

# Masanobu Fukuoka's Enduring Influence on New Agrarian Movements Abroad

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the ongoing popularity of Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese farmer, philosopher, and writer, among leaders of agrarianism in the West. First, to provide context, the most obvious shortcomings of modern industrial agriculture are briefly presented. Next, introductions to some of the more prominent movements that are attempting to restore mindful stewardship and husbandry practices to the agricultural process are provided. Then, a basic overview of Fukuoka's life and farming philosophy is followed by an analysis of the ways in which Fukuoka is quoted and portrayed when he appears in the works of Western writers of agrarianism in order to shed some light on how Fukuoka is perceived abroad and to thereby suggest just what sort of influence he wields during this turbulent time in global food production.*

## Introduction

*Mr. Fukuoka has understood that we cannot isolate one aspect of life from another. When we change the way we grow our food, we change our food, we change society, we change our values.*

Wendell Berry, Preface to *The One-straw Revolution*, 1978, p. ix

Last summer, a thin and frail 95-year-old man passed away at his small ancestral farmstead in the mountains of Ehime prefecture. While his name might not be well known to the general public, Masanobu Fukuoka is a legend among people worldwide who are involved in sustainable agricultural practices. He was the pioneer of what he called "natural farming" (自然農法), an agricultural method that avoids plowing, weeding, and the use of fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides. It's a method that tries to mimic natural processes as much as possible rather than relying on human intervention. He also liked to call it "do nothing" farming (何もしない農法), a deceptively simple moniker since, as he admitted

himself, it took him over thirty years to perfect (Fukuoka, 1978).

This paper explores the nature of Fukuoka's popularity and legacy, especially in Western countries, by examining what his admirers have said about him and how they have chosen to portray him in their own publications. To provide background, a brief review of the crises in modern agriculture and an introduction to some of the major agrarian trends that attempt to rectify the situation are first offered.

## **What Is Wrong With Agriculture?**

*Modern agriculture is just another processing industry that uses oil energy in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery to manufacture synthetic food products which are poor imitations of natural food.*

Masanobu Fukuoka, *The Natural Way of Farming*, 1985, p. 17

The fact that some readers might be surprised to encounter this agriculturally-themed article in a journal that focuses on cultural issues is a testament to just how industrialized food production has become. The word *culture* is embedded in *agriculture* for good reason. Perhaps even superseding the invention of writing, the development of agriculture is arguably the human innovation that has had the greatest impact on how our societies have organized themselves, how we humans have conceived of our rightful place in the world, and how we have typically viewed civilization's relationship to its natural surroundings. That is to say, agriculture has provided the foundation for much of what we now consider "culture."

The initial discovery and spread of writing is frequently credited for instigating an expansion of the human mind, leading to the first great cultural blossoming of civilization. It is generally agreed upon, however, that the invention of writing came about via the spread of agriculture: Roughly 5,500 years ago, when Mesopotamian farmers first produced surpluses, urbanization became possible, a market was born, and a need for keeping track of transactions led to the use of pictographic tokens that developed into writing systems (Goody, 1987; Ong, 1982). Only recently, with the advent of industrialism and modern academia's tendency to compartmentalize knowledge, has agriculture been conceived of as apart from culture and belonging wholly to the applied sciences.

How can we best maintain a healthy and symbiotic relationship with the earth? This fundamental question of agricultural is a deeply existential and humanistic one, but it has been recast in the modern era in primarily economic terms: How can we squeeze the most productivity out of a given parcel of land? Once the

notion of reciprocity and the focus on stewardship slipped away, the rapid depletion of topsoils began, and the absurdities of industrial agriculture quickly moved in and took root.

What are these absurdities? It is an overwhelming task to try to enumerate them all because they are interconnected with just about all aspects of our modern lifestyle. As Sir Albert Howard made clear in *The Soil and Health*, his famous tome first published back in 1945, we need to see “the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject” (p.11). While not circumscribing the entire problem, the following facts and statistics shed light on some of the more glaring consequences of our modern agricultural practices.

