
Fatal Flaws in Macrobiotics

Carl Ferré

Several weeks ago I received a call from someone asking why several macrobiotic teachers have died from degenerative diseases. During our conversation he mentioned that he had charted these with the ages and the official reasons, and he noted that the average age of death was less than the national average. I was very happy to speak with him because I have been working on writing this article for some time now. The number of people asking these kinds of questions has increased over the past couple of years and I have read some pretty troubling ideas floating about in cyberspace filled with conjectures and misinformation. It seems to me that someone must at least start the dialogue and provide some perspective. Here are my thoughts for your consideration and response.

First, I must say that in my experience I have never met anyone who didn't benefit in some way from their macrobiotic practice – even those who chose to quit macrobiotics after various lengths of practice. The amount of the benefit varies, but benefit they all have. Over the years I have seen and have heard of many miracles. I am convinced this is one of the main reasons why people continue to seek



CARL FERRE

macrobiotic information.

Second, I know there are macrobiotic counselors who boast a great success rate. And, there may even be those who can say they have never had a failure. However, I have seen people for whom macrobiotics didn't work completely. Why? Perhaps they didn't give it enough time. Perhaps they didn't choose the right foods for their condition. Perhaps they ate too much, forgetting that quantity

affects quality. Perhaps they were too inactive, forgetting that movement, activity, or exercise is always important.

In other words, when macrobiotics doesn't work for someone, it is easier to blame his or her practice and understanding of macrobiotics than to question macrobiotics itself. When macrobiotic teachers develop and later die from a degenerative disease however, it is not so easy to blame the teacher's practice or understanding. Certainly, the teachers know best and would not allow themselves such a fate. One can see why people are questioning macrobiotics and why some people feel there are fatal flaws.

While I do not intend to analyze each specific case completely, comments will be inserted where applicable throughout this article. In my opinion, the "fatal flaws" that are presented here originate from an incomplete or incorrect understanding of macrobiotics. These misunderstandings will be discussed further as my series on "The Real Macrobiotic Diet" continues in the next issue of *Macrobiotics Today*.

How Important Is Food?

For most people, macrobiotic healing has come to mean, and can be characterized basically as, eating the right quantity of the right foods prepared and consumed in the proper manner for one's individual condition, needs, and purpose. This is all one needs to do to be healthy and happy. From this viewpoint, health is 100 percent determined by the foods one consumes.

Many years ago I asked Herman Aihara how much of a factor he felt food was in determining one's health.

He thought for a second and said, "5 percent."

"That's amazing," I responded quickly, "that's exactly what I was thinking!"

He started to walk away and suddenly turned around and said with a sly grin, "But it's the most important 5 percent."

Which is correct? The only way I can accept the 100-percent-food theory is if the largest possible definition of food is used, namely, "anything that nourishes or stimulates." This would include all thoughts, all feelings, all sensory experiences, as well as what one eats and drinks. Since this is not the common meaning of food, I would prefer to use the most-important-5-percent theory.

If there is a "fatal flaw" in macrobiotics, it would be the thinking that food is all that is needed to maintain health. This can lead to one becoming overly compulsive and worried about food. "Oh, I forgot and ate a tomato! What is going to happen to me?" "Oh, I only chewed that mouthful twenty times instead of fifty." You get the idea. It also can lead to a failure to look at all of the factors involved in health and a failure to seek other therapies that could be helpful, if not life saving. Unless your view of macrobiotics includes all of life, then there is more to life, and health, than macrobiotics.

In my opinion, this "fatal flaw" has occurred because an incomplete version of macrobiotics has been allowed to masquerade as the real macrobiotics for too long. People need to see the full scope of macrobiotics at the very beginning of their inquiry into macrobiotics even though they may choose to use only a part of it at first. I see very little new writing about macrobiotics that is not about "the" macrobiotic diet. Let's change this and begin writing and talking about macrobiotics as a way to Happiness, Peace, Freedom, Oneness, Infinity, or God.

