

Chapter 1

Choosing the Macrobiotic Path to Healthy Living

In This Chapter

- ▶ Explaining what macrobiotics is all about
 - ▶ Connecting the body-mind-spirit dots
 - ▶ Looking at the basics of macrobiotic eating
-

Your life revolves around the many choices you make on a daily basis. This word, *choice*, is familiar, but many people misunderstand the role of choice in healing. Choice determines the quality of your life and presents the opportunity to empower or enslave, create safety, offer challenge, and invite love or keep it distant. Because you are always making choices, recognizing the possibilities of choice is the first step toward creating a happier and healthier life. Through the risk of choice and the surrender to its trials and tribulations, you can uncover a primary and powerful tool for self-healing.

There are many paths to self-realization. Some paths seem to be direct routes; others follow more variation. However, like a vehicle you depend on to get you from place to place, your health carries you through life, fortifying you for challenges and providing you with resiliency to adapt to difficulties in order to pursue, undaunted, your journey.

Choosing the macrobiotic path requires more attention — that is, *presence* — and accountability for the many ways you need to nourish yourself. This chapter walks you through the basic tenants of macrobiotics. May you find resonance and revelation in the adventurous journey that lies ahead.

Defining Macrobiotics

Macrobiotics is a compound word adapted from Greek that means “large” or “great” (*macro*) and “life” (*bios*). Hippocrates used the first recorded term of *makrobios* to describe a particular group of individuals who followed a

natural way of life and were known for their good health and longevity. In early Western literature, macrobiotics was described as a more fundamental and natural way of life with dietary principles centered on grains, beans, and vegetables.

Macrobiotics defines itself as a comprehensive way of life, offering invigorating principles that guide and educate with practical tools to strengthen the body, mind, and spirit. Recognizing that we are composed of many bodies — physical, intellectual, emotional, creative, and spiritual — macrobiotics offers unique nourishment to sustain growth and elevate judgment. The ultimate goal of macrobiotics is to create freedom from fear, from sickness, and from living lives of indifference. Creating a “great life” is the goal of macrobiotics.

I heard a quote that has remained with me because it contains a truth that resonates deeply. It comes from German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860): “The two foes of human happiness are pain and boredom.” The reality of this quote can be confirmed by the millions of individuals throughout the world who are suffering from pain and witnessing firsthand how this state negatively influences every aspect of their lives. The ability to live happy, passionate, and vital lives of inspiration, depth, and meaning can be compromised by indifference or pain, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.



To truly live a *great life*, you must feel at home in your own body. This means existing with a certain level of comfort about your health, sensitivity, and fears.

A little macrobiotic history

Classical authors, including Aristotle, Galen, Herodotus, and Lucian, used similar forms of the word *macrobiotic* in regard to health and longevity. In François Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a famous Renaissance satire about the foibles and follies of the newly emerging modern civilization, the French avant-garde, writer, doctor, and humanist has a chapter on macrobiotics. In 1797, Christopher Hufeland wrote a popular book on healing titled *Makrobiotik, or The Art of Prolonging Life*.

In 1958, macrobiotic philosopher and teacher George Ohsawa met a distant relative of Hufeland and by 1959 began using the term *macrobiotic* to promote his teachings. During a New York visit, he took note of Zen’s popularity

in America and, in what seemed like a savvy marketing decision at the time, added it to macrobiotics. Ohsawa’s book *Zen Macrobiotics* attempted to capitalize on the popularity of Zen as taught by popular teachers, Alan Watts, and the works of Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. Interest in Zen was high among the ‘50s “Beatnik” movement, which evolved into what we now know as the hippie generation.

Michio Kushi, a student of macrobiotic innovator, George Ohsawa, had come to America to teach macrobiotics, eventually, Kushi dropped the Zen compound and created a diet that was less strict and confining from the original one Ohsawa had proposed in translated works.

