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An Existential Examination of Macrobiotic Theory

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Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Macrobiotics comes from the Greek root words makro, meaning "great" or "long," and bios, meaning "life"—hence Great Life or Long Life. This phrase, coined by Hippocrates, has come to represent the healthful lifestyle practiced by millions worldwide. Macrobiotics, often mistaken simply as an alternative diet, is based on consuming whole grains; leafy green, round, and root vegetables; and beans and bean products, such as tofu or tempeh. Meals may be occasionally supplemented with fruits, fish and seafood, nuts, and fruit or grain-based sweets. Dairy, poultry, and meat products are used very infrequently, if at all.

After implementing the dietary practices of macrobiotics, individuals must also expand their daily lifestyle and thinking. Macrobiotic individuals strive to focus on living each day happily with gratitude for everyone and everything. They surround themselves with positive and energetic people who further their desire for self-fulfillment. Seeking out and furthering a relationship with a higher being is another necessary aspect of a complete existence. Finally, daily exercise completes the spectrum of optimal wellness.

Americans are more unhealthy than ever. Illnesses such as type II diabetes, heart disease, and a wide range of cancers are robbing our citizens of precious years. Our bodies’ immunities are being compromised by environmental factors such as pollution, nutrient-depleted soil resulting in less nutritious vegetables and fruits, and hormonally treated meats. A drastic lifestyle change, such as the adoption of macrobiotics, is absolutely necessary for the preservation of our collective health.

After practicing macrobiotics liberally for ten months, I am intensely aware of physical, mental, and emotional changes within myself. Physically, I am more rested, more energetic, and
however, frustrated after the conclusion of World War II that he was not finding ways to change humanity to a more peaceful existence (xii).

For two months, Michio sat in Times Square daily and observed people. Being a student of Oriental diagnostic medicine, Michio was aware of the physical ailments of those he observed. He determined that people were products of their environment and the food they consumed (Kushi, Phiya). After completing his Times Square studies, Michio began teaching macrobiotics. He and his wife Aveline, frustrated by the lack of quality whole foods, began a natural foods business. Later they started the East West Foundation and founded Kushi Institute (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* xii). At Kushi Institute, students participate in a variety of classes ranging from fundamental theory classes to advanced cooking and philosophy classes. Students also learn the art of Shiatsu massage. They practice the basics of macrobiotics, including consuming proper quality, quantity, and combinations of healthful foods, regular exercise, and maintaining a positive mental outlook.

The goal of macrobiotics is to create the appropriate condition for the body to heal itself. Macrobiotics is not limited to the relief or treatment of symptoms; it seeks to change the factors that cause illness to rise. “Our destiny is determined by the way we use our mouths….Through eating we cope with the products of the earth itself” (Kushi Institute 15). By practicing the macrobiotic lifestyle, an individual makes the following changes to his or her body: the diet reduces the overall acidity in the intestines and makes it more alkaline. It increases the amount of health-promoting flora within the intestines. It also increases the amount of digestive enzymes throughout the digestive system. By incorporating a wide variety of healthy foods, the individuals increases the amount of “immune-boosting, cancer fighting vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, all of which promote healing” (Harper 168). The diet reduces both the number
of parasites and illness-promoting flora in the digestive system. It eliminates inflammatory foods such as sugars and dairy products, and also rids the body of artificial ingredients and other harmful toxic substances (168).

The adoption of the macrobiotic lifestyle is a peaceful way of detoxifying the physical body, the mind, and most especially, the spirit. At its most basic level, macrobiotics prompts changes in one’s daily diet. Author and macrobiotic counselor Virginia Harper outlines the most simple and effective way of incorporating macrobiotics into one’s life in her book, *Controlling Crohn’s Disease*. The first step is to discontinue the use of all refined and processed foods. By taking this drastic step, one eliminates the canned, frozen, and microwavable foods that have become part of the standard American diet. These foods, which contain high quantities of preservatives, colors, and flavors, lack the nutrients needed to fuel our bodies (169).

Secondly, to achieve better health, one should discontinue using processed and refined sugars, including white table sugar, brown sugar, honey, molasses, fructose, sucrose, dextrose, corn syrup, juice concentrate, and malt (Harper 169). Sugar is essentially a powerful acid that robs the body of minerals and causes inflammation within organ systems. It causes imbalances in blood sugar levels, leading to hyperactivity. Sugar overworks the spleen, pancreas, liver, and intestines. It is responsible for causing mood swings, irritability, and fatigue. It can lower resistance to infection, and consumption of it is related to hypoglycemia, diabetes, emotional hysteria, eating disorders, and reproductive and other cancers (Turner 15).

