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Ekken Kaibara: The Grandfather of Macrobiotics

As any history, that of macrobiotics begins best at the beginning. And as with any history, the beginning is very hard to find. Behind the obvious pioneers of the near past are lines of influence that stretch into the distant past and to the very dawn of history. So to choose a starting point for any narrative is by necessity somewhat arbitrary.

George Ohsawa (1893–1966) is generally regarded as the founder of macrobiotics. While he gave his distinctive imprint to the movement and did much to introduce it to the world, he was not its originator. Ohsawa himself often cites Sagen Ishizuka [石塚左玄] (1850–1910), a Japanese physician, as his inspiration and teacher. And though Ishizuka formulated many of the concepts which are the basis of modern macrobiotics, much of his teaching as well was a gift of the past. From him the lines of transmission stretch back to the dawn of civilization in East Asia, to the time of the *I Ching* [易經] (“The Book of Changes”) and the *Nei Ching* [內經], (“The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine”).

Between these ancient days and the modern era there were various philosophers and men of medicine, both in Japan and China, who helped transmit the seeds of macrobiotic thought. However, I have chosen Ekken Kaibara (1630–1716), in part from personal gratitude, to begin our story.

Kaibara was born just eight years before Japan began its policy of seclusion. After a century of contact with the West, during which the introduction of Christianity and of firearms caused much disruption, the Japanese decided to end all but token intercourse with the outside world. Kaibara was attracted particularly to classical Chinese learning (already an integral part of Japanese culture), and became a leading figure in the Neo-Confucian School.

Originally, Confucianism was a social and political philosophy. It emphasized the need for harmony and stability in all human affairs and taught an ethic of gratitude, subservience and responsibility to achieve this. All relations in family, community and nation were seen as hierarchic. To those above one should give absolute obedience and respect. To those below one should show paternal kindness and concern. If each person acted according to his place and duty, harmony and peace would prevail.

To this original teaching the “new” Confucianists added Taoist ideas about how the universe began and how it operates. Referring to the *Tao Te Ching* [道德經] (“The

Way and Its Power”), they called the universal absolute the Tao. This primal Oneness expresses itself as two opposite but complementary energies, Male and Female, Yin and Yang. From their interaction all things are created, and according to their laws all things move and change.

Kaibara embraced both this social philosophy and metaphysics. In his book *Onna Daigaku* [女大学] (“The Great Teaching For Women”) he explains the role and duties of the feminine sex according to Confucian ideas. As a woman is fickle and liable to get into trouble she should, from girlhood through old age, be subservient to some male relation. As a girl she should defer to her father, as a wife to her husband, and as an old woman to her son. She should cultivate the virtues of modesty, quietness, gentility and purity. Such is her natural place and duty in human society.¹

Kaibara was also an avid observer of the natural and human world. He traveled widely and wrote pioneering works on botany, geography, herbal medicine, and on popular manners and morals. At the age of eighty-three, he retired from active life, and, free to sift through a lifetime of experience and learning, wrote the *Yōjōkun*. It has been translated into English under the title *Japanese Secrets of Good Health* and includes the old sage’s views on health and longevity.

He begins by asserting that physical well-being and long life are the natural condition of mankind. In Chapter One he writes:

“... it is only natural that one who has learned health preservation and who applies it, will become strong in body, will shirk off all diseases, and live to the age Providence meant him to live to, and enjoy it too . . . (!)”²

A bit later he says simply, “One who is continent about food, drink, sex and sleep, takes a walk in the morning and in the evening will not get sick.”³

For Kaibara human life is meant not only to be long and healthy, it is meant to be enjoyable. He writes:

Saints always expound on the delights of living. A poor fool like me can hardly understand the mind of saints, but at least I know that delight is something that Heaven and Earth meant living things to have, and something that man is born possessed of.⁴

And sickness, like health, is something which humankind creates. Quoting the *Tao Te Ching*, Kaibara observes “One’s life is in one’s own hands.” Sickness comes only when one has willfully abused oneself. “Illness never comes without reason.”⁵ Yet more pointedly he observes, quoting an ancient Chinese sage, that “Calamity arises from what we say and illness comes in through the mouth.”⁶

With this basis Kaibara offers various suggestions about staying healthy. Control of the principal passions and desires is essential. Lack of self-control, and indulgence in food, sleep, talk, and sex lead to trouble. Moderation and self-discipline are the keys to health and long life.

