WHEN IDEALS COMPETE WITH REALITY — THE MACROBIOTIC IRRELEVANCE OF CLASSIFYING CANCERS ACCORDING TO "YIN AND YANG"

I recently took a telephone call from a prospective client who complained, “I’m so confused about this macrobiotic theory—not sure if I have a yin or yang cancer. Now, let me get this stuff straight: if I have a yin cancer, then I can eat some meat, because meat is more yang, correct?”

Absolutely, incorrect. And, thoroughly confusing. Let me offer another perspective:

George Ohsawa, one of the early synthesizers of the cultural, philosophical, and dietary template for which he borrowed the name of “macrobiotics,” initially looked at cancer in terms of its nature. Based on the fact that cancer cells multiply—an act of expanding force—he classified it as a “yin” condition. Ohsawa suggested that the dietary basis of healing cancer should include avoiding yin foods and to move toward a more yang approach in food selection and cooking techniques.

Michio Kushi, a student of Mr. Ohsawa during the late 1940s developed another theory in the late early 1970s suggesting there were yin cancers and yang types of cancer. That is to say, certain cancers were due to an abundance of yin food, while others were instigated from the over-consumption of yang foods. This distinction also separated them into specific areas of the body, organ involvement, and rate of growth.

It’s this author’s opinion that using the terms, yin and yang—with all due respect to the general brilliance of Mr. Kushi—is archaic, unnecessary, and consistently confusing to many. They are easily misunderstood terms and foreign to our lexicon. Using classical Chinese terminology of yin and yang as a reference can be alienating to many, particularly if they’re not familiar with the nuances of Asian philosophy. What is difficult to comprehend—even by many macrobiotic students themselves—is the dynamic nature of these opposites and how they exist in combination with one another as opposed to sole entities. It is not a linear philosophy where you simply say something is yin, or something is yang. This is one of the biggest novice mistakes made by macrobiotic people in conversation; “That’s very yin,” or, “I feel yang...” The layers of combination cannot be conveyed in such pat observations.

I suspect that one of the reasons Mr. Kushi made this distinction in classifying cancers by yin and yang categories was to show how specific extremes predispose one to different cancers; animal protein excess often manifests itself in the lower body (as in prostate), while sugar excess revealed itself in to the upper body (such as breast, throat, and brain). From this perspective, it’s helpful to understand which dietary excess might be one of the causes or instigators of a particular cancer, but in real-
ity both extremes always contribute to systemic degeneration, the weakening immune function, increasing anaerobic bacteria, and diminishing nutritional profiles.

And, the dietary prescription will always be the same: Initially, varying percentages of whole grains, vegetables, sea vegetables, and beans. Small volumes of fish, oils, and fruit are recommended according to individual cravings to maintain one’s weight and as possible supplementary fare, but not as principal food.

I’ve heard macrobiotic people with cancer talk self-righteously about the evils of including fruit in their cancer protocol, yet sit there with a giant plate of food and stuff their guts until they couldn’t move. It may be wise to remember Ohshima’s dictum that, “quantity changes quality.” A lot of good food is counter-productive to healing. We need smaller volumes eaten more frequently so that our bodies will find it easier to digest and process. In some cases, a small piece of fruit may satisfy the person’s sweet craving and avoid taxing the liver and digestive system with an onslaught of other food.

**Making Up Our Own Chinese**

To make matters even more complicated, Ohshima, in an ambitious effort to simplify this classification system, reversed some of the definitions of yin and yang that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) had been using and writing about in their classical medical texts for thousands of years. For TCM practitioners this has always devalued macrobiotic medical theories and for the general public it has proved confusing and questionable. I fail to see any practicality in this.

Observing life with an unprejudiced view will confirm that all phenomena appear in degrees of opposition; hot and cold, light and dark, inflammation and constriction, back and front, centrifugal and centripetal, aerobic and anaerobic, strong and weak, acid and alkaline, etc. Physically, as well as magnetically, there are natural laws that govern these extremes; like repels like, and opposites attract, etc. There is no doubt that extremes exist and have natural laws that govern them. However, we might better relate to these extremes in a plain language that describes their tendencies, such as expansion and contraction, acid and alkaline, or inflammation and constriction—any English term denoting such tendencies will do. While we are a melting-pot culture, we should maintain clear definitions and in one language that is familiar. Most languages contain foreign phrases, but using important classification phrases that have varied definitions from another language has not proven user-friendly.

