

**Learning  
from Salmon  
and other essays**

**Herman Aihra**

George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation  
Chico, California

**Other Books by Herman Aihara**

*Acid and Alkaline*

*Basic Macrobiotics*

*Kaleidoscope*

*Learning from Salmon*

*Macrobiotics: An Invitation to Health and Happiness*

*Milk, A Myth of Civilization*

*Natural Healing from Head to Toe*

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# Preface

In nature, all existence follows a pattern of order. Also in nature's plan there appears from time to time a human being designed to become a natural leader. Often a person must pass through many kinds of life experiences before this capacity becomes obvious; a certain crystallization finally takes place, and from that point there is no question that the ability of clear vision is a permanent possession for the one so designed. Such a one is Herman Aihara.

Herman was born Nobuo Nishiyama in Kyushu, southern Japan, in September of 1920. He was given his American first name by his teacher George Ohsawa, who suggested names for many of his students in order to smooth their acceptance in other countries. Ohsawa was the extraordinary man, synthesizer of philosophies, who introduced the term 'macrobiotic' to the Western world. In Africa, India, Japan, Europe and then the United States he spearheaded the natural foods movement by giving an old Oriental system of health known as *shokuyodo* ('right way of nourishment') the new name of 'macrobiotics' and attracting thousands of followers. When Ohsawa died in 1966, Herman's position as a macrobiotic leader was clarified. With growth and practice his particular skills became refined over the years, and the tumbles of life produced a rare gem.

Along with the many activities of a family man and president of the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation, Herman Aihara became a compelling writer. In late 1978 and early the next year I re-read many old issues of the *Macrobiotic Monthly* and I realized that some of his best work was in the form of editorials and piecemes written for the magazine. In all those issues, the articles by Herman

really stood out. They penetrated. But the richness of his insight had reached only a limited number of readers—subscribers to the *Macrobiotic* and their friends. There was a need to put this work into book form. We began to re-work many of the old articles and transcribe some taped material. Herman wrote some new pieces. With the same sense of joy and adventure conveyed in the articles, *Learning From Salmon* took shape.

In this collection of essays, short articles, poems, and lectures it is evident what direction Herman has developed in his teaching. The branches of his flexible mind have taken a special bent in the direction of psychological subjects, and this has been providential for macrobiotics. Techniques for physical health have been well represented in macrobiotic literature, but a shortcoming has been guidance for inner life. This twenty-year span of writing goes a long way toward answering that need. Characteristically, Herman addresses everyday concerns of the mind and spirit with unpretentious practicality and leaves the reader with fresh inspiration. Personal and marital problems, friendship, the struggle to accept and be accepted, the bridging of East and West—these have proven to respond under the warm accuracy of his awareness. Many things are here: pearls of counsel and reflection, philosophical discussion, humorous anecdotes of the macrobiotic movement, personal experiences. Science, religion, politics, health, and nature are explored with a respectful attitude and a creative curiosity.

Herman Aihara has successfully adapted the concept of ‘learning from nature’ to all facts of life. His is a special gift to observe, learn, and teach the real nature of any subject at hand. It is a great pleasure to present this collection.

– *Sandy Rothman*  
*April 1980*

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**Introduction: February, 1980**

## **Before Learning from Salmon**

Macrobiotics was started in Japan about 300 years ago by a scholar, Ekiken Kaibara. He lectured on how to live a long life. Later, his teachings were compiled into a book called *Yojokun* – ‘Advice on Longevity.’ This most famous advice was: eat less, sleep less, and desire less.

Then about 100 years ago an army doctor named Sagen Isikizuka studied Oriental medicine after learning that his knowledge of Western medicine couldn’t cure his kidney disease. He found the sodium/potassium ratio in foods and in our body to create a physical as well as mental balance, and recommended whole brown rice as the best balancing food. Sagen also reached the conclusion, after searching Western medicine for many years, that food is the highest medicine. He realized that all sickness and physical weakness is caused by wrong eating habits. In other words, he established a science of foods for health and happiness. This is called *shokuyo* in Japanese and was later called *macrobiotics* by his student, George Ohsawa. *Shoku* is all matter (or energy—ki) which creates and nourishes the perfect man. *Yo* is the deed or way to nourish ourselves, with the knowledge of *shoku*. *Shokuyo* is the right knowledge and deeds which create and nourish the healthy man.

