
What is Macrobiotics?

From *Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics*

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Macrobiotics is the practical application of the natural laws of change. The term comes from the Greek; “macro” means great, and “bios” means life. It is a tool that allows one to learn to live within the natural order of life, the constantly changing nature of all things.

Macrobiotics as it is known today is the result of the tireless work and vision of George Ohsawa (1893-1966). Ohsawa developed tuberculosis at the age of fifteen. By the time he was eighteen, his mother, younger brother, and younger sister had all died of the same disease. His own illness had progressed to the point that the doctors had given up all hope for him. Determined to overcome his condition, Ohsawa began searching for alternative theories of health. He based his theory and practice of macrobiotics on Sagen Ishizuka’s (1850-1910) theory of balancing mineral salts, the early heaven’s sequence of the I-Ching, yin and yang, and other ancient Eastern concepts. He lived to the age of 73, devoting his life to teaching macrobiotic theory and writing on science, ethics, religion, and philosophy from a macrobiotic point of view.

While macrobiotic principles can be applied to all areas of life, this book emphasizes their application to diet and health. The macrobiotic approach to diet emphasizes whole grains and fresh vegetables. For the most part it avoids meat, dairy foods, and processed foods. The goal is to provide the body with essential nutrients so that it can function efficiently without loading it with toxins or excesses that must be eliminated or stored. And since 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.

A basic tenet of macrobiotic thinking is that all things—our bodies, foods, and everything else—are composed of yin and yang energies. Yin energies are outward moving, yang energies are inward. Every thing has both yin and yang energies, but with either yin or yang in excess. Most of the foods that make up the standard American diet have very strong yin or yang characters and also tend to be acid-forming. In contrast, macrobiotic practice emphasizes the two food groups—grains and 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 the new sense of control are two of the most important benefits of a macrobiotic practice.

A 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 heal any illness that does occur. Anybody who begins a macrobiotic diet goes through a period of healing, beginning with the elimination of accumulated toxins and excesses. Those who are already following a macrobiotic diet may also have periodic health problems, and can adjust their diets accordingly. 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.

The conventional nutritional approach holds that each individual needs certain amounts 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 us based on our current condition and what we 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. The first and most important step is to change from a diet based on meat and sugar to one based on grains and vegetables.

Very few people can make such a radical shift overnight. Instead, most people learn macrobiotics in stages.

BEGINNING STAGE

In my experience, the easiest way for relatively healthy people to start a macrobiotic practice is to follow a basic diet that emphasizes whole grains and fresh vegetables. The food we eat affects the way we feel, think, and act. Learning to use macrobiotic principles is much easier after a transitional time of using a basic macrobiotic dietary approach.

The main benefit of a standard macrobiotic diet is that the body becomes cleaner as toxins and old excesses are discharged. This alone can sometimes relieve minor aches and pains. As our bodies are cleansed, our minds become more clear and our natural good judgment begins to return. People who are in relatively good health may begin a macrobiotic diet after consulting books or relatives or friends who are more familiar with macrobiotic practice. The first section of this book provides all the information that is needed, but a good macrobiotic cookbook is also invaluable.

People with a serious illness should consult a health care advisor or a macrobiotic counselor who is familiar with the effects of dietary change before making big dietary changes. Most people need help learning to use macrobiotic principles effectively to remedy serious illness. A standard macrobiotic diet must be tailored to the individual's condition. Even two people with the same illness need different dietary adjustments.

Many people who are beginning a macrobiotic diet, or are considering doing so, are taken aback by the

number of Japanese foods in a standard macrobiotic diet. Japanese foods are often emphasized simply because Ohsawa was Japanese. The expression of macrobiotics is becoming less Japanese as more Americans write and teach about macrobiotics.

A second source of confusion is that there are three primary expressions of macrobiotics: that of George and Lima Ohsawa, and those of Ohsawa's students Michio and Aveline Kushi, and Herman and Cornelia Aihara. This book unifies their three different expressions of the macrobiotic approach. Still, in consulting any source of macrobiotic information, readers may find seemingly conflicting advice.

INTERMEDIATE STAGE

In the intermediate stage one begins to learn the principles of macrobiotics. Macrobiotics is based on the principle that there is a natural order to all of life. What a person does and eats determines who that person is and how that person feels. If one lives and eats in harmony with the natural order, the effect is the natural condition of health and happiness. If one lives and eats in disharmony with the natural order, the result is a condition of minor sickness and eventually major sickness. A return to living and eating in harmony with the natural order leads to an improved health condition and outlook on life.