Kaibara discourses at length on the subject of food—its choice, preparation, and manner of eating. Among the things he counsels:

Eat rice as a daily, staple food.

Eat fresh vegetables when they are in season.

Eat simple light meals of foods that are clean, freshly prepared, peaceful in quality and balanced in terms of the five tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and pungent.

Avoid heavy, greasy, overcooked, raw or unripe foods.

Avoid hard and fatty meat. Some lean poultry and game may be eaten sparingly. They decrease the life span, however, and can be dispensed with entirely.

Fish should be eaten whole if possible and cooked with ginger and soy sauce in order to neutralize poisons.

Above all do not overeat. Eat only to 80 to 90 percent of capacity, until just before one feels full.

Before eating remember with gratitude the farmers and others who have produced the food, the parents and benefactors who have supplied it, and those who have cooked and served it. Remember too those who are without food, and one's unworthiness before such blessings.

Never eat while angry or worried.

Do not eat between meals or immediately before going to bed.

After eating take a short walk to stimulate circulation. Massage the stomach and the abdomen lightly to encourage digestion.

For Kaibara restraint of the other desires is also important. One should get enough sleep but not too much. Excess sleep causes the vitality *ki* [氣] or "life energy" to stagnate. One should observe regularity in waking and sleeping, rising early and retiring at mid-evening. One should also control the desire to talk unnecessarily. Endless, pointless conversation depletes the vital energy and leads to instability of temperament and restlessness of mind.

Kaibara's suggestions about sexual activity are yet more complex and strict. Citing another Chinese source of antiquity he says that for a person between twenty and thirty years of age sexual intercourse is permissible once every four days; for a person thirty to forty once every eight days; forty to fifty once every sixteen days; fifty to sixty once every twenty days; and thereafter once a month. It is very important to conserve sexual energy since it deeply affects the function of the kidneys, and the kidneys are the seat of vital energy for all the other organs.

In addition, one must observe rules of propriety regarding time and place. One should not engage in sex during solar and lunar eclipses, lightning storms, high winds, downpours, sweltering heat, biting cold, earthquakes or the appearance of rainbows. It is also forbidden ten days before and ten days after the winter solstice; when one is tired, hungry, or thirsty; when one has eaten or drunk a great deal; and when one is angry, sad, worried or surprised. Sex should not be enjoyed in sunlight, moonlight, starlight, or before a religious shrine.

One is tempted, of course, to ask Kaibara and his ancient Chinese killjoys exactly when and where one is allowed to have sex. If all the restrictions are observed one may indulge only on cloudless overcast evenings during the new moon in a thatched cave opening to the northwest. It should be noted with gratitude that while many of Kaibara's teachings on food have passed into modern macrobiotics, his "bedroom rules" have been largely ignored.

Kaibara offers other practical advice on maintaining health and vitality. Daily physical exercise is important, including, at the least, a walk after each meal. One should avoid sitting or lying down too much. The vital energy must move. Also, to activate this energy one can receive a daily finger-pressure massage, or practice *dō-in* [導引], a method of self-massage imported from China. This is an excellent way to begin the day. Kaibara also recommends a deep breathing exercise to be carried out twice a day. This, he says, replaces stale, dirty air in the body with clean and fresh air.

“The correct position one should assume is that of lying stretched out and face up, with legs extended, the eyes closed, the hands firmly clasped, and a distance of about five inches between the two feet and the same distance between each elbow and the torso One should breathe in through the nose a lot of air from the outside. Once a lot of air has been accumulated . . . one should exhale slowly through the mouth.”⁷

Kaibara also recommends keeping one’s immediate environment orderly and clean.

