

Is Macrobiotics Solely Vegan?

Michael Rossoff, L.Ac.

The short answer is “No” and “Yes.”

The simple reason is that macrobiotics has never been a one-size-fits-all. The basic intent has been and remains how to use foods to fulfill your body, mind, and spirit’s needs. Put another way, it’s about using foods to achieve your life’s dreams and destiny. So, one person may need to be vegan, and another may benefit greatly from eating some animal foods. But if you approach macrobiotics as being solely vegan, then there is no option or leeway to go beyond vegetable-quality foods. And this may be a great mistake for those people who need animal foods for their overall health.

The original stimulus for this article began when I heard and read from my longtime friend and senior teacher, Bill Tara, that macrobiotics was intended to be vegan. His emphasis on the broader ecological and social issues surrounding food for humanity are ones that I agree with. His book, *Eating As If All Life Matters* (written with Marlene Watson-Tara, Xlibris, 2018), is the main source for the references I use.

The disagreements I have are two.

One is that Bill has effectively re-



Michael Rossoff

written the history of macrobiotics by claiming that it was always taught and practiced as vegan. While macrobiotics never stressed animal foods, it clearly encouraged fish eating. When I moved to Boston in 1969 and lived in one of the many study houses, fish was encouraged once a week (as was fruit). When Bill says that “fish was seen as a ‘binge’ (not essential, used for pleasure)” [page 220], this was far from the consciousness of most people. As I will explain later, the inclusion of fish

was in many ways more of a benefit to the nutritional health of the many macrobiotic students and adherents.

The second disagreement I have is that Bill emphatically communicates that ecological and social issues trump the philosophical and healing principles incorporated in macrobiotic teachings. It is the other way around. Without holding to the core teaching of the Unique Principle, which says yin and yang always coexist and that nothing is absolute because everything is always changing, then macrobiotics becomes simply a diet. Further, macrobiotics was always taught alongside of Oriental healing principles of YinYang, Five Transformations, and meridian energies. Foods were taught as benefiting or harming certain conditions, organs, and mental states.

GEORGE OHSAWA AND MICHIO KUSHI

George Ohsawa, the grandfather of macrobiotics, taught ten healthful diets with half of them including some animal foods. Michio Kushi taught ambiguously, so that you can find quotes pro and con regarding the use of fish or animal foods. Both

Early History of Macrobiotic Food Choices

The early teaching and books available on macrobiotics in the 1960s, 70s and 80s are very instructive about the spirit and understanding of macrobiotics. Below are quotes from some of the most renowned early cooking teachers.

Lima Ohsawa

In *The Art of JUST Cooking* (Autumn Press, 1974), Lima Ohsawa writes: “The macrobiotic diet, however, is not a strict vegetarian regimen. We do not believe that if a man or woman eats vegetable foods exclusively, he or she will, of necessity, achieve health or vitality, and live in harmony with the environment, or for that matter, that every man must restrict himself to the vegetal realm if he wants to realize his nature. The natural order in our surroundings is both more precise and more flexible. The shape and relative number of our teeth, the gateway of food into the body, tell us more about the order in human nutrition....

“Room is left, however, on the plate as in the mouth, for proportionately small quantities of animal foods if necessary or desirable. The animal foods we recommend are the lower forms of life, or those that have been least domesticated or processed by modern man. We do advise that as few animal foods as possible be part of one’s daily fare....

“To follow the MB diet properly, each of us must come to know himself and understand the dynamics of food to discover how best to satisfy his own particular requirements....

“You can be a vegetarian and derive all the vitamins, minerals, (etc.) from a well-balanced diet of grains, fresh vegetables, fruits, and nuts. But animal foods and dairy products can also find a place in a macrobiotic meal if we prepare them properly and combine them harmoniously with the other elements included in our menu. We are free to eat whatever we wish; nothing is forbidden but ignorance and carelessness.”

Here are some of Lima’s recipes in this book: Red Snapper Tempura, Shrimp and Eggs, Pan-fried Mackerel, Egg Tofu, Salmon Croquettes, Squid with Scallion Miso, Red Snapper in Miso, and Koi Koku (Carp Soup).

