

Eating the
WU WEI WAY



For a Longer, Healthier Life

The Daoist concept **Wu Wei** means literally
'Not Doing' or 'Without Effort';
Do nothing that disturbs the harmony
of the natural order. *'Go with the flow'* of nature.

STEVEN ACUFF
Recipes by
ANGELIKA BERTACCO

Chapter 1

My Path to *Wu Wei*

My quest for the “Holy Grail” of nutrition began on a wintry evening in 1971, when I went to a public lecture on macrobiotic food in my hometown in Oregon. The unconventional presenters, Leslie Curry and Noah Osteen were wanderers from San Francisco, whose home was a cozy cabin built on the back of a flatbed truck.

I had never heard of macrobiotic food before. Later I found out that the word *macrobiotic* first appeared in the writings of Hippocrates. It comes from the Greek *makro* (“great”) and *bios* (“life”). This “great life” originally meant a full, healthy life with balance in food, drink and work. However, the couple presented the macrobiotic way of eating as organic, whole food with a unique approach based on the energetic effect of food on the body and mind.

In the early twentieth century, a strong-willed Japanese man, George Ohsawa, taught a way of eating for self-healing inspired by the ancient wisdom of Oriental philosophy and traditional, natural Japanese food, after he cured his tuberculosis by eating this way. When Ohsawa brought his teaching to the West, he borrowed the word *macrobiotics* from Christoph Hufeland, a German doctor who in the nineteenth century had written a book about *Makrobiotik*. Ohsawa thought that Hufeland expressed the essence of his teaching.

At the talk that evening, the macrobiotic couple spoke about Ohsawa and his understanding of the *Yin* and the *Yang*, the classical Chinese words for the complementary polar opposites that are the basis of Daoist philosophy. The energetic effect of some foods is the *Yin*, i.e. expanding and cooling. This includes foods such as cucumber, celery and other watery vegetables as well as fruit. Other foods have the *Yang*, i.e. contracting and warming, for example baked root vegetables, brown rice with salty soy sauce and even animal protein. The macrobiotic way is to strive to balance the energetic polarity between expansion and contraction to support optimal wellness. Westerners could take the terms *Alpha* and *Omega* to show the

polarity instead of *Yang* and *Yin*, which in Chinese merely mean the sunny and shadowy side of a hill respectively.

Man can mesh with the natural energetic world around him and keep the harmony by going with the flow and doing nothing to disturb it. This allows living life to the fullest. The Daoist concept of *Wu Wei*, literally “not doing,” expresses this well. It is effortless, like the trees following the changes from spring to summer to fall to winter. Insight into the patterns of the *DAO* promotes sensitivity to this greater order. This, in turn, promotes more humility, since the great *DAO* is endless while man is very small and limited.

By living the spirit of this oneness with the environment (in Daoism: “man earth not two”), man aligns himself with the greater energy of the *DAO*. Following the spirit of *Wu Wei* makes life easier, healthier and happier.

Finding Out for Myself

After the presenters spoke about macrobiotic food, they served a warming meal, beginning with a miso-seaweed soup and followed by brown rice, fried vegetables and aduki beans. I liked the clean, natural taste of the food and felt a gentle sensation of well-being in my stomach. It resonated pleasantly inside me, as if I had just met an old friend after many years. This was true food.

Wanting to find out more, I read George Ohsawa’s classic book *Zen Macrobiotics*. Ohsawa taught that a key principle of macrobiotic living is the spirit of *Non Credo* (“I don’t believe”). Rather than blindly believing what others claim, we should rely on the only trustworthy expert we have, namely our own thinking and experience. Everyone finds out for himself or herself what is right from the greater knowledge that comes through personal study and practical experience. This promotes clearer intuition to make the right food and lifestyle choices.

The next step was to try macrobiotic food for a week. I followed Ohsawa’s guidelines and ate what he described as harmonious foods, including whole grains (mostly brown rice), plenty of vegetables, miso soup, and for protein, mainly beans and other legumes and natural eggs from the farmers’ market. Following Ohsawa, I ate no sugar, dairy food, meat, nightshades or tropical fruit.