Discontinuing the use of dairy products is another key element of adopting the macrobiotic lifestyle. Dairy products are not needed, as commonly thought, to prevent osteoporosis. The most fundamental problem with consuming cow’s milk is that it is acidic, while the necessary human milk, intended only for infants, is alkaline. Consuming his or her
mother's milk provides the baby the complete immunity of the mother, providing defense against illness for the rest of his or her life (Harper 172). Human milk contains a great amount of phosphorous. This mineral is necessary for nervous system development and brain growth, both of which occur rapidly after birth. Conversely, cow's milk is full of calcium, which is necessary for calves whose bone structure develops rapidly. A direct result of a lifestyle heavy in dairy consumption is over-grown, overweight children who are growing larger each generation (Harper 173). Dairy consumption also prompts excess mucus production and congestion of the heart, liver, gall bladder, lungs, intestines, and sexual organs (Turner 15). Additionally, proteins found in dairy products trigger an immune reaction in sensitive children. This brings about the development of allergies and lactose intolerance, and in serious cases, juvenile diabetes (Harper 173).

The next step in adopting macrobiotics is the discontinuation of all red meat, pork, and chicken products. The animal meats available today are very different than those consumed in past generations. Today, animals are generally given hormones to make them grower faster, and bigger. Animals are also treated with antibiotics to lessen the impact of illness and disease. Additionally, the manners in which animals are slaughtered continuously, rather than simply when needed, cause fear within the animals, producing pheromones that remain in the meat when consumed by people (Harper 174). After meats become available to the consumer, they must be cooked at high levels of heat to kill e.coli and other bacteria present. Cooking at such extreme temperatures kills the bacteria as well as digestive enzymes necessary for easier digestion.

Meat, also acidic, contributes to changing the pH of the body making it more hospitable to illness. Consuming meat is linked to higher rates of heart disease, cancer, adult-onset diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and multiple digestive disorders (Harper 173). Meat also
toxifies and acidifies the blood, depletes calcium within the body, and overworks the kidneys and liver (Turner 15). These problems stem from the difficulty the body has digesting animal proteins (Harper 173). Physiologically, humans are not equipped to digest tough flesh. Carnivores have a short, simple digestive system, generally only three times the length of its body. This system allows for quick expulsion of putrefying bacteria within the intestines. By eliminating these toxins quickly, carnivores are releasing poisonous build-up from their bodies. Humans are unable to eliminate toxins as quickly because of the length of the intestines. The build-up of decaying flesh from the consumption of meat causes illness.

According to a 1989 National Academy of Science study, vegetarians consumed less protein, performed niacin, and vitamin B₁₂ than their meat-eating counterparts. Vegetarians, however, still consumed above the recommended daily amount of each. Vegetarians were also found to have equal or greater amounts of all other vitamins, including calcium, vitamins A and C, and magnesium. Women vegetarians of reproductive age were found to have comparable amounts of iron than non-vegetarians, plus higher levels of calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, vitamins A, C, B₆, and B₁₂, riboflavin, and thiamin (Kushi Institute 25).

The next step in adopting macrobiotics is the discontinuation of all flour products, as wheat is a difficult grain to digest. The digestive process is also hindered by the consumption of cold drinks, sugared drinks, carbonated sodas, juices, and tap water. These should be avoided as they each contain elements that slow down the digestive process and irritate the abdomen (Harper 175). Individuals should consume quality spring water, at least one half of his or her weight in ounces per day, or order to remain well hydrated.

Finally, people should discontinue the use of all chemicals and pollutants. When people ingest chemically treated plants or animals, they are absorbing those toxins into their body. The
body, unable to recognize or breakdown the foreign substance, stores it in fat cells and lymph glands to be dealt with later (Harper 176). Years of storing such poisons lead to degenerative diseases and cancers. Consumers should learn to avoid such chemicals as artificial colorings, aspartame, monosodium glutamate (MSG), olestra, and others (177-78).

After eliminating all of these weakening substances from the body, it is key to begin incorporating elements of the standard macrobiotic diet. The following pyramid diagrams the suggested macrobiotic dietary guidelines:

The macrobiotic diet consists of 50-60% of whole grains and whole grain products. Grains were the staple food of civilizations throughout the world for centuries. In Old English, the word “meal” meant grain (Turner 13). Whole grains are high in vitamin B and provide six of
the major amino acids (Harper 180). In macrobiotics, the ratio of complex carbohydrates to proteins is seven to one. Whole grains reflect this balance, providing seven times more complex carbohydrates than protein (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 60). A variety of whole grains are beneficial for the body, but whole grain brown rice is the best for daily consumption. It aids the nervous system and brain activity, and also supports colon activity (Harper 181). Other healthy grains include amaranth, buckwheat, corn, millet, barley, quinoa, rye, spelt, leff, whole oats, and whole-wheat berries. It takes twelve pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat. If the entire world reverted to a more simple diet, there would be enough food for the entire world’s population (Wolf, “Menu Planning”).

