
There's Yin in My Yang!

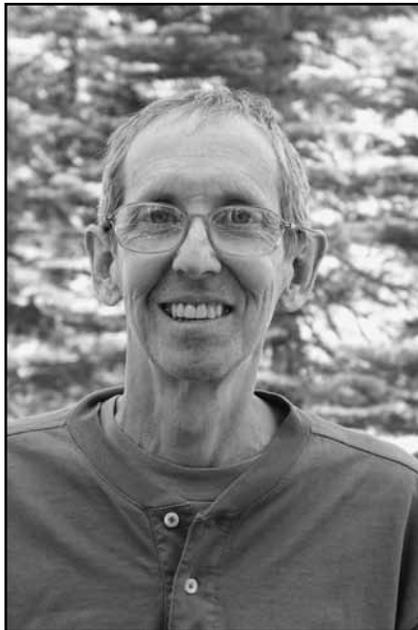
The Yin/Yang Controversy Revisited

Carl Ferré

Many years ago, a student told me, “Macrobiotics would be much better off without yin and yang.” He continued, “Just tell me what to eat and what not to eat—but, don’t tell me I have to learn yin and yang!” He couldn’t make any sense of it—the yin/yang way of thinking was too foreign for him. Today, dietary macrobiotics without yin/yang study is gaining in popularity.

Ohsawa gave us a shortcut to supreme judgment, universal consciousness, and infinite freedom—prayer (contemplation on the order of the universe) and fasting (eating and drinking only what is necessary). Prayer and fasting is to macrobiotic practice as zazen (seated meditation) is to Zen.

In his book, *Taking the Path of Zen*, Robert Aitken writes, “The heart of Zen training is zazen. Without zazen, there is no Zen, no realization, and no application of the practice.” A similar thing could be written about macrobiotics. The heart of macrobiotic practice is prayer and fasting. Without both prayer (contemplation on principles) and fasting (eating well), there is no macrobiotic practice and no realization of judgment, consciousness, and freedom.



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In other words, in order to practice macrobiotics some sense of yin/yang theory is required. Otherwise, we are merely following a list of foods to eat and a list of foods to avoid. This is not true macrobiotics—no matter how well we follow the prescribed lists. True macrobiotic practice involves making choices based on macrobiotic principles. One of the fundamental principles is yin/yang theory.

THE TWO VERSIONS

There are two ways in which yin and yang are used. These two versions originated in China and come from different interpretations of the *I Ching*. The version of yin/yang theory used by Chinese medicine is based on trigrams as arranged by King Wen (1231-1135 BCE) in the 12th century BC and by the work of Confucious (551-479 BCE) and the Confucian scholars in the 5th century BC. This interpretation of the *I Ching* is referred to as the “metaphysical orientation” or as the “written *I Ching*.”

The other interpretation is referred to as the “physical orientation” or the “oral *I Ching*.” The physical version is based on the thinking of Fu Xi (Tsi; 2952-2836 BCE) in the 29th century BC. Other followers of the physical yin/yang system are Lao Tzu (604-531 BCE) and Ekken Kaibira (1630-1716)—both important persons in the history of macrobiotic thinking. Ohsawa based his version of yin/yang on this orientation as he explains in his introduction to *Philosophy of Oriental Medicine* (see page 6).

Much more about Ohsawa’s reasoning and about the two versions

Introduction to *Philosophy of Oriental Medicine*

by George Ohsawa

The Unique Principle of Far Eastern philosophy, the very basic unique foundation of all our cultures, including medicine, is definitive. However, its translation and interpretation may be either physical or metaphysical.

At the beginning, over four thousand years ago, the Unique Principle was a physical dialectics. Later, metaphysical commentators and interpreters, such as Confucius, twisted or complicated the explanation of it. Then the physicians did the same. Here lies the reason for the confusion and uncertainty beclouding the philosophy and medicine of the Far East.

The Far Eastern peoples, always referred to as spiritual, metaphysical, or primitive, use a quite peculiar language; they inhabit an infinite, eternal, and absolute world, and in consequence their tongues are indefinite, uncertain, and extremely simple, but deep and often lacking in clarity. The Chinese and Japanese languages (the Easternmost ones) lack the notions of time, number, and sex. (As a matter of fact, according to my method, you can learn colloquial and pure Japanese in four hours. It is the easiest language that I know of in the whole world.) This factor has also unquestionably contributed to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the philosophy of the Far East.