Switching my food so radically gave quick results. I woke up the first morning two hours earlier than normal, feeling very refreshed. I already considered myself robust, having a brown belt in the Japanese martial art of jiu jitsu. Over the next few days, however, I felt even stronger,

emotionally calmer and mentally sharper.

The quick benefit of this leap into the world of whole foods amazed me. How sweet the first organic carrot tasted, as if my taste buds had just come to life. I began to understand the powerful impact of food on health. Within weeks, I even saw that a lipoma (hardened lump of fat under the skin) disappeared from my lower right arm after a doctor had suggested surgical removal.

The ecologist in me liked the macrobiotic idea that whole food and natural lifestyle strengthen the bond between man and the environment. It made sense that choosing organic food and an ecological lifestyle would bring forth greater harmony with nature. It was also appealing to eat food that is seasonal and when available, locally grown. This takes less fossil fuel for transport and makes less pollution. This new way of eating also meant much less wasteful food packaging to throw out. When I shopped in the natural food store of the time, I brought my own bags and containers and scooped the bulk foods out of barrels and burlap sacks.

Stumbling upon macrobiotic food became a milestone in my life. I became more aware of the interconnections of life, including the physical health of the nervous system, which is the link between the physical and mental realms. I began to see the influence of food on thinking and behavior, just as Ohsawa had written.

Beginning my Life's Work

Several months after my first encounter with macrobiotics, I set off to Europe, where natural food was harder to find. When I ate food of less quality on my travels, the pleasant inner glow from the balanced macrobiotic meals faded. The swings in my energy level showed me yet again the great impact of food on well-being.

Later, in Denmark, I met Karen Friberg, who also was keenly interested in macrobiotics. With simple macrobiotic food, she had overcome rheumatoid psoriasis and then begun teaching macrobiotic cooking courses. We worked together and later married. Our activities grew and we founded a macrobiotic study house in Sweden. Four daughters were born, who all thrived on our dairy-free way of eating. Many mistakenly believe that children need milk from cows or goats for nourishment and especially for calcium. I will come back to this controversial subject in a following chapter.

Many people came to our study house to learn about how to eat for better health and

especially for self-healing of specific problems. Above all, they wanted to know how to cook whole grains, vegetables, beans and seaweed. I often gave personal nutrition advice to those struggling with health problems.

In the early 1980s, more cancer patients began coming after the media reported that some cancer patients had recovered their health with macrobiotic food. Anthony Sattilaro, MD, inspired many cancer patients to eat the macrobiotic way with his book *Recalled by Life*. Dr. Sattilaro wrote about his own recovery from advanced metastasized prostate cancer. A few years later, actor Dirk Benedict wrote *Confessions of a Kamikaze Cowboy*, telling of his victory over prostate cancer while eating the macrobiotic way. The guests who came to our study house went through their highs and lows, as they tried to overcome old food habits or tough family situations. This gave me more insight into what it takes for self-healing in the real world.

In 1986, Peter (48) from Berlin came to me in Kassel, Germany to get advice on food to fight cancer. Peter had right-side lung cancer that had spread to his liver and brain. His doctors gave him no hope and said he had only 3 months to live. He took only painkillers.

I showed Peter the macrobiotic food program that I had learned from Michio Kushi, author of *The Cancer Prevention Diet*. When Kushi later came to Germany, I told Peter that he should consult Kushi. He said after the consultation that Kushi essentially had confirmed my advice.

Monika, his wife, cooked balanced macrobiotic meals for him every day, and after a few weeks Peter was able to drop the pain medication. After about 18 months, the oncologists were amazed when they could find no more trace of cancer. For many years after, I met Peter whenever I came to Berlin. After five years, Peter told me that the oncologists had asked him to come to the clinic to explain what he had done to stop terminal cancer.

Over the following years, I spoke twice to oncologists from Peter's clinic who came to me because a loved one had cancer. Oncologists know the modest results of their treatments. Peter died an elderly man, twenty-three years after his cancer diagnosis. This was truly a wonder after the oncologists' prognosis: three months to live.