- The world's heritage of food diversity is being decimated by the assembly-line mentality of industrial food production. Since 1900, Europe has lost 75% of its crop diversity and the U.S. has lost 93%; and just 30 plants now feed 95% of the world's population (Katz, 2006).
- Each food item in a typical U.S. meal travels an average of 1,500 miles before being eaten (Kingsolver, 2007). This adds an enormous ecological cost to our modern food distribution system that, unfortunately, is not reflected in supermarket prices.
- Industrial agriculture is awash in chemical applications. The World Health Organization estimates that pesticides cause 3 million people to get sick every year, resulting in 250,000 annual deaths (Ross, 2005). While the popularity of organic food has risen steadily since the early 1990s, it is important to remember that before World War II nearly all food was organic. When the massive war effort came to an end in 1945, large corporations in Europe and the U.S. that had been producing chemical weapons had to find a new market, and so with government assistance, the pesticide and herbicide industries were born (Katz, 2006; Pollan, 2006). As Indian food activist Vandana Shiva frequently says in her speeches, “we are still eating the leftovers of the Second World War.”
- Our modern food system is second only to automobiles in the amount of fossil fuels it consumes. Also, industrial agricultural, with its chemical fertilizers, pesticides, farm machinery, processing, and packaging, contributes as much as 37% of the greenhouse gases we emit into the atmosphere – more than any other single human activity (Pollan, 2008).
- Perhaps the most striking evidence of the corporate takeover of agriculture is in the seed business. An estimated 98% of the world's seed sales are now monopolized by just six companies (Kingsolver, 2007). Not surprisingly,

these companies are heavily invested in developing new hybrids and genetically modified (GM) varieties. These new seeds are patented, so farmers and gardeners are legally obliged to buy their seeds every year rather than practice the centuries-old tradition of collecting their own seed stock for the following year. While natural seeds are not yet illegal, natural pollination from neighboring patented crops causes genetic contamination, and GM varieties thus enter the food chain even when there is resistance among particular farmers and consumers. Seed companies have now grown bold enough to sue natural farmers who have unwittingly planted seeds contaminated with patented genes. The most widely reported case is that of Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser. After planting his own seeds as always, he was sued by Monsanto Inc. because those seeds contained genetic material from the company's patented canola seed that had wind-drifted onto his land. The Canadian Supreme Court sided with Monsanto, but awarded no monetary damages (Cummings, 2008).

- Roughly three-quarters of all agricultural subsidy funds in the U.S. go to only 10% of farms (Katz, 2006). This generally means that large-scale industrial farms are being propped up by government funds, while small-scale independent farmers are left to fend for themselves.
- The replacement of family farms with corporate-industrial agriculture has dire consequences for the displaced farmers. In the 1980s in the U.S., a time when many farm families started incurring massive debts and found themselves losing the battle to keep their farms, suicide rates were significantly higher among farmers than the general population (Katz, 2006). Between 1998 and 2000 in India, twenty thousand farmers committed suicide, most often by drinking pesticides (Shiva, 2001). In one dramatic case of despair, Korean farmer Kyung-hae Lee stood outside the building in Mexico where World Trade Organization negotiations were being held in 2003, and stabbed himself to death while his fellow protesters shouted the slogan, "WTO kills farmers" (Watts, 2003).
- The inherent diversity of traditional polycultures is rapidly being replaced by monocultural commodity crops that the food processing industries depend on. In the U.S., the most common monoculture is corn. But, in fact, only a small fraction of the annual corn crop is eaten as corn. Most of it is instead processed into various corn derivatives that show up on ingredients lists as modified starch, glucose syrup, ascorbic acid, maltodextrin, lecithin, dextrose, and maltose to name just a few examples. By far the most common derivative is high fructose corn syrup, an ingredient now omnipresent in sodas and

sweetened fruit drinks. Thus, of all the items in a typical North American supermarket, more than a quarter of them, including hot dogs, frozen waffles, soda, soups, cake mixes, frozen yoghurt, coffee whitener, margarine, salad dressings, snacks, ketchup, canned fruits, and candies, now contain some form of processed corn (Pollan, 2006). This means that much of the diversity that processed foods seem to offer is an illusion since they are essentially reformulations of the broken down components of a very few commodity crops. What's more, when modern industrial farming techniques are used in the U.S., each harvested bushel of corn causes five bushels of topsoil loss (Logsdon, 1995).

- For each dollar spent on food in the U.S., only 19 cents goes to the actual farmers who grew the crops. The rest is consumed by the various other stages in the process including packaging, transport, and marketing (USDA, 2000).
- As consumption of cheap, mass-produced processed foods rises, so do medical costs. In 1960, an average American family spent 17.5% of its income on food and 5% on health care. By 2003 those numbers had essentially reversed to less than 10% for food and more than 15% on health care. Meanwhile, obesity has more than doubled in the last 30 years: Fully one-third of the U.S. population is now obese, and these people spent \$78.5 billion on obesity-related medical costs in 2005 alone (Katz, 2006).