The Heart of Macrobiotics: Nourishing Body, Mind, and Spirit

Our health and happiness depend on the way we nurture each realm of our life. We can discover a more balanced and unified health when we nurture body, mind, and spirit. Too much emphasis in one area can potentially weaken other areas.

I've had clients who were all brain and didn't seem to live in their body, and I've had clients whose focus was exclusively on the physical at the risk of ignoring other realms. The way we eat can influence our mental and emotional state. Conversely, our thinking, the way we perceive situations and react to them, can influence our body functions. Emotional states are known to influence our hormonal levels, digestive secretions, and even immune health.



I'm not saying that all areas need equal attention; however, we do need to cultivate deeper relationships with areas we've ignored. Each area requires some nourishment and self-challenge for growth.

Nourishing the body means

- ✓ Taking nourishment from balanced whole food sources
- ✓ Challenging your physical endurance
- ✓ Exercising regularly for better circulation and oxygenation
- ✓ Performing deep breathing exercises to help release respiratory acids
- ✓ Getting quality sleep and rest

Nourishing the mind means

- ✓ Developing your intellect and judgment
- ✓ Identifying and articulating your feelings
- ✓ Challenging and changing behavioral patterns that don't serve you
- ✓ Establishing a personal philosophy, a moral code, and personal rules of conduct
- ✓ Setting goals regarding your health, finances, education, body, creativity, relationships, and so on

Nourishing the spirit means

- ✓ Discovering a more meaningful life or purpose (see Chapter 10 for more on this)
- ✓ Making time for regular worship, prayer, or visualization

- ✓ Developing more sensitivity to the “energy world” (“sending” prayer, yoga, T’ai Chi, acupressure are some examples of “energy therapies”)
- ✓ Practicing meditation, if not as a spiritual practice, then as a destressing technique
- ✓ Cultivating and trusting intuitive impulses

Many people fall somewhere between being at home in their bodies and feeling out of place in their bodies. We’ve lost the understanding of what foods truly nourish and sustain us.

How eating well can bring balance

We’ve become estranged from the normal functioning of our body. We need “outside” help; now, we need caffeine and nicotine to get going each day; suppositories to move our bowels; alkaline tablets to neutralize excess dietary acidity in our stomachs; sleeping pills to fall asleep; statin drugs to normalize blood pressure; analgesics for pain; and insulin to regulate blood sugar.

Originally, our body functions were designed to work naturally, without the “benefit” of medications. Treating symptoms has become so ingrained as an immediate therapy that we think nothing of popping a pill to soothe our complaints, ignoring the side-effect consequence of many medications. Our refined food diets with excessive amounts of sugar, salt, chemicals and animal products are prime reasons for such dysfunction and must prominently figure in any attempt to foundationally change these conditions.



While exercise can be a helpful therapy, it is still limiting because a lack of dietary balance can undo the benefits of what you’ve earned from exercise.

Not knowing how to reverse these conditions puts us at a gloomy disadvantage because we end up feeling out of control and victimized by poor health. Most of us falsely assume that many of these conditions are the natural consequence of aging and therefore irreversible.

The very simple act of eating nourishes and sustains your physical well-being and is one of the most basic functions that ensure your daily survival. It’s a simple black-and-white premise: If you don’t eat, you cease to exist. So, eating properly is the key to restoring your health.

Eventually, beyond securing quality food, you must address the larger concerns of balancing food groups, eating for your needs, and becoming sensitive enough to interpret the messages your body continually broadcasts.



Eating a “macrobiotic diet” isn’t simply a matter of choosing between *good* and *bad* foods, but more about knowing what foods create health and what foods are compatible with the way you are designed and the lifestyle you’ve

chosen. Thinking about foods in moralistic terms of good and bad only encourages rebellious behavior and is often cited as a cause of eating disorders. Ultimately, it's not just about how *long* you live, but more about how *well* you live.

How the mind and spirit contribute to good health

Spiritual questions help you to find meaning in your life. They may include some of these: How did I help others? How much of my heart do I share? How much distress have I caused others? How forgiving am I? How well do I love? These questions reflect your happiness and tell you about the life you're living better than questions such as, How much status have I achieved? How much am I earning? What material possessions have I acquired? A healthier question to focus on is, How well am I living?