During this time, I often lectured on the macrobiotic way of eating in Germany, where I met Werner Wicker, the owner of a medical clinic in Kassel. He planned to include natural therapies in a new clinic program and thought that the food concept I presented was right for the clinic. I helped lay the groundwork for a macrobiotic food program and then supported it by coming regularly to the clinic to counsel patients personally during their month-long stay.

It became clear to me that I needed more in-depth training for such a daunting task. I had worked several times over the years with Michio Kushi, the leading macrobiotic teacher from Boston, when he came to Europe. Kushi kindly offered to tutor me for work with cancer patients, and his personal guidance proved to be very helpful.

We called the clinic program *Vitalkost* (vitality food) and it soon became popular, accommodating about 60 patients at any given time. Every Thursday the patients got a thick fish-vegetable soup that included the soft-cooked, finely blended bones. This dish is *koi-koku*, a Japanese macrobiotic specialty that strengthens the body and helps weak people to get back on their feet.

I learned a lot about the practical application of macrobiotic food theory during these years as I commuted between my home in Sweden and the clinic in Germany. It was a unique situation, where the patients had optimal support to overcome their illnesses. They didn't have to go back home to their own kitchens and try to prepare meals with unknown food items, as others must do. They came three times a day to the dining room for their meals and even took part in cooking courses.

The patients' nutritional needs varied, and flexibility in macrobiotic food choices helped them stay with it. While most did well eating grains and vegetables as staples, others needed less carbohydrates and more fat and protein in their meals to feel well with the new food. Some thrived with more animal protein, which was mostly fish.

A special whole blood test (including both serum and red cells) often showed a lack of minerals that the conventional serum blood test routinely misses. A hair mineral analysis was also helpful. Those with cancer had no time to waste getting their essential mineral levels into the normal range. The general macrobiotic thinking at the time opposed specific supplements based on blood tests. In my work, however, the whole blood test proved to be very beneficial, and I recommended that patients take natural food-based mineral supplements based on their test results.

It wasn't easy for all of the patients to cope with the emotional and social aftermath of eating food very different from that of family and friends. These patients needed the support and understanding of their partners and loved ones, but it was not always forthcoming. For some cancer patients, the dire situation of trying to overcome a life-threatening illness became a barometer of the health of their relationships. Anita, 45 years old at the time, had breast cancer. When she went home after her stay at the clinic, her husband belittled her about her new food

until she had enough and left him. Others gave up for the sake of peace at home, even though they felt better with their new way of eating.

Both physical and mental factors play a role in undertaking a major change in daily food, and patience helps to overcome the hurdles. Everyone needs to go at his or her own pace. It is not a matter of all or nothing, and even taking a few first steps forward can be the right beginning for some.

Ingrid, who was 50 years old at the time, suffered horribly from rheumatoid arthritis. She came to the clinic with such intense inflammation in her hands that her husband had to help her with everything. After failed steroid treatment at three specialist clinics in Germany, she was still plagued by inflammation. She had no idea that changing her food could relieve the condition. Like most people, Ingrid had never heard of the inflammatory effect of nightshades. These include potatoes, tomatoes, bell peppers, chili, eggplant and tobacco. After a month of eating at the clinic avoiding all nightshades, her hands recovered fully. *Vitalkost* has helped many patients and the program has been ongoing since 1988.

Ingrid wondered how her highly trained medical specialists could have such a shocking lack of knowledge of healing with food. I told her that doctors learn very little about nutrition in their medical training. Even if they knew about it, they are too busy to take the time needed to explain food for self-healing to their many patients. In addition, the dominant pharmaceutical approach to medicine leaves no financial incentive for food advice.

New Insight from Dr. Weston A. Price

A few years later, I took another step forward in my understanding of food for wellness and longevity when I met Sally Fallon, author and activist for natural food. She showed me the brilliant work of Dr. Weston A. Price, the great pioneer in nutrition research. His classic book *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration* gave me new insight especially into the need for eating enough good fat to stay healthy.

