

**Macrobiotics in context: how macrobiotics began a connection of Eastern philosophy to the West but through a narrow window.**

In 1950's France a Japanese man called Yukikazu Sakurazawa, who renamed himself George Ohsawa for his western audience, instigated the introduction of what was originally Chinese medical philosophy and medicine to the Western world. He and a few others of his generation aimed to make connections in the West pointing out that the Western world could use some of the ancient philosophy of the East, particularly because of the total colonialization that occurred after the world war. In a way the Western world actually woke up to the existence of Eastern philosophy due to war.

Ohsawa was a student of the Classical texts of Chinese medicine that had been diligently stored in Japanese monastic traditions for more than 1,500 years. The origins of these texts are even older than this, having a history of over 2,000 years in their native China. Since then these texts have provided the basis of all medicine from East-Asia and there are clear connections with the perhaps older medicine of the Vedas of India and the yogic therapeutics of Ayurveda. In essence the root philosophies of the ancients were *one*, but over time this medicine has become increasingly fragmented as a result of the subjectivity of each ego that takes it on.

Ohsawa was genuine in his want for knowledge and truth and also his conviction that the West needed the East more than it could ever know. His focus of interest was not only in the Classics of Chinese medicine but he also had the charisma and linguistics to pass this message on to the West and enable them to make a connection to it. He did so through popularization of a term that was already known to Western culture, which in Western language best described the yinyang philosophy of the East, which was "macro-biotics". This literally means "large-life" or "life-enhancing" is a better description, way of being. The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates originally used this word, in fact the medicine of the ancient Greeks, of China and India all complete a total continuum of universality, just with different expressions of the different regions they are in.

Ohsawa began teaching his philosophy of yinyang to western students in a way that he felt they could understand which came from his own understanding of Classical Chinese medicine. However, herein lies one of the first problems of macrobiotics. George Ohsawa was one man, with one man's ideas about Chinese medicine that he had studied and he was entering into a world that found his way of this "exotic" expression interesting and of unique focus. The modern West were unfamiliar with a way of being associated with yinyang theory, so in a way George Ohsawa had a captive audience and one that was very unlikely to question his terms or reflections. However, his peers in Japan, particularly the group known as Keiraku Chiryō [beginning in the 1940s] or "meridian therapy" group who were dedicated to Classical Chinese medicine and those involved in Kanpo, traditional herbalism which including nutritional understanding, or even Koho-Anma or Classical massage, would all have questioned his theoretical position of yinyang outright. These people were not involved in Ohsawa's outpourings but were known to him and his student Michio Kushi, such as the Meridian-therapy group member Honma Shohaku. While interest was ignited for a whole generation of Westerners into the Eastern philosophy resulting from what was passed on through Ohsawa, the mix also contained some of

Ohsawa's ideas that were at best partial and at worst simply misguided, which came to be chewed over in the West for several generations.

As someone who is glad to have started my training in macrobiotics, I can not only see some of the very important benefits but also the huge pitfalls of this approach. It is important that these be understood, particularly by those who are looking into macrobiotics as a "complete" methodology for health, or for those already within it who might want to see the broader picture from which it originated.

The main philosophies expressed by Ohsawa which fragment Classical medicine are two-fold, one is to do with yinyang theory and the nature of constitution, and the other is to do with "Japanese-ness", both of which I will look into in the following passages. But first let's look at yinyang theory, from Ohsawa's limited perspective.

Ohsawa and his student Michio Kushi formulated and expressed their own theory of yinyang which is very difficult to understand for many students of Classical Chinese medicine as it is quite simply counter-instinctual. It seems to be opposite to that which people learn in Chinese medicine college and we must remember that Ohsawa himself purportedly gleaned these from the Classics. So firstly what are the differences and how can we see this in the bigger picture...