**Energetics versus Physical “Reality”**

Energetics versus physical “reality” is the ongoing conflict between alternative medicine—particularly macrobiotic theory—and Western medicine. Many macrobiotic theories are based on the science of energetics, while modern medicine prides itself on what can be observed physically.

There are still many scientists that question acupuncture because they cannot accept that 5,000 years ago the ancient Chinese mapped out invisible pathways (meridians) of energy that run throughout the body, relate to different organ systems, and can be either stimulated or sedated via meridian points with needles, heat, or touch. We know it often works, but, from a physical perspective we still wonder why.

When you look at a lot of macrobiotic theory, you see numerous energetic references, many of which were constructed by concept and philosophical assumption. This rarely flies for a pragmatic scientific audience or the governing body of medical professionals who—generally—are not in touch with what you cannot see or quantitatively measure. Both sides need to give a bit. If macrobiotic practitioners want to be taken seriously by the general public and the medical establishment, we have to find ways to easily illustrate this information without resorting to philosophical assumption, relying on anecdotal testimony, or making sweeping statements that seriously undermine our credibility.

**SUGAR, LOW-FAT, LOW-PROTEIN AND THE WEIGHT-LOSS DILEMMA**

**Cells With Killer Appetites**

From a dietary basis, the little that we know about cancers is that simple sugar (strong acid-forming food) fuels cancer development. Cancer cells are the first to take up blood glucose. This is the basis of a medical PET Scan (Positron Emission Tomography—See: http://www.mayfieldclinic.com/PE-PET.htm).

Because malignant cells grow at a rapid rate, they end up metabolizing more sugar than normal cells. Diagnostically, this gives your physician a glimpse into how aggressive a tumor might be, or how its growth can be slowed by conventional treatment therapies. At the same time, excessive animal protein and fat has been implicated in a number of male cancers,
including colon cancer. In essence, both extremes contribute to this condition. In fact, basic nutrition teaches that protein breaks down into amino acids, which are absorbed through the small intestine's lining to enter the bloodstream. However, excess amino acids are actually converted to fats and sugars.

Unknown to many is the hormonal havoc that concentrated and refined sugar plays with our system. And, our addiction is only growing. You can hardly buy a bag of cookies from a natural food market that do not contain simple sugar. They put a tuxedo on sugar by calling it, “Evaporated Cane Sugar,” or, “Organic Raw,” but “a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet.” Don’t be duped. They put simple sugars in packaged salmon, tomato sauce, beans, rice cakes—even rice and soy milks—and more, all to entice consumer dollars by catering to our national sweet-tooth. Sugar in more secretive clothing has crept back into the natural food market by now being advertised as, “natural.”

“Reward: An Extra Helping of Beans!”

One of our esteemed Japanese macrobiotic teachers used to recommend a diet drastically low in protein. His contention was that protein breakdown by-products have been noted to promote cancer growth, so his diet limited concentrated proteins (beans, tempeh, tofu, etc.) to once or twice weekly. While many people visiting his center did well initially, they were not able to maintain such a drastic approach. While visiting there as a guest lecturer, I listened to many people tell me that they were constantly hungry, found the food unsatisfying, and were constantly craving protein and oil. Many were compensating by overeating, yet were still losing weight. What they achieved by overeating was not weight gain, but the unexpected result of more frequent bowel movements. Very few continued their regime when they returned home. When people with cancer come to macrobiotics and experience dramatic weight loss, emotionally, their body image suffers. Initially, many are ecstatic about losing weight that they’ve carried for years, but at a certain point it becomes depressing. In the back of their mind, they equate—as most physicians do—weight loss with cancer progression, regardless of the degree of their health consciousness. They’d look in the mirror, see wrinkled, sagging flesh and suddenly feel hopeless. “I’m a shadow of myself…” one man complained. His voice was the personification of defeat. It’s vanity’s revenge and for many, something difficult to overcome.

It’s not just a vanity issue, however; loss of hope can lead to doubts about mortality, mood swings, and depression. Dieterly, in an effort to compensate for a lack of meal satisfaction, those eating a macrobiotic diet for cancer sometimes resort to eating greater volumes of food. Often, this can lead to bouts of fatigue, gas, bloating, and poor sleep.

