time for being exhausted;  
a time for being safe,  
a time for being in danger.*

So being patient is a virtue, and something that is to be appreciated. Besides, when one is patient, one's eyes are wide open, one sharpens one's human perception for all things beautiful too (Low, 2009).

### Open Mindset and Strategic Thinking

Based on one's accumulated knowledge and experiences, the impatient or fixed mindset would immediately say, "It cannot be done". In this respect, the authors believe that one should unlearn in order to have an open mindset; and unlearn can be said to be a way to learn and being creative. Unlearning is a process in which one tries to put (something learned) out of the mind; forget; or to discard (accumulated knowledge). This would enable one to have more fresh ideas; opportunities; choices and alternatives in doing one's strategic thinking.

Take, for example, when an individual is found to be a diabetic; and very often, without any hesitation, the doctor would declare one as diabetic and advise one to take medicine for (s)he would say, "For diabetic patient, there is no other way out but only medicine can manage the sickness." However, if we have an open mind, we might stop, pause and ask ourselves, "Can't we not take medicine and live a natural/normal life?", "What are the side effects of taking medicine?", "Are all the body systems of the diabetic patients the same?", "Is it true that if we don't take medicine we can not live a normal life again?" and "Can't we take care of ourselves by doing exercise and having a balance diet instead of taking medicine?" In fact, nowadays, we can change our lifestyles to cure our sicknesses; and also by doing regular exercise and taking a proper and balance diet (Low and Ang, 2011; 2011a).

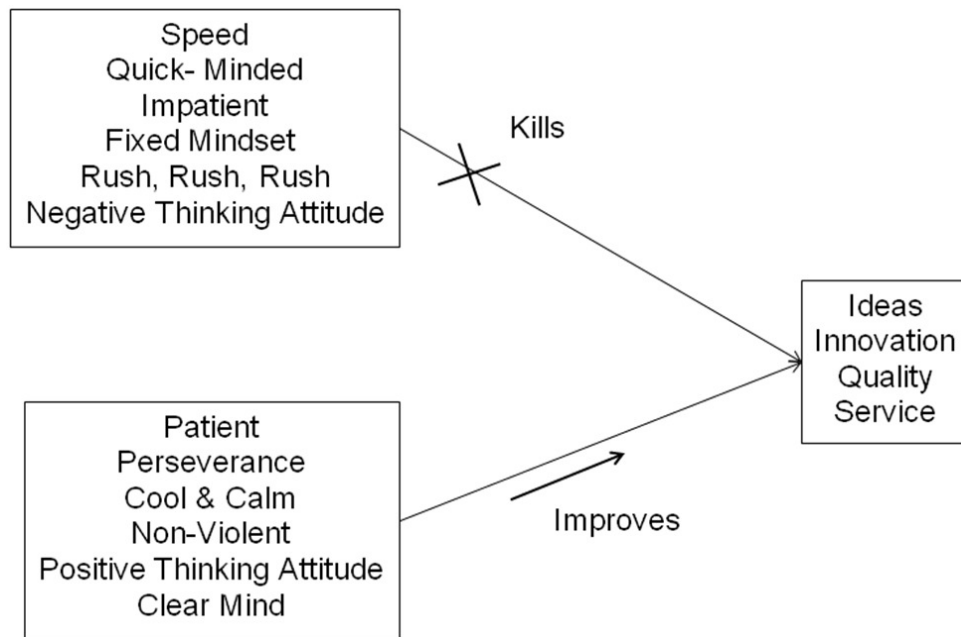
Another common example is that when a person is

found to have high blood pressure, the doctor would advise one to take the prescribed medicine. Suppose an individual is forty-five years old, he or she would have to take medicine as a remedial action for the rest of his or her life. However, if one can unlearn and being creative and think positively further on how to cure high blood pressure, one would seek for other alternatives to cure one's illness and ask more questions like, "What about, at regular intervals, doing relaxation exercises such as lying down and not pressuring oneself? What about change our lifestyles or change our diet? What about having work/ life balance? Would the blood pressure drop? What about not doing anything for the day, just close one's eyes, try not to think of anything, breathe softly, lightly and smoothly, would the blood pressure drop without medicine (to be normal)?" All these are similar to what a doctor would advise his or her patient to lie down and rest in order to recover or to maintain the balance of one's body system.