Returning to our primary ques-



HERMAN AIHARA 1920-1998

tion, I have to say that I do not know exactly what anyone else is eating all the time. Sure, I have eaten with Herman Aihara, Michio Kushi, and many other macrobiotic teachers over the years. Unless you are with them all the time, how do you know what someone else is eating when they are not with you? Imagine our surprise when Herman admitted during one French Meadows camp that he had been going to a donut shop and having donuts and coffee every day for four years.

Didn't Herman know this would

be detrimental to his health? Why would he do such a thing? Was Herman practicing macrobiotics at this time and, if not, why not? Was having donuts and coffee the only reason Herman developed heart problems and died? If you learn only two things from this article, understand that any inquiry into one's death leads to more questions than answers and that no matter how much you know, there is always more to it. Still, I believe the exercise can be of value in helping to explain macrobiotics further. Here is a look at some of the many factors in health, most of which involve "food" in the larger sense.

SPIRIT

I believe without question that Herman knew that having donuts and coffee was detrimental to his physical health. And, the fact that it did have a negative affect shows that macrobiotic theory was correct in his case. If you violate the Order of the Universe you will pay the price no matter who you are. Why did Herman do it? Again, we probably cannot know all of the reasons. What he said at camp was that he did it to atone for not eating the mochi with sugar his mother made for him when he departed Japan for America.

Herman believed his mother to be stuck spiritually and his action was out of love for her. Herman often lectured about giving up what one likes in order to grow spiritually. In this case, Herman gave up what he liked most – his physical life. Ohsawa maintained it takes from thirty to fifty years (ten to twenty years if very diligent) to attain a total understanding of the source of all spiritual power. If anyone that I know had reached such an understanding, it was Herman.

A year before he died, Herman fell in the Feather River while fishing and nearly drowned. Cornelia believes this weakened his heart. I don't disagree. In recalling the experience Herman spoke about being in the

river and being carried downstream. The more he struggled, the worse his situation became. Suddenly, he saw Ohsawa's face and it was beautiful. He stopped struggling and let go, accepting whatever fate had in store for him. At that point, someone pulled him from the river and he was saved. To me, the experience had a profound affect on him.

The role of spirit in health needs to be explored more. In Herman's case, he knew who he was, where he came from, and where he was going. Personally, I feel he was ready to go and seeing Ohsawa's face confirmed it. I do not blame him in any way. Herman's having donuts and coffee was an expression of his freedom and nourished his spirit. Who are we to question his judgment or choice?

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Another reason people in general and macrobiotic teachers in particular eat foods that are not considered to be macrobiotic is for social support. Perhaps Herman was going to the donut shop for social nourishment. There, he could talk with his buddies about fishing. He didn't have to explain yin and yang over and over, or even talk about macrobiotics at all. He could just be Herman, another one of the guys.

I was with Herman and Dr. Anthony Sattilaro a short time before Dr. Sattilaro passed away. Dr. Sattilaro explained that he had chosen not to practice macrobiotics because whenever he did he was ostracized by his colleagues. His association with them was more important to him than eating macrobiotically and possibly living longer. This is another example of the need for social nourishment and an expression of freedom.

Every macrobiotic person eventually has to make similar choices. I recall Herman saying that it is better to keep a friend than to keep a diet. The optimum would be to do both, but this is not always possible. How you react to such situations may lead to greater

stress and ultimately reduced energy. The worry over eating a certain food can be more detrimental than just eating the food.

WATER EVERYWHERE

"Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink." Another "fatal flaw" concerns the consumption of water. I believe Ohsawa intended for people to drink the necessary amount of water for maintaining health. However, when he came to this country he saw many people drinking way too much, leading to weakened kidneys. Of course, what they were drinking



GEORGE OHSAWA 1893-1966

was mostly coffee, soft drinks, and beer. So, his advice was to drink as little beverages as possible. He never intended for people to quit drinking water all together.