Let's look at yinyang in Ohsawa's expression:-

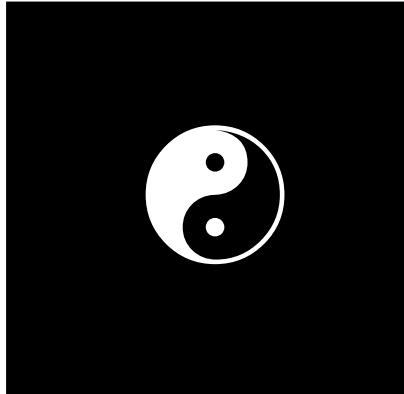
Yin	Yang
<b><i>Expansive</i></b>	<b><i>Contractive</i></b>
<b><i>up and out</i></b>	<b><i>down and in</i></b>
Cooling	Heating
female	male
Earth	Sky
<b><i>Space</i></b>	<b><i>time</i></b>

Now compare this to the Classical yinyang base:

Yin	Yang
<b><i>Accumulative</i></b>	<b><i>Expansive</i></b>
<b><i>down and in</i></b>	<b><i>up and out</i></b>
Cooling	Heating
female	male
Earth	Sky
<b><i>No space-time</i></b>	

The key areas of issue are bold-italicized above. It seems very strange as to why yang should be described as having a contractive and inward movement and yin described as having an expansive and outward movement, this needs to be explained thoroughly and it never is, so here goes...

The yin and yang expression here in Ohsawa's descriptions are expressed on the yinyang symbol itself:-



If we consider Ohsawa's use of the yin and yang expression as the dots within the yinyang, then we start to get a picture of what he was getting at. Yin-dot is at the peak of yang, so at the extreme of yang there is heat and powerful energy but within this the coolness and calmness of yin, at the peak of yin there is the dot of the heat and power of yang. As such at the peak of yang, which is about expansion, there is too a motion inwards and downwards; at the peak of yin, which is all about accumulation and drawing inwards, there is too an expansiveness and openness of yang within. What is being described at these polar sections of the whole symbol is in fact *fire* and *water*, these are Ohsawa's yinyang expression. Fire and water in the Chinese expression are very complex, fire is yin and is like a flame, within it is soft, calm and cool but without it is hot, bright and expansive. What is meant here by water is sea-water or salty water, this is both cool and calm without but it has fire or salt within, or one could describe it as a water which has strong currents within it. So within the coolness is heat. Also directionally yang is seen as the sky or the above and so it is *as if* yang shines downwards onto the human, so in meeting earth yang seems to go downwards.

In the same way the earth or the yin is drawn upwards to the sky, like water vapour rising upwards, this is the yin rising upwards to heaven. Hence from the human perspective it seems as if yin is moving up and out and yang is moving down and in. This is in fact true but only because the two qualities are mixing at this point, the fluids of the earth only rise because they have heat within it, the sky seems to shine downwards because it seems we are always below it, so the earth's position relative to the sky is the incorporation of yin within the yang.

Yinyang *includes* fire and water as energetic poles but it does not mean that fire and water are everything, it means that this is the quality of, say, summer and winter but this isn't the whole of yinyang, yinyang includes all of the seasonal changes not just the poles. This is one of the reasons why Ohsawa's view is skewed. As with most versions of the so-called "classical" picture, it is one man's view of a vast subject and as a result the products coming from this that are offered as macrobiotic diets and regimens of understanding, are skewed along with this ideology. Similar very personal views of Classical medicine are expressed in many numerous "new" therapeutic methods which have their owners "stamp" placed over them to delineate why they are doing as their own "style". "Style" is inevitable, but fundamental

principles are the same “song-sheet” that essentially life is “singing” from hence at this level, there needs to be a universality of connection, otherwise what occurs is fragmentation. This unfortunately is the warped emasculation of medicine where what was originally One gets constantly fragmented into smaller and smaller parts because people want to “make it my version” which is to make it exclusive and to “own” it, even if they say this is not their intention. The point is that the natural yin within medicine is already within acceptance and as a result there is no rigidity and egotism to manage, this is again why it is the yin qualities that are the foundations of healing. This realization is rarely seen and even more rarely passed on.

Why Ohsawa decided to do this is hard to understand. When we look into what he actually wrote on yinyang, say in his small book *“Acupuncture and the philosophy of the Far East”*, we get a perspective of his viewpoint about yinyang that is fundamentally skewed as outlined above from the outset. This makes me feel that Ohsawa did not truly realize the picture of yinyang from the Classics in its multi-dimensional format but simply saw a part of this and decided to focus on this as being the whole. This is not the first time this has been done and it continues to happen daily because the nature of yinyang as an ideology is impossible to truly grasp and to make absolute statements about it.

