

# **MACROBIOTICS REVISITED**

**A Review of Macrobiotic  
Theory and Practice**



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Chico, California

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# Preface

My personal journey with macrobiotics began on a hotel rooftop in Kathmandu, Nepal. Watching a beautiful sunset one evening in the spring of 1980, a bearded young man approached and sat down. After a few words of small talk, he launched into an explanation of brown rice and miso soup. He took out a piece of paper, drew a line on it, and put yin on one end and yang on the other. He proceeded to give me my first lesson in macrobiotic theory and practice. I came away from that first exposure to macrobiotics with the title of a book to read later, *The Book of Macrobiotics* by Michio Kushi.

That visit to Nepal was in the middle of a year and a half of open-ended travel throughout Southeast Asia, India, and Nepal. During that time I met many people from many countries and I collected quite a list of book titles, places, and many other wonderful ideas to look into one day. When I returned home to the United States, *The Book of Macrobiotics* was not the first book that I bought. I went into a natural food store in my hometown of Edwardsville, Illinois and looked in the book section. There was this little book about the size of the palm of your hand titled *Zen Macrobiotics*, a book written by the modern day promoter of macrobiotics George Ohsawa. Strange name I thought—combination of a Western given name and a Japanese surname. The title *Zen Macrobiotics* appealed to me in particular because I had lived in Japan for several years as an English teacher and had dabbled in Zen Buddhism studies before going to India and Nepal. This little book fit in my hand so easily that I took it home and devoured it.

Many of the ideas contained in *Zen Macrobiotics* seemed wild,

even crazy; but, I couldn't put it down. I couldn't turn away from the passion that was in those pages. Throughout the book there was this thread of correctness that was shaking the foundation of my orientation in life. There are many specific details in *Zen Macrobiotics*, but I found a guiding thought that changed my life forever.

One day, during the time that I worked at the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation (GOMF), I was walking down the hallway to the kitchen and co-founder Herman Aihara approached me. I stopped and we talked about something superficial when out of the blue Herman said, "What do you get from Ohsawa?" Talk about being put on the spot. One could cite hundreds of ideas, practices, or views of life. What came out was, "Freedom," I said. My reading of Ohsawa's writings and listening to Herman's stories about Ohsawa ultimately seem to point to freedom. As I looked over the text of *Zen Macrobiotics* again recently, one line jumped off the page, "learn to judge, think, and understand with clarity and freedom." pg. 2

That line, "learn to judge, think, and understand with clarity and freedom" simply states one of macrobiotics' greatest contributions to humanity. Utilizing that concept enables an understanding of the macrobiotic conceptualization of the order of the universe and all its myriad manifestations, including a potentially healing and healthy dietary practice. That simple line has been my guiding thought in macrobiotics and in life in general. In any situation, if I'm able to clearly see the truth of the matter and make a decision based on that truth, no matter what the circumstance, then that decision, I believe, will come to good...eventually—be it a physical, emotional, or spiritual concern. Over the years the cultivation of clear judgment, clear thinking, and clear understanding has proven to be helpful and accurate in many areas of life. It is that idea and practice ("learn to judge, think and understand with clarity and freedom") from *Zen Macrobiotics* that is one of the inspirations for this book.

Another inspiration for this book came from my association with Herman Aihara. Herman lived the George Ohsawa instruction to "see for yourself." Herman had the clarity, insight, and courage to make a significant modification and contribution to macrobiotic

theory with his ideas on acid and alkaline. George Ohsawa's original formulation was that acid is yin and alkaline is yang. Herman, testing that contention for himself, came up with the idea that acid could be yin or yang, and alkaline could be yin or yang. In what George Ohsawa postulated as a dichotomy, Herman saw a 4-quadrant matrix. It became his signature contribution to macrobiotic thought and continues to this day to inform and assist students of macrobiotics in refining their understanding of diet and lifestyle choices.

Putting these two notions together: "learn to judge, think and understand with clarity and freedom" and "see for yourself" further informs the inspiration and execution of writing this book. I believe this book has been conceived and written in the spirit of George Ohsawa and Herman Aihara and I give those men and their teachings credit for my intellectual inspiration.

Here's one last story about Herman Aihara. In the fall of 1991, Herman approached me and said, "You do magazine?" He spoke in the form of a question, not a command, asking me if I would edit *Macrobiotics Today* magazine. Honored and flattered, I immediately said yes; and, I had the presence of mind to ask a very important question of him. "Do you want me to follow any editorial guidelines in selecting content for the magazine? Are there any subjects or topics that are off limits?" "No," he said. "Just see that it continues." With that he walked away. The latitude that he gave me as editor of *Macrobiotics Today* exemplified the concepts of "freedom" and "see for yourself." He trusted me to carry on the traditions and teachings of George Ohsawa and himself, but with the all-important qualification of doing it as I saw fit. I will be grateful all my days for the trust that Herman placed in me.