It's easy to get lost in the information vacuum of nutrition: diets, nutrient evaluations, supplements, herbs, food combinations, assorted theories, and recipes. Then the mental and spiritual aspects of health take a backseat to the latest health fads.

Since mental and spiritual aspects of daily living directly influence our health, they are inseparable from the physical and not to be ignored. Our emotional patterns need to be examined and ways of thinking or narrow perspectives need to be redefined. No one ever said that this stuff is easy. You can make some dietary changes in a heartbeat, but feeling bitter or resentful, emotionally isolated or overly critical of others needs to change because such attitudes do not support good health or peace of mind. A mind and spirit overhaul often requires much self-reflection, outside support, and an enduring will to change.



Experiencing nature can offer a healthy contrast to a frenetic fast-paced city life that seems insulated from natural elements. Exposure to nature can help you feel a deeper and more calming communion with a larger aspect of life. Such experiences give you a measurable sense of scale, allowing you to shift in perspective and invite change that inspires.

Demystifying Macrobiotics: Updating Macrobiotics for Modern Times

From chopsticks to futons, three-piece suits to seaweed consumption, archaic yin-yang principles to Japanese martial arts, the introduction of

macrobiotics to the West by Japanese teachers presented many aspects of their culture as a part of the macrobiotic package.

As young adults in the tightly knit Boston community of 1970, many students (myself included) of well-known Japanese macrobiotic teacher Michio Kushi (esteemed student of George Ohsawa) went out of their way to emulate Kushi; some even spoke in broken English accents, despite having English as their primary language and not being able to speak a word of Japanese. Others wore three-piece black suits (as did Kushi), bowed as a greeting, acted very formal, and even took up smoking (at the time, there didn't seem to be a Japanese teacher of macrobiotics who didn't smoke). We mixed Japanese words into our conversations with a sense of exclusivity: A condiment made with sesame seeds and salt was not called "sesame salt," but by its Japanese name, *gomashio*; white radish was called *daikon*; sitting on your calves with knees bent was called *seiza*. We were young, impressionable, and engrossed in demonstrating the oldest known form of flattery: imitation.

Some of us grew out of this emulation act, while some are still doing it. In the last 15 years, macrobiotics has undergone a quiet revolution of cultural reorientation. With the deaths of many community members and even teachers, the bedrock of the belief system — that food exclusively changes all — has eroded into a practical reality now realized by many (save for the macrobiotic myopic). Today's practitioners understand that there are many paths to healing where each individual can best serve himself by discovering his own balance point. For some individuals, the need to explore psychological aspects of healing may be the perfect complement to a whole foods diet. Some may find greater balance with spiritual disciplines, while others focus on physical work, like aerobic activities, that goes along with a balanced eating plan.



No one-size-fits-all paradigm exists. While a whole foods way of eating is foundational, it is by no means the solitary path to healing.

Setting the record straight on macrobiotic falsehoods

Over the years, I've met many people who told me that they had stopped eating macrobiotically. I debunk the more common reasons people quit the macrobiotic lifestyle in the following list:



- ✓ **"It was too strict — I couldn't eat that way."** There is really no "macrobiotic diet." Macrobiotics is a dynamic philosophy of principles, and some of these principles focus on what foods best suit the way our bodies were designed. The length of our intestines, digestion secretions, and tooth structure reveal that we should minimize how much animal protein we eat. Highly concentrated and artificial foods, such as refined

sugar, weaken our immunity and mess with our blood sugar, promoting wide swings that result in moodiness and fatigue.

The so-called macrobiotic diet suggests a template of principle foods of grain, bean, and vegetable, with smaller quantities of secondary foods that include sea vegetables, fruit, and (optional) animal proteins (see Chapter 3). If you can't eat a certain way, find elements of whole food eating that feel better. This book offers a number of different starting points, making transitions easier and more appealing.