Learning the grain and vegetable diet from Isikizuka, George Ohsawa observed the diet and cured his sickness which had been

abandoned by medical doctors. Since then he devoted his life to introducing this diet all over Japan. As he studied more of this diet, he realized the antagonistic complementarity of sodium and potassium in the diet. The plant and animal worlds are nothing but the manifestation of the yin yang principle, which is recognized in the 5000-year-old vast culture of China (the philosophy of Lao Tsu, the *I Ching*, *Nei Ching*, herbal medicine, moxa, acupuncture). Ohsawa replaced the terms yin and yang for sodium and potassium, using the concepts of modern physics and chemistry instead of the ancient metaphysical concept of yin yang which appeared in the *I Ching* and *Nei Ching*.

When I attended Ohsawa's lecture meetings for the first time around 1940 I was fascinated by his philosophy of yin and yang. I started reading his books and magazines and attended more lectures and seminars. At these seminars Ohsawa served meals consisting of rice, hiziki seaweed, carrot, burdock, and red beans cooked by his students. I didn't much like those meals and I couldn't eat such meals at my home. I had no interest in brown rice. But I was so much interested in the yin and yang philosophy. My classmates laughed at me when I showed my enthusiasm for this philosophy. Some friends even worried about my mentality, because yin and yang was an old and obsolete concept in Japan. My classmates, the future engineers of Sony, Toyota, Datsun, and Toshiba, were so busy digesting 20th century Western science and technology that they had no interest whatever in an old fashioned Oriental teaching. (Yin and yang was considered by most intellectuals in Japan as an old principle of Chinese superstition called Eki *fortunetelling*.)

In my first year of college I was chosen for the crew of a rowboat race representing my class. I was the heaviest among the crew, so I was positioned as number one—the man who controls the pitch of the rowing. We trained every day for a month at the river running through downtown Tokyo, where the old style of the city remained. It was summertime. It was so hot that I ate shaved ice with syrup (made with sugar, of course) after the training. The races finished and autumn came. When the cool breezes started, I had a tremendous



stomach cramp. I couldn't stand up. My parents called a doctor who gave me a drug which stopped the pain immediately. I did the same thing the following year: trained for rowing on the hot days, ate the shaved ice with sugar for a month, and then had stomach cramps again in autumn. A doctor stopped the pain by injecting some pain-killer.

At this time I met Ohsawa and read his popular book, *New Di-etetic Medicine* (Japanese version of *Zen Macrobiotics*). I realized the cause of my stomach cramp was eating too much shaved ice and sugar syrup. Both are very yin; ice is yin because it is cold, sugar because it is the opposite of salt. Sugar stops the appetite or inhibits the action of the stomach. In my case, ice and sugar weakened my stomach. When the yin season began, the cool breezes stimulated the stomach muscles to secrete the yang hormone called acetylcho-line. When muscles are weak (yin) and expanded (yin), as with the condition I had, contraction is difficult. In other words, yin muscles resist natural contraction, and stress and strain builds up. Finally, the contracting effect of the hormone overwhelms, and the muscle contracts. However, it does so in a very clumsy way. It cramps. This is a yin contraction, while the normal contraction is yang. Thinking that since the cause of the cramp was yin and salt is yang, I started taking salt for my stomach. Soon it was better. Then I thought I knew macrobiotics. I thought I knew the secret of macrobiotics—that is to say, the use of salt. What a silly mentality.