“If the outside environment is clean, the inside too is cleansed through contact with it. Improving the inside from the outside makes eminent sense. One should keep one’s living quarters free from dust and dirt. Physical exercise and the cleansing of mind and heart thus gained are essential to health.”⁸

In case of illness one should first try fasting or a very simple diet as a cure. If that fails, then acupuncture, moxibustion (burning pellets of plant fiber on the appropriate *tsubo*, [壺] key energy points) and herbal remedies may be tried as a last resort.

Thus Kaibara offers a wealth of practical advice to keep the body well and vital. Yet he was deeply aware too of the relationship between body and mind. For true health one must cultivate a healthy emotional and mental life. Just as the physical desires should be controlled, the emotional tendencies must also be disciplined. One must avoid an excess of any of the seven emotions: anger, worry, pensiveness, sadness, fear, surprise and joy. In excess, any of these can decrease the vital energy and lead to sickness.

An effective way of achieving this even temper and self-control is to concentrate one’s energy in the *hara* [腹], a point three inches below the navel. This is the vital center of the body. By correct posture, by focusing one’s energy there mentally, and by deep, abdominal breathing one can realize an unshakable calm and steadiness. Kaibara recommends this as a technique used by Zen monks and by *samurai* [武士].

One should also develop positive mental attitudes. Above all one must cultivate a sense of gratitude, a deep awareness of life as a wonderful gift which has been received from Heaven and Earth, from parents and ancestors.

And one should practice the simple pleasures of everyday life: gardening; playing music and singing songs; writing and reading poetry; appreciating the natural beauty of the heavens and the earth; enjoying sports such as archery and horsemanship; spending days of quiet solitude; and enjoying evenings of companionship with the

drinking, though not to inebriation, of fine wine. One should live a virtuous life, **fulfilling** duty to family and society.

To further insure peace of mind, Kaibara counsels, do not expect too much of yourself. If you make a mistake, accept the blame. Don't dwell on it. Thereafter, **accept** what you have done and its result as the will of Heaven.

And do not expect too much of others. To want perfection of others as of oneself makes a burden on the heart. This attitude leads to anger and to reproach.

Be satisfied with a few simple, but functional possessions. Don't crave the finest and the most beautiful. This leads to a restless mind. Be satisfied with what meets your needs. As Ohsawa was to counsel three centuries later, "*Vivere parvo*—Live with poverty."

Behind Kaibara's somewhat serious and puritanical tone is an optimistic, even joyful (in moderation) view of the universe and man's place in it. The cosmos is an orderly, harmonious whole operating according to predictable laws. "The seasons come and go," he writes, "with perfect regularity, and all things in the universe go as they should because the positive and negative dual forces are in constant flux and never stagnate."⁹

Man, created by Providence through the working of Heaven and Earth, is an integral part of nature. Health and happiness are his birthright. He need only observe the order and rhythm in nature and live in harmony with it. If he is sick or unhappy it is his own fault, and he can cure the situation by returning to the way of nature. By exercising care and discipline in how he eats and lives and in how he thinks and feels, man can realize a long, robust life filled with simple joys. Old age, in fact, when the passions have cooled, is the most peaceful and satisfying time of life.

Happily, it seems Kaibara epitomized these teachings in his own life. He traveled widely in his earlier years, satisfying an intense curiosity about the world and the laws by which it operated. Until the age of 70 he was active as the head of his family clan. Then he retired to record the harvest of his years. He studied, wrote and taught. Even at age 83 he had as yet all his teeth and his eyes were good enough so he "could both read and write even the smallest characters." About then Kaibara's beloved wife of many years passed away. The sage died shortly thereafter, as much from a broken heart it seems, as from any specific malady.

The spirit and letter of Kaibara's teachings lived on, of course, and deeply influenced both Ishizuka and Ohsawa, the pioneers of macrobiotics in the modern period. Hence Kaibara can be called "the grandfather of macrobiotics."

¹ Kaibara, Ekken, *Onna Daigaku* ("The Greater Learning for Women") as appearing in Chamberlain, Basil Hall, *Japanese Things*, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Rutland, VT., 1971, p. 502 ff.

² Kaibara, Ekken, *Yōjōkun: Japanese Secrets of Good Health*, p. 1

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47-48

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21