
I Love My Life!

An Interview with Sanae Suzuki

Julia Ferré

Good morning Sanae, Thank you for meeting with me. I know you have done many things in macrobiotics, that you studied at the Kushi Institute and counseled with Cecil Levin. How did you get introduced to macrobiotics?

I started macrobiotics in order to overcome cancer. But I saw Aveline Kushi's book at my yoga studio before then, when I was in college, in the early 1980s.

Aveline Kushi's book was in the yoga studio?

Yes, this is Santa Monica! One of the yoga teachers practiced a kind of macrobiotic raw food diet and had the book there. When I picked it up, I thought she was a Chinese woman because she looked Chinese to me with her long braided hair. Kushi is not a common name in Japan; neither is Aveline. But her name and the word macrobiotic stuck with me—many years before I got cancer.

When did you get cancer?

I was diagnosed in '93, but the symptoms started showing in '91. I was constantly tired and had a low fever. Right before then, I lost my father to cancer. I was busy trying to help



SANAE AND ERIC

my family in a difficult situation. My uncle tried to steal my father's company, and my mom was very emotionally disturbed. She got sick and passed also. It was very stressed.

Did that contribute to your cancer?

Yes definitely. I went to Japan 7 times in 1 year. I think the reason I got cancer was stress—it was too busy—I was still working and not eating good food, traveling too much, and also my first marriage was failing,

I am sorry to say this, it sounds like things are getting worse and worse. What kind of cancer?

Ovarian.

Did you have surgery? What did you do?

No surgery. I was diagnosed because I went to the doctor because I thought I had liver failure again. In '88, I had mononucleosis and liver failure. I used to drink a lot—my first husband was an alcoholic, but I found Al-Anon with their 12-step program and received a lot of support.

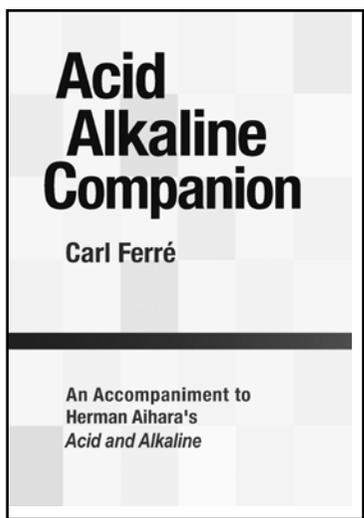
I learned so much there about alcoholism, behaviors, and what it means to be a child of an alcoholic. I learned about other addictions too, even overeating. Then I started volunteering at the Alcoholics Anonymous center in downtown Los Angeles answering the phones. I learned so much English.

Eventually, I became one of the speakers—even with my strong accent. I even went to the hospital and Chino prison to speak. People can change their life—look at me—I changed so much in this lifetime. I learned everything after AA and Al-Anon, I even helped create a Japanese speaking AA meeting in Los Angeles.

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It is still going on.

This was how I began speaking in front of people. The ideas of the 12-step program later helped me recover from cancer. "I am powerless over this cancer."

How did you use the 12-step ideas?

You accept that there is a higher power—or whatever you want to call it, universe or god—and let them take care of it. You write down everything you eat. The last part is a spiritual practice, which is what I am teaching now. The principles are similar to macrobiotics, and I can apply the ideas to a number of people who come to me, some are overeating, using drugs, drinking too much or taking prescription drugs.

Did you incorporate macrobiotics with the 12-step ideas?

When I found Aveline Kushi's book in the yoga studio, I heard about macrobiotics but never did it. Then I stopped drinking and my liver started discharging. Later, around 1993, I had a low fever and felt weak for a year and thought the liver condition came back. I went to the doctor and did blood tests. They told me it was my ovary, not my liver.

I went to the bigger hospital in downtown Los Angeles, and the doctor told me that it was a very aggressive ovarian cancer so I must go back to Japan because I had medical insurance there. This was all so shocking, and made me cry. On the way back home from the hospital I stopped by a Japanese natural market that was near the hospital. I knew the owner, Mr. Kikuchi. He always talked to me about macrobiotics. When I saw him he noticed that I had been crying and asked what was going on. I told him I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. He told me to see Cecil Levin right a way and do macrobiotics seriously.

I contacted her right away, but it was complicated to get started. I had to fill a questionnaire and pick up the form, because I couldn't fill it

out there. We had to figure out how much money we would need, and in the meantime, in Japan, my mom was still sick from my fathers' death.

Eric said he would help me, especially when he found out macrobiotics was about food. He is a chef, and had been to Japan and studied Japanese cuisine. So Eric started cooking for me. I began classes that went for a year.

And you got better.

I started in November, but by April I was very sick because I was discharging so much. It was hard to go to class; sometimes I had to lie down. We had to write everything too because Cecil never gave out recipes. But I learned, and over that year, I was feeling much better and even started gaining weight.

When did you go to the Kushi Institute?