After these experiences came my graduation year. I spent many hours of my school days at the laboratory, experimenting for the graduation thesis. I often cooked meals by myself at the laboratory with much wild grasses, oil, and salt, thinking that was the macrobi-otic cooking. Such a diet damaged my stomach and intestines, stop-ping the assimilation of nutrition. I became thinner and thinner. My parents started to worry. Friends advised me to stop my diet or be-lief; I didn't listen because I thought I was doing the right thing—the macrobiotic diet. I was active in school sports even though I had lost much weight. Then came the daft examination., I failed. I was too weak and too skinny. My friends were surprised, since I was one of

the most athletic students, playing many school sports. However, I still didn't realize I was sick.

After graduate school I worked in my father's factory. My parents were so worried about my skinny condition that they sent me to my mother's native community, to a friend's country home, believing I was tubercular. When all young people were either fighting at the front or working in factories, I was traveling from one place to another without specific aim or responsibility. Having graduated from the engineering school of a reputable university, I should have been working in a very important industrial position for Japan, who was fighting with the world Allies. The onetime bright student was like a disabled, retarded man in such a most important time for the nation. My parents were very disappointed, and blamed macrobiotics as the cause of my sickness. Only I knew the real cause of my sickness. It was arrogance. I was arrogant! I thought I understood macrobiotics but my practice was unwise. Under my family circumstances, to recover from sickness it was best to give up my intention to be macrobiotic. It took about three years to completely recover after I gave up macrobiotics. (Now, I could probably cure such a condition in three months with the macrobiotic diet.) From this experience I learned that an unwise or fanatic application of macrobiotics could be dangerous. The study of life is a lifelong work. Since then I never thought I have learned macrobiotics enough. That experience made me humble. I try to always listen to others' opinions and then humbly establish my opinion.

When the war ended in 1945, I had recovered from a sickness of the stomach and intestines—probably ulcers. I worked in my father's factory. I was a college graduate, but I had failed in macrobiotics. I was eating at home, anything my mother served for me. She cooked fish twice a day, white rice, and used sugar in cooking. Foods were very scarce at that time but we could get anything we wanted through the black market.

I became extremely yang in behavior. I started to learn American social dancing at the newly opened dance halls. Social dance was a new fashion after American forces occupied Japan. When people

were starving to death just after the war, I was a playboy, chasing sexy girls at various dance halls.

My father worried about my behavior and hurried my marriage. I married because my parents were agreed, but I myself was not much attracted to her. My wife committed suicide before our marriage passed one year. It was the end of autumn. She climbed a mountain alone, drank poison, and died without giving anyone her reasons. No one but I understood how she could do such a thing. The reason was her difficulty in coping with my adoptive mother and complicated family structure (we were living with my very yang stepmother and my brother-in-law and his only daughter). Since my mother controlled domestic matters and she relied on my brother-in-law rather than me because he was my boss and a good businessman, my wife was never relaxed in our home. She couldn't see independence in my future. Hers was very much a Japanese expression of love. She warned and advised me by giving up her life.

I was shocked and depressed for a long time. I lost my mind for a month. How pitiful a man I was. My wife could not rely on me. I should have been the sort of man who could carry the burden of a wife and family, at the very least. I didn't know what to do.

At that point I decided to make myself an independent man and I chose Mr. George Ohsawa as my life's teacher. I went to his macrobiotic school and asked him to let me stay. He said I could stay in his school. It was unique, not only in his teaching but also as far as the school administration was concerned. There was neither requirement for admission nor tuition. Anybody could stay and study. Students had to eat meals served twice daily, cooked by a girl who is now one of the best macrobiotic cooking teachers in Japan. This was not exactly a requirement; there was no need for such a requirement, because one who didn't eat meals there would not want to stay there anyway.