Dr. Price documented the worsening health of indigenous people in many parts of the world in the 1930s and 1940s as they gave up their traditional, natural foods. His before-and-after photos of teeth left no doubt that industrialized food wreaked havoc on the health of these once sturdy populations. Straight, strong teeth became tilted and uneven when they began eating the refined sugar and white flour of modern civilization.

While his landmark book confirmed what I knew about the harmful effects of sugar and

other highly refined foods, it also got me thinking about my own way of eating. Aside from eating fish a few times a week, I was nearly vegan. Dr. Price found that the hardy people he studied ate more fat and animal protein than the sparing amounts I ate. It dawned on me that eating a bit more food of animal origin could be beneficial.

Curious as always, I began to eat a bit more fat and some organic chicken and turkey as a new source of animal protein. This made me feel a little stronger, but I also felt more need for the *Yin* of sauerkraut, pickled cucumbers and other cultured, fermented vegetables to balance the *Yang* of the heavier meat. I understood why sour, refreshing sauerkraut goes so well with fatty sausage in Germany. This change put me at odds with those who insisted that the orthodox macrobiotic guidelines, called the Kushi Standard Diet, were the only true macrobiotic way of eating. However, I followed Ohsawa's macrobiotic motto *Non Credo* and found out for myself what was right for me.

A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts

In my research of fat, I learned about the healing potential of coconut oil. It is very stable at frying temperature, helps the immune system destroy harmful microbes and even promotes weight loss when needed.

With the macrobiotic approach, I had hardly eaten coconut oil, since according to macrobiotic theory, tropical foods have strong cooling *Yin* and fit the *Yang* of the tropical climate where they come from. Sesame oil and olive oil are better suited to a temperate climate. To find out more about the effect of coconut oil, I ate some at every meal for several days. The plant-based saturated fat gave me a nice feeling of energy and fullness that lasted for several hours. Over the next few weeks, I also noticed that my skin became smoother and some dry patches on my legs stopped itching and became normal. With this new insight, I included organic coconut oil into my daily food program.

Contrary to the popular myth, the saturated fat in organic coconut oil doesn't increase blood cholesterol or the risk of heart and circulatory disease. The common theory—and it is only a theory—is that saturated fat leads to blockages in the arteries that cause heart attacks and strokes. However, throughout the centuries, natural populations in the tropics have lived well with coconut as a major food.

Some very knowledgeable nutrition specialists have weighed in on the coconut oil debate. Prof. Emeritus Jon Kabara, PhD, from Michigan State University has stated that coconut oil is

the best oil for health. The saturated medium-chain lauric acid in coconut oil is also optimal for losing weight, when needed. It breaks down quickly and converts to energy rather than accumulating in the body, as oils with long-chain fatty acids do.

I once lectured about food and health at a yoga retreat in the hilly rain forest near Auckland, New Zealand. Afterward Caroline, 36 years old, asked me what she could do about her obesity and other health problems. She had suffered with rheumatoid arthritis from the age of 2 and got lots of medical treatment and steroids. She even underwent several operations to get artificial joints because of the ongoing degenerative illness and the side effects of the medication, which also left her extremely overweight. She tried every diet she came across, but nothing helped.

I advised her to drop her failed low-fat approach and eat healthy fat, especially organic coconut oil, along with whole grains, vegetables and for protein dried beans, lentils and chickpeas. I explained to Caroline that sugar and nightshade plants make joint inflammation worse.

Caroline began this program at once and was able to stop taking nine of her eleven medications within three weeks, including an anti-inflammatory that she had taken most of her life. Over the next year, she lost about 6.5 pounds (3 kg) per month. During the second year, she kept losing weight, but at a slower pace. After two years, she had lost a total of 100 pounds (44 kg). She maintained this weight over the following years without gaining it back again, avoiding the well-known yo-yo effect, when weight first goes down and then up again, which is common with conventional dieting.

Another benefit of Caroline's macrobiotic way of eating was improved bone density. Before she switched to the new food program, she got a bone-density scan. It revealed a level 9 percent below average for her age, a common side effect of long-term steroid use. The next scan two years later showed her bone density had increased and was then within the normal range. Her doctors told her that this was unheard of with big weight loss, since bones normally become thinner. However, typically, they didn't ask her how she had achieved this.