The biggest problem with this severe deprival approach seems to be consistency. People were stressing about the foods they missed, dreaming about food, planning their “binge meal,” and generally talking about it nostalgically, if not incessantly. This growing obsession or general dissatisfaction with food was contrary to healing—and obviously stressful.

Eat Bread to Prevent Homicidal Tendencies?

I have found that the addition of digestive enzymes—particularly for older individuals—made a positive difference in their absorption and appetites. Additionally, eating more frequently—maybe four smaller meals as opposed to three during the day—usually worked well. I recommend a concentrated protein source (beans, bean products, or small amounts of animal protein) sometimes twice daily, but in small portions. This makes...
The presumption is that adopting a macrobiotic lifestyle should make one completely immune to sickness and disease. This is partially the fault of many writings that has positioned macrobiotics as a quick cure for a myriad of conditions.

I believe that a macrobiotic lifestyle and an awareness of its principles and its dietary template can enhance our innate sensitivity to be more aware of our body’s distress signals. In my personal experience and as a 30-years counselor, I’ve seen people dramatically transform their health. Unfortunately, the macrobiotic emphasis in the last 25 years has centered around food as a main healing tool, minimizing the role of emotional expression, exercise, a sense of daily life passion, and a need for making our time purposeful. These factors have a strong influence that no individual committed to personal growth or core healing can afford to ignore.

I took a good look at my own history and lifestyle after I was told I had cancer, which fortunately turned out to be a fluid cyst that I had had—presumably—since birth. What factors caused it to grow in my later years? Retrospectively, I believe the gradual widening of my diet to include caffeine, more oils, more saturated fats, and generous amounts of flour culminated in a massive wake-up call whose message still echoes in my head. For me the lessons came slow—in fact—they’re still coming...but that’s the work I realized I needed to do.

Others—sadly—were not as fortunate and succumbed to the very condition that they were advising people how to avoid. I don’t think it serves anyone to glibly pin it on any one factor (“Death by wheat toast”), but consider viewing it as a large puzzle with many pieces—each offering a more complete view of what we call life.

**A “Macro” Perspective—10 Self-Healing Traits**

The healing path is composed of many roads all leading to the same destination: the place where body, mind, and spirit are resurrected. The road—or road—we choose should be based on fulfilling the incomplete areas of our lives—areas we’ve neglected and that beg for greater self-nurturance and expression.

These roads may be named Faith, Purpose, Nutrition, Love, Honesty, Compassion, Immunity, Passion, Spirit, Forgiveness, and Gratitude. In the relatively young field of alternative medicine—the kind that’s practiced by most conventional medical doctors today—we’ve only recently recognized that healing efforts must not only be personalized for the patients special needs, but must offer some semblance of control, encouraging the patient to make informed choices instead of being hi-pressured by “experts” into believing that there are no other options available.

It is Macro-biotics, not Micro-biotics. And, that’s a good thing. Macro means large and reminds us to consider all the factors that entail living a large life. Clinical research—as well as scores of anecdotal testimony—has repeatedly shown that the people who survive cancer often do so with the support of the following ten traits:

1. Life Purpose
2. Positive Attitude
3. Good Nourishment
4. Healthy Lifestyle
5. Manageable Stress
6. Sense of Humor
7. Love and Social Support

**“Today is the tomorrow I was so worried about yesterday.”**

—A. Hopkins
8. Emotional Expression  
9. Physical Exercise  
10. Strong Faith  

These ten traits can have a vital healing influence. In seminars, where I speak about these self-healing characteristics, participants are asked to consider the areas they need to emphasize for more comprehensive healing. Hopefully, an inner dialogue is inspired that begins to redefine and question everything about the way we live, love, and care for ourselves. The beginning of whole healing occurs when we commit ourselves to examining and integrating those missing ingredients that are essential for a more healthy, passionate, and resilient life and that can only be savored by living each moment fully for the present.

**SOME GENERAL CANCER PREVENTION & TREATMENT SUGGESTIONS**

Below is a lengthy list of suggestions organized categorically for good health or recovery. Do what you can and continue to add as they become a part of your lifestyle.

**Food Related**

1. Eat whole food, meaning whole grains, vegetables, beans, bean products, and sea vegetables as principal fare. Select small quantities of fruit and (optional) animal protein as a dietary supplement. Use good-quality sea salt that is cooked into food. Introduce some traditional fermented foods such as sauerkraut, umeboshi, miso, and lightly salted vegetable pickles from other cultures. Enjoy a variety of non-caffeinated teas.