✓ **"I'm not Japanese. Everything macrobiotic seems to be Japanese."**

Your foods and lifestyle don't have to conform to anything Japanese. The people who originally promoted macrobiotics in this country were Japanese, so this misunderstanding is understandable. However, if you research your own culture, you're sure to find identical practices from its ancient traditions. Most early cultures that had developed agricultural practices ate the same whole foods.

In search of culture

It's common to seek a cultural identity if you don't have one. Having a sense of belonging, of commonality, and of ritual helps us mark time with familiar ceremony. Because America is somewhat of a melting-pot culture, we may share a lack of cultural history and ritual tradition. Many turn to religion to fulfill that void in their lives. For those not religiously motivated, a movement with a strong ideology can often become the substitute, allowing us to adopt another culture and new codes of behavior or belief systems. This was a common theme among many of the early Boston macrobiotic community members.

After several years of life in the Boston macrobiotic community, I developed a better understanding about the essence of macrobiotics. Then I began to question things that were supposedly "macrobiotic." I donated my floor futon and bought a familiar (and natural fiber) mattress; I found a table that had chairs, instead of sitting in Japanese *seiza* position before a low table. Although I still ate with chopsticks, I found some quality wooden spoons and forks to use as well. I began to call vegetables by their

American names and research other cultural cuisines with a focus on adaptive macrobiotic principles. I had trained myself to think in terms of opposites (yin and yang), but realized that this wasn't a linear concept of opposites but a very complex philosophy with many layers that required much more thought than just extreme labeling. I went from thinking in black and white to realizing that there were many shades of gray.

Immersing myself in Japanese culture was a powerful and broadening experience, and I grew to appreciate its uniqueness as a traditional culture practically opposite from Western culture. However, it also gave me an appreciation for things Western.

At some point in our quest for what feels authentic, we have to admit what feels natural and what feels contrived. I still appreciate Japanese culture, but having studied other cultures and the roots of my own, adopting some rituals and creating my own, I now have a greater sense of identity from this journey.

- ✔ **“I just crave all the bad foods you shouldn’t eat.”** Many cravings are rooted in a physical or psychological basis. Cravings are how your body talks to you, so you need to understand this language and find effective and natural ways to handle your cravings. See Chapter 5 for some practical strategies to overcome cravings and make eating less stressful and more pleasurable.
- ✔ **“There’s too much salt in the diet.”** In the early days of macrobiotics, many Japanese teachers recommended far more salt than was necessary. Although you need quality sea salt, the amounts needed are minimal.
- ✔ **“There’s nothing fresh in the diet — everything’s cooked.”** This revision of macrobiotics that you hold in your hands heartily suggests eating fresh foods, such as salad or vegetable juices. The only exclusions are for people who have intestinal inflammation or those with nutritional deficiencies where raw food can often be an irritant. With raw food, many nutrients remain locked in the cellulose layer. The heat from cooking softens these plant cell walls, making nutrients more available.
- ✔ **“I couldn’t get the whole yin/yang thing — it was too heady for me.”** There’s enormous value in understanding the concept of opposites and how they influence all phenomena. But this has been overconceptualized and is overwhelming to many. In this book, Taoist terminology of *yin* and *yang* is replaced by the more easily understood *expansion* and *contraction*.
- ✔ **“I don’t have time to do all that cooking.”** You mean you don’t want to spend the rest of your life in the kitchen? I can’t blame you! I offer many shortcuts for reducing cooking and preparation times. See Chapter 13 for some advice.

Examining our dietary fall from grace

Since the Industrial Revolution (“Ah, yes, I remember it well . . .”), dietary patterns and habits throughout the world have undergone a gradual yet dramatic shift in quality, production, and availability. Although we have a multitude of foods, in terms of healthy quality, it’s been a downhill ride.

Technological developments, mechanized methods of farming, chemical preservatives, food coloring, and artificial flavorings have become staples for nearly 90 percent of commercial foods. In our hurried pace of life, we have made the poor choice of opting for mass production, added sugar, and fat over quality and balanced food groups.