Fresh organic vegetables should make up an addition 20-30% of the daily diet (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 5). Vegetables provide an array of helpful vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, and also work to detoxify the body (Harper 183). The three main groups of vegetables (green leafy vegetables, root vegetables, and ground vegetables) should all be included in one’s diet. Fresh leafy greens provide more vitamins, minerals, and proteins than meat does. Greens are rich in chlorophyll, which helps create healthy red blood cells. They also provide vitamin C, calcium, and alkaline minerals (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 64). Finally, leafy greens are fibrous and help stimulate elimination (Harper 183). This category of vegetables includes broccoli, bok choy, collard greens, kale, leeks, and many others.
Root vegetables supply a variety of vitamins and minerals, as well as complex carbohydrates (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 64). According to author Virginia Harper, roots work as the intestines of plants by absorbing nutrients and distributing them elsewhere in the plant. Human intestines work similarly, deriving nutrients from foods and providing them to the circulatory system. The nutrients in root vegetables therefore are very good for the intestines. The vegetables provide antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals to the body. Good sources of these nutrients include carrot, burdock, parsnip, and daikon roots.

Ground vegetables also provide vitamins and minerals, plus complex carbohydrates (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 64). These vegetables contain natural digestible sugars. Ground vegetables benefit the liver and large intestine. Acorn squash, brussel sprouts, butternut squash, cabbage, cauliflower, onion, pumpkin, rutabaga, and turnips are all a part of this category (Harper 184).

The only category of vegetables to avoid is those belonging to the nightshade family (Harper 186). Most of the vegetables in this group originated in the tropics and contain irritants and mildly toxic alkaloids (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 65). They contain high amounts of oxalic acid and solanine, which collectively weaken the intestines and increase inflammation. Nightshades deplete the body of calcium and other minerals (Harper 186). Artichoke, asparagus, avocado, beet, eggplant, okra, peppers, potato, spinach, tomato, and zucchini all fall within this classification.

Beans, bean products, and sea vegetables should make up 5-10% of the macrobiotic diet. A combination of beans and grains provides complementary proteins, each contributing a variety of amino acids. Beans provide high quality proteins, easy for the body to digest, without the saturated fats of meat (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 67). Helpful beans to include in the diet are
adzuki beans, chickpeas, green and brown lentils, and soybeans. Bean products are additional sources of nutrients. Tofu and tempeh, both made from soybeans, are practical substitutes for meat. Miso, another bean product, should be included in the daily macrobiotic diet as well.

Sea vegetables are a comprehensive source of minerals, vitamins, and phytochemicals. Many cultures traditionally incorporated sea vegetables into their diets (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 65). Currently, over 75 species of sea vegetables are eaten around the world (Harper 187). Sea vegetables such as kelp contain 150 times more iodine and 8 times more magnesium than traditional garden vegetables. Dulse is thirty times richer in potassium than bananas, and is abundant in iron. Nori, used to wrap sushi, compares to carrots in vitamin A content and has twice the protein of some meat. Hijiki has fourteen times more calcium than whole milk. Sea vegetables are excellent sources of vitamins A, B, C, E, and B12. They also provide minerals such as cobalt, copper, chromium, fluorine, manganese, molybdenum, selenium, and zinc (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 66). Agar-agar, arame, dulse, hijiki, kombu, nori, and wakame may all be incorporated into a diet.

The final 5-10% of the macrobiotic diet should consist of soups. Miso soup should be consumed daily. Miso is a fermented paste made from soybeans, sea salt, and a variety of grains, seasonings, or sea vegetables. Daily servings of miso provide easily digested protein and live enzymes that aid digestion (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 73). Miso also improves blood quality and helps with the assimilation of carbohydrates (Kushi, Aveline 93). Miso produces lactic acid in the colon, which tones the organ and balances beneficial digestive bacteria and harmful bacteria. Cultures that traditionally incorporate miso into the daily diet have significantly simpler microbes in the intestines, lower incidence of illnesses including bowel cancer, and fewer intestinal disorders (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 36).
In addition to the basic macrobiotic diet, supplemental foods may be occasionally eaten. A small amount of white fish may be eaten once or twice per week. The volume eaten should always be less than 15% of the meal. Desserts of fruit or grain-based quality ingredients may be eaten two to three times a week. They should be made from fruits of temperate climates or grain-based sweeteners such as amazake or brown rice syrup. Roasted nuts and seeds may be enjoyed as a snack (Kushi, *Natural Healing* 30).

When choosing foods to be consumed in the macrobiotic diet, one must consider the climate or latitude where he or she lives (Kohler and Kohler 175). In seeking balance with nature and the environment, food that was raised in that environment, growing with the same oxygen one’s body is using, should be consumed (Wolf, “Dietary Approach”). Food that is grown in season is medicinal, whereas food consumed out of season is poisonous. Fruits and vegetables should always be ripened on the vine. For that reason, the more quickly a food spoils, the closer it must be grown to where one lives (Wolf, “Cooking Class”).

