



The Tao  
of  
Sketchnote



Mauro Toselli

# The Tao of Sketchnotes

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Written, designed, illustrated, and photographed by  
Mauro Toselli, except where noted.

# The Tao of Sketchnotes

## Forewords

I'm an IT guy and a Shiatsu practitioner. In 2012, thanks to [Mike Rohde](#) and his book, [The Sketchnote Handbook](#), I discovered sketchnoting. It is the perfect way to take notes and helped me a lot in focusing and getting the most out of my thoughts and, moreover, fighting against losing attention during meetings or boring lectures.

Very soon I started noticing hidden treasures in the process of sketchnoting. Not long after I started to think about my doodling in terms of sketchnoting, I realized there are subtle dynamics I can recognize from the Yin Yang Theory. In fact, according to Chinese thinking, everything can fall in Yin Yang dynamics, sketchnotes included.

## What is a Sketchnote?

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a Sketchnote is worth a million words.

Sketchnote is a term coined in spring 2007 by Mike Rohde when, frustrated by the usual method of taking notes, he tried something new. The term sketchnote describes in one word a handwritten note enriched with a visual language made of drawings, arrows, text, and symbols. Sketchnoting is more than a disciplined way to note and doodle. It is a mindset. This enhanced way of taking notes makes us able to focus on big ideas and filter out anything that is unnecessary.

*“Sketchnote is a visual map”*

***Mike Rohde, The Sketchnote Handbook***

## The Yin Yang Theory

From Wikipedia

*«In Asian philosophy, the concept of yin yang, which is often referred to in the West as "yin and yang", is used to describe how polar opposites or seemingly contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other in turn. Opposites thus only exist in relation to each other.»*



We all have seen the famous black and white Tao symbol, also known as Tai Chi. It embodies the whole Yin and Yang philosophy.

Yin and Yang Theory is almost 3000 years old and even nowadays is surprisingly relevant. Its basic principle is the belief that unity is an interaction of opposite elements which underlies all the universe's dynamics. Yin Yang Theory is a recurrent theme in modern science and physicists like Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and Fritjof Capra have, in some ways, been inspired by its principles. A nice anecdote says that Niels Bohr, winner of the 1922 Nobel Prize in Physics and one of the fathers of Quantum mechanics, designed his own coat of arms, which featured a symbol of Yin and Yang and the motto in Latin, *contraria sunt complementa*: "opposites are complementary."

Yang represents the spiritual part: ethereal, disembodied, bright, warm, moving and changing fast. We can define as Yang things as light, the color white, air, feelings, emotions, and our mind. Yin is the material part: solid, embodied, cold, moving and changing very slowly or not at all. We can define Yin things like darkness, the color black, earth, paper, things we see with our eyes, a book, our body.

These are the main two components of the universe that generate life. Life is a continuous dialectic between Yin and Yang, and what is moving between the two is called Qi, the Energy. Qi cannot exist without dialogue between the opposites, and opposites cannot dialogue without Energy.

We can find similarity in religion. For example, in Genesis we find, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," which is certainly a Yin and Yang definition.

Also we read, "...and God divided the light from the darkness."

Even in computing 0 is Yang and 1 is Yin. They need computational energy to change from 0 to 1, and when they change, they create computational energy.

We can now see Ideas as Yang elements, concepts such as inspiration, intuition, epiphany, something "already and not yet." On the other hand, sketchnotes are Yin: physical, written, pictured, spoken, fixed.

Thinking about the relationship between Ideas and Sketchnotes, we see the process of making Sketchnotes from Ideas and receiving Ideas from consuming Sketchnotes. This is the Energy.

There are four main aspects describing the Yin and Yang relationship. Let's look at how we can apply these aspects to Ideas and Sketchnotes.

## **Four main aspects**

### **They are opposites**

Ideas and Sketchnotes are opposite. They are the extreme points of a cycle. An Idea is completely insubstantial when it arrives, yet physically manifest when it becomes a Sketchnote.

An interesting thing can be found looking closely at the Tai Chi symbol shown above. Even at the maximum Yang point (the extreme top of the symbol), we don't get a perfect element. We can clearly see that black Yin dot in the middle of the Yang. Same for Yin: we have a white Yang spot in the middle of the Yin. We see this in reality. An Idea always has a physical component which is the one ensuring that the Idea has a meaning, can be expressed in our current language, and can become a Sketchnote. On the other side, a Sketchnote has an immaterial part, that something not physically expressed. This is the part that makes sure a Sketchnote can create, instill, and give birth to an Idea.

### **They are relative**

Nothing can be completely Yin or completely Yang, and everything carries in itself a small part of the opposite element. A Sketchnote could have a Yin or Yang prevalence if related to another Sketchnote. This relationship can be either intrinsic, formal, or substantial.

For example, imagine a sketchnote describing a lecture, no more or less of what was told. Then compare it with another sketchnote that describes the root of the lecture's contents, how the lecturer became involved, and raises questions about the real meaning of the lecture itself. If we look at the intrinsic meaning, this second Sketchnote has a more Yang aspect in comparison to the first. The former is material, presents the information as it is, has little soul, and does not make us think or reflect deeply. The latter has a soul, instills thinking, makes us question the meaning of the lecture, and has a perceptible and intriguing immaterial part.

Moreover, we can hear the lecture. In this case the Sketchnote has a more evident substantial Yin aspect: the Sketchnote is written, material, we can read it and touch the paper. It is Yin. The voice of the lecturer is immaterial, we can hear it but we can't grab it. As soon as he stops talking, the lecture disappears in the silence. It is Yang.

### They are interdependent

*"All can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness. All can know good as good only because there is evil."*

### **Lao Tzu - Tao Te Ching**

The Yin Yang Theory says they are opposite, but in both of them exists a part of their opposite. One cannot exist without the other. We can apply this principle saying that a Sketchnote is the materialization of an Idea, and an Idea is the spiritualization of a Sketchnote. In other words, Sketchnotes should carry an Idea and Ideas should be catchable into a Sketchnote.

### They are in balance

Life is a continuous dialectic between Yin and Yang, and the same is true for Sketchnotes and Ideas. We have to imagine them as a system which can regulate forces to maintain the balance. As they are relative, and the flow is not always regular, it could be that the level of Yin or Yang dominates at various times. Eventually balance is achieved.

Sometimes we have the so called spark of genius, which is very Yang. This Idea is so incredible, so visionary, so Yang that is hard to grasp and hold. We wander around, spending energy with this thought flying in our mind until Yin occurs. We see, read or hear something Yin and, click, we have an epiphany and we find the way. The concepts become solid and we are able to translate the Idea into a Sketchnote.