A macrobiotic approach uses whole foods that contain nothing artificial, encourages local farming, has proved to be far more sustainable and ecological while economically, in the long run, lowers food bills.

What follows are my top ten detrimental food-related changes that have occurred in the past 150 years.

Whole grains have gone A.W.O.L.

Somewhere along the line we began *polishing* whole grains, thus stripping away valuable vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Today we have wheat bran, wheat flakes, wheat germ, and so on. What happened to *whole* wheat? White rice was originally brown rice with seven layers of bran that were milled off.



Whole grain has been a staple food of many cultures for thousands of years. The most common forms of whole grain, which are really grain products, are bread, pasta, crackers, muffins, and pancakes. Real whole grains are cereals that still have their original form intact: brown rice, millet, unhulled barley, quinoa, buckwheat (technically a seed), and others. Giving whole grain as feed to animals and then eating them makes them into our personal grain processor. Go direct! Eat whole!

We're steak-and-potatoes people

As we've reduced complex carbohydrates (from whole grains) and increased refined foods and various sugars in our diets, we crave the dense and salty quality that meat gives us.

We can't seem to get enough: We start some mornings with bacon, eggs, and sausage, have a meatball sandwich or chicken or tuna salad for lunch, and complete this animal feast with steak, lamb, or veal for dinner. Reducing or eliminating the amount of meat we eat isn't just about chemicals, hormones, and other synthetics added to animals' feed, but the fat and protein content and the toxic substances produced when our bodies break down the meat.

Excessive animal protein has been linked to colon cancer and a host of other diseases. (There's an ethical argument as well, but not everyone is sympathetic to that.) What I am sure about is that if everyone were required to kill, butcher, and prepare the meats they favored, animal protein as a dietary staple would plummet. It's so convenient to buy a neatly packaged chicken breast from the market and go home and pop it in the oven that we rarely reflect on the steps we didn't have to endure that make this possible.

"Just a spoonful of sugar . . ."

Shakespeare wasn't thinking about sugar when he gave Romeo the words, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." But when you think about white sugar, honey, molasses, brown sugar, maple syrup, barley malt, and agave syrup, and all their different properties, they still share the same acidity and inflammatory effect in our bodies. True, some may have a little bit of minerals, but they're all predominantly sugar, no matter how you slice it.

Once upon a time, we enjoyed the naturally sweet taste of fruits, which we ate fresh, or dried, cooked, or canned in winter. A little honey or maple syrup also proved memorable on special occasions. Today it's a sad and tragic story. The average North American consumes nearly 140 pounds of refined sugar each year, not including corn syrups, honey products, and miscellaneous edible syrups like sorghum. This figure also does not include an additional 24 pounds of artificial sweeteners! It's estimated that the average teenage boy drinks more than 800 cans of soda yearly! The most assaulting thing we do is wash down a good meal with soda, milkshakes, fruit juice, alcohol, or milk. This isn't digestive friendly; it's an act of intestinal war!

Long ago sugar was considered a luxury food and most frequently enjoyed by royalty. The mind-boggling increase of simple sugars in the modern diet parallels the increase of disease, debilitation and premature death.

"Isn't ketchup a vegetable?"

The main vegetables in the fast-food world are tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, and a sprig of throwaway parsley. Save for these, many people wouldn't know a vegetable if it hit them in the head.

Additionally, the adoption of pesticide and herbicide farming, freezing, canning, and using artificial preservatives to facilitate long durations of storage and transport have contributed to the deterioration of vegetables' quality.

"But it looks like a fruit . . ."

Hybrid species of uniform fruits sprayed with toxic chemicals have replaced wild and naturally cultivated fruits. In many examples, modern fruit has lost some of its naturally sweet taste and tends to be larger. This has also given way to the juice industry, where artificially flavored, colored, and sweetened concentrates seem to be everywhere and are consumed daily by many.