Water should be obtained from the immediate environment. Similarly, fruits should be grown in the same climatic and geographical region; for instance, a Tennessean would eat fruits grown in the southeast. Vegetables may be consumed from a more extended area. A southerner could eat vegetables from the south, mid-Atlantic, or mid-west. Whole grains and beans from anywhere in the United States are appropriate for someone living here. Sea vegetables harvested within the same climatic belt may be consumed. Finally, sea salt from the hemisphere one lives in is appropriate for consumption (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 114).

Climate does not simply dictate foods chosen, however. It also prompts various cooking styles for different seasons. During warmer weather, lighter foods and cooking styles are preferable. Whole grains, lightly cooked vegetables, pressed and raw salads, and some fruits are
appropriate. Heartier foods with longer cooking times should be consumed in colder months or in colder geographic climates (Kohler 137).

Although the type of food consumed is critical to the practice of the macrobiotic lifestyle, how it is eaten is also crucial. According to Kohler and Kohler, “We have eight front teeth primarily for use in cutting vegetable foods; four canine teeth for tearing animal foods; and twenty molars for grinding grain. So twenty-eight of our teeth are for chewing vegetable foods, whereas four are for eating animal foods, in a ration of seven to one” (Kohler 121). In order to reap the benefits of a diet high in complex carbohydrates, thorough chewing is necessary (Stanchich 48).

Chewing is the first agent of digestion (Kohler 123). Food is ingested through the mouth, where it is mixed with alkalinizing saliva. Chewing is necessary to achieve the alkalinization required to receive maximum benefits of digestion and absorption (Kushi, Natural Healing 85). The stomach is unable to digest carbohydrates with the acid it secretes. Chewing breaks down carbohydrates, beginning the transformation of food into energy (Stanchich 48). According to Dr. Robert Haas, the strongest animals alive, those with the greatest endurance, chew their vegetation very well (49).

Looking at survivors of German concentration camps, one can see the benefits of chewing. Author Lino Stanchich writes that his father chewed his food 300 times per mouthful. Those who joined him in chewing the poor quality food all survived the experience. Those who quickly ate the small amount of food, died rapidly (53). Chewing improves immunity. The muscle contractions that occur while chewing stimulate the pineal gland, located in the mid-brain. This gland attracts universal energy and vibrations. This energy is incorporated into the
food, which charges the stomach and intestines. (Wolf, “Menu Planning”) This charge, a healing agent, ensured the survival of some Holocaust victims.

Macrobiotic philosophy prescribes that well people should chew each mouthful 50 times. Individuals who are ill should chew 150 to 300 times per mouthful. Not only will chewing aid digestion, it forces one to concentrate on the act of eating, centering attention on being well. This meditative state is conducive to healing.

In order to maximize healing, individuals should also exercise daily. The benefits of exercise include improving circulation, boosting strength and muscle fitness, increasing oxygen delivered to cells, eliminating toxins, strengthening cardiovascular health, improving sleep, reducing stress, and elevating moods (Harper 237). Regular exercise stimulates blood and lymph circulation, and digestive and nervous system function (Kushi and Jack 73). The increase of oxygen consumed while exercising increases the basal metabolic rate, resulting in the body burning calories more quickly. This provides greater means of controlling weight (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 92). Exercise is especially beneficial before eating. Increased oxygen in the body helps better digestion and assimilation of food, resulting in the need to eat less.

Macrobiotics provides additional recommendations, outside of diet and exercise, to improve one’s way of life. The suggestions include: living each day happily without being preoccupied with your health; having gratitude for everyone and everything, particularly offering thanks before and after every meal; cooking one full, complete meal per day, avoiding excess leftovers; using a variety of foods in selection and preparation; sitting down to eat in a relaxed, unhurried way; chewing food well, until it becomes liquid; not eating for three hours before sleep; keeping a consistent daily schedule of eating, sleeping, and waking; avoiding contact with materials other than cotton as much as possible; lightly exercising every day; avoiding taking
long hot baths or showers; completing a body scrub once or twice a day; avoiding chemically perfumed products and cosmetics; avoiding electric or microwave cooking, instead using gas or wood stoves; minimizing use of color television and computers with display screens; minimizing the use of electrical appliances around the body; and singing a happy song aloud each day (Kushi Institute 28).

**NEED FOR CHANGE**

During the last century, the quality of life in industrialized nations has declined. Despite advents in technology and medical science, cancers and degenerative diseases are taking massive tolls on populations. Family units are dissolving, and huge percentages of children are being raised in one-parent households. The incidence of mental and emotional disorders is on the rise, as are overall crime rates. Kushi writes, “The epidemic of degenerative disease, the decline of traditional human values, and the decomposition of society itself are all clear indications that something is deeply wrong with the modern orientation of life” (Kushi and Jack 22). Without drastic steps to return to a purified, holistic existence, cultures will continue to experience escalating social problems.