When we look at the Classical perspective of yinyang we are looking at something which incorporates the fire-water dynamic of Ohsawa’s ideology but also sees the broader picture of pure yin and pure yang energy. Pure yang might be called spring energy and pure yin might be called autumn energy. The summer could be called yin within yang and the winter might be called yang within the yin. We can see here the nature of the yang of spring as being purely and simply an expression of expansion, rising to a peak of energy in summer before starting the process of accumulation downwards into the yin beginning at summer. Naturally autumn is a state of cooling and calming and accumulation down into the earth and it reaches a peak in winter, where it collects enough energy to build up internal warmth for the movement to spring again and so the cycle goes on.

“Contraction” is the term used to describe Ohsawa’s yang, but actually contraction is the pathological state of energy. “Contraction” is a state where energy is contained and pulled inwards which only really occurs in the human condition of “self” of me. So, let’s give Ohsawa the benefit of the doubt and use the term “accumulation” which would normally be applied to the yin in Classical medicine, but given this, yang certainly doesn’t have the nature of “accumulation”, it naturally spreads out like rays of the sun, it opens out and wants to move outwards. This is clearly the nature of yang. Heat moves upwards and outwards naturally and coolness moves inwards and downwards naturally, this is simply expressed in the water cycles of nature, in day and night and in everything we see and do.

Yin is seen to be equivalent to space and yang to time, this again is total dualism on the part of Ohsawa and is either an attempt to really confuse or simply an ignorance concerning the nature of reality. The point is that yinyang is out of time and space, time and space have no meaning to the Taoist understanding of life. Time associated to yang might be described as linear and yin as circular, but this is as far as it can go and even this is problematic. There is no time or space and this was clear to the

ancients who understood and presented the Tao Te Ching, which is the foundation to Chinese philosophy of the Classical medicine era.

As well as these discrepancies in macrobiotics there is then the process of categorizing foods into relative associations of yin and yang, leading to the confusion of those foods which create contraction and inward direction also being tied up with heat and foods that created cooling being tied up with expansion. Of course foods can have different mixes of qualitative expressions, however this viewpoint based on Ohsawa's model of yinyang is a complete misconception and requires constant vigil as to what is meant by "yin" and "yang" because naturally it doesn't make sense to the instincts. Instinct is the basis from which this philosophy emerges, as such we instinctively know that cool things calm and cool down, we even use these expressions in everyday language, "to cool down" and "calm down" and "heat up" but this is not because of principles of physics, which they also express, but because they are naturally what is felt. To place erroneous directions of the energetics of heat and cold is to misplace the philosophy. Unfortunately as this is foundational to the stack of cards of Ohsawa's macrobiotics, when questioning this level the whole thing falls, or at least is contextualized as being the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

Even if we try to understand the nature of Ohsawa's fire-water based ideology, this doesn't really help us in the long run with learning about yinyang, which is more than just fire and water, it is inclusive of both and incorporates all of the phases of energy in between fire and water, not just fire and water. What Ohsawa does is to flatten the yinyang expression into linear, and may I say very masculine dynamics, and this rigidity is often mirrored by the followers of the macrobiotic approach.

This brings me to the "Japanese-ness" point. Many of us consider Japan as something very feminine or it is often presented like this, but actually for many years Japan has been under the indomitable and detached rule of very yang masculine energetics. The martial arts of Japan mainly originate from China, these are known to be very linear in their approach and often very aggressive in a way that the Chinese martial arts can be too but usually have far more femininity. One can easily see the fluidity and roundedness of many of the forms of Chinese martial arts in comparison to the very linear, generally stylized approach of the martial arts of Japan, such as karate. Of course there are exceptions with specific styles and teachers of course highlighted perhaps by Japanese Aikido, but the stricture of Japanese approach and focus on absolute force has been commented on by numerous people over the years as not being what martial arts were about and the female quality within these arts has been disregarded because of an overtly male dominance. This is simply representative of the mind and "way" of the cultural influences. There is generally a great deal of patriarchal rigidity and absolutism within the Japanese approach to many of the traditional arts, which in fact have Chinese origin, but which the Japanese consider to be their own as they constantly want to have expressions that are "uniquely Japanese". There is actually very little which is uniquely owned by anyone, and definitely not by Japan, separated as it would wish to be from its long-term foe China. The origin of Japanese people is likely to be China, Mongolia and many other regions around Japan itself.