– Bob Ligon  
January 2017

# Introduction

In my work as editor of *Macrobiotics Today*, I remember that Donna Wilson, in her occasional articles, would call for a dialogue among macrobiotic teachers, counselors, and practitioners so that macrobiotics, as a movement or body of information could self-reflect and self-criticize thereby consistently revitalizing the theory and practice. I believe she identified, accurately, that macrobiotics tended to preach to the choir. And as such, macrobiotics did not have a self-revitalizing debate and discussion that could critically consider aspects of theory and practice and propose improvements and changes.

The reason for this book is to offer up some ideas to initiate just such a self-reflection on the theory and practice of macrobiotics. Like many people who have practiced macrobiotics, I have gone through many changes in my relationship to the theory and practice of macrobiotics as I wrote in the Preface.

Macrobiotics, like any system of thought, has certain blind spots that reflect the blind spots of those who have come before us. I know that I have my own blind spots that others will illuminate one day. The task I set out for myself here is to shed light on what I think are some of the areas of macrobiotic theory and practice that could benefit from debate, discussion, and possible modification.

The book is organized in five major sections. Each section and/or chapter highlights the contributions and strengths of a particular area of macrobiotic theory and practice, then moves into reviewing and critiquing that area, and concludes with suggestions for modification that I hope will generate debate and discussion.

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# **PART 1**

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## **YIN/YANG THEORY**

## Chapter 1

# The Dialectic

Macrobiotics, and more specifically George Ohsawa, has made many contributions to humanity. The notions of gratitude, taking responsibility for one's actions, and the realization of freedom have enriched many lives immeasurably. I refer you to Ohsawa's writings for more details on what these notions embody. Briefly, the philosophical principles put forth by Ohsawa can provide guidance through the chaos of life. These principles make sense of a seemingly random universe and empower the individual with the ability to control her or his own destiny.

George Ohsawa wrote in *Zen Macrobiotics*, it (*macrobiotics*) "is a dialectic conception of the infinite universe." p. 19. The use of a dialectic concept in describing phenomenon is an immensely important contribution of macrobiotics. This notion underlies all of macrobiotic theory and practice. In simple Far Eastern terms, it is the theory of yin and yang. Ages old, this theory can effectively explain the state and dynamics of all phenomenon. Yin/yang is a compass or "magic spectacles" that can guide one in decision making of all kinds. The use of yin and yang makes possible the estimations of appropriateness, from food selection and preparation to the selection of a life direction. Although I will take issue with some of the macrobiotic formulations of yin and yang, the introduction of a dialectic is one of the major contributions of macrobiotic theory.

One basic tenet of macrobiotic theory is that we live in a relative universe where antagonistic forces are in constant flux, yet paradoxically maintain an equilibrium that allows us to exist in an ever-elusive balance. At a sensorial level, we observe up and down, hot

and cold, night and day. These are examples of the polarity of the dialectic, here expressed as static extremes.

You might notice that each of these pairs is a relative concept. Take hot and cold for example. In July, when the temperature is 80°F or 90°F you would probably say that 50°F is cold. However, in the dead of winter in February when the temperature could be -5°F, 50°F would seem at least warm if not hot. In this fashion, the dialectic enables us to evaluate the meaning of 50°F. The meaning of 50°F is not absolutely hot or cold, but can have the meaning of hot or cold in relation to a certain environment.

This would seem to be a paradox. How can an idea, notion, or value like 50°F mean two seemingly contradictory things when it looks like it's a singular entity? This is one of the beauties of the dialectic. It enables a deeper understanding than what might be apparent from the surface.

The dialectic cuts through the complexity and confusion of life providing a sense of order in the seeming chaos. There are many macrobiotic books that provide more detailed explanations of this concept. Suffice it to say that, while the dialectic did not originate with macrobiotics, the use of a dialectic is a distinguishing feature of macrobiotic theory and practice.

# Yin and Yang Dynamics

## Yin and Yang—Native State

Over the many years of macrobiotic discussions, teaching, writing, and debates, the subject of yin and yang has been given much attention. Rightly so. Yin/yang theory is the basis for macrobiotic theory in particular and for Far Eastern philosophies and medicine in general. The inclusion of a dialectic-like yin/yang is one of the strengths of macrobiotics. While yin/yang theory has many applications in macrobiotics, I have never been able to reconcile several seeming theoretic contradictions.

Macrobiotic theory states that the tendency of yang is contraction and the tendency of yin is expansion. One crucial detail that has never been clarified sufficiently is whether the macrobiotic qualities of yin and yang refer to the native state of something or whether it refers to the resulting effect of yin or yang energy. It would appear from the yin/yang chart shown on page 13 (*The Book of Macrobiotics*, p. 13) that native state is the prevailing condition. All of the “Attributes” seem to me to be native states, that is, what something is without an energy acting upon it.

Yin and yang are not static qualities, but rather a way to refer to relative states or conditions. For example, a carrot is not simply yin or yang, but can be viewed as yin compared to burdock (carrot is not as hard, has more moisture), but it would be yang compared to lettuce (lettuce is a broad leaf, more moisture, and delicate texture). This example uses the native state of carrots, burdock, and lettuce. This characterization is somewhat useful in determining the yin/yang quality of, in this case, a vegetable.