The list of appalling statistics could go on and on, but Wendell Berry (1990), America's foremost agrarian writer and a farmer himself, sums up the fundamental problem succinctly:

For decades now the entire industrial food economy, from the large farms and feedlots to the chains of supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, has been obsessed with volume. It has relentlessly increased scale in order to increase volume in order (presumably) to reduce costs. But as scale increases, diversity declines; as diversity declines, so does health; as health declines, the dependence on drugs and chemicals necessarily increases. As capital replaces labor, it does so by substituting machines, drugs, and chemicals for human workers and for the natural health and fertility of the soil. The food is produced by any means or any shortcut that will increase profits (pp. 148-9).

In short, the *culture* of agriculture is being shattered by human greed and corporate obfuscation. It's no wonder, then, that the large industrial food producers prefer a relatively new term, *agribusiness*, to describe what they do.

## What Is New Agrarianism?

Agrarianism, whittled down to its essence, is a way of thought based on land. This is in opposition to industrialism, which is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology (Berry, 2002). The central figure of agrarianism is the small landholder who maintains some economic self-determination and aims toward an appropriate degree of self-sufficiency. A land-based lifestyle sounds more old than new, and indeed most of the world's great religious works, such as the Upanishads, the Koran, and the Bible, can be said to basically promote an agrarian ethic in what they espouse, even when the focus is on a deity rather than nature itself. Strictly speaking, though, agrarianism affirms that nature is the final model and judge for human usage of the earth, and Berry (2002) traces the Western lineage of agrarian thought through the likes of Virgil, Shakespeare, and Thomas Jefferson. These are not fringe historical figures. That is to say, for much of human history, agrarian thought has been mainstream rather than hidden in the shadows. It is only in the modern era, with its rapid urbanization and industrialization, that this vast heritage of cultural knowledge has begun to be threatened by forgetfulness, and is in need of organized efforts to remember and revive.

So what is “new” about the new agrarian movement? First of all, our current version of agrarianism now has to be in part defined in terms of its opposition to its omnipresent other – industrial agriculture. In other words, agrarianism in previous eras didn't find the need to justify itself as a “movement” against something else because in most societies around the world it was the default lifestyle until the industrial mindset began to displace it.

On a more practical level, the recent explosion in communication technologies and resources, especially the Internet, has allowed agrarianism, which is essentially a place-based and therefore local way of life, to be informed by a global perspective. This means rapid and detailed exposure to more and diverse methods. It also allows a greater understanding of how local problems are tied to global ones, and how local action can fit into a global movement. Finally, our communication breakthroughs have allowed small-scale producers to have greater direct access to potential customers, thus ending industrial agriculture's monopoly of distribution. This, I believe, provides a crucial infrastructural backbone to the current wave of agrarianism revival that, in retrospect, was lacking in previous false starts, such as the “back to the land” movements of the 1970s.

New agrarianism serves as an umbrella term for a whole host of specific movements and methods that are challenging the hegemony of corporate-

controlled industrial agriculture. The term *permaculture* (an abridgement of *permanent agriculture* or, according to some, *permanent culture*) was coined in the 1970s by two Australians, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, and their movement has since spread internationally through workshops, design courses, and countless projects of ecological restoration. Permaculture is basically a system of design that, whenever possible, mimics the interdependent relationships found in natural ecosystems. As the name suggests, it strives for sustainability and self-sufficiency in design of both agricultural systems and human habitat. Mollison (1996) has said that Fukuoka's seminal book, *The One-straw Revolution*, is the best articulation of the basic philosophy of permaculture.

Biodynamic agriculture is a complete and holistic organic farming approach that has spiritual overtones. It has roots in 1920s Europe with Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. One of the major biodynamic websites defines biodynamic agriculture as "a way of living, working and relating to nature and the vocations of agriculture based on good common-sense practices, a consciousness of the uniqueness of each landscape, and the inner development of each and every practitioner" ("What is Biodynamic," 2008). It views the farm as a single living organism that can only remain healthy if the interrelationships of the sub-organisms (soil, plants, animals, and humans) create a self-nourishing symbiosis. While many of the individual tenets of biodynamic farming overlap with mainstream organic farming, the biodynamic approach offers a complete philosophical package that includes a number of distinguishing traits, such as following an astronomical calendar for optimal seed sowing.