Or in reverse, we read a very obscure Yin part of a Sketchnote; we read and read and read without being able to get anything out of it. We start thinking, finally get distracted, and seem to forget it. The Sketchnote is still a Sketchnote, is still Yin, doesn't create an Idea. It is no more Yang than a mental translation in words of the mere drawing. Then we take a shower, the water helps us relax; our cognitive processes are absent-minded in this very Yang enjoyment of the water. Energy flows and, click, we got it! Our mind, thanks to what Emmanuel Kant called Transcendental Idealism, gives birth to a sparkling Idea! This long process from idea to sketchnote and back can happen in a matter of seconds in our everyday life. This is how homeostasis works, using energy to engage Yin or Yang in order to restore balance.

*"Mind and body working together"*

**Mike Rohde, The Sketchnote Handbook**

## What we get from this

### It happens

The dualism of being Yin or Yang should not be perceived as being good or bad. We can now sense that everything is either Yin and/or Yang relative to the environment, people, time or location. Some people are themselves more Yang or more Yin than others. It is conditional and it is the same for people, places, things and sketchnotes as well.

Think about a sketchnote you draw as travel journal for yourself. When you look at it later it can be very Yang, recalling sensations, bringing feelings back to you. However, someone else looking at your Sketchnote may find it just a nice drawing, a picture stating the obvious about a trip. He finds it Yin. And this is not bad, it just is.

For a Sketchnote, being prevalently Yin or Yang on purpose is quite important, though. For an instruction handbook, being Yin is a necessary condition. Its purpose is to deliver quite precise instructions, but if your purpose is to instill ideas or boost up creativity, your Sketchnote has to be Yang.

### The perfect flaw

We have seen that Yin and Yang are opposite and they have a small part of their opposite in each other. There is a very important concept that we can learn from this: a perfect Sketchnote cannot exist and this is good. If we take our time to reflect on this, it is very easy to understand why.

Perfection is fragile. Take a perfect circle. When you see a circle you think about a circle. When you want to express a circle you draw a circle. You can't add or remove anything because if you do, it is no longer a circle. It can't evolve.

Perfection is static. When we say, "Oh, this is perfect," we nail it in space and time, but time elapses and space changes. Everything is moving and what is still, steady is lagging behind. For these reasons a Sketchnote has to be imperfect to be good. We want our sketchnote to inspire, instill ideas, and to allow this it needs to give space to those who are consuming it. It needs an unresolved, immaterial Yang part in its physical body. In this way we can evolve; we can take a sketchnote and use it for inspiration and, hopefully, create something new.

## Disharmony

We can now understand how Yin can become Yang and vice versa, but this process cannot be triggered whenever we want. It happens in the right time, when there is enough energy and natural conditions, like the Yang dawn arriving just at the end of the Yin night or the Yang steam appearing when the Yin water boils. Everything always changes to find equilibrium.

But we, the world, the life are not perfect. Sometimes Yin and Yang find themselves unbalanced. Perhaps we try to draw even if we are not in the right mood, our mind struggling with a problem and unable to seize a subtle meaning, or our physical body is so tired that our mind gets distracted. It happens more often than we need and we experience disharmony.

There are two kinds of disharmonies: excess and deficiency, and they affect both Yin and Yang. Even if we think that an excess of Yang is the same as a deficiency of Yin, it is not.

Let's look at a couple of examples. We are in good shape and healthy. This means our Yin part, our body, is normal. But we have a lot on our minds; we are obsessed by ideas or work. We are restless, working until late night everyday. We produce a lot, but soon our productivity starts to diminish. We feel tired and our body needs more rest. If we don't pay attention to our Yin part, the body, we will burn out. This is excess of Yang.

Here is a different case. Spring is coming after a cold, long winter. The sunlight lasts longer, and we look forward to doing things outside, like going out for a jog. Our mind is healthy and awake, but we spent the winter online, watching TV, eating on the couch. When we try to run, we get tired very soon, we pant and gasp. Then we go back home, sad and frustrated, grab some junk food and go straight to the couch to eat and watch TV. Listening only to our gut feeling caused by our body, the Yin part, and ignoring the enthusiasm and desire for wellness driven by our mind, the Yang part, will lead to depression. This is deficiency of Yin.

In both cases we experience signals which we can call symptoms. If we listen to them and follow the energy flow, we will achieve harmony. In the first case, resting bodies also calms the mind. In the second case, our mind tells the body to get fit gradually. Not paying attention to symptoms will lead to an identical result in both cases but for different disharmonies: weak body and frustrated mind. Let's see how this applies to sketchnoting.

## Excess of Yang

Sometimes the immaterial, highly energetic Yang part overwhelms the regular Yin. By regular I mean that the Yin's energetic level is good enough to adequately capture an Idea in a Sketchnote. This happened to me. The day I received my copy of [The Sketchnote Handbook](#), I read it in one day. Then I grabbed pens and pencils and started to draw anything about everything, without focus or giving myself the opportunity to play. I was trying way too hard. I let my Yang damage my Yin.

One day I sketchnoted my grocery list. Once at the store it took an enormous amount of time to decrypt what I had drawn because my sketchnote was poor and mostly inappropriate. My Yang (enthusiasm) pushed too hard and this damaged my Yin (Sketchnotes).

*“Take the first step: Reserve a small area in your regular note to try some sketchnote techniques - even if it's a drawing of the speaker”*

**Mike Rohde, *The Sketchnote Handbook***

## Excess of Yin

When the material Yin aspect level is predominant, the disharmony is subtle and sometimes hard to discover. You are at an interesting conference and you grasp the ideas which are clear in your mind. Then you start drawing in your overly-large notebook with a lot of different pens and markers. You draw a symbol and on its side a big chunk of text describing its meaning, or you make so detailed a drawing because you feel the idea is not explained clearly enough. And you keep doing it over and over. At the end of the day, you will get something which is worse than a regular text-based note because you damaged your Yang part, your capacity to sense and elaborate ideas, by writing explanations about your drawings.

## Deficiency of Yang

Sometimes the immaterial Yang aspect level is lower than the regular Yin. It happens more often than we think. It is when our mind it is not able to fuel the body, like when you are at your desk, staring at a white page with a pen in your hand, and nothing happens.

I was at TEDxMilan and a lecturer was explaining how Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper made a difference and created a pattern which was followed across the whole world of art. A great concept supported with wonderful slides. Guess what I did? Yes! I tried to draw the Last Supper. It took so much time and obviously wasn't worth it. I missed part of the lecture and ripped out the page because it was so ugly! My Yang, my mind, was unable to think of a simple but strong concept to capture on paper. Thus my Yin started working with what was available.

*“Sketchnotes are about capturing and sharing ideas, not art”*

**Mike Rohde, *The Sketchnote Handbook***

## **Deficiency of Yin**

If the material Yin aspect level is lower than the regular Yang, we are not able to put the concept down on paper. Drawings that we use to do easily now seem tricky, and we experience a lack of confidence in our temporarily lost drawing skills. In this case the disharmony could be easily mistaken for a lack of ability.