Cornellia Aihara

Here are a selection of recipes Cornellia included in *The First Macrobiotic Cookbook* (GOMF, 1964, re-

vised 1984): Red Snapper Stew, Soup Mussels, Shrimp Tempura, Fried Oysters or Clams, Sesame Chicken, Fried Chicken, and Duck Clear Soup. And here are some fish recipes from *The Calendar Cookbook* (GOMF, 1979): Baked Fresh Tuna, Pan-fried Cod, Baked Fish (Mackerel or Bass) with Salt, Cold Salmon with Gravy, Deep Fried Perch with Kuzu Sauce, and Trout/Sardines. Egg recipes include Tofu-Egg Clear Soup with Watercress, Egg Foo Yung, and Egg Drop Soup, while other animal food dishes are Fried Quail, Wild Pigeon (Fowl or Fish) Shish-Kebab, Fried Chicken, and Roast Turkey with Stuffing.

Michel Abehsera

In *Zen Macrobiotic Cooking* (Avon Books, 1968), Michel Abehsera writes: “You also probably know that the Zen monks were vegetarians. Zen macrobiotics is based on deep respect for this vegetarianism and follows it to a very considerable extent but leave room for fish and fowl as secondary food. Unlike the traditional vegetarians, Zen macrobiotics considers fish—when part of a meal in which rice or other grains are primary, vegetables and fish secondary—a healthful food. Fowl is less healthful but, if organically fed, will do no harm.”

Recipes in this book include Stuffed Mackerel, Scalloped Oysters, Lobster Cantonese, and Fresh Herring in White Wine.

In *Cooking with Care and Purpose* (Swan House, 1971), he writes: “Fish is a healthy food for vegetarians who refuse to eat meat. It gives stamina to the organism. For Jews, it is a holy food that is served on Friday nights and Saturdays.”

Fish recipes include Fish Pancakes, Salmon Casse-rolle, Salmon Rice Paddies, Mackerel in Cider

Annemarie Colbin

In *The Natural Gourmet* (Ballentine Books, 1989), Annemarie Colbin writes: “As I developed my own approach, my book learning became rounded out by my own real-life experience.... I found, for example, that not only do sick meat eaters get healthier when they eat vegetarian, but weak vegetarians often become stronger when they reincorporate fish or fowl into their diets....

“In 1979 I wrote my first cookbook, *The Book of Whole Meals*.... The book is meatless and wholly dairy and sugar-free but does contain several fish and egg recipes. Curiously enough, I received completely opposite comments about the book...strict adherents of macrobiotics consid-

ered it ‘too wide,’ while mainstream nutritionists think it is ‘too restricted.’...

“It is possible to be a healthy vegetarian provided you eat whole-grain-and-bean combinations *daily* and a variety of vegetables of all colors. *It is also imperative that you avoid the use of white table sugar and the foods containing it....*

“It is not, however, essential that you “be” a vegetarian. If you label yourself as such, deviations from your dietary standards, which are sometimes unavoidable, will cause you anguish and guilt. It is much more sensible to choose to eat foods that keep you feeling healthy, whatever those may be. Many people today are finding that a

largely natural-foods diet, sugar- and dairy-free, with accents of fish, fowl, or perhaps an occasional egg, keeps them in excellent health.”

In the fish chapter, Annemarie writes: “Committed vegetarians can skip this chapter. However, most people have some trouble absorbing the protein from vegetable foods efficiently; therefore, a tasty fish dish several times a week is a must for good health and stamina.”

Recipes in this book include Rolled Flounder Fillets with Lemon-Dill Sauce, Poached Salmon Fillets with Mock Hollandaise, Fish Timbales with Lemon Butter Sauce, Baked Whitefish with Scallion Stuffing, and Seafood Yosenabe (with scallops and shrimp).

teachers ate fish regularly during their lifetimes.

As Bill Tara says in his book, “Michio Kushi distinguished between therapeutic and health maintenance diets. Most therapeutic diets contained very little or no oil and absolutely no fish. Maintenance diets sometimes included fish.” [page 92] Therefore, macrobiotics never took a strictly vegan approach to personal eating.