Caroline discovered the strong healing power of food, when she at last ate what her body needed to heal itself. This included eating enough of the right kind of fat. After years of following the mistaken advice from doctors and nutritionists who told her to restrict fat consumption, she learned that it's wise not to believe everything the experts say.

Self-Healing with Food

My work with macrobiotic food has shown me the truly wondrous benefit of eating well. I have followed the progress of many people who have sought my advice over weeks, months and even years. Often they tell me that their doctors were amazed at how much their health had improved after switching to macrobiotic food. They report that their doctors commonly remarked, “Whatever you are doing, keep doing it.”

If the doctors instead would ask these patients what exactly they were doing, they would begin to understand the healing power of food. Their lack of curiosity stifles their ability to become better doctors. Most of them know very little about food as a common cause of disease. There are shining exceptions. Sherry Rogers, MD, author of *The Cure is in the Kitchen*, told how she regained her health by trying the macrobiotic approach. Dr. Rogers wrote about environmental medicine, a branch of conventional medicine that (like macrobiotics) looks at everything that might affect a patient’s health, including food and other environmental factors. With a sense of humor, she nailed the essence of the challenge in making such sweeping food changes with a brilliant statement: to want to eat macrobiotic food, you have to be smart enough or sick enough.

The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, father of modern medicine, understood this very well. His famous quote “Let food be thy medicine” shows this insight. Medical doctors should learn more about the wisdom of the man behind the Hippocratic Oath.

Food is a complex issue that nutrition scientists are still trying to understand. They are now backing quietly away from long-held beliefs that have proven to be wrong. We need to break out of the rusty dogma about nutrition and take a holistic approach with insights from personal experience, food traditions as well as cutting-edge scientific research. Then we can tap into the true potential of self-healing with food.

The power of food to heal is clearly seen in the story of Elke, age 42, who came to see me in Berlin to ask my advice about her severe skin allergy. She was getting the standard medical treatment with cortisone cream, but the thick, crusty skin kept coming back on her hands and forearms. Cortisone only suppresses the symptoms for a while, a typically symptomatic treatment.

I showed her the food guidelines to overcome her skin allergy and emphasized that she had to stop all dairy food to clear her lymph system. Elke followed the program strictly and cut out all milk products. After three weeks, her skin had healed and become soft. She told me

later that she had wanted to tell her success story to the others in her allergy patient support group. However, her dermatologist wouldn't allow her to share her story, since he claimed that her cure with food wouldn't work for anyone else and she only would raise false hopes. Her story obviously didn't go down well with a dermatologist who knew only the symptomatic approach to medicine.

It makes sense to eat what supports wellness and stop consuming what burdens the body. This goes to the heart of healing any health disorder. Yet it is not as easy as it might seem. Food can be as controversial and sensitive as politics or religion. People tend to have strong emotional ties to their beloved indulgences and delights. Even when facing serious illness, many often ignore health advice. Some even feel annoyed by well-meaning friends and loved ones who want them to switch to wholesome food.

Generally people don't want to take personal responsibility for their wellness or illness and would rather hand this responsibility over to medical doctors, the "experts" as they see it. For whatever reason, most prefer to be passive patients rather than active self-healers. They don't like change and would rather go on with their old ways and habits. However, people don't have to be passive lambs. Everyone has the power to strengthen his or her own health, and taking this personal responsibility is a pillar of macrobiotic thinking.

The hardest habit of all to break seems to be that cherished morning coffee. Waking up with a caffeine jolt is the common response to the widespread problem of chronic tiredness that often begins at the first waking moment. This shows clearly that the body isn't in good shape. Caffeine only gives a temporary effect of heightened alertness by stimulating the adrenal glands to produce stress hormones. This serves as a short-lived crutch to get the energy that the body lacks. Of course, this can't provide the energy that comes from eating well. Real energy comes from true well-being, which is only possible after the adrenal glands recover from caffeine over-stimulation.