Let me call things by their real name: not everyone is an artist, and if drawing is natural and easy for some, it is difficult for others, like me. It is important to point out that this specific case is not a disharmony, it is a condition that could be improved with exercises and practice. In a simplistic way, we can identify the disharmony when we feel overwhelmed doing physical tasks that we normally do without effort.

## **Disharmonies matter**

Whether being Yin or being Yang is normal, feeling an imbalance due to disharmony is not. We need to become aware of these imbalances and learn how to recognize the harm they can cause. Knowing about ourselves and our abilities is usually enough to make a bell ring in our head when something gets weird. However, in the next chapter we will learn how we can use Sketchnoting to make a sort of diagnosis. It is a simple technique which can be used for a wide range of cases, especially related to content such as articles, images, slideshows and websites.

## **Analysing our Sketchnotes**

This is an empiric practice and an oversimplification, but it is fun and can give some interesting hints. We must bear in mind a couple of things. First, what we are going to analyze is ourselves, not the source of what we are going to sketchnote. Second, all is relative. The results may vary from time to time and with our mood. I find it interesting to analyze a sketchnote just minutes after finishing one, and I repeat the exercise a couple of days later. It is amazing how my point of view can change. Let's dive into this technique.

### **Design tools**

We need a map where we draw our analysis and a reference chart. The latter is a set of assumptions divided into two columns. On the left side we have statements related to the condition of Yin and on the right those about the condition of Yang. With practice, you will find the assumptions that work better, and you will make their own reference statements.

## My Chart

To better understand what I mean, take a look at the following image of my own reference tool.



### Reference Chart

#### Idea

| -  | +  |
|--|--|
| I just followed the lecturer flow, I took in the facts | I was inspired, I had good Ideas                       |
| Was easy to imagine information figuratively           | No need to think: ideas flowed in mind naturally       |
| I got the informations but small inspiration           | I was overwhelmed by ideas                             |
| I felt concepts hard to understand in deep             | Following Ideas I landed on concepts outside the topic |

#### Sketchnoting

| □  | ○   |
|--|---|
| My usual set of drawings is enough to express the Idea | I always use different and new drawings           |
| I try hard to put on paper all Ideas                   | Ideas push hard to be drawn                       |
| Space seems always not enough                          | I have so many ideas and I fill up all space      |
| I can't figure out how to draw this Idea               | I'm willing to draw but I can't imagine how to do |

#### Sketchnote

| +  | -                                      |
|--|--|
| What I draw is dry and clear                             | The Sketchnote is dynamic              |
| I often use text on the Sketchnote to reinforce concepts | I love this detailed Sketchnote        |
| The Sketchnote is crowded                                | The Sketchnote flow is clear           |
| Sketchnote is kind of blurred                            | It is a simple but pleasant Sketchnote |

#### Reading

| □  | ○  |
|--|--|
| It show exactly what I had listen                              | This simple Sketchnote worth a thousand words                      |
| I can recall topics and facts but no Ideas                     | It could be obscure for others but, to me, it recall lots of Ideas |
| I can recognize the shapes but I'm not sure about the meanings | So much details for a simple concept                               |
| If it weren't for the text I wouldn't understand               | I wouldn't follow the flow if it weren't for the arrow             |

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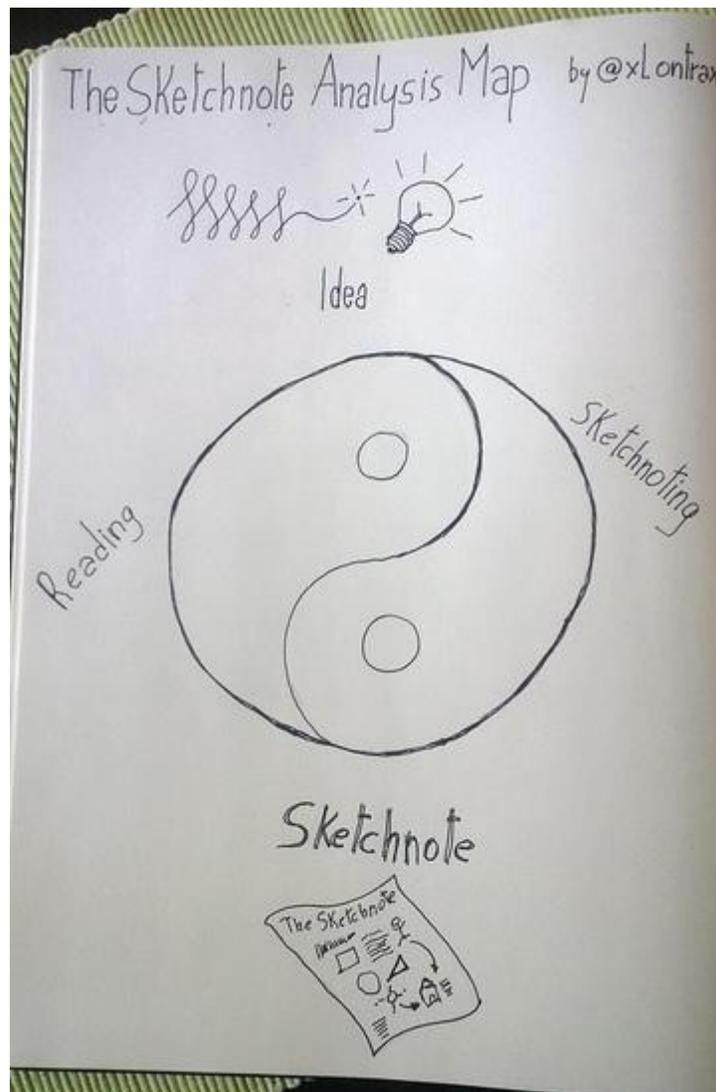
@xLontrax

[\(download My Chart in pdf\)](#)

Once again I need to point out that, as all is relative, this reference chart works for me and, as my skills change, I update it from time to time. Please consider that this chart may not be suitable for you.

In the first row of each section you will find two small symbols: minus and plus signs for Ideas and Sketchnotes, a square and a circle for Sketchnoting and Reading. These symbols will be used as markers during the analysis. By the way, the square is a Yin symbol and the circle is Yang.

Back to the map. On a blank sheet of paper, we can draw either a Tao symbol or a cross in the center of the sheet. If you choose the Tao symbol, do not spend time making the Yin part solid black, the outline is enough. The symbol represents our Sketchnote in its Yin and Yang duality that makes it whole.



[See on Flickr](#)

Let's start at the top of the symbol: the maximum of Yang. This is the part that corresponds to Ideas, thus we write "Idea" just above the top of the symbol.