In the beginning, over four thousand years ago, the sky, or infinite space, was considered the supreme yin symbol, and the earth, the supreme yang symbol. The sky, being infinite space, the boundless expansion, was considered the representative of yin, the centrifugal force. The earth, on the contrary, was considered yang, the centripetal force.

Later, metaphysicians described the sky as the generator of all the phenomena and beings in the world, including all celestial bodies (the major force, or supreme divinity), and they classified it as yang. The earth was considered yin.

Metaphysically speaking, the sky, infinite space, may be called yang, the greatest producer. In the physical sense, however, the sky—infinite space, the boundless expansion—may be called yin, the greatest entropical passiveness. From this point of view, the earth is compact and yang.

In old Chinese medicine, the small intestine, bladder, stomach, large intestine, etc., are classified as yang while the heart, kidneys, pancreas, liver, etc., are classified as yin. This is a metaphysical classification. Physically speaking, this must be reversed: all empty organs are yin, as they are passive and receptive; all solid organs, with density and compactness, are yang. (The stomach intestines, bladder, lungs, etc., are yin; the liver, kidneys, heart, pancreas, etc., are yang.)

We are living in a scientific and physical era. We therefore need a physical, up-to-date classification to unify terminology for the introduction of the Unique Principle into all the natural sciences, in addition to medicine, and all the cultural sciences as well. Most of all, it is necessary in the formation of fundamental concepts for a world government.

of yin/yang may be found in Roy Collins's book, *Fire Over Heaven: On the Origin, Interpretations and Evolution of the Yin/Yang Dialectic and I Ching*, published in 2001. The important thing to understand is that Ohsawa didn't just carelessly change the meaning of terms that have been used for centuries in Chinese medicine. Ohsawa used a different, older interpretation of yin/yang.

Both systems work and have value. The version of yin/yang theory we choose depends on our purpose. Yin/yang theory is a tool. It may be used to help make decisions from dietary choices to health remedies to consciousness raising to spiritual enlightenment.

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David Kerr, who is compiling a complete list of yin/yang classifications from the *I Ching*, *Nei Ching*, and Zen macrobiotics, reminded me of Ohsawa's analogy. Yin and yang are like directions on a compass. They are used to provide direction in one's life. Ohsawa's main concern was to provide a compass that was usable by individuals to help themselves. In other words, thinking for oneself was more important to Ohsawa than memorizing someone else's classifications. He believed the physical formulation of yin/yang was best for this purpose.

The differences between Ohsawa's version and the Chinese medicine version are like the differences

between tools such as a flathead screwdriver and a Phillips screwdriver. A flathead screwdriver is used for a slotted screw (one groove “-”). A Phillips screwdriver is used for a Phillips screw (two grooves “+”). In this analogy, Ohsawa’s version is like a flathead screwdriver.

Chinese medicine is used for healing. Macrobiotics can be used in all areas of life, including overcoming an illness. This action would be similar to using a flathead screwdriver on a Phillips screw—it can be done but takes care and patience. In stubborn situations, a Phillips screwdriver (Chinese medicine) may be needed.

CONFUSING CONCEPTS

When I first began macrobiotics in 1975, I was greatly attracted to buckwheat. Everyone told me that buckwheat is a yang grain and too yang for summer (yang). I ate it everyday, however. It was not too yang for me. Many years later, Jacques deLangre told me that buckwheat is actually part of the rhubarb family (a fruit) and very yin in his opinion.

Herein lies one of the confusing things about yin/yang. There are unequal amounts of yin and yang in every food, in every organ, in every person, and in every thing. Aspects of buckwheat are yang (small, hard) and aspects of rhubarb are yin (rhubarb family). Buckwheat is considered “yang” by those who think the yang aspects dominate and “yin” by those who think yin aspects dominate. The same can be said about tomatoes, salt, sugar, or any other food.

Once at the French Meadows camp, I asked someone from the audience to come forward and we stood side by side. I asked which of us was more yin and which was more yang. Since I was taller, the participants choose me as more yin. We turned sideways. Now, I was more yang because my stomach was more slender. Whether one is considered more yin or more yang depends on the cat-

egory—in terms of height I was more yin; in terms of body size he was more yin. All categories must be considered if we want to determine the overall yinness or yangness of any thing or anyone.

My first lecture at the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation in 1978 was on yin and yang. After explaining the terms as I understood them, I held up objects and asked which was yin and which was yang. Most of the students sat with blank faces while a ten-year-old boy from the Netherlands who knew no English pointed to the “right” (in my opinion) choices in each case. By the end of the talk, everyone was confused, including Herman Aihara and me. The idea is easy enough but the application is not always so clear.

