



## Food as Ecological Medicine: Learning to Live Ecologically

BY BONITA FORD, MA

*The ultimate goal of natural farming is not the growing of crops . . .  
but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.*

— Masanobu Fukuoka

In this post-industrial age we can look at the world around us and see the devastating effects modern societies have had on human and environmental health. The bad news is abundantly clear. We are depleting our supplies of clean drinking water, losing vital topsoil, cutting down precious rainforests, releasing tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, polluting land, water and air, and threatening our biological life support systems. Human diseases related to nutrition and the environment—such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and asthma—are rising rapidly.

At the same time, there is good news. More people than ever before are working to create viable solutions for a healthy, sustainable future. The “green” movement is growing, and we are seeing its influence in the realms of agriculture, business, building and design, education, health, and politics. We are recognizing the vital connection between the health of the planet and the health of people and other living beings; the tide is beginning to turn.

However, given the importance of the task at hand, we must ask if simply buying organic food, recycling our garbage, driving hybrid cars, visiting a naturopath, and joining organizations such as Greenpeace are enough to secure our common future.

In order to restore the health of people and the global ecosystem, we must move beyond old ways of thinking and delve deeper for solutions. As Albert Einstein said: “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Our future well-being depends on our ability to find and create solutions that are life sustaining in the long-term. We are challenged to re-examine not only our behaviors and actions, but also the mindset, beliefs, and attitudes from which our actions arise. We must integrate solutions into every aspect of our daily lives.

Healthy food and sustainable food production are excellent starting points on the road towards a healthy, sustainable future. Learning more about the food we eat—as well as developing a greater understanding of the processes involved in bringing

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food from the garden or farm to the table—gives us a greater appreciation for our connection to the Earth. Human health depends on the plants and animals we cultivate for food; ultimately, we are radically dependent on the health of the soil, water, and air to survive. We are invited to open our eyes to the intricate web of life that supports our health and well being.

## Food for Body, Mind, and Spirit

Food is in fact medicine for personal and ecological healing. The type of food we eat, the way we eat, and the way we cultivate our food all contribute to our physical, emotional, and spiritual health, as well as to the ecological health of the Earth.

The way food grows from the living Earth offers a unique lens for examining the workings of the natural world. The processes involved demonstrate the relationships among plants, animals, and other elements within living ecological systems. When we grow our own food or observe a vegetable garden, it becomes apparent that the quality of the food depends on the health of the plants and animals, which in turn depend on the vitality of the soil and the purity of the water and air. Furthermore, eating vital foods or growing our own food reconnects us to the natural world and fosters an appreciation of the healing properties of nature. In nature, we can experience the fragility and resilience of life, the miraculous and life-giving quality of a simple element like water, the mystery of food “waste” being transformed into soil-enriching compost, and the miracle of a plant growing from a tiny seed. When we cultivate and eat food consciously, we learn about ecological principles and the healing potential of nature.

Savoring the nourishment and healing that nature provides leads us back to a sense of the sacredness of food. Many cultures have extensive rituals and customs around food: hunter-gatherer and small-scale agricultural societies often recognized that an abundant harvest was a gift to be appreciated. At its best, food gives us nourishment, comfort, pleasure, and cause for celebration. Healthy, sustainable food feeds and heals our bodies, minds, spirits, and the Earth.

## Holistic Approaches to Food, Farming, and Living

*What* we eat is important to our health. But we often forget that *how* we grow our food shapes how we relate to the Earth that sustains us. Holistic approaches to food production allow us to cultivate healthy food as well as a healthier relationship to the natural world. Two such approaches are Masanobu Fukuoka’s natural farming and permaculture.

Masanobu Fukuoka, a pioneer of natural farming, describes the process as “the very embodiment of life in accordance with nature.” Through careful observation and experimentation, Fukuoka developed simple, effective techniques that produced abundant and healthy crops without the use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, prepared compost, weeding, or tilling.