Despite many advances in medical technology, effective cancer cures, or even treatments are not available (Kushi and Esko 6). At the beginning of the twentieth century, one out of every twenty-seven people was affected by cancer. By 1950, the number had increased to one in eight and by 1985, one out of every three people had cancer (9). Cancer exists long before symptoms present themselves. Medical treatment has strayed from its original purpose: to treat the problem. Now, it masks the source of the problem by dealing only with symptoms. Without treating the root causes of cancer, it cannot be cured (Kushi and Jack 24).
In addition to cancers, other degenerative diseases are affecting the world population. Chronic diseases are manifesting themselves as a result of nutrient excesses and imbalances with the diet (Kushi Institute 27). In 1971, the United States became the first nation to consume processed foods as more than 50 percent of its diet (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 2). According to Kushi, “An excess of calories and saturated animal fats coupled with nutrient loss in processing and the use of additives, is largely responsible for the staggering rate of health problems in many Western nations” (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 2).

Each year, the average American consumes more than nine pounds of chemical additives. When the body reaches a substance it cannot recognize or digest, it moves the chemicals to weak organs where it is stored for years. When the body is forced to deal with these pollutants, it is generally in the form of cancer or another disease. Throughout the last century, industrialized nations have seen a rise in rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, AIDS and immune deficiencies, Alzheimer’s disease, and other degenerative conditions (Kushi and Esko 9). According to a survey by the National Center for Health Statistics, nearly one out of two Americans has a condition that may result in chronic disease (Kushi, *Macrobiotic Way* 2).

Even more prevalent that the above problems is the issue of obesity. Twenty percent of all preschoolers are overweight, and ten percent are clinically obese (Markel). Of adults, 35 percent are overweight and an additional 26 percent are obese (Brownlee 141). With over half of the population struggling with weight issues, illnesses such as Type II diabetes, heart disease, and a wide range of cancers are robbing citizens of precious years. It is possible that obesity may soon cause as much preventable illness as tobacco smoke. Yet currently, $16 million is spent annually on programs to prevent obesity, whereas tobacco abuse garners $100 million in support of substance control (142).
In addition to comprehensive declining health, the dissolution of the traditional family unit is weakening our society. Civilizations throughout time were held together by the family. In the past, families were cemented by a shared quality of blood, resulting from a shared quality of food (Kushi and Associates 31). Since the disruption of patterns of eating and family life, our world has experienced an increase in broken families, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and crime. Divorce rates continue to climb as does the incidence of out-of-wedlock, teenage pregnancies. Domestic abuse involving all members of the family has increased and reported cases of child abuse are increasing exponentially (16-17).

Alcoholism, drug use, and juvenile delinquency exacerbate violence within the family (Kushi and Associates 16-17). As family problems continue to rise, the quality of education within schools is declining (19). Adolescent suicide is a growing concern, reflecting the destabilization of the collective mental health. Over 30 million people in the United States are under some form of professional mental healthcare, more than triple the number in 1955. Billions of dollars are spent annually on pharmaceutical drugs designed to control mental and emotional illnesses (204).

Evidently, change is needed to return to a more stable and peaceful existence. As Americans consume increased quantities of processed and chemical-enhanced foods, their health rapidly declines. Without the base of mental and emotional stability and a strong family support group, physical wellness cannot exist. These three components of wellness are so infinitely intertwined that they cannot be unraveled. A drastic shift in values must occur to repair the damages we have inflicted upon ourselves. A commitment to improved diet and lifestyle is the first step towards adopting a more holistic existence.
My Personal Journey

I became acquainted with the macrobiotic lifestyle after doctors were unable to specifically diagnose my mother with an illness she suffered. After two frustrating years interacting with the medical community, she decided to try alternative methods of healing. Her experimentation with natural remedies led her to church friend Ginny Harper, a macrobiotic counselor. Being away at college, I was only peripherally observing my mom’s venture into the unknown.

The first summer that I was home and my mom was practicing macrobiotics, she cooked one meal for herself and a traditional one for the rest of the family. As she progressed through cooking classes, however, and learned to flavor the naturally bland food, I began incorporating portions of her food into my meal. Away at school again as a junior, I found myself uninterested in devoting the time necessary to cook full meals. I continued my routine of cafeteria and restaurant eating, supplemented occasionally with fresh cooked meals. During my time at school, I slowly gained weight, adding to my naturally small frame. Although I was still fairly thin, I was evidently not as fit as I previously had been.

Returning home for yet another summer, I was impressed by my mother’s slim physique and evident healthfulness. Although she had not yet achieved optimal wellness, she looked better than she had in years. During my time at home, she pressed me to read books on healthy living and invited me to biweekly macrobiotic potluck dinners at friends’ homes. There I was introduced to a community of kind individuals, all of whom had a flair for cooking. The food was delicious! I was attracted to the lifestyle of these individuals and the health they exuded.