In the beginning of my macrobiotic practice I quit drinking water for several years. I'm still recovering from the damage to my system. Drinking too little water is as dangerous, if not more, as drinking too much. After a while of not drinking, my thirst mechanism quit working and I simply was not thirsty. After a few years of drinking at least a half-gallon of water per day for corrective purposes, my thirst

mechanism returned and now I can rely on drinking water when thirsty.

Herman used to tell me that he could stop any sickness he felt coming on by simply quitting drinking all fluids, including water. During the summer before Herman died, Bob Ruggles, myself, and others tried to get Herman to drink more water as we thought he was in danger of becoming dehydrated. To my knowledge, Herman did not change his minimum water intake routine.

ADAPTABILITY

If there is one word that defines health it would be adaptability – the ability to adapt or change. To me, the most important thing to do when one is sick is to change, even if one has been practicing macrobiotics for years. Macrobiotics is a philosophy of change. If you get to the point where you can't adapt or change, you are not really practicing macrobiotics. Although I don't think Herman fit in this category, I have seen macrobiotic followers who are pretty entrenched and lacking in flexibility mentally.

One of Herman's most important lessons was his lecture on holding on versus letting go. Here is a quote from his book *Kaleidoscope* (pages 298-299).

"But actually, in life, happiness comes when you give things up. Happiness doesn't come when you hold on.

"For instance, when you start macrobiotics, you are very happy because you gave up meat or cheese. Then, when you like brown rice and miso soup, you have to give them up. Many people are unhappy because they're stuck to brown rice and miso. When you cure sickness using brown rice, it's not only the brown rice that cures you but also what you gave up. So the next time you get sick, it's almost incurable because then you only have brown rice, miso and soy sauce to give up!

"So please be careful to always de-

velop the bigger Self. The macrobiotic tendency is the opposite. Don't exchange brown rice for happiness."

UP IN SMOKE

When I arrived at the Foundation Cornelia Aihara and I were the only non-smokers – everyone else smoked. Once while driving Herman to San Francisco from Oroville, Herman pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"You know, Herman, you should quit smoking." I blurted out.

"You're right," he exclaimed, putting the cigarette back in the pack and tossing it out the window.

"Herman, you shouldn't litter the highway!" I screamed. "We could be fined."

"Okay, turn around – maybe I need cigarette," he said calmly.

I weighed the alternatives and decided to keep driving. Later, I learned that he was planning to quit as part of his letting go theory and because he wanted to discourage his daughter from starting.

I was happy to see Roy Collins' article on smoking in the March/April 2002 issue of *Macrobiotics Today*. Herman smoked for twenty-five years. As a health factor, this is one that no doubt affects everyone, either first hand or as second hand smoke. On several occasions Herman told me that Ohsawa would have changed his stance on smoking given the overwhelming evidence that has come out since Ohsawa's death in 1966. I believe him and encourage everyone, macrobiotic teachers included, to quit smoking immediately.

I was in Europe in 1991 when the news came out that Aveline Kushi had developed cancer. In talking with people, I was surprised that no one considered second hand smoke to be a factor. Again, this would be only one factor of many. Another factor that comes to mind in Aveline's case is the effect of years of tireless work in helping others with their health. Many macrobiotic teachers spend

much more time helping others than paying attention to their own health.

LA SMOG

This brings us to a related topic, the quality of the air we breathe. Recently I read a startling admission from the National Park Service that, "the air quality in Great Smoky Mountains National Park has diminished to the point where on some days it can be dangerous for humans to breathe." Imagine the quality of the air in Los Angeles and other large cities. Eight of the ten cities with the worst air quality are in California by the way.



CECILE LEVIN 1937-1999

Ohsawa lived in a time when the air was cleaner. Now, it is more of a factor in one's health, especially in large cities, near industrial plants, and in agricultural areas where all kinds of chemicals are sprayed on plants. You can avoid buying such crops by buying organic foods, but if you live near sprayed fields you can't avoid the affects of the sprays completely. In fact, I am inside next to indoor plants with the air purifier running instead of doing work outside because of the poor air quality at this time of year.