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Similarly, permaculture, an approach developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, offers a methodology for designing ecological and cultural systems based on nature's principles. Informed by the wisdom and practices of indigenous cultures, permaculture is rooted in an ethic of caring for people, caring for the Earth, and investing surplus back into systems.

Careful observation and understanding are inherent to both Fukuoka's "do nothing farming" and permaculture. Quiet, open-minded observation promotes a deeper understanding of how nature functions and how we can participate more effectively and harmoniously in these natural processes. As much as we actively cultivate the land for food, we are reminded also to "do less" and to be open to receiving what nature already provides. Practitioners of natural farming and permaculture recognize that healthy ecosystems are naturally abundant, energy- and resource-efficient, and life sustaining. Natural systems have had millions of years to evolve; nature invites us to watch, listen, and learn.

By slowing down, doing less, and learning what nature can teach us, we may find that food cultivation also offers the possibility of self-cultivation. By relating to our food in a more holistic way, we deepen our relationship with the natural world that feeds and sustains us.

## Ecology, Relationships, and Interconnectedness

The study of living systems reveals that ecology is about relationships. In a healthy system, each element is in dynamic, harmonious relationship to the other elements. The healthiest food system fosters sustainable relationships among plants, animals, farmers, food workers, and food consumers. Because many of us no longer grow our own food, it is easy to lose sight of the multiple layers of relationship that are involved in producing the food we eat.

Living systems theory tells us that all life is interconnected in an intricate web of relationship. Each part of the system is connected to other parts by strands on the web; the whole web is greater than the sum of its parts. We cannot sever any strand on the web or rid ourselves of any part without affecting the whole. Thich Nhat Hahn, a highly esteemed Buddhist monk and peace activist, names this concept *interbeing*. He asks if we can see a tree and a cloud in a sheet of paper: "If the tree could not grow, you could not have the sheet of paper . . . So it is sure that the cloud is in the sheet of paper, and if you try to remove the cloud, the sheet of paper will collapse . . . That is interbeing—the cloud is inside the paper" (1998). Without the rain from the cloud to nourish the tree, there would be no sheet of paper.

Activist and writer Joanna Macy uses the phrase the "greening of the self" to describe the expansion of our concept of self and self-identity to include the Earth and all life on this planet. She contends that protecting the health of global ecosystems is not about doing what is good or moral; it simply makes sense if we understand that our own lives are inextricably linked to all life on this planet. In contrast to a person-centered view of self and world, this more *ecocentric* perspective calls us to consider the effects of our decisions and actions on the well being of *all* life. John Seed, another ecologist, states that:



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It would not occur to me to plead with you, “Oh, don’t saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence.” It wouldn’t occur to me because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realise that the world is our body. (as quoted in Macy, 1991, p. 192)

As humans, we depend on plants to convert the sun’s energy into food and to produce oxygen for us to breathe. We depend on fresh water from rain, rivers, lakes, and aquifers, which comes from evaporation from oceans and transpiration from trees. If we look around us with open “ecological eyes,” we see that our lives are dependent on other living processes, and that all life on this planet is interconnected. We begin to understand that *we are nature*.

From this perspective, organic food is more than simply an item in the grocery store. It is food that has been grown through a certain *process*, and inherent in that process is a worldview that understands and appreciates the interconnectedness of life and values the life-sustaining properties of the natural world. By delving into the myriad physical, biological, social, and spiritual connections around food, our relationship to food becomes more enriching and life enhancing.

## An Ecological Way of Living

Respecting food, people, and the Earth are all part of a holistic way of living healthfully. In many indigenous traditions, food, creative expression, spiritual practice, healing, and community celebration are neither separate from one another nor from everyday life. What do these cultures have to teach us? We can learn from such cultures that, far from being separate, every aspect of our lives is intricately interconnected and interdependent.

When we cultivate our relationships with food in all of these dimensions, we move closer to an ecological way of living. Food is nourishment, celebration, and healing. If we are willing to learn from the ecological processes associated with food, we can enjoy a sustainable way of life that is rooted in our relationship to the Earth and all living beings. We can open ourselves again to an age-old medicine that speaks to us from the very heart of the Earth.

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