Returning to Knoxville for summer school in June 2001, I decided I wanted to try out macrobiotic cooking. My attempts were boring at first. My limited knowledge of cooking did
nothing to help the blandness of rice or beans. I enjoyed making sushi however, and it quickly became a staple of my diet. Despite my fumbling attempts at cooking, I quickly began noticing positive changes within myself.

Physical changes were the most immediate. I quickly lost a noticeable amount of weight. The elimination of dairy products and sugar resulted in a nearly ten-pound drop in less than two weeks. My energy level, previously erratic and heavily dependent on sleep, rocketed, remaining at a constant high. My bouts with nighttime insomnia and daytime sleepiness faded. I immediately ceased remembering dreams or nightmares, making my sleep more restful. The most noticeable change was the cessation of stress headaches and sinus congestion. I was not aware of the plague of these symptoms until they disappeared. I felt more whole than ever before.

Mentally, the adoption of the macrobiotic lifestyle allowed me to be more focused and introspective. My thinking became clearer and I was less prone to be sidetracked by other issues. Tendencies to procrastinate were replaced by a more action-oriented attitude. My sometimes-compulsive personality mellowed, allowing me to enjoy experiences rather than worry through them. I became more thoughtful in my interactions with others, and I found that I was better able to control both my thoughts and words. Most importantly though, I experienced thoughtful self-revelations.

Emotionally, I immediately noticed a balancing within myself. The normal emotional responses to monthly hormonal changes were eliminated. As I became more reflective, I noticed my growing contentment. My confidence improved and I realized greater security in my identity. I was suddenly more free to express my emotions, while at the same time, being in better control
of them. As I proceed on my macrobiotic journey, positive physical, mental, and emotional
changes continue.

After months of practicing the macrobiotic lifestyle, I chose to travel to Kushi Institute in
Becket Massachusetts to attend the *Way to Health* seminar. At the 600-acre reserve nestled in the
Berkshire Mountains, I, along with seventeen others, was immersed in the macrobiotic culture
for seven days. I expanded my knowledge of the fundamentals of macrobiotics and also took
classes on macrobiotic oriental diagnosis. We participated in cooking classes daily, and learned
about natural home remedies.

Kushi Institute is a utopian village on top of a mountain. Driving there, I passed through Normal
Rockwell-like towns dotted along the landscape. Snow covered the grass, giving the pure scenery a
pristine look. Once we reached the school, the purity and peace of the area amazed me. The world literally was left behind. The lack
of television and radio reception insulates the area from outside influence. The area has an aura
of health and peace. It is the ideal place for anyone seeking healing.

Many people travel to Kushi after their doctors have told them that there is nothing that
can be done for their illness. In my session, individuals with lung, colon, liver, and breast
cancers, Hodgkin’s Disease, osteoporosis, and colitis were searching for cures. Additionally,
several people were there to learn to cook for friends and family members who were suffering
from cancer. Two other people, like me, were in attendance simply to learn more about the lifestyle.

I have been blessed to not have lost any family or friends to terminal illness. Although this is fortunate, I found myself ill prepared to live with people fighting for their lives for a full week. During our first night of introductions, I tentatively watched the others, unsure of how to interact with them. I struggled with a sense of guilt; I was choosing to be there, not fearing the repercussions of what would happen if I did not follow our teachers’ recommendations. Most of the others were there to fight, for hope and for their lives.

Secretly, I felt lucky because my roommate was not ill. She was there to learn how to cook for a friend with cancer. I initially avoided those in our group who was sick. I wasn’t sure what to say—everything seemed inconsequential. As the second day progressed however, and I watched the others, I learned what is means to be human. We all were living our own experience. During that week, though, our experiences were overlapping. By limiting my contact with others, I was curbing my existence, and my opportunity to grow.

As a communication major, I rarely find myself without an agenda or a communication plan. I decided that week, however, to simply exist. I cleared my brain of all questions, all predictions, all assumptions, and I became a simple square in the quilt of life. I listened to others’ stories, and although I could not understand, I worked to empathize. I spent late nights laughing with fifty and sixty-year old
women like we were kids at a slumber party. I erased “breast cancer” and “Hodgkin’s Disease” from my brain, and instead lived with Karen and Matt.

During that week, I was fulfilled, as I never had been before. I appreciated all that I learned in the cooking and theory classes. I grew, however, because of the personal relationships I formed. It became clear to me that macrobiotics is less about the physical act of eating, and more about the spiritual acts of giving and receiving. You give of your energy in food preparation so you may receive the healing energy of the food. Similarly, you give your own energy to those around you in exchange for their new, stimulating energy.