The greatest thing about Japan is its conservation policy, it can hold ideas for thousands of years without much change or with subtle and refined change because of

the natural formality and process which is within the cultural expression. This has very much protected the heritage of ancient East-Asia, but to hold natural philosophy in rigid chains is to again miss the point. Ohsawa's expression was unfortunately exemplifies the more rigid and male-domineering type that we see coming from Japan, his ideas were as fixed as his approach to diet which was severe and rigid; an enforced regime he executed with food in fact resulted in one of his own children dying. He was also known to be involved with fascism and had some interest or dealings with this movement in Hitler's Germany and Europe. All of these illustrate the nature of a person's mind not to say anything is either good or bad. Rigidity breeds rigidity and often this is what is found in macrobiotics and its followers. This approach tends to be cultish because it is actually due to the refusal to see beyond the borders of its logic and to look deeply into the origins of its foundation. Although this has slowly unravelled over the years, still in relation the whole spectrum of what yinyang philosophy has to offer is still contracted.

While this is all "fighting talk" actually it isn't about fighting. It's about revealing the truth, not taking sides as to who has the "best philosophy" but actually seeing macrobiotics in context and fundamentally clinically seeing how healing functions which is beyond man-made diagnostics and skewed perceptions of yinyang and is simply about the sensory connection to food and to life.

At the outset the macrobiotic diet was limited to brown rice and vegetables, this expression came directly from Japan via George Ohsawa and his more lenient and more expanding student Michio Kushi, who still heads the organization to this day. The diet was taken on by tens of thousands of people over the years but then often discarded because it was "too strict" and "too bland", or some people found digesting large amounts of rice and vegetables very difficult, even if they were chewing! For some it created massive weight loss, for others weight gain. There was a focus on cleaning up the meat-based diet and protein-based diet of the modern Westerner and to resolve major problems such as cancer and heart disease through diet and health lifestyle. All of this came from Japan and the Japanese way of living, also from early Japanese diet through the morphed yinyang philosophy of George Ohsawa.

As you can imagine this gave a very narrow window through which people could engage with the diet. It formed a kind of cult following in the 70's, 80's and 90's where its following peaked and since then people have been losing interest. The fundamental difficulty with the perspective is its rigidity, feeling that one has to fit in with the Japanese dietary system. This is very different from a sensory understanding of the principles of nature and as a result there is a warping of the macrobiotic yinyang ideology expounded in the western world. The same is true for the so-called "Traditional Chinese Medicine" or TCM diet, which again is a kind of trademark of 1950's China run by Mao Tse Tung and has very little to do with actual Classical Chinese medicine of 2000 years ago. Let's be clear: TCM is not Classical Chinese medicine, it is also a stylized idea, yet this system is taught in almost every college of Chinese medicine all over the world, including China or other One-man based philosophies (for example J. R Worsley's 5-element acupuncture) which are just as rigid as Ohsawa's. All of these are stylized forms of medicine, however the principles of nature underpin all of them and so when seen in context one can understand who will find benefit from what course of action.

Macrobiotics as a diet is useful for the Japanese constitution overall. It is very suitable to a vegetable and grain-based people who supplement their diet with fish. This is the traditional diet of Japan and so suits its people very well. It can also be broadened out to suit a huge number of people in the world whose ancestral element several generations back was agriculturally-based and there tended to be a focus in vegetable foods as a basis. But this is by no means for everyone, some people are far more attuned to very good protein digestion, something the Japanese diet and ideology cannot stomach. The foods that are “central” or “neutral” to one group of people are not so for another. Simply, one man’s meat is another man’s poison, and to clarify the point, one woman’s rice is another woman’s digestive irritant.

Deeply lacking from Oshwa’s expression was the absolute importance of constitutional understanding within the medicine. In the true use of diagnostics there is a very important aspect of seeing the nature of the patient and the type of energetic expression they present constitutionally. In Ayurvedic medicine this was known as the three Doshas and in classical Chinese medicine as the five constitutional types. Even now in the fragmentary ideology of the Western world comes the attempt to find constitutional types with the work of Peter D’Adamo’s Blood Group patterns. This is the first Western expression to come close to seeing a view of dietary connection to constitution. Interestingly this is something that macrobiotics, which is supposedly steeped in Classical medicine does not do, or only does from within a limited and narrow view of foods, and then pronouncing what is a “central-staple food” for everyone, often grains. While macrobiotics in the modern day has changed somewhat and is more “flexible” to the difference in Western diet, even so some foods are still regarded as being “good” or “bad”. It is postulated that meat should be eaten rarely although for some this actually is a much larger natural food group when not viewed through the perspective of the Japanese constitution. This mindset still permeates the philosophy of macrobiotics and was never originally associated with the larger picture of Classical medicine which, even though it originated in China, is a universal principle and can be applied anywhere. Understanding of this relative to the environment and the nature of a person’s constitution and ancestry is very much the key.