Forest gardening is a food production method pioneered in England in the 1960s by Robert Hart and it has had an especially significant impact on European agrarians. Hart started experimenting in his garden in order to provide a soothing environment for his brother who was born with severe disabilities, and soon came to the conclusion that the vertical dimension of gardening and food production had been relatively neglected. Using natural woodland ecosystems as a model, forest gardening aims for an edible landscape in which food can be harvested from seven distinct layers ranging from the underground "rhizosphere" to the canopy layer overhead consisting of mature fruit and nut trees (Whitefield, 2002).

There are also a number of agrarian movements that have been spearheaded by consumers rather than producers. The Slow Food movement first surfaced in Italy when Carlo Petrini, a journalist, objected to the opening of a McDonald's in Rome's historic Spanish Steps area in 1986, and decided to turn his outrage into positive action. While originally founded in opposition to fast food and the fast-paced lifestyle from which it arises, it now takes an active role in supporting

biodiversity and traditional food production techniques. On their main website, they say that “we consider ourselves *co-producers*, not consumers, because by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production process” (Slow Food International, n.d.). Also, regarding the way forward, Petrini has explained that “saving gastronomy is not possible if we cannot save the very context in which it is developed. The challenge ahead is to reconnect the umbilical cord of traditional knowledge that once joined man and nature and has almost been severed by industrialization” (Petrini, 2005). Slow Food now consists of 85,000 members worldwide who act locally through over 1,000 *convivia*, or local chapters.

In North America, all of these agrarian movements have made significant inroads, but perhaps the biggest groundswell of support is for a diverse grassroots movement that cannot be captured so easily by a single term. While *organic* is certainly still a popular word, it has been largely co-opted by the mainstream corporate producers that supply the high-end of supermarket chains (Pollan, 2006). Instead, the current buzzwords are *sustainable* and *local*. Simply put, even organic food is not sustainable if it is not locally produced. The term *locavore* (sometimes *localvore*) was recently coined to refer to someone who chooses to primarily eat locally grown food. The concept is spreading so rapidly that the New Oxford American Dictionary chose *locavore* as its word of the year in 2007 (Severson, 2008). Recent bestselling books such as *The 100-Mile Diet* (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007) and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (Kingsolver, 2007) chronicle the efforts of individuals and families to eat locally. Also, due to pressure from concerned parents, more and more school districts in the U.S. are establishing policies that require food served in school cafeterias to be fresh and locally grown.

Meanwhile, the number of registered farmers’ markets, the quintessential forum for buying local, has more than doubled in the U.S. in little over a decade: from 1,755 in 1994 to 4,685 in 2008 (USDA, 2008). And thanks in part to new marketing opportunities made possible by the Internet, community-supported agriculture (CSA) has witnessed an even more explosive rise in popularity. CSAs make use of direct subscriptions: Consumers buy shares in a local farm’s annual output in advance, and then receive their box of fresh seasonal produce on a weekly or monthly basis. This direct marketing concept first developed in Japan in the 1970s, but in 1990 there were only 60 CSA schemes in the U.S. By 2005, that number had grown nearly thirty-fold to 1,700 (Katz, 2006).

Finally, though not specifically related to food, there is another important sustainability movement well underway in the U.S. Despite all the brash



commercialism that modern America is awash in, there has long been a well-documented undercurrent of simple living that is now resurfacing. From the Puritans to the Quakers to the Amish, and from Emerson to Thoreau to Edward Abbey and Scott Nearing, there has been a consistent pastoral line of American thought that provides a counterbalance to the materialism of the mainstream. Now that simple, self-sufficient, and sustainable lifestyle choices are being buttressed by the moral imperative to avoid a full-blown ecological collapse, simple living in the U.S. is currently undergoing “a revival so substantial that it has become a much-discussed societal trend” (Shi, 2007, p. 278). Downsizing toward simplicity converges naturally with a broadly agrarian ethic, and so this trend has a place under the umbrella of new agrarianism.