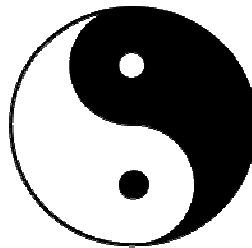
We also wish to highlight that speed can in fact kill. What can one really know about the landscape from a car blasting down the highway at 90 to 110 kilometres per hour? Though being fast can create the competitive advantage of, say, a courier company, speed actually kills ideas, innovation, quality, service (it becomes impersonal, and no time is luxuriously given or allocated to spend it with customers to build relationships) and seriously, even YOU – if you don't watch out! Or for that matter, anyone of us – if we don't watch out! Figure 1 shows speed kills ideas, innovation, quality and service.

From the above, one can gather that it is of great importance for a strategic thinker to be clear on the reliability and effectiveness of the data and/or resources to be used in his/her strategy when mapping out the future. An individual who thinks strategically for his or her long term career would always analyze opportunities and problems from a broader perspective and understands the potential consequences of his or her course of action at each step of the journey. Dynamic managers who think strategically would assimilate and analyze up-to-date data in forming a long term picture of a business environment and also understand the potential impact of their decision-making and actions to their organizations.

A person/group with a cloudy mind would, most often, not plan well, and this characteristic lack of strategic thinking and planning is likely to lead to making poor or bad decisions. This is because "strategic planning is a process for defining an organization's approach for achieving its mission. Conducting successful strategic planning is essential because it creates a foundation for executing work, as well as setting the stage for enterprise architecture, process improvement, risk management, portfolio management, and any other enterprise-wide initiatives" (Gates, 2011). Therefore, clarity of mind of an individual or group is of paramount importance in strategic thinking as it involves obtaining accurate data collection/analysis of reliable sources, in order to form a



**Figure 1.** Speed kills ideas, innovation quality and service.



**Tai Chi Diagram**

representative strategic personal/business picture for decision making and implementation. The authors would advance the argument and it is their contention that an understanding of the philosophy of *Tao* would be very much helpful in attaining clarity of mind.

### **What Is *Tao*? What Is *Yin* and *Yang*?**

*Lao Tzu*, was one of the earliest philosopher in the Chinese history, who describes the marvel of *Tao* as an evolving force that operates throughout the universe. *Tao* is the first cause of the universe. *Lao Tzu* said that *Tao* is 'the way' and he emphasized this in the first verse of his *Tao Teh Ching* (Cheng, 1981) that:

*The Tao that can be said is not the everlasting Tao.  
If a name can be named, it is not the everlasting name.  
That which has no name is the origin of heaven and earth;  
That which has a name is the mother of all things.*  
(*Lao Tzu*, Verse.1).

Therefore *Tao* is always without the name and it is the origin of heaven and earth. *Tao* can also be said to be the Absolute that is the movement and stillness without

beginning, *Yin* and *Yang* (also known as *Tai Chi*) without beginning (Cleary 2003).

The *Tai Chi* (Ultimate Principle of Existence) involved "The two dynamic powers" (the white space represents the *Yang* and the black space represents the *Yin*) exists in equilibrium and from which a coordinated and vigorous force is produced.

This classic symbol for *Yin* and *Yang* appears like a pair of fish swimming in a circle around each other; the tail of one is formed from the head of the other. Here, we can see that *Yin-Yang* are born out of each other and are transformed into each other. Each of the *Yin-Yang* contains the seed of the other; there is a tiny seed circle of dark *Yin* contained in the white part of *Yang*, as there is a seed circle of white *Yang* contained in the darkness of *Yin*.) *Tao* is the force that flows through in all lives. Each person is to nurture the breathing or integral life force ("Chi" or "Ki") that has been given. Unlike Western thinking, time is cyclical and not linear. And overall, each and every Taoism believer's goal is to align him(her)self, having balance (the perfect sense of balance is embodied in the idea of *Yin-Yang*) or be harmonious with the *Tao*. In the universe, there should always be a

balance of nature. *Ying* (female) and *Yang* (male) are always at work, and there should be a good balance; and hence the avoidance of extremes.

*Tao* (*Yin* and *Yang*) is everlasting, the Ultimate and is inexpressible or ineffable. Man should seek the *Tao* to attain self-growth.

"The *Tao* way is not static but dynamic. The greater the interaction between the two forces: *Yin* and *Yang*, the greater the size of *Tai Chi* (the Great Ultimate); it expands" (Low, 2009). Therefore, a person who plays the role of a strategic thinker should be able to have a bigger and clearer picture of his business and his strategy, to fit the goal(s), is constantly refined with dynamism in accordance of the changing data and environment.