2. Speak with your alternative health practitioner about recommended Western and Chinese forms of adjunctive healing such as: Acupuncture, Qi Gong, Herbs, Immunity Nutraceuticals, Enzymes, Food-Based Supplements, and Algae Products.

3. Enjoy relaxed mealtimes, chew well but not laboriously, and give thanks for your nourishment.

4. Buy organic items whenever possible.

5. Avoid tap water. Use recently checked well water, natural spring water or if these choices are not available use reverse osmosis. Consider the investment of a water ionizer that makes your drinking water more alkaline. See: [http://www.waterworks4u.com/Rejuvenator-Water-Ionizers.php?theme=waterionizers](http://www.waterworks4u.com/Rejuvenator-Water-Ionizers.php?theme=waterionizers).

6. Do not store your water in plastic containers. Use glass.

7. Get shower filters so that you are not breathing chlorine fumes during hot showers or baths.

8. Eat more frequently, less in volume. It is better to eat 4 or 5 smaller meals than 2 or 3 big meals. Avoid late night eating by giving yourself at least 3 hours from dinner to bed time. Sleep is for rest, not digestion.

**Mind Related**

1. Engage in daily creative expression. Anytime you’re really engrossed in something you’re passionate about, you are in the moment. That moment usually contains minimal stress and great fulfillment. It is a wonderful place for healing and we all need more time in what philosopher Ken Wilbur calls, “Timeless Moments.”

2. Make your home a sanctuary of comfort and retreat. Scale down, bulk up, create a new space for your new direction. Make it yours, make it comfortable.

3. Study. Take a class, correspondence course, or an online course. Challenge your mind and continue to grow.

4. Make a list of things you want to do, places you want to visit, pictures you want to take, and people you want to meet.

5. Get psychological support. The value of another helping you to look at core issues cannot be underestimated. Read about Byron Katie and “The Work.” See: [http://www.thework.com](http://www.thework.com)
6. Read the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. Han has become the messenger of “mindfulness.” See: http://www.plumvillage.org

**Body Related**

1. Find a physician that will help monitor your progress and be a supportive member of your healing team.
2. Get bodywork whenever you can. Shiatsu, Jin Shin, Tai Massage, Swedish, Deep Tissue, Rolfing, Reiki, Polarity, etc.
3. Practice yoga. Yoga exercises were based on animal postures and finding ways to duplicate those positions with the human form. It influences respiration, all acupuncture meridians, and muscle groups. Practice, if only 2 to 4 postures nightly, but at least try it.
4. Infrared therapies. This low volume but penetrating sauna heat penetrates deep into tissue and helps restore cellular health as it detoxifies. Infrared heat treatment can also be done with hand wands that are applied to different areas of the body—both a diagnostic and treatment aid. See: http://www.gaiahh.com/farinfrared.html
5. Get to bed early, get up early. Rest during the late afternoon, if possible. In the acupuncture cycle of energy, resting at this time benefits the kidneys—our vitality organs as well as the adrenal glands situated on top of each kidney. The adrenal glands exert a strong influence on how we respond to stress as well as on the quality of our sleep.
6. Enjoy physical movement each day. Walk, hike, bike, swim, light jog, row, but get those muscles and lungs active.

**Emotionally Related**

1. Make peace with unresolved relationship issues. If the people you want to heal with have passed on, forgive, talk to them, and let it go. Holding on never really serves you. Mark Twain said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.” Something to think about.
2. Love those that you are close to, or give through volunteer efforts.
3. Keep a daily or weekly journal of your insights, feelings, and thoughts. You don’t have to write War and Peace, just brief entries to give an overview and to express yourself.
4. Say good-bye to negative people who are self-absorbed and drain your energy.
5. Avoid isolating yourself. Reach out via support groups and cancer survivors.
6. Make time for friends and family—primary or extended. Don’t just do things—talk, laugh, and create something together. Find the common thread.

**Spirit Related**

1. Engage in some form of spiritual practice daily.
2. Meditate! Put aside 20 minutes daily to meditate or visualize your health goals. Get some support to do this. Read: Simonton’s *Getting Well, Again* and other books on visualizations or simple meditation.

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