Neurotoxic caffeine is a burden especially for the liver, the main detoxing organ. Shortly after stopping caffeine, unpleasant symptoms of toxin withdrawal often set in, such as headache, but these pass in a short time. Everyone knows that chronic stress leads to illness, but who thinks about the rise in stress hormones from caffeine?

The popularity of caffeine as coffee, tea and "energy" drinks shows how widespread chronic tiredness is. The cause can be as basic as weak intestines that can't absorb the essential nutrients well. A feeble digestive system leaves the body deficient of nutrients, which saps vitality. A strong

digestive tract, on the other hand, breaks the chewed food mass down properly and absorbs the nutrients into the bloodstream. Without the proper minerals, vitamins and enzymes, the liver can't rid the body of harmful toxins or carry out other vital functions.

As the body gets older, it tends to get weaker. Only a conscious effort to promote the renewal of the body can slow down aging. Wise food and lifestyle choices support full life quality regardless of age. It doesn't take in-depth, detailed knowledge of nutrition to do this. It comes down to eating the right whole foods and chewing well.

The body then has the means to produce energy, sustain proper body functions, rid itself of toxins and repair damage to cells or form new ones. This is the basis of both physical and mental well-being, including clear thinking and good memory. Eating right promotes better life quality as well as a longer lifespan. This is the way to make the most of life, however long the lifespan.

In my youth, I greatly admired Alan Watts, an original thinker, philosopher and author who wrote about the meaning of life. Watts was a Christian theologian and one of the first Westerners to become a Zen Buddhist master. When I stepped into the world of natural food, I was dumbstruck to find that Watts, in spite of his understanding of Eastern philosophy, thought little of the importance of food. His death from a heart attack at the age of 58 put an end to his genius. Had Watts not overlooked the vital food factor, he surely would have fulfilled much more of his potential.

Finding Out for Yourself

Remember that there is no one way of eating that fits everyone. Think about everyone's uniqueness, both physically and mentally, as well as the various jobs, activity levels, age, gender and home climate or season.

Most experts don't see nutrition holistically and write rather from a limited, scientific perspective. It takes the greater overview, together with sound and practical guidelines for daily meals, to make it work well. For example, the book *The Metabolic Typing Diet*, by William Wolcott, showed me that I am a carbohydrate metabolic type rather than a protein or mixed type. However, Wolcott lacks the holistic dimension. Interesting as the book is, the list of beneficial foods for the carbohydrate type includes highly processed, low-fat dairy food, the worst of the milk products. In the chapter on milk, I debunk the myth that cow's milk is a good source of calcium to prevent osteoporosis, and show rather that milk is a risk factor for weak

bones and many illnesses.

It takes two kinds of knowledge to find the optimal way of eating for individual needs. The first kind is intellectual and analytical, dealing with various theories and ideas. Those theories that seem to make sense are worth trying. The second is practical and involves listening to the feedback from our own bodies and observations. This is the spirit of Ohsawa's motto *Non Credo*. We need the broader knowledge to understand intellectually what might be best for us, but also the finer intuition to feel it.

Don't forget *Non Credo* when reading or hearing what people think about eating for health—or any other subject. Keep an open mind, but don't just believe what others claim. Find out for yourself what is true. I once came across a true pearl of wisdom: *Look everywhere to understand*. Be curious.

With the macrobiotic perspective, it becomes easier to make sense of the confusing contradictions that abound in the field of nutrition. This greater understanding empowers you as a self-healer.



Good food is the key to a long, healthy life.

With good nutrition, the body has the means to produce energy, sustain its vital functions, rid itself of toxins and rejuvenate its cells. People who eat with wellness and longevity in mind feel better, have more energy and experience greater mental clarity.

This book will help you understand how to eat in a way that promotes wellness and will improve your quality of life regardless of your age. It is based on a holistic approach to health - drawing on traditional wisdom about food and insights from the authors' personal experience as well as cutting-edge scientific research.

The many recipes show how the principles of health can be applied in a very practical way. The recipes cover a broad spectrum for everyone interested in eating well - from recipes that focus on self-healing to healthy snacks, quick and easy meals and delicious desserts.