### **Masanobu Fukuoka and His Method**

Fukuoka, born in 1913, was the eldest son of an Ehime farming family. After graduating from an agricultural college in Gifu prefecture, he worked in the plant inspection division of the customs office in Yokohama. A bout with pneumonia led to a period of soul-searching that culminated in a moment of epiphany: He grasped what he calls the principle of nothingness. He suddenly realized that nature is an astounding and unnamable power, and that all of humanity's attempts at understanding were foolish fabrications. Of this pivotal moment, Fukuoka says, “this later gave birth to my method of natural farming, but at first I was totally absorbed by the conviction that there is nothing in this world, that man should live only in accordance with nature and has no need to do anything” (1985, p. 164). While such a flash of insight might lead others toward a life of nihilistic obscurity, Fukuoka felt liberated and motivated by it. He soon resigned from his promising career in Yokohama and returned to Shikoku. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War II caused him to delay his farming plans and instead he accepted work at an agricultural research laboratory in Kochi. Finally, in 1947, he returned to his ancestral farm and began in earnest his life's work of developing and chronicling a natural method of farming. In the late 1970s he began to receive international recognition, leading to speaking tours in the U.S. and India, and involvement in desert rejuvenation projects in Africa and Asia. In 1988 he received the most prestigious public service awards in both India (the Deshikottam Award) and in the Philippines (the Magsaysay Award), and in 1997 he received the Earth Council Award for his contributions to sustainable development. He spent the last years of his life quietly on his farm before passing away in 2008.

The four basic principles of his farming method are no tilling, no fertilizer, no

weeding, and no pesticides. In short, it's a method that attempts to minimize intervention and unnatural inputs. The key is to gently nudge nature along in the desired direction at the most opportune moments, and the only way to develop the critical sense of timing necessary to be successful is through constant and complete observation of the natural cycles occurring in one's own fields. But rather than an analytical type of perceiving that the modern mind tends to lean on due to our now virtually unconscious acceptance of dualism and rationalism, Fukuoka stresses that observation needs to occur with a mindset emptied of preconceptions. In Buddhist philosophical terms, he advocates that we make efforts to overcome a discriminating (分別) approach to knowledge and allow ourselves to be receptive to non-discriminating (無分別) comprehension. Of course he offers plenty of practical farming advice based on his own experiences, but it is this philosophical basis influenced by Eastern spirituality that makes his method unique. While a "do-nothing" method sounds deceptively easy, his techniques are difficult to apply by farmers who are unable or unwilling to make this fundamental shift in mindset.

## **Fukuoka as Portrayed by Agrarians**

Fukuoka was aware of but apparently not surprised by the fact that the farming philosophy he espouses was having an impact on Westerners: "It is only natural that farmers in the West who question the trend toward large-scale mechanized agriculture have sought an alternative in eastern methods of organic farming" (Fukuoka, 1985, p. 44). To understand more precisely what it is that new agrarians in the West find when they turn to Fukuoka and his books, the remainder of this paper will look at how Western writers choose to represent him in their own works.

### ***Fukuoka as Rebel Scientist***

*When confronted with the havoc wrought by science and technology on nature, one cannot help feeling disquiet at this very process of scientific inquiry that man uses to separate and classify his doubts and discontents.*

Masanobu Fukuoka, *The Natural Way of Farming*, 1985, p. 54

A number of writers refer to Fukuoka when buttressing their arguments that science as it is commonly practiced has led agriculture down a questionable path. Because Fukuoka was trained as a microbiologist and had a successful career as a plant pathologist, his criticisms of a purely scientific approach to farming cannot

be easily dismissed as simply the views of someone outside of the scientific community. Stamets (2005), when introducing Fukuoka to his readers, calls him an “ecological visionary.” But Stamets also makes a point of referring to him as a “farmer-scientist” as opposed to simply a farmer, and he writes that Fukuoka “understood that scientific reductionism failed to reflect biological synergisms – processes that are still far beyond the most sagacious scientists” (p. 32).

In their book *Gardening for the Future of the Earth*, Shapiro and Harrison (2000) include Fukuoka in their section entitled “Voices of Hope and Change,” a biographical rundown of the visionaries whom they believe are reshaping agriculture for the better. Beyond the typical biographical information, however, they return to Fukuoka in a later chapter when they discuss the importance of observation in land stewardship. Careful observation is what underpins the scientific method, but their goal is to point out that Fukuoka, a successful scientist turned farmer, advocates a more holistic form of observation than the deductive method that permeates conventional applied sciences: “Fukuoka writes that observation must be undertaken in the context of the whole ecosystem” (p. 45). Their extensive Fukuoka reference goes on to include the following from *The One-straw Revolution*:

An object seen in isolation from the whole is not the real thing. Specialists from various fields gather together and observe a stalk of rice. The insect specialist sees only the insect damage, the specialist in plant nutrition considers only the plant's vigor... It is impossible for specialized research to grasp the role of a single predator at a certain time within the intricacy of insect relationships... Methods of insect control which ignore the relationships among the insects themselves are truly useless. (Fukuoka, 1978, cited in Shapiro and Harrison, 2000, p. 45)

Not only is this an indictment of the pesticide industry, it is an authoritative viewpoint of someone who understands the shortcomings of reductive science procedures from first having applied them himself for many years.