"Did you say 'vegetable protein?'"

Say the word protein and most people immediately think of some kind of meat. In the Western world, the word meat has become synonymous with the word *protein*. But for the majority of the rest of the world, concentrated sources of protein come from beans and bean products. Today much of these protein sources are fed to livestock instead of people.



Depending predominantly on bean protein, as opposed to animal protein, makes good ecological sense. The foods that we eat greatly affect our environment. Raising animals for food in large "factory farming" operations ends up using tremendous amounts of natural resources such as land, water, and grain. At the same time, these operations are responsible for water pollution, erosion of soil, and greenhouse gases. A plant-centered, whole-foods diet uses fewer resources and does not impair our environment to any degree similar to a diet that emphasizes animal products.



Don't believe that gas is a given when you eat beans. You can do many things to avoid this problem (see Chapter 6 for additional tips). I recommend avoiding certain food combinations and using sea salt when cooking beans or not combining the complex sugars of beans with simple sugars of fruit. When these two different sugars are combined, the simple sugar ferments the more slowly digesting complex sugar, and the result is a fermentation that is gaseous.

Junk food is everywhere!

Almost daily we are faced with an onslaught of vending machines, fast-food restaurants, food courts, and street vendors selling anything that's fast-food related. Ready-made foods, sodas, ice cream, candy, flavored coffee, and other sugary, salty, or spicy foods and beverages are the featured players. Nutritionally, there's nothing wholesome about these foods, yet they've flourished.

"Autopilot" agriculture and a perilous environment

Because of massive demand, most large-scale farming is dependent on mechanized agriculture, relentless pesticide and herbicide spraying, and soil additives for the crop yields that are necessary to make substantial profits. Chemicals and hormones have altered the quality of livestock feed, causing growth hormones and chemical residues to be passed on in meats and animal byproducts, such as milk, cheese, and butter. Currently, nearly 100 percent of cattle are fed five or six sex hormones to accelerate weight gain.

"Don't mess with my salt"

Mine salt, with much of its trace mineral compounds removed and artificial ingredients added (to prevent discoloring, to bleach color, to help pour more freely, to help with potential iodine deficiency, and so on), is but a shadow of its former self.

Real salt from the sea, with its mineral matrix intact and none of the artificial ingredients added, can be found in natural food markets as "solar evaporated sea salt."

Welcome to "Artificial Land"

Not only have we infiltrated our foods with chemicals, hormones, and synthetics over the last 100 years, but those substances have found their way into our water, air, building materials, housewares, clothing — pick a random category and it's guaranteed to contain some chemical toxins. It's estimated that more than 25,000 chemicals can be found in cosmetics alone.

In some way, all of these chemicals pose a direct threat to our health. The body, in its wisdom, attempts to store chemicals and toxins in fat cells to keep them from accumulating in the bloodstream. Still, they affect us, in terms of liver function, brain tissue, nervous system health, and blood chemistry.

The benefits of macrobiotic eating

The preceding sections tell you how tough it can be to eat healthy in today's world. But after decades of observing the effects of balanced whole foods on thousands of clients, friends, and family members, as well as drawing on my personal experience, I've seen a sensible macrobiotic diet result in the following:

- ✓ Greater energy, endurance, and vitality
- ✓ Regular and effortless bowel function
- ✓ More stable moods as a result of a regulated blood sugar profile
- ✓ A reduction in systemic acidity, which means less inflammation, more muscular flexibility, and better absorption
- ✓ Better digestion simply by reducing dietary extremes
- ✓ Deeper and more restful sleep with a reduction in the previous amounts required
- ✓ More mental clarity, better memory, and more coordinated physical responses
- ✓ Reduced physical stress
- ✓ Prompt and permanent weight-loss
- ✓ Better circulation of blood and lymph fluids
- ✓ Greater tendency toward optimism and less negativity
- ✓ Less emotional rigidity, more vulnerability, and more openness

The rest of this book shows you how you can achieve these benefits.