### ***Tao* Is a Path, A Way of Thinking**

As the saying goes in *I-Ching*, there are three kinds of *Tao*, "The *Tao* of heaven is built upon *Yin* and *Yang*: the *Tao* of earth is based on the soft and the hard: and the *Tao* of mankind stands on humanism and justice." *Lao Tzu* differed greatly from Confucius by using the balance of the *Yin/Yang* and the soft/the hard to teach and explain the *Tao* of Nature (heaven and earth). He propounded *wu wei* (action through inaction) instead of *Ren Yi* (humanism and justice) which Confucius used as a foundation for his philosophy (Cheng, 1981).

As for cultivating oneself, *Lao Tzu* did not encourage conscious action and promoted Non-Action for he said that, "through Non-Action there is nothing left undone". *Lao Tzu* propounded, "Learning is to learn Non-learning" and he even goes to the point of desiring Non-desire for the similar reason that, "through Non-Desire there is nothing left undesired". He said that Learning that one can learn is not everlasting learning; Desire that one can desire is not everlasting desire. Then what does he mean by "everlasting learning" and "everlasting desire?" In practice, he obtained positive results (*Yang*) through negative methods (*Yin*). For instance, he promotes *Yin* and *Yang* theory as follows: know the strong, cleave to the gentle; know the glory, cleave to the humility; know the advance, cleave to the retreat; know what is, cleave to what is not; know the masculine, cleave to the feminine. The authors believe that this concept is very useful to the strategic thinker in leading his/her organization to explore and to redefine its core strategies.

As for ruling a country (or managing a corporation), *Lao Tzu* said that, "governing a great nation is like cooking a small fish." (*Lao Tzu*, Verse 60) His military tactic uses the weaker to overcome the strong, like the rider who is controlling his galloping steed. He speaks of using orthodox to govern a nation and the unorthodox to fight a war (*Lao Tzu*, Verse 57). Here again, unless one has a clear mind to strategically think and differentiate any situations, one would not be able to apply one's strategy (tactic) optimally.

### **Achieving the Clarity of One's Mind**

One can attain the clarity of one's mind by seeking out and achieving the *Tao*. And also, by balancing *Yin* and *Yang* or achieving equilibrium of *Yin-Yang* (male-female elements of the *Tao*). *Tao* in the first instance can be attained by being non-violent.

### ***Tao* Is Non-violence**

When leading by the *Tao*, one avoids violence (*Lao Tzu*). One also leads by the non-violent example. Interestingly, Gandhi (1869 – 1948) also said, "A non-violent revolution is not a programme of seizure of power. It is a programme of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power" (Burgess, 2000). Violence is counter-productive, and it hurts others. On the other hand, non-violence is more productive; it means the building up and growing of one's patience and in turn, leads to one's cooperation and collaboration with others. *Sun Tzu*, an ancient Chinese strategic thinker, propounds non-violence in resolving conflicts or war. The first chapter of his book, *The Art Of War*, contained the core messages of which his first principle is anchored on *Tao* (Cheng, 1981; Mitchell, 2007). It is with *Tao* that people would be in complete accord with their leader and they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger (Giles, 1988).

It is not necessary to just compete; in our strategic thinking, a win-win situation can, in fact, be planned; we can also cooperate or collaborate with others, chiefly, the competition, and we synergize with them (Low, 2010, 2009c: 7; 2003). Joint ventures or some form of synergies can be worked out too.

### **Attaining Clarity Of Mind By Understanding The Principle Of *Chi* In The Human Body And The Balance of *Yin* And *Yang***

Life and business are about gaining much energy to be able to capitalize it, sustaining and moving on; so in our lives, *Chi* is very critical and more so, in strategic planning – life without health or wealth without health is meaningless (Low, 2010). Let us explain further on *Chi*.

Differing from the Western Medicine, the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a concept of *Chi* as a form of energy. It is believed that this energy exists in all things (living and non-living) including air, water, food and sunlight. *Chi* is said to be the unseen vital force that nourishes one's body and sustains one's life. It is also believed that an individual is born with an original amount of *Chi* at the beginning of one's life and as one grows and lives, one acquires *Chi* from eating and drinking, from breathing the surrounding air and also from living in one's environment. An individual would become ill or dies if

one's *Chi* in the body is imbalanced or exhausted. Therefore the balance of *Chi* in abundance in a human body would give one a healthy body which enables one to think clearly. For an unhealthy body, one's mind would be so distracted that one cannot have clarity of mind.