**Table 1. Examples of Yin and Yang**

	Yin ▼*	Yang ▲*
Attribute	Centrifugal force	Centripetal force
Tendency	Expansion	Contraction
Function	Diffusion	Fusion
	Dispersion	Assimilation
	Separation	Gathering
	Decomposition	Organization
Movement	More inactive, slower	More active, faster
Vibration	Shorter wave and higher frequency	Longer wave and lower frequency
Direction	Ascent and vertical	Descent and horizontal
Position	More outward and peripheral	More inward and central
Weight	Lighter	Heavier
Temperature	Colder	Hotter
Light	Darker	Brighter
Humidity	Wetter	Drier
Density	Thinner	Thicker
Size	Larger	Smaller
Shape	More expansive and fragile	More contractive and harder
Form	Longer	Shorter
Texture	Softer	Harder
Atomic particle	Electron	Proton
Elements	N, O, P, Ca, etc.	H, C, Na, As, Mg, etc.
Environment	Vibration ... Air ... Water ... Earth	
Climatic effects	Tropical climate	Colder climate
Biological	More vegetable quality	More animal quality
Sex	Female	Male
Organ structure	More hollow and expansive	More compacted and condensed
Nerves	More peripheral, orthosympathetic	More central, parasympathetic
Attitude, emotion	More gentle, negative, defensive	More active, positive, aggressive
Work	More psychological and mental	More physical and social
Consciousness	More universal	More specific
Mental function	Dealing more with the future	Dealing more with the past
Culture	More spiritually oriented	More materially oriented
Dimension	Space	Time

\* For convenience, the symbols for Yin, and for Yang are used

### **Yin and Yang—Effect**

Confusion sets in when one looks at the effect of yin or yang energy. Referring to the yin/yang chart, yang characteristics are contraction, hotter, brighter, more aggressive, drier, gathering, and male; and, yin characteristics are expansion, colder, darker, more defensive, wetter, separation, and female. Following this categorization of the qualities of yin and yang, male, hot, and bright are all yang characteristics and female, cold, and dark are all yin ones compared to each other respectively.

If yang is hotter and contractive and yin is colder and expansive, then you would expect something that has heat applied to it to contract. Conversely, something that has cold applied to it should expand. To my observation, applying heat to something makes it expand. Water heated creates steam, expanding to the extent that it will drive turbines. Putting food into a refrigerator causes the microbial activity to slow down, retarding spoilage. That slowing down is contracting—reducing activity.

One of the macrobiotic principles is that yang produces yin and yin produces yang. This understanding seemingly resolves the contradiction that heat (yang) causes something to expand (yin) and that cold (yin) causes something to contract (yang). And though macrobiotic theory does state this relationship between yin and yang, it is not explained well enough in macrobiotic books and lectures. This principle leads us to an important question however.

When is yin or yang viewed as a native state and when is it applied as an effect of energetic movement? It seems to me that macrobiotic theory applies yin/yang dynamics in both ways and the result ends up being confusing. My conclusion is that the macrobiotic formulations of yin and yang are not only used in a logically inconsistent way but also have been interpreted by many with yang (male) oriented bias.

I would concede that it may be a matter of perspective and opinion. However, I have a real problem when the macrobiotic version of yin/yang dynamics is applied by macrobiotic counselors or teachers in an attempt to make macrobiotic practice a medical modality.

Despite the usefulness of the macrobiotic formulations of yin/yang in some applications, those same formulations can have significant negative consequences when pressed into service of diagnosis and treatment incorrectly.

### **An Alternate View**

Still utilizing a dialectic approach, it is appealing to view the earth as being composed of matter and energy. Matter and energy are a fundamental relative world polarity. Energy animates matter. For example, electricity (energy) makes appliances (matter) run, otherwise the appliance is just a construction of metal and plastic. Conversely, matter gives form to energy. That same electricity (energy) puts the form of the appliance (matter) in motion; otherwise, electricity is an invisible energy of no use to us. This example helps us make sense how the complementary antagonism of the dualistic, binary material world works.

In this way of thinking, matter can be conceived as yin, and energy can be conceived as yang. This formulation of yin/yang comes from Traditional Chinese Medicine (hereafter TCM), and to my observation, more accurately reflects the nature of the material world.

### **Yang as the Whole Enchilada**

To my understanding, the macrobiotic formulation of yin and yang has both matter and energy as yang characteristics. In macrobiotics, yang is the energetic, the animator, but since yang is thought to be contracting it is also the solid, the heavy, the material, while yin is the expansive and lighter. Yin then, in macrobiotic terms, has little energy and little or no matter. This viewpoint has led to yang being aggrandized by macrobiotic practitioners. It is everything positive, creative, admirable, and desirable. Yang is viewed as the energetic force and it yields all the stuff we see. It is no coincidence that yang is associated with male-ness and that this interpretation of macrobiotic theory heavily favors yang as the quality that is most desired and respected. In addition, macrobiotics comes from Japan, which at that time (early 20th century) was a very patriarchal, hierarchical so-