It is this exchange of energy that promotes healing on all levels. Macrobiotics cannot be defined as a specific diet or particular good and bad foods. Instead, it is a vehicle of self-actualization. It provides you with the freedom of choice and the knowledge of balance needed to heal yourself. Macrobiotics is not the only pathway to wellness. It is the most comprehensive view of full body awareness and health that I am aware of, however. Macrobiotics gave me the direction and freedom I needed to experience the full scope of existence.

**MY UNDERSTANDING**

After spending a week studying at Kushi and experiencing the holistic awakening of my body, mind, and spirit, I was prompted to seek out others who shared the same experience. I feel
vast contentment to read an author who describes my experience in his or her words. There is a connection there that cannot be shared in any other way. It is similarly gratifying to stumble upon an individual who seeks to know himself or herself on a more profound level. My greatest accidental discovery of enlightened individuals came when I entered Roy Ambrester’s Speech Communication 320 classroom.

Within this class, we read a variety of authors and watched several movies that stimulated our awareness of social encapsulation and self-awakening. Reading authors such as Chopra, Laing, Perls, and Roszak contributed to my understanding of the existential awakening within myself. The class was full of one enlightening concept after another. Conversations were provocative and meaningful. It was gratifying to expand my knowledge of such philosophy within a supportive environment, and it was enjoyable to share an aspect of the holistic journey I am traveling with others.

Beginning with R.D. Laing in his “Mystification of Experience” article, I first found macrobiotic principle hidden within our philosophy homework. Laing writes that long before our birth, even before we are conceived, our parents have decided whom we will be (2). He probably does not even understand the full meaning of his statement! The lifestyle of my parents will affect my children. At its most basic social level, this comment makes sense. My parents’ values and experiences will be passed through me to my children. It is not as simple as that, however.

Macrobiotics is based upon principles of energy. Simplistically, what I eat, my associations with other people, the feelings I experience, the grief I struggle with will all be passed along to my children. It is not a matter simply of the nine months I am carrying the child either. A lifetime of stored and hidden energy will move from my body into that of my child. Following September 11, my mom made the scary prediction that we will see many children in
coming decades traumatized by the events of that day. The children most affected logically will be those in the wombs of women widowed by the tragedy. However, as far as September 11 affected the souls of all generations, the fear, frustration, and grief experienced during that time will be passed on to the next generation, and residual effects will be passed on to the next, and so on.

Fritz Perls’ text on Gestalt Therapy is especially applicable to the macrobiotic practice. He writes, “we discover that producing things, and living for things, and the exchange of things, is not the ultimate meaning of life. We discover that the meaning of life is that it is to be lived, and it is not to be traded and conceptualized and squeezed into a pattern of systems. We realize that manipulation and control are not the ultimate job of life” (42). Few people would disagree with the inherent message in this statement. On the other hand, few people have ever truly experienced liberation from “things.” During my week at Kushi Institute, I was able to glimpse what this freedom is. I had no concern for the external forces that normally so consume me. Instead, I felt whole in just being. How I was being, or acting, or feeling was immaterial. The sheer fact that I existed was enough.

The idea that an organism works as a whole, not simply as a collection of parts, is one that seems to escape many people today. Perls recognizes this very basic tenet of macrobiotics. The existence of our intestines cannot be separated from the workings of our lungs. Few people today would see the connection between the two. By viewing the body, mind, and spirit holistically however, we see that one “aspect” of self is simply a classification that cannot be made. How can you determine where your intestines end and your lungs begin when their functions are so intimately related? Ask a western medical doctor; he will draw a thick, dark line separating the two. Ask an eastern medical doctor, and he will think you are crazy. Organs and
their functions cannot be separated, just as our psyche cannot be separated from our physical
wellness. Health is finding the balance within all systems.

According to Perls, where individuals’ experiences overlap, is where they will find the
possibility for communication (44). During the past century, individuals’ experiences have
connected less and less. As our world diversifies and people move in outward directions, the
potential for personal communication has decreased. Throughout history, the most practical time
to converge and share was during meals. Although we still meet for meals, we are unaware that
we don’t connect as people did before. Why?

With the proliferation of worldwide transportation networks and the variety of restaurants
available, individuals have any choice of food at each meal. This is considered by many to be
ideal. Everyone is able to cater to their own tastes without encumbering others. According to
macrobiotic principle, however, you begin taking on properties of what you eat. As people
continually ingest beef, chicken, fish, pork, or even vegetables, they move in the direction of
their most often ingested food. In a hilarious but brilliant presentation given by Carrie Wolf at
Kushi Institute, she made the appropriate comment that at the end of the day, how does a cow,
chicken, fish, or pig communicate with one another? (“Menu Planning”). Is in any wonder that
families have difficulty communicating and working through problems? To more fully
understand one another, we must meet on common ground, by sharing the same food as those
around us.