Some people have argued that the problem in understanding yin and yang is Ohsawa’s changing of them. I disagree and find the Chinese medi-

cine version just as confusing. In my experience, both versions contain aspects that appear confusing from the perspective of common sense. Many a discussion with an advocate of the Chinese medicine version has ended with our agreeing to disagree. The reality is that the other version appears confusing to anyone who only knows one of the two versions, especially if the understanding of the “known” version is partial. Anyone who knows one system well will have fewer problems learning (or discussing) the other system.

SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES

In the traditional Chinese model, yang corresponds to the sunny side of the mountain and yin corresponds to the shady side of the mountain. This naming leads to hotter, brighter, fire, drier, and active being classified as yang and colder, darker, water, wetter,

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and receptive being classified as yin.

It appears to me that the main difference between the physical and metaphysical interpretations comes from the classification of heaven and earth. The physical interpretation views heaven as empty space and cooler (yin) and earth as a solid object and hotter (yang). From this viewpoint, it follows that denseness, descending, gravity, centripetal force, contraction, inner, and matter are all yang and hollowness, ascending, levity, centrifugal force, expansion, outer, and energy are all yin.

The metaphysical interpretation views heaven as the active producer of energy (yang) and earth as receptive (yin) matter. From this viewpoint, it follows that denseness, descending, gravity, centripetal force, contraction, inner, and matter are all yin and hollowness, ascending, levity, centrifugal force, expansion, outer, and energy are all yang. Thus, the physical interpretation considers matter as yang and energy as yin while the metaphysical model considers matter as yin and energy as yang.

Consider the water/rain cycle. The sun heats the earth and heated air containing water vapor rises until it becomes cooled in the heavens aloft. This cooling results in condensation of the water vapor into droplets that then fall to the earth. The physical interpretation is that heat (yang) causes the air to rise (yin) until it becomes cooled (yin), causing it to condense and fall (yang). The metaphysical interpretation maintains that the nature of heat (yang) is to rise (yang) until it becomes cooled (yin)—the nature of which is to fall (yin).

Both interpretations lead to the same conclusion—yang leads to yin and yin leads to yang. Specifically, yang attracts yin until it becomes yin, at which time it attracts yang until it becomes yang. The two versions only differ in viewpoint—where yin changes to yang and vice versa. Yin and yang are fluid (changing all the time) and never static (balanced). It

is the unification (complementary nature) of yin/yang that is important.

CONCLUSION

Yin/yang theory is central to macrobiotics and to Chinese medicine. Each discipline uses an interpretation of yin/yang that fits its purpose. Each version is based on interpretations that are thousands of years old. I disagree with the idea that macrobiotic theorists should change the physical yin/yang interpretation to the Chinese medicine metaphysical model. The better approach is to accentuate unification rather than

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separation. Here are suggestions for unification of the two interpretations.

One. Macrobiotic educators need to do a better job of teaching macrobiotic principles in general and yin/yang theory in particular. The first step in this process is producing clear and understandable statements of macrobiotic principles. The second step is to make certain that these statements are agreed upon and taught. Students who want to learn both yin/yang systems are advised to learn one version well before attempting to learn the other version.

Two. Both macrobiotic and Chinese medicine theorists and educators need to acknowledge that the two distinct versions of yin/yang are valid and have value. Macrobiotic litera-

ture should include a statement that explains the different usages of yin/yang. The same statement could be used during all lectures so that no one is confused by the different versions. Here is such a note from my book, *Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics*: “Note that the macrobiotic usage of yin and yang is different from the way yin and yang are used in Chinese or Oriental medicine. Chinese medicine uses yin and yang as a curative technique. The macrobiotic way uses yin and yang as a way to restore natural order and gain freedom. Both systems work, and many macrobiotic followers and counselors have learned both usages in order to understand life more fully.” It would be helpful if Chinese medicine educators would produce and use a similar statement in their literature.

Three. Overcome close-minded thinking. It seems to me that there are macrobiotic practitioners who are closed-minded about any discipline other than macrobiotics. This closed-mindedness exists in persons who practice Chinese medicine as well. Chinese medicine has value—it has over 2000 years of refinements to its yin/yang system as used for healing. Macrobiotics has value—it allows one to understand the order of the universe and her or his connection with the divine source of all things. Understanding this connection allows us to live a life that is happy, healthy, and free.

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