

Fronts and Backs

by Bill Herbst

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Macrobiotics is a Japanese philosophy and discipline that grew out of the Taoist tradition of Yin and Yang. Based on balance and harmony as primary keys to health and consciousness, Macrobiotics gained considerable traction, as well as notoriety, in the American youth subculture of the 1960s, largely through the teachings of its two most notable 20th-century proponents, George Oshawa and Michio Kushi. Most people who know only a little about Macrobiotics think of it as a diet, a regimen of eating based on natural, whole foods — with grains, beans, and vegetables at the heart of the diet — and with special emphasis on consuming “living” foods grown locally and eaten only in season.

My personal connection to Macrobiotics was always tangential. I wasn't a devotee and never adopted its relatively strict vegetarian diet. What interested me most were the philosophy and principles behind the discipline, one of which stood out for me as a revelation when I initially came across it and has remained a guiding truism in my observations of myself and others over the 40 years since then.

Here is the principle as I first heard it: *[“That which has a front also has a back. The bigger the front, the bigger the back.”](#)*

What this means, to the best of my understanding, is that life has a center of simplicity, grace, and poised awareness. When one is in the center, life is balanced and naturally in harmony with itself. We are light as a feather and less subject to the laws of gravity or the action-reaction blowback of karma. In more scientific terms, karma is the equivalent to Newton's Third Law of Motion in physics: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

All that sounds great in theory, but, as we know, human beings display a marked tendency toward complexity, thoughtlessness, and disproportionate excess (if a little is good, then a lot must be better...). As animals, we are driven by desires, fears, willfulness, and ego attachments. Inevitably, from time to time, we lose our centeredness and veer off toward extremes. We descend into drama and melodrama. For some people, this veering off away from centeredness is a nearly permanent condition.

As we pull away from the center, leaving behind simplicity, grace, and stillness, an artificial “front” is created. We could think of that as operating from ego rather than essence. Since balance must be maintained (that's a natural law, not an instruction), a “back” comes into being to balance out the front. The back will

necessarily be the opposite of whatever the front appears to be. Many paired qualities can exist as fronts and backs: optimism and pessimism, certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt. If our front is a façade of intentional but false confidence, then our back will be insecurity.

This is not to suggest that every quality of the psyche is always accompanied by its opposite. True and centered confidence stands on its own. When confidence is a pose or front, however, a back side of insecurity is created. That's the thing about fronts — they are inherently false, unbalanced, and out of harmony. They *require* their opposite. That's why the aphorism "*fake it 'til you make it*" is such lousy advice. Faking it is essentially putting on a false front, which in turn creates a back. We may think we can maintain control and keep our masks, and in the short term we may, but in the long run that's a bad bet.

As the front gets bigger, heavier, or more pronounced, so will the back. Our will and awareness are invested in our front, which will be obvious to ourselves and others. The back, however, will tend to be hidden or obscured. Sometimes we know what we're hiding, but other times we're so focused on our front that we are unaware of the back.

At some point, the front and back will flip, with the back taking over forcefully for at least a short time before yielding again to the front. The person who "wouldn't hurt a fly" suddenly becomes enraged or violent. Friends who profess to love us turn hateful. Whatever we assumed to be correct is revealed to be, if not false, at least partially untrue. Whatever pattern of expression we've come to expect is suddenly turned on its head.

We have all experienced this in our own behavior, in our interactions with others, and in the collective assumptions of society.

When we ourselves do the flipping, we may or may not realize that something strange has happened. That depends on the extent of our mindful self-awareness and how much we're paying attention. Lord knows, we all do a certain amount of acting out on auto-pilot, driven by the powerful emotional shifts of our limbic brains. Some people seem to do little else. Even when we know that we've flipped, stopping the eruptions of feelings or behaviors can be very difficult. And then later we apologize (or not).

When we're on the receiving end of someone else's flip, our reaction could be baffled consternation or immediate recognition. We may wonder, "*What the hell?*" or instead might think, "*Ah, there it is! The lurking back side is revealed.*"

The point here is that such unexpected flipping may appear to be contradiction, but it's really not. Both sides of any coin can and often do exist within a person, a relationship, a family, a nation, or even an entire civilization. Rather than being contradictory, such fronts and backs are actually complementary.

Things are not always what they seem.