In his preface to *The One-straw Revolution*, Berry (1978) also mentions the antagonistic view of reductive science that seems to run through Fukuoka's book. Perhaps worried that a seemingly anti-science stance might be dismissed by some readers as anti-intellectual, Berry explains that “Mr. Fukuoka is a scientist who is suspicious of science – or of what too often passes for science. This does not mean that he is either impractical or contemptuous of knowledge. His suspicion, indeed, comes from his practicality and from what he knows.” This complements Berry's preceding statement that Fukuoka “speaks out of authority – not out of knowledge

only, but out of knowledge and experience together.” And Berry goes on to explain that “what [Fukuoka] fears in modern applied science is its disdain for mystery, its willingness to reduce life to what is known about it and to act on the assumption that what is not known can safely be ignored” (p. x).

Clearly, Berry and other agrarian writers are attracted to the fact that Fukuoka has a background in science, and this helps to explain Fukuoka’s enduring popularity in the West. The recent history of Western agriculture has been one of increasing mechanization and chemical applications. This turn of events has caused farmers to rely more and more on specialists and scientists. For any Western farmer who is uneasy with this development, Fukuoka’s books must come across as a powerful revelation. Fukuoka’s intimate familiarity with the Western scientific approach shields him from being categorized as a lightweight malcontent of modern practices. Also, his Japanese ancestry implicitly suggests to Westerners that Fukuoka is grounded in a deeper tradition that could provide a proven way forward if industrialism’s grip on agriculture ever wanes: namely, Asia’s 4,000 years of successful and sustainable agricultural practices.

### ***Fukuoka as Practical Farmer***

Fukuoka also appeals in a very concrete way to some agrarians who admire him as an innovative practitioner. Hemenway (2001) labels Fukuoka “sage-like” (p. 166) and mentions a number of his carefully timed methods, such as his use of white clover as a natural nitrogen-enhancing cover crop and weed suppressor. Flores (2006) calls him “revolutionary” (p. 109) and admires the way he uses shelterbelts and seedballs to establish healthy polycultures. His advocacy of seedballs, in particular, has influenced natural farmers around the globe who have been searching for plant propagation techniques that fit with no-till philosophies. Basically, a seedball is a seed that has been rolled in clay and then dried to form a pellet with a diameter of about one centimeter (Fukuoka, 1985). By broadcasting these in a field at the right time, a farmer can avoid the losses to birds that unprotected seeding would face, and also avoid any tilling of soil that in-ground sowing would require. Whether Fukuoka “invented” this technique as Stamets (2005) claims, or is just passing on an ages old Japanese farming tip is unclear, but what is important is that Fukuoka had a knack for blending philosophical musings with practical advice that allows him to appeal to a broad spectrum of readers – people who like to think about food production, people who actually farm, and those who do both.

Fukuoka’s “do nothing” approach, the idea that farmers ought to search for

ways to do less rather than do more, is one of his basic tenets that strikes a chord with overburdened practitioners. Farmer-writer Gene Logsdon, when recounting his search for new methodologies as his body weakened with age, says, "all I had in mind was practicality" and that when he came across Fukuoka's *The One-straw Revolution*, he "realized I was not alone" (p.157). He then goes on to quote Fukuoka:

I was heading... toward a do-nothing agricultural method. The usual way to go about developing a method... results in making a farmer busier. My way was opposite. I was aiming at a pleasant, natural way of farming which results in making work easier instead of harder... I ultimately reached the conclusion that there was no need to plow, no need to apply fertilizer, no need to make compost, no need to use insecticide. When you get right down to it, there are few agricultural practices that are really necessary. (Fukuoka, 1978, cited in Logsdon, 2003, p. 157)

It's an eminently welcome attempt to shift the paradigm, but can only succeed, as both Fukuoka and Logsdon acknowledge elsewhere, when accompanied with close observation and an intimate knowledge of one's fields.

