Macrobiotic Approach

A Thousand Macrobiotic Diets

Carl Ferré



Photo by Nancy Adler

When I wrote Sandy Rothman, former editor of *Macrobiotics Today*: "In a room of 1,000 people, there could be 1,000 different macrobiotic diets," he responded that I should start with that and then ask: "Why? Because macrobiotics is not 'a diet.' Part of its teaching includes an approach to food and diet: a way to choose appropriate foods based on individual and environmental conditions. How did it become 'the macrobiotic diet'?"

The short answer can be found by looking at macrobiotic books. The term "macrobiotic diet" can be found in almost every book about macrobiotics related to food choices. The same applies to macrobiotic websites. It is now used without adequate explanation in lectures and in conversations among macrobiotic practitioners. It's no wonder that macrobiotics is now known almost exclusively as a specific "diet." This is the opposite of Ohsawa's intention.

George Ohsawa first used the term "macrobiotics" in 1947 to describe his philosophy: mainly the order of the universe, unifying principle of yin-yang, and stages of judgment. His idea was that each person uses the order of the universe and its seven laws along with the twelve theorems of the unifying principle (yin-yang) to determine the best foods and lifestyle decisions for him- or herself.

Ohsawa wrote very little about specific foods until he published *Zen Macrobiotics* in English in 1960. He writes: "There are ten ways of eating and drinking by which you can establish a healthy and happy life. The objective is to maintain a good balance of yin and yang in accordance with our cosmological, biological, and physiological philosophy."

After Ohsawa died in 1966, his students Herman and Cornellia Aihara and Michio and Aveline Kushi wrote extensively about macrobiotics and food choices. This resulted in three different variations on what became known as the "macrobiotic diet." Here is a quick summary of the similarities of the three major expressions of macrobiotics related to food choices.

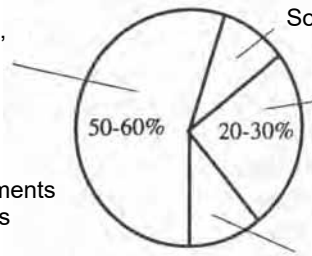
All three major systems use Ohsawa's idea that the principal food of humankind should be whole grains. All three systems list secondary foods as vegetables, beans, and sea vegetables, etc. All three systems list special dishes, luxury foods, or occasional foods. All three systems give percentages of the various food groups. All three systems list foods to avoid. And all three systems have special instructions for those dealing with any sickness, mostly further restrictions on food choices.

Ten Ways to Health and Happiness

diet no.	cereals	vegetable nitsuke	soup	animal	salads fruits	dessert	beverages
7	100%						see text
6	90%	10%					page 53
5	80%	20%					
4	70%	20%	10%				
3	60%	30%	10%				
2	50%	30%	10%	10%			
1	40%	30%	10%	20%			
-1	30%	30%	10%	20%	10%		
-2	20%	30%	10%	25%	10%	5%	
-3	10%	30%	10%	30%	15%	5%	

Source: *Zen Macrobiotics* by George Ohsawa

Macrobiotics, the Healthy Choice



Plus: occasional foods:
Fish and Seafood
Nuts and Seeds
Seasonings, Pickles, Condiments
Natural Snacks and Desserts
Natural Beverages

Source: *Standard Macrobiotic Diet* by Michio Kushi

Percentages from the Aihara Method

	Winter cold climate	Fall/Spring temperate climate	Summer hot climate
Grains	70-90%	50-70%	30-50%
Vegetables	10-30%	30-50%	50-70%
Beans	5-10%	7-12%	10-15%
Seaweeds	5-10%	7-12%	10-15%
Pressed salad	5-10%	7-12%	10-15%
Fish	10%	5%	2%

Source: *Macrobiotics: An Invitation to Health and Happiness: Appendix* by Herman Aihara

Over the years, the amount of specificity regarding food choices continued to increase until people started relying on the food lists rather than using macrobiotic principles to make food choices. The lists made it easier for people because they no longer had to learn the order of the universe or the unifying principle of yin-yang to practice macrobiotics. The inference was: Just choose food from the approved list and avoid those on the avoid list and all your problems will disappear. The quantity of people practicing macrobiotics increased, but the quality of understanding decreased. The true essence of macrobiotics related to food choices was lost.