The way to learn about the natural order is to study yin and yang. These Eastern concepts provide a view of life that allows us to live and eat in harmony with the natural order. The knowledge of yin and yang is used to change a weak condition to a strong one, sadness to joy, sickness to health. It is a working knowledge of yin and yang that leads to greater freedom and more control over our health. The second section of this book provides an introduction to yin and yang; learning how to apply these principles to life is the goal of the immediate stage. Of course, we can start this stage at any point, even from the first day. As our understanding increases so does our enjoyment of life; as our physical, mental, and emotional health improves so does our judgment increase. We can better evaluate the appropriateness of advice from others. This increase in confidence leads in general to a more positive outlook toward life.

ADVANCED STAGE

At the advanced stage, we have reached the dietary goal of macrobiotics: To be able to eat whatever we want whenever we want without fear. No food is forbidden.

This stage is very different from the beginning stage. It is complete freedom rather than a set of rules. Judgment is so developed that we know what to do without having to stop and think about the principles involved. We know the effect of each food and how to counterbalance that effect.

People at the advanced stage realize the importance of sharing their knowledge with others, and they are searching for additional tools with which to better their lives. They understand that macrobiotics does not provide all the answers, but rather is a way of viewing life that can incorporate any and all other disciplines and methods of growth. People at this stage of practice can be recognized by their health, happiness, and honesty.

BENEFITS OF MACROBIOTICS

In general, the more we know about macrobiotics and the more we practice it, the greater the benefit. However, since every individual is different and no two people have the exact same reaction to changes in diet and lifestyle, the exact benefits for each person differ. Here is a brief list of common benefits:

- * Less or no fatigue.
- * Better health: relief from all pains and sicknesses, including colds, the flu, and cancer.
- * Better appetite, able to eat the simplest food with complete joy and deep gratitude.
- * Better sexual appetite and more joyful satisfaction.
- * Deep and good sleep every night without bad dreams.
- * The ability to fall asleep within minutes of lying down.
- * Improved memory, leading to better relationships.
- * Greater freedom from anger, fear, and suffering.
- * Ability to view difficulties as positive learning experiences.
- * Better clarity in thinking and promptness in action.
- * More generosity in our interactions.
- * Greater control over personal destiny.
- * The belief that nothing in life is too difficult.
- * Greater honesty with oneself and others.
- * Improved understanding of Oneness (God).

Many of these benefits are obviously related to health. In fact, in macrobiotic thought all of these benefits are the product of good health. The third section of this book outlines the macrobiotic view of sickness and healing, and provides some information on macrobiotic diagnosis, as well as natural home remedies that can be helpful during the healing process.

The following section is from the healing chapter in Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics.

MACROBIOTIC CENTERING DIET

Most diseases in civilized society come from excesses rather than from deficiencies. The macrobiotic way of expressing this is too much yin, too much yang, too much extreme yin and yang, or too much acid-forming food... In simple cases a dietary remedy is easy: simply eat more foods with the opposite qualities and less foods with the same quality.

However, many cases are more complex. Nothing in this world, including one's condition, is ever all yin or all yang. Just as with categorizing foods, all the yin characteristics and yang characteristics of a condition must be added up to determine if someone is overly yin or overly yang. There may be swelling (more yin) and redness (more yang) and so on. Adding up all the factors and deciding how much weight to give each one can be confusing.

Fortunately, simply eating a basic macrobiotic diet helps to restore the body's own healing power. One approach to healing is to eat a variety of foods when healthy and to use a beginning macrobiotic centering diet when sick or uncomfortable for any reason. This approach is used for short periods of time and is often all that is needed to restore health depending on the sickness (overly yin conditions respond best) and the strength of a person's natural healing power.

A macrobiotic centering diet is a restricted basic macrobiotic diet, eating and drinking only what is necessary for one's life, and toward the center of yin and yang balance. This means eating primarily whole grains, vegetables, beans, and sea vegetables. Sea salt either by itself or in miso, soy sauce, umeboshi, or gomashio, and liquid, usually bancha tea (kukicha), are also needed. Everything else is kept to a minimum or avoided altogether. This approach allows the body's natural healing power to heal from within.

Specific percentages and instructions are included in the book as well as a chapter on understanding and using yin and yang. One other note: It is assumed that one will drink water when thirsty or desired. While water may need to be restricted in certain rare cases, current thinking is to drink water when the body calls for it.