What are the complaints against animal foods in general and fish in particular? From YinYang perspective animal foods are categorized as Yang, which in excess can create strong cravings for Yin foods such as fruits, alcohol and sugary foods and soft drinks. These Yin foods can cause many weakening effects over time. And excess Yang animal foods can also create unhealthy conditions. These were the original teachings, not the concerns of animal welfare or ecological effects. Even if we add in these concerns now, our individual consumption of some fish or a little egg or chicken is minimal compared to modern dietary intake. Even Bill says, “macrobiotics involves understanding the effects of different foods and making choices according to individual needs.” [page 99]

So why should we “need” some animal foods for our best health? First, animal foods have been part of the human diet in all cultures and throughout history. Even primitive societies in South America and southeast Asia today eat some animal foods, according to Chris Killiam, an anthropologist who has visited these groups. While macrobiotics classifies animal foods as Yang, this is an oversimplification. Because wherever there is Yang, there must be Yin. And the Yin of animal foods is their fats. While fats, especially animal fats, have a bad reputation for causing heart disease (which is not so absolute anyway) they have important medicinal benefits. These include supporting hormones, providing sustainable energy (verses sugar’s quick energy), and nourishing the blood and immune systems (think of cod liver oil and its many benefits).

Macrobiotic food selection emphasizes fish over other animal foods because it is less Yang and because it comes from the water world versus land, which also makes it lower on the food chain.

Many years ago, I taught a class titled “When Is Someone Not Macrobiotic?” My interest was stimulated by people saying that they are

no longer macrobiotic or that other friends said the same thing. When does someone “leave” macrobiotics, when they were previously very dedicated? There are two possibilities. Either the person revolted from the narrowness of the eating or simply needed other foods that were “forbidden.” Another view is that when people saw that this person was eating some dairy or some banana or some chicken, they wanted them banished. Either way, this reflects the cultish nature that was contained within macrobiotics. I can recall in the late 1980s when Michio Kushi said at a teachers’ meeting that a teacher got a disease because he ate some chicken. It is never so simple. This demonstrates the arrogance contained with macrobiotics, and which has kept it isolated from the rest of society.

I recall a meeting in January 2015 following Michio’s funeral when 75 or more teachers from around the world met in Boston. It was a wide-ranging discussion on all things macrobiotic. Jessica Porter asked, “Why is macrobiotics not popular like vegan or keto or South Beach or other diets?” My answer then and now is that macrobiotics is the only “diet” that promises to diagnosis and treat

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ailments and diseases. That is, promising to be a medicine, without the full array of skills and depth of knowledge necessary. On this level macrobiotics could choose to be a part of Oriental medicine's dietary therapy, but it lacks rigor and has altered YinYang in such a way that it is incompatible with Oriental healing. So, it remains isolated and limited. Or, of course, it could halt the practice of diagnosis and go back to its origins and promote a philosophy of healthy living.

The teaching of Oriental medical principles, such as YinYang and the Five Transformations, are also used in Feng Shui, 9 Star Astrology, and Chinese Astrology (this year of 2022 is the Yang Water Tiger year). Based on YinYang complementary opposites, these concepts take us away from "good" versus "bad," whether in foods or all other realms. In Five Transformations, there are the five grains, five

vegetables, five season, five emotions, five animals and so much more. When macrobiotic teachers use this model to explain why, for example, millet is the grain of Earth, which governs Stomach and Spleen Pancreas, they ignore that the animal associated with Earth is chicken. But the ancient wisdom that placed millet with Earth also understood that chicken can benefit the same organs.

My point is that food is medicine. Every culture has experiences with this. Even our Western medical approaches recognize that there is value in whole grains, specific fresh vegetables, fruits, and legumes. Macrobiotics has attempted to elevate this concept of food as medicine with varied results and limited success.

I have helped many long-time macrobiotic people who strictly adhered to the teaching of no animal foods, little to no oils (except sesame oil of course); fear of bread, crackers, herbal teas (only bancha allowed); brown rice as the best grain; miso soup every day; and more. There is a lot of misunderstanding of salt in the diet, too (worthy of another article). Often it is women who persevered despite cravings and illnesses. They gradually developed weakness or other health problems over many years. It is my observation that women are much more susceptible to becoming "blood deficient," which is an Oriental medical term for a causative factor in illness. This type of deficiency is a form of malnutrition, due to limited intake of nutrients. Yet many macrobiotics diagnose it as an overly Yang condition. The Yangness is tightness (not natural flexibility) in body and mind. Once the person starts changing to more variety of grains, vegetables, oils, fruits, and liquids, and often especially some fish, chicken, eggs, or bone broth, they begin to relax and

feel stronger and happier.

Bill Tara says, "Since macrobiotics is a wide-ranging philosophy, different interpretations exist. Some interpretations fail to address the environmental, social, or ethical issues.... [Therefore,] I am referring to the dietary standards presented [here in this book] as the Human Ecology Diet, to distinguish it from other points of view." [page 100]

Why not call his vegan approach this name? I suspect two reasons.