The prescriptive "macrobiotic diet" appeared to be good for the short term, but it was disastrous in the long run. Today, the foundational principles are rarely taught and have been pushed aside in favor of following the food lists and hoping for the best. Ohsawa's idea of people thinking for themselves is all but forgotten.

What Could Have Been

Ohsawa, Aihara, and Kushi all caution people about making macrobiotics a rigid set of rules or dogma. Consider these examples.

In *Macrobiotics: An Invitation to Health and Happiness*, Herman Aihara writes: "Macrobiotics…is an art. Knowing that no absolute rules exist, or can be followed forever, we start with principles that are as adaptable to the constantly changing world we inhabit as possible. Only you are the artist who draws the painting of your life. Macrobiotics is neither rigidity nor imitation."

In the 1995 edition of *Standard Macrobiotic Diet*, Michio Kushi wrote: "Standard macrobiotic dietary practice is not a set, rigid diet but rather a commonsense, flexible pattern of eating that differs according to climate, environment, condition of heath, sex, age, activity level, and personal need. The goal of macrobiotics is freedom—the ability to create and realize whatever we want in this life as part of our endless spiritual journey in the infinite universe."

Later, he writes: "The guidelines presented in this book are general suggestions. These suggestions may require modification depending on your special condition and

personal needs. Of course, any serious condition should be closely monitored by the appropriate medical, nutritional, and health professionals."

One macrobiotic book that doesn't include "the macrobiotic diet" is *Macrobiotic Dietary Suggestions* by William Tims and Robert Allanson published in 1984. In this book, the authors list seven important points to remember that describe a macrobiotic approach to diet very well.

Important Points to Remember

1. Everyone is unique and always changing. Be flexible, changing your food and cooking techniques.
2. Different foods have different qualities and affect us in different ways. The macrobiotic way of eating is choosing our food for how we want to be and what we want to do.
3. There is a time and a place for everything, including all kinds of foods. Any food can be appropriate depending on the situation. There are no good foods nor bad foods. A key to health and happiness is choosing the right food for the right situation.
4. Close contact with nature promotes health and well-being. Eating locally and regionally grown food in season brings us closer to the natural environment around us.
5. Experiment and experience for yourself to find which foods work for you and which foods don't. No one can know you as well as you can know yourself.
6. Follow your own feelings, instincts, and intuition. You hold the key to your happiness.
7. Food is only one source of nourishment. We are changed by everything we come into contact with.

Imagine what macrobiotics might be today if the statements by Ohsawa, Aihara, and Kushi about macrobiotics not being a rigid diet or set of rules had been fully understood. Or if the important points in *Macrobiotic Dietary Suggestions* had been adopted in the 1980s.

Correcting "the Macrobiotic Diet"

To conclude that there is a "macrobiotic diet" or one way macrobiotics should be practiced by all people all the time is inaccurate and needs correcting whenever and wherever it is found. How one practices macrobiotics needs to change over time as one's condition changes, as one's environment such as air and water quality changes, and as one's purpose changes.

The first step toward correcting the wrong direction that resulted in the misconception that there is something called "the macrobiotic diet" is to quit using the term in favor of the "macrobiotic approach to diet," "macrobiotic dietary approach," "macrobiotic way of eating," or another similar phrase.

Of course, it would be next to impossible to change all usages of "macrobiotic diet"

in existing books and on websites. However, a simple statement could be made that there is no "macrobiotic diet" and that all references to it really mean "macrobiotic approach to diet." The basics of the macrobiotic approach could then be made. The following ideas are summarized from the three major expressions of macrobiotics.