In 94, I went to the Kushi summer conference. Cecil said that since I finished her 1-year course, I was eligible to teach cooking. So I got a job at Erewhon in 95 and started teaching cooking classes. I also attended and taught at the Health Classic (that Larry Cooper was doing) from 96 to 99. I met Mark Hannah and joined his cooking team there and later at the Kushi Institute. That is why I couldn't come to French Meadows camp. In 98 and 99, I did the levels at Kushi Institute.

But before that, other things happened. In 97, I went to Europe for 6 weeks and studied with all the macrobiotic teachers—for example, Madam Rivière and Renee Levy in France, Yoshimi Clim in Belgium, and Muramoto's wife in Italy. I went to seven different countries and each country has a little different style of macrobiotics. It was very inspiring. In Belgium, they were making futons and I helped. They asked if I knew how to make futons because I was from Japan. I said, no one in Japan knows how to make futons!

When I got back to the United States, I went to massage school. I already knew how to do shiatsu, but one of my clients advised me to go to massage school so I could charge. So I was massaging and cooking for people and they were feeling better.

I didn't know you did all of these things. All these experiences—alcoholism, cancer, macrobiotic education, and then your accident. When I read about your accident in your book, I cried, it was so sad. Are you ready to talk about your accident?

Yes, after I finished levels 1 to 3 at Kushi Institute, I came back to Santa Monica for awhile. I worked as a macrobiotic consultant at Erewhon Natural Foods Market and cooked and massaged privately. I started a macrobiotic community and opened Studio Mugen (Mugen means infinity in Japanese). In 2001, I decided to go to level 4 when I heard that Michio Kushi was teaching again.

That trip was funny. In other years, I drove to Montreal with Eric, and he came back by airplane. I have driven to Kushi Institute myself and never got lost, but on that trip, I got lost so bad. I couldn't find my way out of Montreal. I was driving 2 hours, but kept missing the exit into America. There was something going on, weird things kept happening, like I couldn't find my watch when I was leaving Kushi Institute. I could not decide when to leave Kushi Institute. Now, I realize these were signs that I should have known and paid attention to, but I forced myself to go on. When I got to Arizona, I got lost again. I arrived there at 3 in the morning rather than 7 at night. I was supposed to be in LA next day. That is when I had the accident.

Was the accident in Arizona?

Yes, middle of desert. Nobody else was there; rescue had to come by helicopter and I was air lifted.

What happened? Did someone hit you?

No. The car swerved and rolled over 3 and a half times. I was awake during the entire accident and remember everything. The emergency people came 4 hours after the accident. It took a long time for them to take me out from the car because they had to cut the door to pull me out.

What happened to your dogs?

I had 3 dogs and 1 cat with me. Two dogs died. The other stayed with me the whole time; the cat too. People who came to help said they didn't go anywhere, even though it was 104 degrees. I remember when they dragged me out, the sun was so hot, I was losing my consciousness. I woke up three days later.

Did you have an out of body experience?

Yes, In the hospital. My heart

stopped for 12 minutes.

What do you remember?

There was light. Some people might call it white light. To me it was shining light. I went there, but before I went, I saw every minute of my life since I was born. It goes so fast! It was kind of scary.

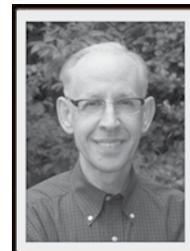
Did you go to the light? Were you alone?

At first, I didn't feel alone though, because it was so comfortable. The first thing I saw was my first dog, Sakura in America. I was so happy, and then I had to tell her that I had to go. Next, I saw my father, he had already passed at that time. He said, "It is good to see you," and he wanted to have tea, he is so Japanese. I told him I had to go; I didn't want to stay there. It was so good to see my dog and my dad but I think I was trying to come back to this life.

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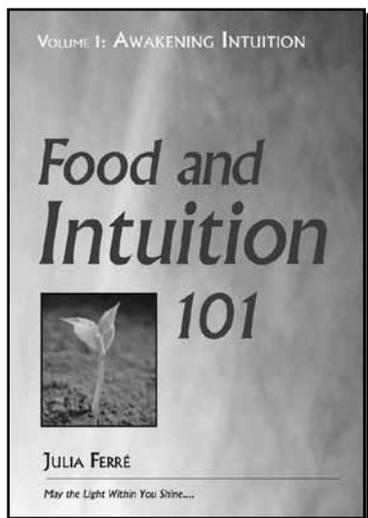
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In the meantime, the doctors were trying to recess me but the electric resuscitation didn't work. If I had a regular doctor, that would have been it, but Doctor Hamilton in the Trauma center did a procedure that he had heard of in school, but he didn't know anyone who had ever done it, where they put the needle into the heart sack that stopped, like the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

Wow! Needle directly in the heart!

Yes, he did that and it worked. I woke up. But, I heard that I was very nasty; I told Eric right away, move my f..ing bed to the window so I can see sunlight. I told him to get Rescue Remedy and do this and that.

I had a lot of broken bones. My lungs and heart got crushed, there were broken ribs, and I had lots of surgery. Both legs and ankle were totally crashed and broken so I have lots of scars and many plates and screws. Now, I am kind of like a bionic woman.