Diagnostically one may believe that you get pimples on your nose because you’re eating too much dairy, however this is not always the case because everyone’s constitutions are different. People are affected by various foods in different ways so it isn’t a one-for all approach. This is what makes even the diagnostics of macrobiotics limited to their own parameters.

Not all constitutions will have the same dietary requirements because they have very different bodies and natures, even lifespans. While this is understood to a certain extent in the macrobiotic diet it is still within the format of a Japanese diet. It’s like going to a Chinese or Japanese food store trying to find the food of your ancestry within the narrowness of this food shop when you’re from Turkey. The result is that one has to mould to the rigidity of the diet rather than there being a fluidity of the understanding of yinyang outside of Ohsawa’s ideas, which indeed does for some people include staple foods like bread and even meat, interestingly eaten by Hippocrates himself! As always it’s about what is appropriate, but what is appropriate needs to be without boundaries, it is unlimited, the range of food on offer is totally open and is about seeing the person in the context of this spectrum.

Then there is the illusion that has been bred around the macrobiotic philosophy that what they do is some how different to Chinese medicine (which is often wrongly assumed to be all about TCM) and that somehow macrobiotics has the right road. This is simply the expression of “telling your grandmother how to suck eggs”, the point being that one doesn't need to tell one's grandmother the philosophy of “how to do it”. However, unfortunately this is Ohsawa's legacy, in his eagerness to express the nature of the yinyang philosophy to the West he didn't bother to actually consider the nature of the Western people he was engaging with, in a sense he wanted to convert people to the Japanese approach.

Modern macrobiotics feel they are free of the rigidity of the diet that Ohsawa and even Kushi presented in its structure and ideology, and while this is true there is still the basic premise of yinyang being confused in the process of explanation. The process of separating themselves from the larger body of Classical medicine still keeps them as a sect and something that is blocked off from the large picture of Classical medicine overall.

This is not an argument about the nature of theory, in fact it's much deeper than that, having to do with instinctive-intuitive sensing naturally, so simply the experience of heat and cold and therefore the innate understanding of the origin of the philosophy of yinyang as a cerebral idea. One knows when the basis of a philosophical ideal does not match the true nature of the senses, when these senses are truly open to the possibility of the master's words being “his view” rather than absolute. There is something awry with the ideology here and this is why macrobiotics, while having great potential as a way of looking at food and relating to the nature of cooking and foods in a different way, fails to see its own limitation, it also fails to see its own audience. It purports to be a “cure-all”, so takes the very modern Western approach of a blanket covering of “this way or the high way” type ideally which again confirms its own rigidity.

However, macrobiotics does bring back the handmade quality of cooking, and cooking from the older generation of Japanese that has now almost died out altogether in Japan. Much of the macrobiotic cooking style allows us insight into careful and energetic attention to the process of food preparation and as such is very useful, especially to those of us who have no understanding of cooking or the energetic quality of what we do. This makes macrobiotics a very useful understanding and also shows us the nature of how the Japanese constitution cooks and prepares food. The way that it works for them can offer an insight into how the principle can be applied to this specific type of constitution and from here we can see how the Western constitution might adapt this principle. But this is not, as Michio Kushi would have us believe, an evolution to “homo-spiritus”, that is all dualistic ideology, a creation of a mentality about “getting better” and ancient medicine had no such ideology. What is, is “already enough”, so enough already!

Luckily I had teachers who discerned the true nature of what macrobiotics meant from the Hippocratic expression, rather than the Ohsawa-based pattern. One man who to this day writes with brilliant understanding and clarifies the nature of macrobiotics is Steve Gagné, who trained in macrobiotics in the 70s in and since then has studied diet and cultures all over the world in order to bring back the true essence of Classical



medicine to the nature of instinctive food experimentation and an understanding of how diet might be looked at from within. Please see his work here:-

<http://www.stevegagne.com/>

The rigidity of any philosophy is not only found in its fruits but in its roots, and this is why one must take all of macrobiotics and its ideologies with a very large pinch of very coarse and unrefined sea salt.

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