While seedballs and some of Fukuoka's other techniques may be widely applicable, the same cannot be said of all of his farming practices. Importantly, though, he does not claim that they are. He earns praise from a number of writers for emphasizing that local conditions ought to dictate farming choices: "Natural farming takes a distinctive form in accordance with the unique conditions of the area in which it is applied" (Fukuoka, 1978, p. 46). While this may seem like an obvious point to make, it actually stands in opposition to modern industrial agriculture authorities who dispense advice based on results achieved in experimental fields and laboratories. In essence, Fukuoka is suggesting that natural farmers avoid the so-called experts and their theories regarding what farming practices ought to work best because those theories are ignorant of any particular farmer's actual conditions. His stance is one of local solutions based on careful observations, and this is a decidedly practical position to take.

If Fukuoka's techniques admittedly do not always have broad applicability elsewhere, however, some readers might be prone to wonder why he even bothers to share them in such detail. In his preface to *The One-straw Revolution*, Berry (1978) anticipates this possible reaction, and suggests that Fukuoka's practical passages "deserve our attention because they provide an excellent *example* of what can be done when land, climate, and crops are studied with fresh interest, clear eyes, and the right kind of concern. They are valuable to us also because

they are suggestive and inspiring. Any farmer who reads them will find his thoughts lured repeatedly from the page to his own fields” (p. ix). I would add that these passages are also appealing to Western agrarians because they offer such a refreshingly novel perspective. I am not aware of any other books available in English that have been penned by a Japanese farmer. Not since King’s *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (originally published in 1911) has a Western audience been given such an up-close account of the sustainable agricultural practices that have evolved in Asia.

### ***Fukuoka as Philosopher***

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

Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-straw Revolution*, 1978, p. 119

The above sentence is by far the most commonly quoted Fukuoka reference in the books and websites of his Western admirers (see, for example, Chaskey, 2005, p. 107; Fox, 1996, p. 45; Hanley, 2006, p. 24; McLuhan, 1995, p. 149; and Zimdahl, 2006, p. 106), and for good reason: It encapsulates Fukuoka’s essential approach in a nutshell. Once it is understood that Fukuoka’s aim goes far beyond agricultural techniques, his unorthodox writing style in which he oscillates between practical advice and philosophical musings no longer seems unusual. On the contrary, his ongoing popularity among Western readers can be attributed, I believe, to precisely this willingness to merge the act of natural farming with the practice of right living. *The One-straw Revolution* is Fukuoka’s most popular book, and it is also his most philosophical one. But even his more practice-oriented books, such as *The Natural Way of Farming* (1985), have complete chapters devoted to his philosophy and philosophical strands woven throughout the pages of practical guidance. Fukuoka consistently lifts a discussion about the vocation of farming above the uninspiring verbiage that industrial agriculturalists have mired it in, and his target audience has been immensely receptive to such a message.

The popular quotation noted above even found its way into *Edible Forest Gardens: Ecological Design and Practice for Temperate Climate Permaculture* (Jacke and Toensmeier, 2005). This is the latter half of a two-volume tome that, at 1,032 total pages, is arguably the most thoroughly detailed and technical book yet produced by the new agrarian movement. That is to say, the authors move in the opposite direction as Fukuoka by complicating rather than simplifying, and by

seemingly treating agrarianism as an emerging and complex science. Nevertheless, they too find inspiration in Fukuoka's words, and they seem to even acknowledge the irony of quoting him by preceding the citation with this apparent allusion to Fukuoka's "do nothing" goal: "The more we watch what happens when we do less, the better we'll get as designers and managers" (p. 427).

In the academic sphere, the field of deep ecology is at the forefront of providing the philosophical underpinnings for the modern environmental movement as it explores ways to mend humanity's psychological connection to the natural world. In *Deep Ecology* (2001), Devall and Sessions suggest that "Fukuoka is particularly useful from a deep ecology perspective because he discusses the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of agriculture in technocratic-industrial societies and presents some alternative proposals" (p.150). They then proceed to quote one of Fukuoka's passages that addresses the shortcomings of a rational (discriminating) mindset:

The reason for all the confusion is that there are two paths of human knowledge – discriminating and non-discriminating... I deny the empty image of nature as created by the human intellect, and clearly distinguish it from nature as experienced by the non-discriminating understanding. If we eradicate the false conception of nature, I believe the root of the world's disorder will disappear... Nature as grasped by scientific knowledge is a nature which has been destroyed; it is a ghost possessing a skeleton, but no soul. (Fukuoka, 1978, cited in Devall and Sessions, 2001, p.150)

While deep ecologists find Fukuoka "useful," Bill Mollison, the permaculture founder, finds more philosophical honesty in Fukuoka than in the academically-oriented field of deep ecology because Fukuoka is out in on his farm practicing what he preaches. In an interview (Atkisson, 1991), Mollison said the following:

When you get deep ecologists who are philosophers, and they drive cars and take newspapers and don't grow their own vegetables, in fact they're not deep ecologists – they're my enemies. But if you get someone who looks after himself and those around him – like Scott Nearing, or Masanobu Fukuoka – *that's* a deep ecologist. He can talk philosophy that I understand. People like that don't poison things, they don't ruin things, they don't lose soils, they don't build things they can't sustain.