While I don't know for sure what

any macrobiotic teacher was eating, or is eating now, if anyone was following macrobiotic principles strictly, it was Cecile Levin. Conversations with her students have confirmed this. Living in the middle of Los Angeles in all that polluted air was probably more detrimental to her health than any of us realized, especially during the last years of her life. While battling cancer and heart disease clean air and pure water are vitally important.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

The last two issues of *Macrobiotics Today* (March/April and May/June, 2002) contained an excellent series by Lynda Mathé on "The Health-Earth Connection." In the first article Lynda introduced earth energy issues that affect those who live and/or work over stress producing areas. The connection of certain areas to cancer was shown. How can we know whether or not any of the macrobiotic teachers who have died were subjected to such geopathic stresses unless we have their homes and work places tested?

In the second article, Lynda ". . . explores the electromagnetic rays created by human technology, and how to realistically deal with them." While she offers many excellent strategies for dealing with the effects of magnetic and electric fields, for our purpose here it is sufficient to realize such fields are rapidly increasing. One of the reasons we moved our offices from Oroville to Chico was the building of a transmitter pole near the location that was affecting our health.

The houses of today are filled with harmful products. Certainly the teachers would seek out those constructed with the most natural products, or would have changed the carpets and so on. However, how do we know? There is also the matter of natural clothing and cosmetics to consider.

AND THEN THERE'S STRESS

Actually, we could look at all of the factors of health as stresses to one's system. Eating inappropriate foods leads to toxins in the body that stress our healing ability. Environmental hazards add stresses to our lives that must be dealt with, leaving us less able to fight other battles in maintaining health, and so on. On the other hand, the love and support from family and friends helps provide energy to combat these stresses.

If one does not feel loved and supported however, this can add to one's stress. Add stress at work, over financial concerns, and during times of loss and one can become drained of the energy needed to heal. This can lead to a cycle similar to the one I wrote about in *Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics* (page 106). "Strong abnormal fear leads to depressed T-cells, which leads to a weakened immune system, which leads to greater sickness, which in turn leads to greater fear."

I bring up these concerns because none of us really knows how stress may be affecting anyone else, macrobiotic teachers included. Unless you are with someone 24 hours per day and thinking their thoughts and feeling their feelings, how can you know? Certainly we loved Herman. But, did he feel that love? Could it have been veiled or overwhelmed by other concerns that were draining his energy and masking his judging ability?

Other things that would need to be known are the amount of sunshine one is getting, the amount of movement, the amount and quality of sleep, and so on. According to Herman, Ohsawa was only sleeping two to three hours per night. Sleep deprivation was probably a factor in his passing when he did. Was it the total reason he died when he did? Of course not. There are no doubt many more factors that haven't been mentioned.

YANG IS GOOD

Getting back to the role of macrobiotics in all this. There is some talk about pressure cooking being detrimental to one's health and thus a "fatal flaw." This question was raised at one of the French Meadows Camps and the teachers there said they knew of no credible evidence to suggest that pressure cooking was harmful to health. Still, I would add that variety is key in all things and using various preparation styles would be important.

The idea, proposed by some, that



AVELINE KUSHI 1923-2001

any one factor could be the reason for any one person's death is just ridiculous – much less the idea that all macrobiotic teachers have died due to one "fatal flaw." Every such theory that I have seen is based on a bunch of assumptions. It makes more sense that many and all factors are involved.

However, pressure cooking as it contributes to an overly yang condition could be troublesome. Here, the "fatal flaw" is the misconception that yang is good and yin is bad. Both are needed for good health. When one begins a macrobiotic practice, especially if large quantities of sugar have been

consumed in one's past, more yang is perhaps needed. Later, especially if one overdoes the salt (more yang) and drinks very little (also yangizing), more good quality yin such as greens and/or salad is needed along with cutting down on the yang factors.