Following clockwise 90° is where Yang turns into Yin, like in late afternoon when the day turns into night. Here is when we draw our Idea on paper, when we Sketchnote, thus we write on the right of the symbol "Sketchnoting."

Continuing clockwise we get the maximum of Yin. This corresponds to the materialization of Idea. Easy to guess, we write "Sketchnote" just below the symbol.

Now we arrive at the opposite side of "Sketchnoting," where we look at our Sketchnote to recall Ideas. It is where Yin becomes Yang, from the material part we get the immaterial part. We simply write "Reading" on the left of the symbol. We have our map.

### Fill in the map

We now go through each section and row of the reference chart, starting from Idea. We read the statements on the first row and, without spending too much time pondering, we choose the one that best applies to our case and write the relative symbol on the map in correspondence to the section we are analyzing. Please note that if you find yourself thinking, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure," this counts as Yin and you always use the symbol from the left column. We go row by row, section by section following the map clockwise. It is important to keep the mind open and relaxed; we are not doing an exam and we are not going to rate anything. Whatever the result, it will not be good or bad. It will just be a statement of a condition, and we can use this feedback to better understand ourselves. It may happen that a very successful Sketchnote turns out to have a strong Yin or Yang imbalance. This matters a lot because it can give us a valuable hint about how we Sketchnote.

### What does it mean?

We have our map and we want to get the most out of our effort. Looking at the map we see that Idea and Sketchnote are connected by the vertical axis, while a horizontal axis connects Sketchnoting and Reading. If we look at the individual sections first, we will actually see the big picture by comparing the opposite sections of each axis.

Let's start at the top.

### Idea

This is the maximum of Yang and creativity lives here. We consider pluses and minuses as a measure of the level of Yang. A preponderance of one of them can indicate an excess or deficiency, but as a Sketchnote is a whole made of opposite parts, we will consider how this area relates to the one at the bottom end of the vertical axis: the Sketchnote.

## Sketchnoting

Where Yang is transformed into Yin. Here we find our ability to express creativity. The presence of squares (Yin) and circles (Yang) describes the tendency of our action. For example, having four circles in this section define a more Yang action. It means that we have a powerful Idea and the main effort take place in our mind, Yang part. It is about translating the Idea in concepts which can be easily drawn.

Yet we can find a different picture where we have three squares and one circle. This defines a more Yin action. The effort is on the physical activity of drawing where, perhaps, drawing skills are not enough to clearly express the Idea. It is important to note that this area will be compared with the area at the opposite part of the axis: Reading the Sketchnote.

## Sketchnote

The maximum of Yin. The Ideas embodied in a material product. Here we see our nitty-gritty evaluation of the sketchnote itself, not what it recalls or what it communicates. We can find a bold Yin tendency expressed in four plus symbols, and this may say that the sketchnote is kind of static, with lots of plain text stating the obvious. Four minus symbols would express a very light, dynamic and elusive sketchnote.

## Reading

Where Yin is transformed into Yang. The Sketchnote is a catalyst of Ideas and meanings. We can have a Yin prevalence with four squares meaning that we get just what we see, very explanatory but not inspiring. Or an opposite case with four circles where the Sketchnote is so evocative, so inspiring, that the observer can be taken far from the subject.

## The big picture

As we have gone through every single section, it is time to put things together and get the overall image of our work: the big picture. We learnt that the axis represents a relationship and connection between sections at the opposite end. Starting with the vertical axis, we need to understand if and which section is prevailing over the other. This will tell us if there is a disharmony and which kind of disharmony.

In some cases a disharmony is self evident, and it is easy to identify an excess or a deficiency. For example, the Idea section may balance gracefully, showing two plus and two minus, while the opposite Sketchnote section presents three or four plus signs, meaning a strong Yin excess (remember that Sketchnote section is the maximum of Yin and plus signs enhance this aspect).

In the case of a fuzzy or balanced tendency, such as having three plus and one minus in both the Idea and Sketchnote sections—meaning that both sections are kind of strong or that neither is prevailing—we simply observe and rely on the horizontal axis to determine if there is a real tendency.

The last case we need to cover for the vertical axis analysis is the hyper-defined tendency. The best example is having a powerful four plus sign Idea with a weak four minus sign Sketchnote. Even if we tend to accept this condition as is, we can't ignore that there is something important going on here. My suggestion is to investigate more deeply. In this case, as well as in fuzzy tendency cases, we can rely on the horizontal axis to determine the tendency.

The horizontal axis is where energy is involved in making things happen. Drawing at the right end and reading at the left end. At first glance we can simply make a count of Yin and Yang symbols at both ends, just do the math, and use this observation to refine what we get above.

However, there is an aspect that deserves a close look: when opposite ends of the horizontal axis balance each other. For example, the less we're able to capture an Idea in a Sketchnote (Sketchnoting section with three circles and one square, meaning that some Yang remain Yang and doesn't transform in Yin) the more the Sketchnote will be read "as is" or will lack inspiration (Reading section with three squares and one circle, meaning that some Yin remains Yin a doesn't transform in Yang). In this case, as per my experience in analyzing Sketchnotes, deficiency is more likely the right condition to apply to what we get from the above vertical axis analysis.

This may be tricky the first few times, but I'm sure with a minimum of exercise it will become natural. Following you will find a cheat sheet showing some cases (including those above) that make it easier to understand the whole process.