When one studies the principle of the Life Force; the *Chi* and the *Tao* (*Yin* and *Yang*); one would understand how this Life Force manifests in nature. Through self-cultivation, one would basically enrich one's *Chi* for optimum health and longevity. This happens when one subscribes to this Life Force from nature that flows freely into one's mind and body. However, this requires one to living freely from desires, worries and emotions. To live freely, one has to detach from the worldly possession. For instance, money is to be spent, there is to-ing and fro-ing, going and coming/ non-attachment to the money or the material things for better flow. Furthermore, one also requires disciplining oneself by having proper diet, sleep and exercise so that one would not disturb and interrupt with the movement of Life Force which may cause the *Chi* to dissipate in one's body. This dissipation of *Chi* would result one to fall into sickness, disease, physical and mental sufferings. It is Taoist's belief that the practice of *Chi Kung*, *Tai Chi* movements and meditation helps one to harmonize one's Life force with one's environment and nature.

### Stationary and Moving

One would ask this question: Why, for clarity of the mind, both *Chi* and the balance of stationary (*Yin*) and moving (*Yang*) are so important?

Take note first of all: When one is asleep, one's body is heavy and resting (stationary) and not moving. In fact, the body takes time to recreate, rejuvenate its strength or regenerate energies for the body, the storehouse of energy (*Chi*). And when one is awake, one's body feels lighter, and one can move from one place and another, converting its potential energy into kinetic energy and spending its kinetic energy. It is natural that too many activities will make one's body and mind feel tired and also make one difficult to think clearly. On the other hand, too few activities will also make the body feels stiff and the mind feels bored. Hence, obviously, one has to strike a balance between stationary and moving, which is important for the clarity of mind.

Doctors normally advise one to have enough sleep (usually 6 - 8 hours). So it is meant that there should be an optimum point when sleep (potential energy) and being awakened (kinetic energy) are balanced for the body and the mind to be effective and active. It is very important that one should understand the condition of one's body so that one can perform in an optimum way; the reason being that a healthy lifestyle would enable one to have a healthy mind. A healthy mind would help him or her in thinking effectively, more so, strategically.

The overall concept is that when one is in action and moving like flowing water, one can only be aware of oneself in action in relationship with the surrounding environment. However, the moving water is not like a mirror and one cannot see oneself clearly because the surface of the water is uneven for clear reflection. But when the water is still and calm, one sees oneself better and clearly through optimum reflection. One thus needs to have the calmness and stillness of the mind to focus and move forward with a clear direction. On this note, it also means that one should have a balanced and healthy body to minimize any psychological and emotional distractions (external and internal) in order to attain the clarity of mind while doing strategic thinking.

### Applying Intuition

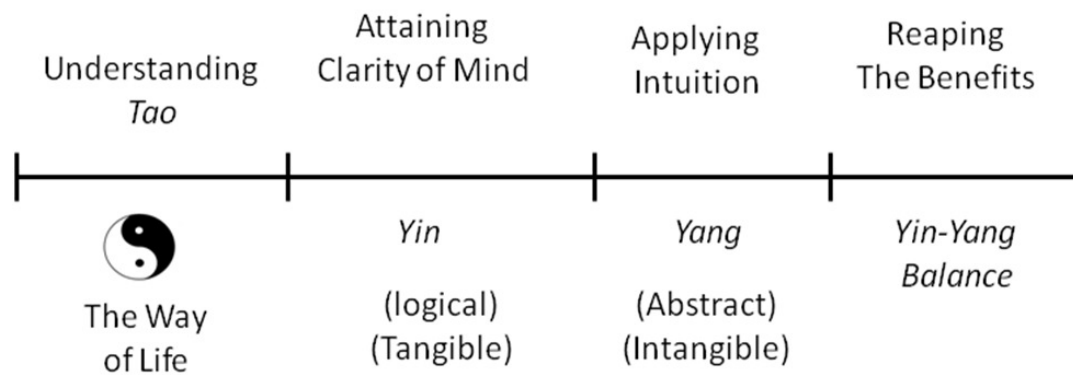
The term intuition is used to describe as thoughts and preferences that come to mind quickly and without much reflection. The word "intuition" comes from the Latin word "intueri", which is often roughly translated as meaning to look inside or to contemplate. Therefore, intuitive knowledge can be said to be the "gut-feeling" that a person has in making a decision and it is also the snap judgement or the first impression that a person has without going through a series of thoughts. The right brain is associated with feeling whilst the left brain is associated with logical thinking. – Hence a balance of *Yin* and *Yang* is applied. It is to the authors' belief that through one's accumulated experiences and knowledge over the years, one would have obtained lessons learnt from a series of successes and failures one have encountered. And it would be natural that when one faced somewhat similar problem, snap judgement can be made through "thinking without thinking" (Gladwell, 2005).