Several years ago, former *Macrobiotics Today* editor Bob Ligon caused quite a stir at the French Meadows camp by reporting that in his counseling experience he had seen many people who had developed deficiencies by following an overly restricted macrobiotic diet for too long a period of time. Mostly, these people were yin deficient. I believe Bob to be accurate in his assessment and this is one of the reasons for my insistence on the need to change the way macrobiotics is perceived and practiced.

ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

Once a lady came to the center who had spent her life selling cosmetics. She had developed cancer and was determined to heal. She was very positive and looked forward to the time when she could help others understand the dangers of the very products she had sold for so many years. She did very well with macrobiotics.

Another person in the same group came because his daughter had insisted. He had no confidence in macrobiotics and was basically negative about every suggestion made to him. He did not do well with macrobiotics. He was surprised to experience a reduction in pain during his stay but he couldn't believe that a change in what he was eating had anything to do with it.

In my opinion, if the food factor is 5 percent of health, then attitude is 50 percent or more. A positive attitude, and thus the absence of negative thoughts, is so important. I suspect that all macrobiotic teachers would have a positive outlook on the benefits of macrobiotic practice. However, if one's belief system is that practic-

ing macrobiotics means never getting sick and then one gets sick, negative thoughts or an abnormal fear that the body may not be able to cure itself could be a factor in limiting one's recovery ability.

Part of the reason that one's attitude is so important is that it determines whether or not one is open to trying new things – in other words, how open to change one is. This applies to those new to macrobiotics and to those who have been macrobiotic for years being open enough to honestly look at their condition and needs.

One of the reasons for writing this article is because so many have been asking for it. Basically, what they want to know is whether or not macrobiotics will work for them. Here, again, is an expression of fear that macrobiotics may not work. What you need to remember is that every one is different. Just because eating certain foods works for one person doesn't necessarily mean eating the same foods will work for another. Just because macrobiotic practice doesn't work for one person, doesn't mean that it will not work for another. Of course, we want to learn from the mistakes of others, but we need to remember always that what really matters ultimately is one's own experience.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Ohsawa was given up on by modern medicine at the age of 18. He lived until the age of 73. Is this a success or a failure? Some people see it as a failure because he died of heart problems at a relatively "young" age. However, modern medicine considers five years after such a diagnosis a success. Given Ohsawa's accomplishments and influence, I would have to call his life a resounding success.

As Ohsawa's case shows, one's life before macrobiotics has a profound effect and shouldn't be forgotten as yet another factor in one's overall health condition. Jacques deLangre

had a congenital heart problem, yet he lived a happy and productive life due to his macrobiotic practice. Still, because he died at a younger age than the national average, some people think macrobiotics failed him.

When I first began macrobiotics I honestly thought that through proper practice I would never be sick again, that all my dreams would come true, and that I would die a natural death at a time of my own choosing. Based on my reading and understanding at the time I felt that there simply was no disease that couldn't be cured by diligent macrobiotic practice. Still, I viewed my macrobiotic practice as an



JACQUES DELANGRE 1925-1993

experiment to see if these goals were indeed possible.

Over a quarter of a century later I continue with my experiment even though my practice and understanding have changed. Have I been sick during these years of macrobiotic practice? Yes, I have been physically sick many times. Have all my earlier dreams come true? No, because I wanted too much – health without sickness, beauty without ugliness, the good without the bad, peace without war, and so on. Do I still believe I can die a natural death at a time of my

own choosing? I seriously doubt it as the world becomes more and more polluted. On another level, it really doesn't seem that important to me anymore.

What has changed for me is that I am beginning to see a bigger picture and to comprehend my life's purpose. In my opinion the ability to gain greater clarity of life in general and one's place in it in particular is one of the main benefits of macrobiotic practice. I believe all the macrobiotic teachers who have died gained great insights into these matters. Fortunately, we have their writings to ponder, their lectures to remember, and their lives to celebrate and appreciate.