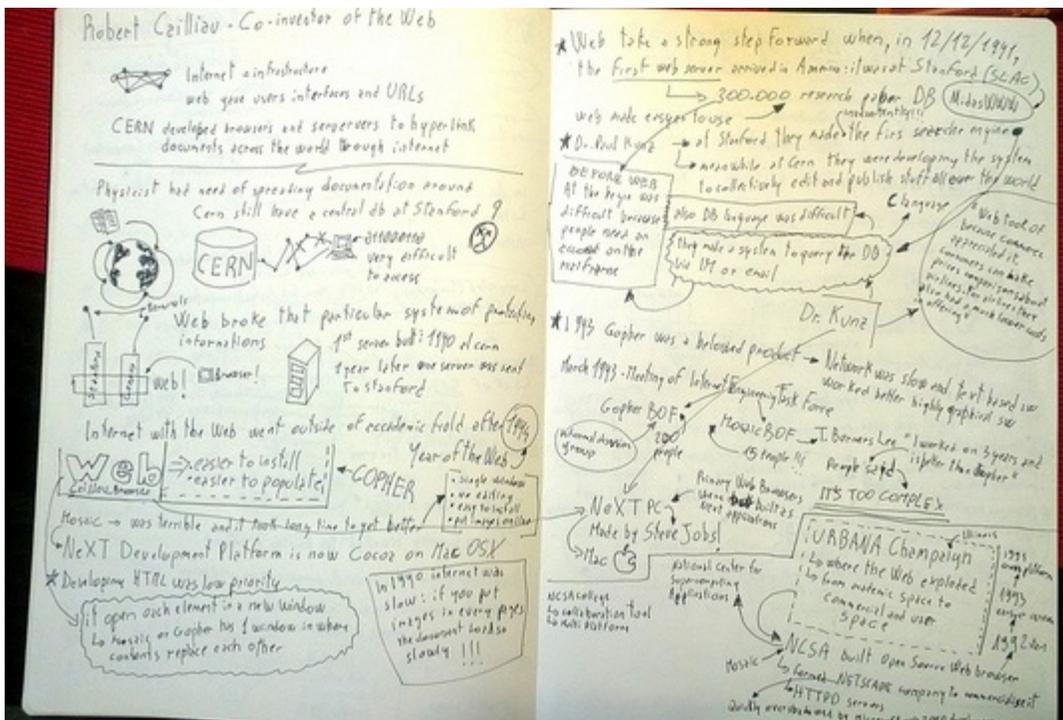
| Idea<br>(Yang) | Sketchnote<br>(Yin) | Sketchnoting | Reading | Result          |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------|---------|-----------------|
| ++++           | ++++                | □□ ○○        | □□ ○○   | Well done!      |
| ++-            | +++-                | ○○ □□        | □□ ○○   | Yin excess      |
| ++-            | +++-                | ○○ ○□        | □□ □○   | Yang deficiency |
| ++++           | ----                | ○○ ○□        | □□ ○○   | Yang excess     |
| ++++           | ----                | ○○ ○□        | □□ □○   | Yin deficiency  |
| ++++           | ----                | □□ □○        | ○○ ○□   | Yin deficiency  |

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## Sketchnoting the Sketchnote

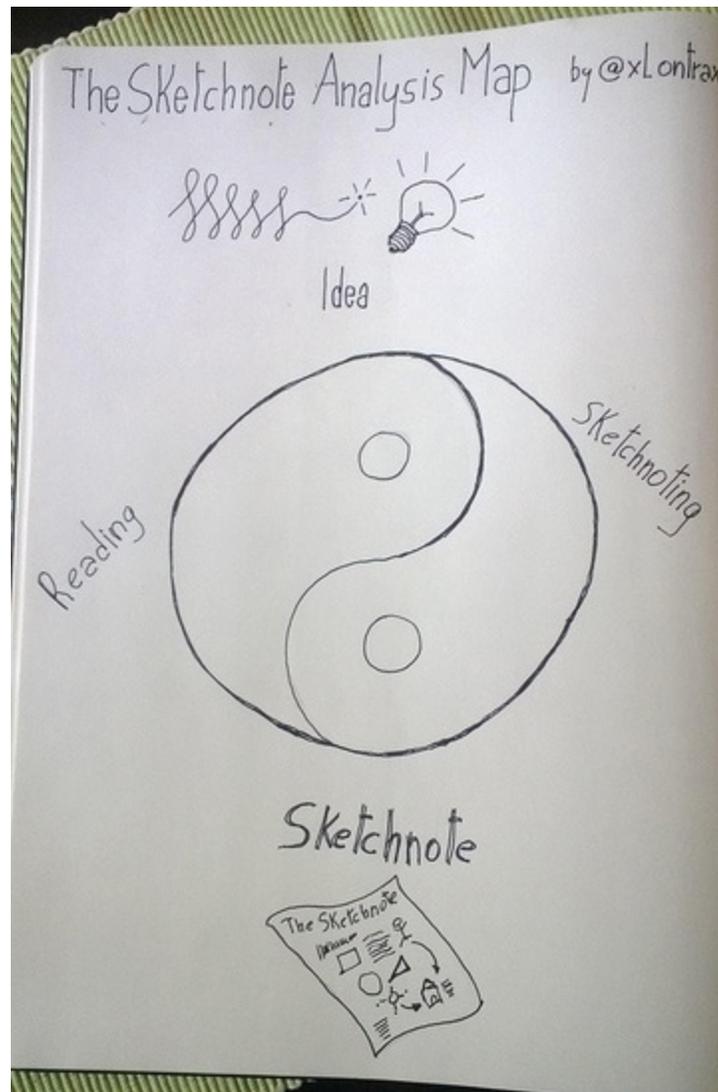
Here is the fun part: we can tell a story! Your sketchnote map is the energy's story of your sketchnote. It is a powerful tool which can deliver big Ideas about how you sketchnote. Why not capture them and enhance the map, drawing a story on it? It is really simple.

We start from the Idea section and add notes and drawings in support of our analysis. Follow clockwise to the Sketchnoting section, do the same and again until you close the round. What you get is your circular Energy story. Here is an example of the whole Sketchnote analysis.



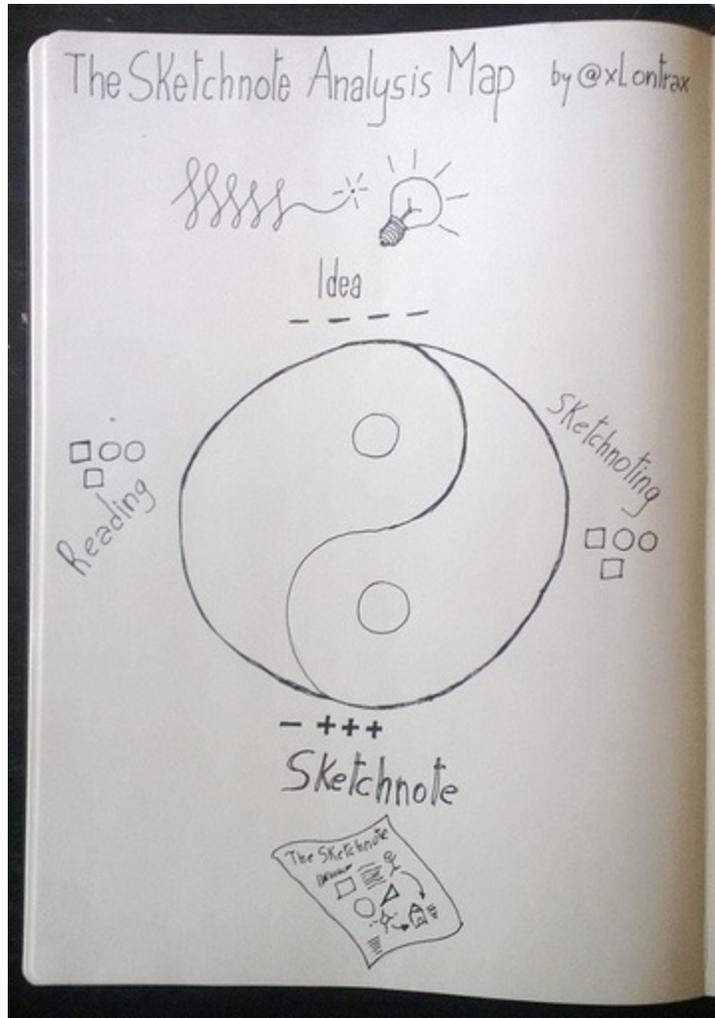
[See on Flickr](#)

This is a Sketchnote I did during a lesson on Coursera. In that lesson there was a large amount of information, dates, and facts. I was so engaged in listening and understanding correctly that it was hard to me to keep relaxed and grab big ideas. However I was able to capture some of them.