Gestalt therapy recognizes that the organism is a system that must be in balance to
function properly (49). Any imbalance is experienced as a need to correct the balance.
Macrobiotic principle rests on the balance between yin and yang forces. When considering this
perspective, illness is not a negative experience, but rather is a warning that the body is out of
balance. Simple ailments such as sinus congestion, backaches, and rashes should be recognized as early warning signs of potential greater problems. In essence, we should be thankful that our body is so well attuned that it experiences illness allowing us to make adjustments to our lifestyle.

Perls defines an integrated person as one "who is aware of his various component parts and has put them together into a unified functional whole" (54). Similarly, "the complete person is the one who is most aware of his component parts, most accepting of them, and has achieved an integration—a continuing integrating process" (54). This idea is definitely not restricted to individuals practicing macrobiotics. It is something that anyone who has experienced macrobiotics for any length of time is aware of however. Each meal is a holistic gift to the body. It prepares oneself for a greater awareness and appreciation for the biological experience that is occurring. Eating combines physical, emotional, and spiritual forces. Eating correctly meets every need of our body. By recognizing this principle, people are developing additional room for growth.

Perls recognizes the human tendency to play helpless, especially in the face of difficulty. In macrobiotics, there is no room for helplessness. Food provides every individual with the means to help himself. Everyone has free will; it is simply a matter of exercising it. Macrobiotics is self-healing. You use your energy to create and serve foods that will nourish your body. Your dependence shifts from others to yourself. This is not to say that you should not have in place a strong support network. It simply professes that you must be willing to support yourself to experience healing.

Finally, Perls writes, "I can't give you a prescription because everybody tries to get out of the impasse without going through it; everybody tries to tear their chains, and this is never
successful. It’s the awareness, the full experience, the awareness of how you are stuck, that makes you recover, and realize the whole thing is just a nightmare, not a real thing, not reality” (61). This is a fitting conclusion to Perls’ connection to macrobiotics. Healing is a process, both physically and emotionally. To reach an optimal balance, one must traverse through an impasse. They may be stuck there for days, weeks, months, or even years. However, it is moving through that impasse on one’s own strength with the support of others that makes wellness so rewarding.

Author Deepak Chopra especially illustrates elements of my macrobiotic journey in his book Perfect Health. He writes, “all of us are responsible for creating the body we live in” (8). This ultimate declaration of responsibility is an idea that must be realized to achieve wellness. We must be accountable for what we do, while at the same time realizing that our body gives us many chances to heal (9). Cancer and other diseases are completely preventable. Even AIDS can be eradicated from the body when it is returned to a healthful balance. By the lifestyles we live, we are choosing the diseases that overtake us (11). Our perspective must be reshaped to see sickness as a warning signal and to choose wellness.

Like in macrobiotic principle, Chopra believes that maintaining balance in the body, mind, and spirit forms the ultimate prevention of any disease (17). Our bodies seek to return themselves to a state of balance at all times. After eating meat, made of very yang properties, our bodies crave the light, upward yin energy of sugar. It is these extremes that cause further imbalance in the body. Macrobiotics circumvents this seesaw balancing by eliminating the far ends of the spectrum from the daily diet. Individuals instead consume grains, vegetables, and beans, all of which are very balanced foods.

Having the knowledge of foods and their properties gave me the confidence to continue practicing macrobiotics despite social pressure against it. Friends and even extended family were
critical of my decision to eliminate so many “normal” foods from my diet. People unfamiliar with the science of the diet criticized my practice, telling me knowingly that I was not ingesting enough calcium or iron to possibly be healthy. My knowledge in the correctness of my decision allows me to withstand the social pressure against my decision. Chopra recognizes this exact situation, writing “When you find out what is actually going on inside, you will no longer be bound by society’s notions of what you should be doing, saying, thinking, and feeling” (24).

The gratification of understanding authors such as Chopra reinforces my belief that I am continuing on the pathway to greater self-realization. Macrobiotics has opened me to a better understanding of my physical health and has provided me the opportunity to know myself more fully. Its literal definition, “great life,” accurately describes my practice of the lifestyle. I am enriched by my increased health, and especially by the expansion of my mind. Traveling to Kushi Institute afforded me the opportunity to relate to individuals on an entire new level. I am a more enlightened person now. There is much that I do not know, but I embrace the uncertainty that will lead to greater revelation in the future.
Works Cited


UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT – APPROVAL

Name: Jeannie M. Wherley

College: Communications
Department: Speech Communication

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Roy Ambrester

PROJECT TITLE: An Existential Examination of Macrobiotic Theory

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature], Faculty Mentor

Comments (Optional):

True to form, Jeanne has undertaken a project worthy of a doctoral dissertation. Her insights are superior to her ability to combine complex perspectives creating a theory that is more than the sum of the parts. Brilliant.

Though the context of Macrobiotic theory may seem remote to many, Jeanne has made it more universal by applying Existential Analysis.

Every Speech Communication major should be asked to read this fine piece on Communication Theory.

Good Show! A+