To add to the above, the authors would wish to say that intuition is not only this gut feeling, but also considering what first that comes to mind, the process is dominated more by the subconscious mind. Intuition is like an internal Geographic Positioning System: GPS system that never makes a mistake. Intuition never lies, it is always right and it always guides us in a way that is for our highest good. Intuition awakens us to our deepest dreams and desires. It increases our sensitivity to others, connecting them to us.

What more, to be intuitive is to be creative too (Low, 2005; 2006), and so the strategic plan can also reap the benefits of being creative as well as flexible to suit the emerging or changing situation(s). And reaping the other benefits of *Tao* will also be discussed further in the next section.

### Reaping The Benefits of Tao

When a strategic thinker understands *Tao* and thinks



Note: *Yin* is substance, down to earth, logical and tangible. (Clarity of Mind)  
*Yang* is sky, spiritual, abstract and intangible (Intuition)

**Figure 2.** Understanding Tao, attaining clarity of mind, applying intuition and reaping the benefits.

positively, (s)he would always see things with wisdom instead of just simply accepting facts/things and believing them to be true. (S)he would always talk with facts and ways to proof the facts. Furthermore, (s)he would work in harmony with nature and as such, such a way is compatible with humankind's taking care of nature and the surrounding environment of the communities they live and work. This is unlike in the Western tradition and belief that nature is to be conquered by man and which by doing so; it consequently produces an ecological imbalance world. Besides, greenness and corporate social responsibility can then be factored in the strategic thinking and plans.

Calmness comes from the positive thinking – if ripples are always there, it's how we see it and capitalize on the positive thinking and derive goodness out of the situation. When one's mind is clear, one sees clearly and does what is right. One stands upright and maintains one's integrity; it is also connected to ethics. And when a person's conscience is clear and the decisions are made based on that clarity, it becomes similar to the Chinese saying: a clear conscience is like a soft pillow, one sleeps well on it. Having a clear conscience enables one to think not only for oneself but detachedly and in a big-picture way, that is, one also thinks for others; one or one's organization becomes other-oriented. When one thinks broadly, then one becomes other or outward-oriented; this appears to be so natural; social responsibility and greenness becomes part and parcel of the strategic thinking and it strengthens the strategic plan, making it robust and more complete or holistic; sustainability is thus incorporated or built-in. It is very important that clarity of mind and strategic thinking should work hand in hand when running the business. Take, for example, on the one hand, a business leader should make himself or

herself clear about the activities, the resources and the capabilities of the internal organization (*Yin*) of the firm and on the other hand, he or she should also be well understand about the external environment (*Yang*) such as the competition and the opportunities of the industry (Ireland et al, 2009). By having a clear idea on the *yin* and *yang* of the business, a business leader would able to carry out his or her decision-making effectively.

When thinking strategically, (s)he also balances his (her) own thinking in an optimistic fashion with that of thinking in a pessimistic manner, both scenarios are worked out and contingencies planned. The *Yin-Yang* approach thus improves the strategic thinking and planning. Interestingly, one Taoist-inspired poem on the clarity of mind goes like this.

*"Close your eyes and you'll see clearly.*

*Everything comes in, yet something distilled pours in distinctly.*

*The truth unveils.*

*It becomes clear; the ideas serve as ale.*

*They invigorate and refresh us.*

*Cease to listen and truth buzzes"*

When there is clarity of one's mind, there is no panic, crooked or disturbed thinking. As in "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you", a poem by Rudyard Kipling, one is able to think straight, unfazed or disturbed by any downturn or crisis. One is not stressed; instead, one is cool, calm and composed, hence the benefits of meditation to achieve clarity of the mind, goal and direction.

In summary, when one understands *Tao* which is the way of life, one would be able to attain clarity of one's mind and by applying one's intuition later, one would be able to reap the benefits of this process of strategic thinking. Figure 2 shows the process of understanding *Tao*,

attaining clarity of mind, applying one's Intuition and getting the benefits.

## CONCLUSION

It is recommended that through the understanding of the Chinese concepts of *Tao* (*Yin* and *Yang*), one can attain clarity of mind in helping one's strategic thinking. It is very important that an individual must have a healthy lifestyle. (S)he meditates; being cool and calm; thinks and feels through, and then decides on the way forward. In this way, it would stop a person from rushing in doing things blindly; looking before one jumps and not losing sight of the bigger picture/strategy. Obviously, one requires a clear mind and also ample time to think and plan strategically before commencing a task/project.

In this paper, the authors are highlighting the ancient Chinese ways of attaining clarity of mind to help the leaders/managers in applying strategic thinking; they act as such: being patient, balancing individual thinking with other-centred thinking, evaluating, combining logical thinking with intuitive thinking, doing it creatively, and pondering or appraising the situation with both positive and negative perspectives.

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