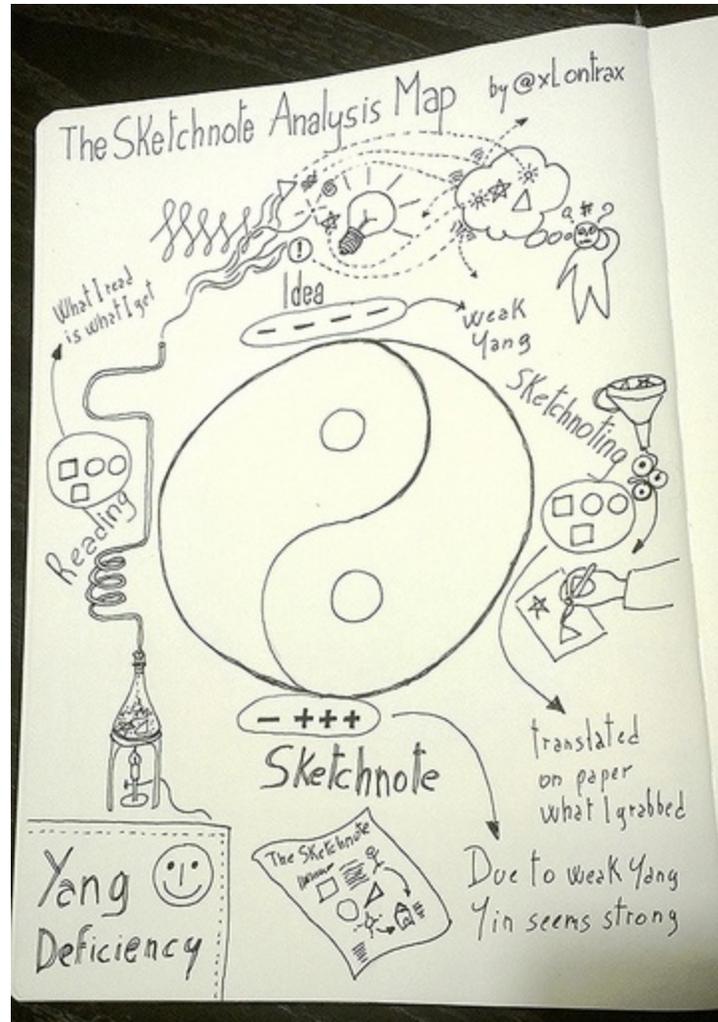
[See on Flickr](#)

This is the map I used for my analysis. It is interesting to note how my enthusiasm had me drawing some embellishments, that sparkling bulb and a sort of thumbnail of a sketchnote. This turns out to be not a good idea. In a minute we will see how these drawings interfere with the analysis. Not to mention, as this action was driven by my enthusiastic Idea to “do more and express more,” it is clearly a Yang excess!



[See on Flickr](#)

Here is my analysis. You can find a weak Idea, a moderately strong Sketchnote, and a nice balance between Sketchnoting and Reading.



[See on Flickr](#)

The big picture. Here is my Energy story. The lesson I was sketchnoting was very dense, with a lot of concepts and information new to me. It was very hard to pay attention and keep all of the information. I didn't succeed in capturing the Big Ideas (four minus in the Idea section) and started noting data and facts. This was easy, I took some textual notes, drew some features, and enhanced the flow with arrows and connectors (two squares and two circles in Sketchnoting section). The outcome was a Sketchnote with a lot of written text and few drawings, mainly used as embellishments than concept drivers. It was very similar to a note taken with the good, old textual technique (one minus and three plus in Sketchnote section).

Today, when I see that Sketchnote I'm able to recall all the information I noted and it does a good job of this. But no Big Ideas, no enrichments. It delivers merely what is written there (two squares and two circles in the Reading section). This depends only on my initial failure in capturing Ideas. In fact there aren't signs of problems in Sketchnoting nor Reading and the Sketchnote was produced with what was available: plain information. This is a clear example of Yang deficiency.

## The place of Sketchnotes in the Universe

All is connected, all is relative, all is one and dual and the Sketchnoter is as well. We have seen how to evaluate a Sketchnote, and we can't ignore that we made that Sketchnote. Everything contributes to energy flow. How were we when we drew it? How was the location? And the light? There was a reason why we were there, listening to that lecture, in that certain spot, and that was not a casual event, even if it was just one of the countless configurations life can create. Without touching very big topics such as the determinism, destiny, or meaning of life, it is doubtless that our sketchnoting was influenced by many factors from the inception of an idea and even before: when we chose to attend that event or look at that video and take a sketchnote.

In the Taoist view of cosmology, we can find the definition of *former heaven* and *later heaven*. The sinologist and Medical Sinology teacher [Giulia Boschi](#), in her book [Chinese Medicine: its root and flowers](#) describes these two concepts:

*“The second meaning in the Neijing, and the most widespread nowadays, links “former heaven” to innate factors in individual constitution and “later heaven” to every element acquired from the environment.”*

Furthemore

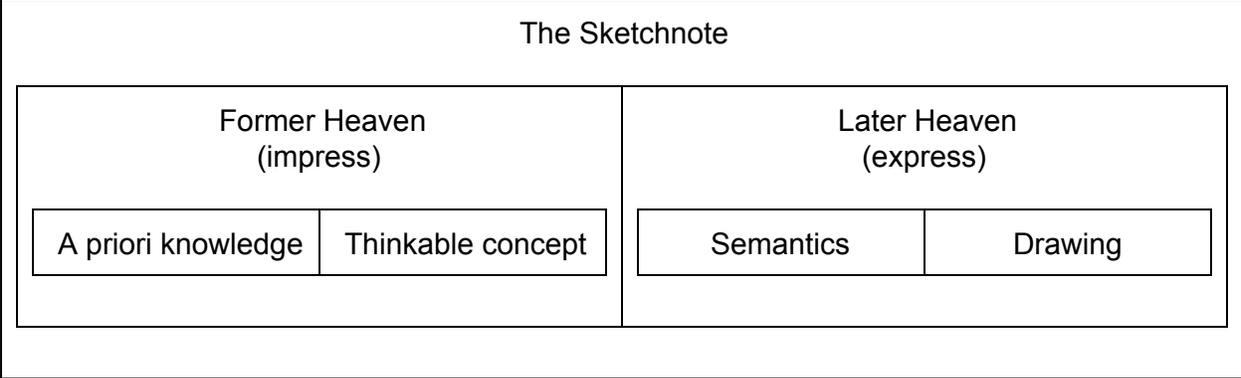
*“In other word prior to heaven impresses and post heaven expresses.”*