Basics of the Macrobiotic Approach to Diet

Whole Foods, Plant-Based Diet

The macrobiotic approach to diet emphasizes whole grains and fresh vegetables. Although all foods may be used for a specific condition or purpose, meat, sugar, dairy foods, and processed foods are minimized, used with caution, or avoided. Whole, organic, unprocessed foods are preferred over conventional products. The goal is to provide the body with essential nutrients so that it can function efficiently without loading it with toxins or excesses that the body must work to eliminate or store. And because the body is always adjusting to changes in the environment and in its own aging process, its needs will always change as well. The idea is to balance the effects of foods eaten with other influences on the body, largely through diet, and to adjust to changes in a controlled and peaceful manner. This requires some understanding of macrobiotic philosophy and principles.

Quality

The quality of food is extremely important. No matter what the food, the more natural—the less processed or refined—the better. Limit or avoid foods that have been colored; preserved; sprayed with synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides; irradiated; or treated in any way with chemicals. Foods grown with genetically engineered seeds should also be avoided if possible. Organically grown or produced foods are preferable; organic foods taste great, reduce health risks, and are best for the health of the soil and water. Select locally grown and seasonal foods as often as possible, especially when buying fresh vegetables. Locally grown foods are most adapted to the local environment and eating them helps the body to adapt to the local environment as well.

Control

A basic tenet of macrobiotic thinking is that all things—our bodies, foods, and everything else—are composed of yin and yang energies. Yin energy is outward moving; yang energy is inward. Everything has both yin and yang energies, but with either yin or yang in excess. Most of the foods chosen by many Americans have very strong yin or yang characteristics and tend to be acid-forming. In contrast, macrobiotic practice emphasizes the two food groups—whole grains and fresh vegetables—that have the least pronounced yin and yang qualities, making it easier to achieve a more balanced condition within the natural order of life.

Living within the natural order means eating only what is necessary for one's condition and desires and learning to adjust in a peaceful way to life's changes. Learning

the effects of different foods allows one to consciously counteract other influences and maintain a dynamically balanced state. The resulting freedom from fear and new sense of control are two of the most important benefits of macrobiotic practice.

Healing

Macrobiotic practice encourages the body's natural ability to heal itself. If the body is not burdened by toxins and excesses, it can function better and thus help provide relief for any illness that does occur. Anybody who begins a macrobiotic dietary approach goes through a period of healing, beginning with the elimination of accumulated toxins and excesses. People who are already following a macrobiotic way of eating may also have periodic health problems that requires adjusting their diets and lifestyles or receiving help from a qualified health professional.

Of course, there are factors other than diet that affect health; true macrobiotic practice emphasizes balancing extremes in all areas. Finally, the goal of macrobiotics is not to avoid death, which is part of the cycle of life. Rather, it seeks to ensure that each person's life is long, healthy, and enjoyable.

Individuality

The conventional nutritional approach holds that each individual needs certain quantities of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals each day, based on a statistical average of everybody's needs. This makes the recommended daily allowances easy to comprehend but does not allow for the uniqueness of each individual's changing needs. It eventually leads to stagnant thinking. The macrobiotic approach maintains that what works for one person will not necessarily work for another, and that what works one day may not work the next. Therefore, using macrobiotic principles means to determine the foods best suited to you based on your current condition and what you want to become. In other words, a macrobiotic approach requires a change in thinking from a static view of life to a dynamic and flexible one. This leads to real freedom.

Carl Ferré is the current president of Ohsawa Macrobiotics and author of Acid Alkaline Companion *and* Essential Guide to Macrobiotics, *and editor of* Essential Ohsawa. He can be contacted at gomf@earthlink.net.

> *"Macrobiotics is an art of living that is joyful, amusing, happy, healthy, and free. It is based on the realization that only you are the master of yourself—not bacteria, doctors, scientists, ministers, philosophers, or dietitians—especially not macrobiotic ones!."*
>
> *– Herman Aihara*
>
> *from* Macrobiotics: An Invitation to Health and Happiness