THE BIGGEST FLAW

There will always be those who will accept over-simplified explanations for why others get degenerative diseases and later die from them. And, I suppose there will always be those who try to use such explanations to further their way to health. The logic goes something like this: some macrobiotic teachers have developed degenerative diseases and have died as a result of them, thus macrobiotics, or "their" version of it, doesn't work; so, you should try my system, or my version of macrobiotics.

Further, critics will say that the deaths of macrobiotic teachers have not been fully explained and, therefore, they must be hiding something – the fact that their system doesn't work. In this article, I have attempted to show many of the factors one would need to know and consider in order to answer the question of why someone has developed a degenerative disease and later died as a result.

There are many more factors that haven't been mentioned more than in passing. One's family life, love life, and religious life all have a great influence on one's health. What goes on behind closed doors and how a person reacts to such situations are things we simply do not know. In my opinion, we have no business prying into such

matters or judging others in these areas. We only need to know that these factors have an effect on our health and need our attention as much as, if not more than, what foods we are consuming.

Many years ago I asked Herman, "What would we do if everyone suddenly became macrobiotic?"

"We would do something else," he replied without hesitation.

"You mean we would go against macrobiotics, the very thing we are learning and teaching!" I exclaimed in a somewhat puzzled way.

"Yes, there is always another side. Our job is to point out that side."

I was so confused that I just sat there trying to make sense of what he was trying to tell me. I thought macrobiotics was the goal – that macrobiotics was the answer. How could he say that we would do something else if everyone were to accept and practice macrobiotics?

To answer this question we have to look more deeply into macrobiotic principles, the subject of a future installment of "The Real Macrobiotic Diet" series. In the meantime, here are some homework questions. What would happen if everyone in the world practiced macrobiotics? Would all diseases cease to exist? Would everyone get along? Would there be peace on Earth? I wonder.

Carl Ferré, author of Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics, lectures regularly at the French Meadows camp.

Responses to this article may be sent to gomf@earthlink.net.



The following letters are from the September/October 2002 issue of Macrobiotics Today.

Letters

MORE FATAL FLAWS

Thank you so much for your "Fatal Flaws in Macrobiotics" article in the July/August Macrobiotics Today. It is such a clear explanation of the inter-related dynamics of achieving a satis-



LIMA OHSAWA 1899-1999

factory practice. But, . . .

In your first paragraph, you say that you will deal with the question about why so many teachers had an "average age of death. . . Less than the national average." The rest of your article is permeated with a (totally unnecessary) implicit focus on this question.

Many people confuse "average" and "normal." Averages reflect groups, not individuals. Individuals are usually normal, and rarely average. Think of height, for example. Whatever the average height of a group, some few

people might be just that tall, but the various heights of most of the people in the group are still normal.

Same with age at time of death. As you so aptly discuss in your article, there are many factors leading to dying before or after some specific average age of death. But it is totally inappropriate (an improper use of statistics), to simply look at the numbers and say someone "should" have attained the average age of his cohort.

And this underlying focus of your article wound up being a distraction, for me, to your discussion of macrobiotic principles as they apply to longevity.

—Eli Nadel

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Thank you Eli for your letter and viewpoints. Sorry for the distraction.

—editor

RENEWED ENTHUSIASM

Thank you, thank you, Carl!

"Fatal Flaws in Macrobiotics" (July/August 2002) is an article that is right on in every category. We all need reminding, sometimes, about the larger life of the macrobiotic philosophy. Getting caught up in the pragmatics of how to build health is easy to do, and it tends to draw our attention away from the larger question of why we want to build health in the first place.

As teachings of a philosophical nature are apt to do, macrobiotics sometimes becomes misunderstood and gets leveled to its lowest common denominator as it is passed on, told and retold. As it is spread around, it sometimes gets spread thin. It is refreshing to read thick, juicy macrobiotic truths such as the ones in your article. It left me with renewed enthusiasm for living the great life.

—Annalysa Lovos
via email