**Giulia Boschi - Chinese Medicine: its root and flowers**

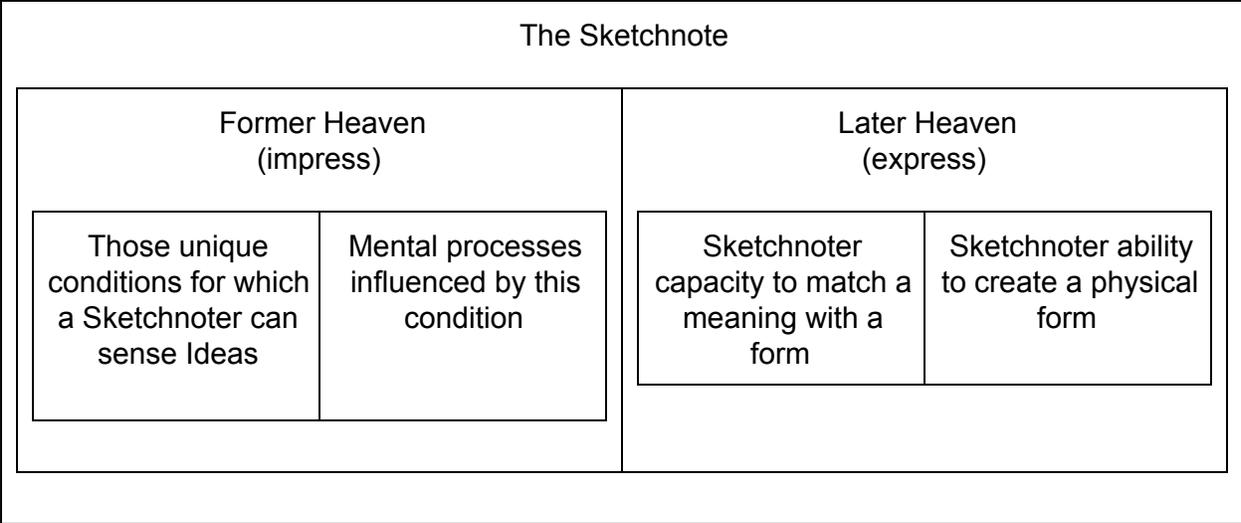
These are subtle, complex, yet fascinating concepts and I would like to try to apply them to sketchnoting.

We learned that Yang cannot exist without Yin, thus everything has a dual aspect. In addition, each one of these opposite aspects has its own dual aspect. For example, taking the sketchnote concepts we can identify Idea as its Yang part and the Sketchnote, the physical drawing, as its Yin part. They each also have their own dual aspects. Idea has a Yang part we can identify as the innate mental processes and abilities, what Kant defined as “a priori knowledge,” and a Yin part that is the embodied Idea, that “thinkable” concept we can think in our language.

The physical Sketchnote has a Yang part which is the content, the semantic aspect, and a Yin part which is related to the physical part, the ink on the paper. These aspects have their dual nature, as well, and so on. It is possible to apply the same principle of former heaven and later heaven, expanding our vision and drawing the life of the Sketchnote from the Idea's inception to the final production of the immutable artifact, the physical drawing.



But we can also consider a wider aspect.



And this is now where we can catch a glimpse of the Universe in our sketchnoting process. Why was that lecturer invited? Why did we attend that event? How did the lecturer’s energy resonate in our mind? We must consider the emotional filter and, moreover, our experience and our education which have molded our perception, our “mental dictionary” of images which can be translated into human concepts, and our ability to move our hands accordingly to make a drawing mean exactly what we think.

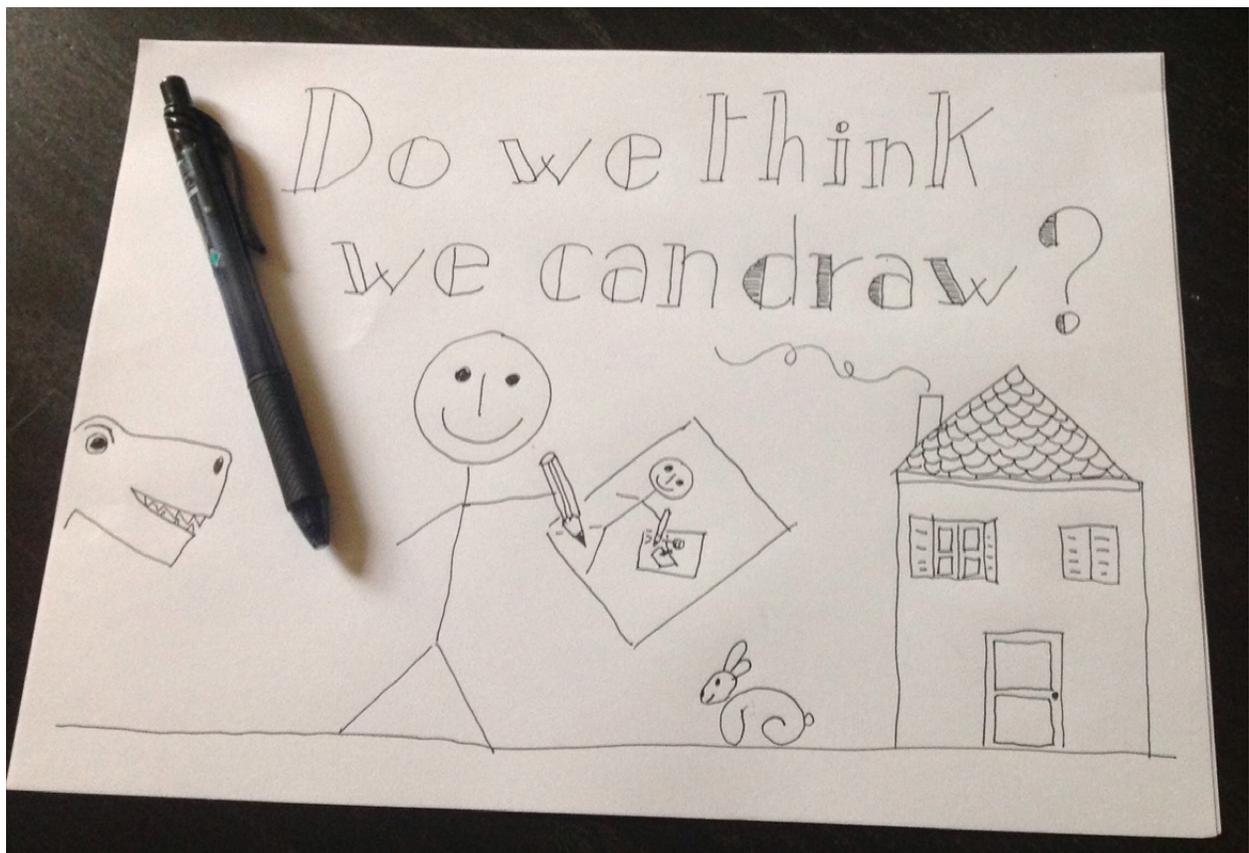
The origins of each sketchnote largely belongs to who we are and how the life and the universe have shaped our selves. Years ago Giulia Boschi told me one thing that sculpted itself in my mind and heart: “our task in life is to find our unique role.”