In fact, there was one sort of requirement. Students had to answer Mr. Ohsawa's questions by themselves, not by way of a textbook or dictionary. The curriculum was in two parts—one was a mental education (yin) and the other was physical (yang). The school

day began with sweeping, washing, and putting things in order. This was not merely an exercise in yangization but it taught us orderliness. Ohsawa emphasized this work because orderliness is one of the most important conditions for health. Next came a lecture by Mr. Ohsawa—the main part of the curriculum. The subjects covered all fields: foreign and domestic news, science, medicine, economics, politics, modern living, business, industry, astronomy, cosmology, religion, sociology, and more. In the afternoons, students worked in the school or outside of it. Even this came within the scope of his teaching since they had to submit a report and get his criticism or remark. This was followed at night by solitary study or discussion in a group. Sleeping was another part of the curriculum: a short, fast, deep sleep was a sign of the good health which students wanted to acquire.

All the lectures were given to exercise our ability to think—the path to higher judgment. It did not matter which subject Mr. Ohsawa chose—from physics to metaphysics, from matter to non-matter, from the biography of Gandhi to that of Benjamin Franklin. His lesson was always the understanding of the order of the universe, justice, freedom, and eternal love. During my one month stay, he never taught us symptomatic Western medicine, Oriental medicine, or treatments for sickness such as ginger compresses, albi plasters, etc. Physical diagnoses were left completely to our self-study. His only teaching was for us to understand and acquire infinite freedom, absolute justice, and eternal love.

Finally, the student himself decided whether or not he was graduated from Ohsawa's teaching. Most students bypassed graduation and just left the school. However, they were welcomed to return at any time. What made a graduate? He who understood the principles of macrobiotics and achieved health and happiness in his life was the graduate. Freedom from all constraints or troubles such as sickness, poverty, hate, fear, etc., was the certificate of graduation. That was why graduation was not controlled as in the usual school. The students who graduated easily often met trouble or became unhappy, and realized they needed more study.

During my stay at Ohsawa's school, I was so depressed that my mind was out in space. I didn't do anything or help in the tasks such as cleaning rooms, cooking meals, shipping books and magazines, or writing and editing for Ohsawa's monthly magazine. I just ate, slept, and listened very seriously to Ohsawa's lectures. Although I was his laziest student, Ohsawa blamed nothing for my laziness because he knew I was serious about learning what he tried to teach. I was very serious. I was looking for how to live, and I found it in one month's time. I made a big discovery. I found myself. Christ said, "If you know yourselves you will be known, and you will know that you are the son of the Living Father. But if you do not know yourselves then you are in poverty and you are poverty." (The Gospel according to Thomas.) What I found in a month's time is who I am. I didn't learn meridians or compresses—I can't teach those techniques. I can teach one thing: who you are. To learn 'who I am' you don't need any books. All of a sudden, you are there.

At the same time I learned two more things: "Everyone is happy; if not, it is his own fault" (Epictetus) and that the food you eat is one of the most important factors for your health and happiness.

I returned home to the job in my father's factory. My character and behavior looked the same, but my understanding of life had completely changed. I became more and more an adventurer, and my desire to be independent became stronger. Finally, I decided to leave Japan forever to see other worlds and build my independence. Decision makes action. I abandoned my fortune and my parents and made the fees for the transportation from Japan to the United States by second class in a cargo boat, \$360 even at that time. I landed in San Francisco with great joy and curiosity in 1951 at the age of 32. My new life had started.

Since then I have experienced many difficulties and much sadness: immigration troubles, causing me to leave this country three times, twice to the Bahamas and once to Europe; the death of my parents (they gave me lots of love but I gave them only worry); the death of my babies, caused by my ignorance and arrogance; and finally my second wife's sickness. I not only overcame all these diffi-

culties but established a happy and wonderful life. This is due to my first tragedy and to the teaching of George Ohsawa.

In 1960 I started publishing the first *Macrobiotic News*, which consisted mostly of Ohsawa's articles and lecture notes. After his death, Lou Oles continued the magazine and books with me; after Lou's death, I continued the publications. This "book" is a compilation of my shorter writings over the last twenty years.

It is my sincere hope that my learning from George Ohsawa can be of some help to you and that you might enjoy the whole of your life instead of living in fear, resentment, desperation, and anger.

– *Herman Aihara*  
*February 1980*