One is that the world of Veganism will have great difficulty embracing macrobiotics. I know this from personal experience. One example occurred when I presented an intro-

"My point is that food is medicine. Every culture has experience with this."

ductory lecture to a visiting vegan group who came to one of our local macrobiotic potlucks. Many were angry that macrobiotics emphasizes grains, cooking, salt, and oil. They were very arrogant in their beliefs that raw foods are better, cooking is not encouraged much, and salt is shunned. Meanwhile, excessive fruits, salads, vegetable-and-fruit juicing, and sugary foods are standard fare. We should ask, why are certain people attracted to more raw foods, vegetable juices, etc.? One answer is that they are against eating animal foods, often for emotional reasons (killing is inhumane) or for spiritual reasons. Another reason is that they are excessively Yang by constitution or condition. Therefore, the Yin of more raw foods is appealing. Only when they are no longer so overly Yang is there

a possibility of these people becoming interested in a vegan macrobiotic approach.

Another reason that Bill may shy away from the name Human Ecology Diet is because he may lose macrobiotic friends who are fine with eating some animal foods. So, his approach is to use fear to entice these people. Fear of toxins in the ocean, micro plastics in the waters, and all the harm that comes from animal farming (of fish or poultry or beef). In my experience fear is the quickest way to arouse people and then lead them astray. And by the way, micro plastics are now everywhere—in the soil, water, and air, therefore there is no sure way of escaping them.

Macrobiotics is unique because it stands firmly on a philosophical base, called the “Unique Principle.” To me, the entire purpose of this teaching is for developing our judgment, beyond good versus bad, right versus wrong. It demands critical thinking, using the tools of YinYang understanding. This creates discernment, which leads to greater clarity and ultimately great freedom. The principles teach us that all foods are available to us. Therefore, it’s not about one special food or exact diet but about learning how to choose for yourself based on experience and understanding what is appropriate for you at any time.

I have helped many people use macrobiotics as a healthy vegan approach and many others as a healthy animal-food approach. Either way, it is important to do it with a clear understanding of the art of cooking, food combining, and adjusting for seasons and for pleasure. So, be vegan if this is what works best for you.

But we cannot say that macrobiotics is vegan, only. Then it will have lost its way. We can say that “vegan macrobiotics” is a sub-category of the

larger application of macrobiotics, but it cannot replace it. So, if you need to eat some animal foods for health and wellness, then know that you are just as “macrobiotic” as any other person’s dietary choices.

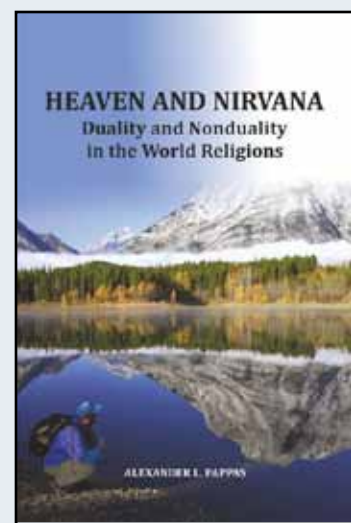
We cannot lose the uniqueness of the core teachings otherwise it is just another diet. By using YinYang thinking you will increase your curiosity and insights into using foods for your wellness and happiness.

This article was first presented as a talk on Ginat Rice’s Whole Health Forum YouTube channel. [Click Here to view his presentation.](#)

Michael Rossoff, L.Ac. began macrobiotics in 1969, when living in Boston for three years, where he studied with Michio Kushi and Shizuko Yamamoto. He then returned to his hometown of Washington, D.C. to open an East West Center. During the early years he created a 6-month macrobiotics & Oriental healing course, that has evolved into his current Basic Alchemy seminar. In the 1980s he published MacroMuse magazine for seven years. During this same time, he had a large center in Maryland called the Macrobiotic Association, where cooking classes, lectures, acupuncture, and massage were incorporated. Michael studied Oriental medicine in England in the late 1970s and has been practicing acupuncture ever since. From 2000-2003 he was the academic dean of an Oriental medicine school. In 2005, Michael moved to Asheville, North Carolina, where he continues his macrobiotic teaching and counseling along with his acupuncture practice. [Read more on his website www.MichaelRossoff.com.](http://www.MichaelRossoff.com)

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