In my opinion Sketchnoting is part of this research. Each Sketchnote is unique in shape, in time and in meaning.

## Last but not least in the process: the Sketchnoter

We have seen how to do a simple evaluation, and I think all of us can understand that it will be nearly impossible to find a perfect Sketchnote which is good. However, whatever will be the Yang aspect of a Sketchnote, the Yin part intended as the bare bones look of a Sketchnote, relies upon our capacity to draw. This does not mean that we must be good artists and designers to sketchnote, but the more we are confident in drawing, the less energy is required to transform Yang into Yin. Also a simple drawing can drive ideas more effectively than a drawing that needs energy to be understood.

This raise a simple question: do we think we can draw?



[Jeannel King](#) has a great answer, wonderfully expressed in her e-book called [What you draw is good enough](#) .

“... because in order to draw ‘Good Enough’, you have to believe that YOU are Good Enough!”  
**Jeannel King, *What you draw is good enough***

This is the secret: don't just try to do *good enough* drawings, but know that what you draw is *good enough*. We'll look at what it means to know that we make good enough drawings.

The exact moment when we are sketchnoting is when Yang Ideas condense on paper in Yin drawings. This is the moment when we can easily sense the energy flowing through ourselves, and we can perceive how this flow is influenced by our mood. The latter is no more than the result of the interaction between Yin and Yang, either internal (body and mind relationship) or external (the relation between our selves and the environment). Drawing *good enough* is independent of our skills. Even if we are artists, we can produce a not-good-enough-yet, wonderfully-drawn sketchnote. Being anxious about the outcome or being overconfident are both cases where we experience additional energy consumption, which is subtracted from the sketchnoting energy flow.

Both Mike Rohde and Jeannel King point out that sketchnoting is about communication and expressing ideas. In their books they give valuable hints on how to be comfortable during sketchnoting. But all of this is influenced by our awareness, and we all know it is a matter of time and practice to understand and internalize how to draw *good enough*.

### **Breath of Life, breath of Sketchnoting**

Have you ever felt cold hands or arms during sketchnoting or during a time that was literally breathtaking? They are both symptoms of something wrong in our breathing. Breath is a very important part of every action, and its harmonious flow is most important of all.

[Shizuto Masunaga](#), in his book [Zen imagery exercises](#), clearly explains how breathing is fundamental in every action, and this phrase is particularly meaningful:

*“In Japan the word iki means breath and ki is frequently used to define mental phenomena. Ki is also used to express the power behind a well-disciplined action.”*

### **Shizuto Masunaga - Zen imagery exercises**

Therefore it is reasonable to postulate that breathing can considerably affect our sketchnoting. I've experienced on many occasions that being aware and practicing good breathing is not just a side aspect of an action but an important and influential part of the action itself, and I learned how to apply this also to sketchnoting. I'm not going to teach breathing exercises, but here are my breathing tips.

### **Breathe with your belly and arms**

When you sit or find a place to sketchnote, make sure your belly has enough space to expand. It is a good idea in some cases to widen the belt slightly. Make sure your arms are mostly straight, elbows bent away from your body. To evaluate your posture, take a deep breath, expand your abdomen, and imagine that the air fills your arms all the way to your hands and fingers. Doing this we allow energy to flow freely.

### **Take a second to check your breath**

If we feel stuck or we find it difficult to continue drawing fluidly, it is time to check our breath. Is it short? Do we breathe with the chest or with the belly? Are we holding our breath? We can repeat the above exercise to make sure everything is all right. Shortly we will be able to do this without interrupting our activity.

We can also consider a different view: when we inhale we absorb ideas and make them more physical. When we exhale we relax elbows and wrists and let the idea flow through our arms to the paper.

### **Clenched teeth and sticking the tongue out**

These are habits, and we are often unaware of them. In some cases, when we are under pressure and eager to achieve, our brain tries to distract itself with involuntary activities in order to lower stimuli and make the part of it which serves cognitive behaviors work freely and quietly in the background. Unfortunately, these can affect breathing too, and we must bear in mind that paying attention to these habits can be very energy consuming. My suggestion is a simple meditation technique: gently put the tongue on the roof of the mouth, breath deeply with your belly, and start focusing on the sketchnote. That's it, very simple. Give it a try!

## Thus ends this short ebook

I had fun working on this interesting and deep journey into my way to sketchnote. Maybe I'll never be a good sketchnoter, and maybe I'm not good at drawing, but I would like to be *good enough*. Sketchnoting makes it possible for me to express myself in a way other than the usual ways, and I do like what I get at the end of the day. I have my large notebook (space is never enough), my pens, my Sketchnotes and my Ideas. What makes me happy is that even if the sketchnote is not the best, what it carries, Ideas, will never die and will enlighten my mind for the rest of my life.

As a mountaineer I say that my next climb starts exactly from the summit of the mountain I've just climbed, and this is what I'm doing right now: thinking about a second, larger, improved edition to dig into the way energy flows through a Sketchnote. Heraclitus once said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice." Let me paraphrase, if I may, this famous saying: "You can't do the same Sketchnote twice." We can't because the subject of the Sketchnote will be obviously different, but also because we will be different people, with different skills and moods at any given second of our life. Everything flows, and I would be very pleased to embrace this flow with you, sharing experiences and points of view, and I invite you to contact me whenever you want and ask me anything about the topics covered in this e-book.

I encourage you to read Mike Rohde's book, [The Sketchnote Handbook](#) and join his Flickr community where you will find some of my sketchnotes and many others, some of them really amazing from talented artists.

I also suggest you download Jeannel King's e-book [What you draw is good enough](#) for further reading.

Thank you.

Ciao

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**Giulia Boschi:** sinologist, physiotherapist, traditional Chinese medicine and qigong teacher. Now working as a lecturer of medical Chinese at Pio V university, as a teacher of Chinese medical theory and qigong in different Institutions and as a private therapist.

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Author of [The Sketchnote Handbook](#)

Website: <http://rohdesign.com>

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Website: <http://sweatingcommas.com/>

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