Doctor Hamilton who revived me understood and wasn't disturbed by what I was doing—the essential oils, Rescue Remedy, and refusing to eat meat. While the other doctors said I needed meat to strengthen my bones, Doctor Hamilton told me to keep doing what I am doing because I look better everyday and it is a miracle that I came back.

One surgeon wanted to amputate my left leg because it was so bad. He said I may never be able to walk, and that I would have to live with a wheelchair forever. They sent me to physical therapy to learn how to move my upper body, to move from bed to wheelchair. I lived total bedridden for 1 year and used a wheelchair full time for about 3 years. It was a very depressing hard time. There was so much pain all over my body, and I wanted to kill myself.

The really difficult thing was my relationship with Eric. When I was diagnosed with cancer, he had asked me to marry him; but I told him no be-

cause I didn't have the confidence to live. He is also 12 years younger than me, and I told him to find a younger and healthier woman who can have your baby. I really wanted his happiness, and thought it was selfish of me to keep him with me. He was hurt by that, but even so, he stayed with me. When I told him in Montreal right before the accident that I was going to study level 4 and be a counselor, he decided he was going to leave me.

And then you were lost! Lost without Eric!

During that trip, I realized that I truly loved him and that I was going to ask him to marry me. He said

“Doctor Hamilton in the Trauma center did a procedure...where they put the needle into the heart sack that stopped, like the movie Pulp Fiction.”

if I ever changed my mind, I would have to ask him next time! On the day before the accident, I talked with my friend and—thank god I shared with her—told her I was going to ask Eric to marry me and that I wanted to be with him the rest of my life.

On the way home, I stopped in this little town called, “Hope” to let the dogs and cat out, and I said, “I have hope, I am going to tell Eric.” The accident was 15 to 20 minutes later.

This is a phenomenal story.

After I came out from the coma in the hospital I told him that I loved him and wanted to marry him, but Eric thought I wanted to marry him because I needed him again, like when I had cancer. He didn't want to be my caretaker again.

Oh no.

I shared my feelings with my girlfriend the night before the accident and she told Eric that it wasn't like that, but he already started to move out. He even began dating. That was hard. I was bedridden, and I questioned why I even came back to life. This critical time lasted for about 6 months, but I decided no matter what I continued to love him. About 2 years later, he finally saw that truly I loved him. He proposed to me once again. Then I made a promise to myself to walk on my wedding.

I remember reading this in your book!

Yes, that is what I did. And so many people cried at our wedding for joy.

That's right. You have to write this. All the things you have done—the cancer, the 12-step program, food, the accident, the courage, the romance, the fun, the animals—you have so many things that can help people.

Yes, I really want to help people with the 12-step.

Your passion for living is so contagious. When I met you at camp, I could feel that your life energy is different than other people. I thought, oh you had a near death experience, and of course that is part of it, but it is bigger than that one experience of being in the light.

I feel so good now. After that, I had so much PTSD, and I had to overcome that and get over the fear, I couldn't ride in a car, I couldn't go outside of my house, I was so afraid.

Sure, of course. And here you are, fast forward to now, you have this restaurant, you have 6 dogs, you are raising therapy dogs, you have a home, rentals, classes, you are teaching quite a bit, written three books with Eric, writing recipes, making home products, each one

of these is a chapter, and we could spend hours talking, I know we could.

Exactly, we could talk more and share my life which you don't know all of my past, my childhood, at 5 years old, I was molested, but here I am happy.

My goodness, Sanae, you have had experiences that crumble an average person. One of these experiences is horrible enough, and you have had many experiences.

But I am still here, smiling. Yes, I love my life.

You love your life! And it is contagious. Being with you, I can feel your energy, and it makes me love life too. The rest of us are reaching for that and trying to understand that, and here you are. Thank you so much for sharing.

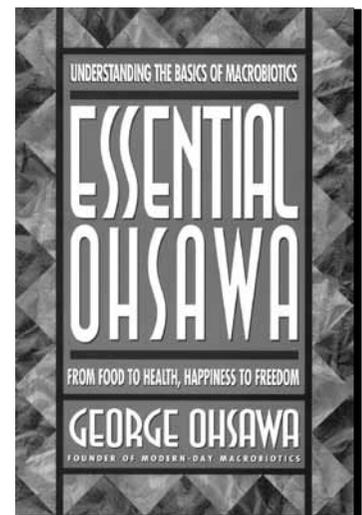
Sanae Suzuki is a Whole Health Macrobiotic Counselor for people and pets, co-owner of a fabulous organic vegan macrobiotics restaurant called Seed Kitchen in Venice, California, and author of two vegan macrobiotic cookbooks: Love Sanae and Love, Eric and Sanae. A survivor of ovarian cancer and a near-fatal car accident, Sanae overcame both of these extreme life challenges through a macrobiotic diet and lifestyle. After her recoveries, she has been dedicating her life to teaching cooking, nutrition macrobiotic counseling, Do-in exercise, meditation, and a sustainable lifestyle, in addition to her healing shiatsu work. Her desire is to help plant a seed of physical, intellectual, and spiritual happiness that will flourish within each person she meets. For more information, see: www.seedkitchen.com.



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