## Appeal of Eastern Mysticism

There is a final possible aspect of Fukuoka's appeal that deserves mention. For Westerners disillusioned by the modern Western lifestyle, there has long been a trend to look toward the East for some version of truth that reaches deeper than scientific rationalism. The Beatles' sojourn in India, the popularity of ancient Chinese cosmologies such as the *I Ching and feng shui* in the West, and Tibetan pilgrimages by various Hollywood celebrities are among the more obvious recent examples of this tendency. Eastern philosophies, because of their ancient roots and mystical aura, are sometimes leaned on as a sort of trump argument that offers a shortcut escape from the rational (or, using Fukuoka's term, "discriminating") mindset required by the scientific approach.

While it is difficult to know for certain whether Fukuoka was aware of this tendency or even had a Western readership in mind while writing, *The One-straw Revolution* has a number of passages that seem to indicate he enjoyed portraying himself as almost the stereotypical image of a wise and mystical Eastern guru. He refers repeatedly to the visitors living in simple huts on his land who are drawn to his methods and lifestyle: "They come from somewhere, stay for a while, and then move on. Among the guests are agricultural researchers, students, scholars, farmers, hippies, poets, and wanderers, young and old, men and women of various types and nationalities. Most of those who stay for a long time are young people in need of a period of introspection" (p.152). And while much of the book is expository and argumentative, he frequently slips into a narrative mode when describing the settings of conversations with these visitors who have made pilgrimages to his farm. Typically, they are sitting around a fire or under a tree and asking questions of the master who, in classic guru fashion, more often than not points out the foolishness of the question rather than providing an expected answer. While such passages could be seen as self-aggrandizing, Fukuoka also frequently belittles himself as a wizened old farmer who knows nothing. Most of these conversation scenes are toward the end of the book, and they present a rather jarring departure from the previously established voice and flow, indicating that Fukuoka perhaps faced some literary difficulty over this question of self-portrayal. I feel that his true stance is that he hoped to portray himself as a mostly unseen guiding hand in a new agrarian movement while being tempted by but ultimately refusing center stage in its unfolding, and such an interpretation is supported by a number of short, descriptive passages such as this: "With the light from the Inland Sea at their backs, the silent youths returned slowly to the huts for their evening meal. I followed quietly behind in the shadows" (p.153). In any case, the narrator



of *The One-straw Revolution* remains somewhat of an enigma throughout, and this unexpected literary aspect perhaps also contributes to the continued popularity of the book and its writer.

Finally, even for Western agrarian writers who have no particular interest in Eastern methods, philosophy, or literary representation, the simple fact that a farmer-writer across the world in Japan has independently come to remarkably similar conclusions as their own offers a welcome affirmation of their arguments from afar. Thus, referring to Fukuoka in their own works helps to create a sense of inevitability; a feeling that a tidal change is occurring on a global scale. For this reason, quoting Fukuoka can be viewed as a smart rhetorical move, and it too helps to explain his enduring popularity in the West.

## Conclusion

The title of Fukuoka's most popular book, *The One-straw Revolution*, no doubt sounded rather presumptuous to some when it was first published. Now, even his doubters would have to admit that it was a rather prophetic choice. This solitary, isolated, maverick of a farmer from a sparsely populated region of Japan had the foresight to commit his unique farming approach and philosophy to paper. His words have since repeatedly traveled around the world, been translated into numerous languages (seven different languages in India alone), and withstood the test of time as evidenced by the number of reprint editions stretching toward and beyond twenty for some publishers. Even today, his name is invoked by agrarian practitioners and thinkers in a wide variety of countries as a way of lending credence to their arguments. In a sense, Fukuoka himself has become that single straw of his title. Though he is not solely responsible for the revolutionary backlash that is occurring now against the industrial model of food production nor the groundswell of renewed interest in an agrarian approach to life, he has become one of the central pillars upon which this diverse movement leans for support. All in all, it's an impressive legacy for a solitary, small-scale natural farmer from the remote mountains of Shikoku.

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