

Farmer Philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka: Humans Must Strive to Know the Unknown (1)

By Natsuko TOYODA

It was a good thing that this year's Group of Eight summit was held in rural Japan. Hokkaido, the summit venue, is blessed with vibrant nature and its people live a rustic life. It would be great, I think, if Hokkaido made the G-8 summiteers and the leaders of other countries invited to the Toyako Summit feel, even fleetingly, that it would be nice if the world can live at peace like this. Japan is abundant in vegetation, and one feels at peace because vegetation begets water, enriches the soil, and provides the basic sustenance of human life: clothing, food and dwelling. There is this man who, out of such conviction, developed a system of natural farming, introduced seed balls, the old but rational technique of planting seeds in clay balls, which enables plants to take root even in dry soil, and sowed seeds in the world's deserts. Let me introduce Mr. Masanobu Fukuoka, the farmer philosopher.



Fukuoka: World-famous Father of Natural Farming

It was 10 years ago that I first heard of Mr. Fukuoka's name from a Malaysian teacher at my university. Mr. Fukuoka, as I remember the teacher telling me, was the author of *"The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming."* He developed a system of farming that does not require plowing, the use of chemicals or fertilizer, nor weeding. Specifically, his method of planting seed balls caught the eyes of the United Nations' agricultural experts who thought the technique would be useful to U.N. reforestation efforts, and Mr. Fukuoka contributed to greening activities in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, India, Africa and other parts of the world. In 1988, Mr. Fukuoka won the Asian version of the Nobel Prize, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, and received the highest honorary degree awarded by India's Tagore University from former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, then the university's chancellor. "Mr. Fukuoka is admired by many people in Asia and Africa, but he is not well-known in Japan, and I wonder why," the Malaysian teacher said with a puzzled look.

This episode had completely vanished from my head until last year when a neighbor of mine gave me some of vegetables she had planted and told me, "I grew this veggie with the Fukuoka natural farming method and didn't have to pull a weed." Afterward, another friend of mine told me of his trip to India. "I had planned to sleep in camps while traveling in India and then I met an elderly Indian farmer who let me stay at his home because he said 'you are Japanese like Mr. Fukuoka.' He showed me a well-thumbed Hindi-language edition of *'The One-Straw Revolution'*." Who, then, is Fukuoka?



Visiting Mr. Fukuoka

I paid a visit to Mr. Fukuoka in June, the starting month of the rainy season in Japan when farmers are busy planting rice seedlings and doing other farm work. Mr. Fukuoka turned 95 years old this year and lives in the city of Iyo in Ehime Prefecture on the smallest main island of Shikoku, a region well-known for its *mikan* (tangerine) farming. I have heard that until about 10 years ago Mr. Fukuoka had maintained a self-sufficient way of life living off his mountainous natural farm; since then, he no longer goes up the mountains, retiring to a quiet life with his family. When I saw him, his beard was silvery white, and his appearance exuded dignity. He can barely move these days, but he is otherwise healthy. Each morning and evening, he eats a big *natsu-mikan* (Chinese citron) bigger than the size of a fist. He usually doesn't show his emotions, but once inadvertently our eyes met and he broke into a broad grin, a gentle radiance glowing at the back of the pupils of his eyes.

As I talked to Mr. Fukuoka, he worked hard to move his stiff body and mouth, and the words that came out in a raspy voice again and again were: "People actually don't know what they think they know. Everything is useless. My book is also useless." What message did he try to convey? Let me try to figure it out while taking a look at the life of people who have come under his influence.



Natural Farm of Fukuoka's Son

Mr. Fukuoka's son, Masato, grows rice and *mikan*, and tends the family farm together with his wife, using the organic farming method. To this day, people who admire Mr. Fukuoka come from all over the world to visit the family farm. When I was visiting Mr. Fukuoka, a young Frenchman named Etienne, who came to Japan to learn the natural farming method, was helping out with the planting of rice seedlings. Mr. Fukuoka had succeeded in growing rice and then wheat in the same land every year without plowing or planting or weeding the field (except for minimum weeding necessary to grow the crops in a way not disturbing natural self-purification). Masato no longer strictly follows this splendid farming method set up by his father, but still he grows rice without using chemicals or chemical fertilizer. When I asked him, "Is there no

problem if you don't use chemicals?" he smiled and responded matter-of-factly, "I don't know, since I have never used chemicals."

The soil of the paddy is soft, and tiny air pockets seep up as if the mud is breathing. When rice seedlings are inserted into the mud, rice-fish, frogs, spiders, earthworms, and all sorts of living things come into view. Usually, I hate earthworms, but surprisingly I didn't feel bad when I saw them wriggling in the field. Etienne's family has a big farm and works with modern technology. Etienne says he likes natural farming and his dream is to farm in Japan.

Natsu-mikan on Masato's farm were ripening and I helped picking the fruit. As I walked near the orchard, the fragrance of citrus wafted in the air; it felt so refreshing. The steep slopes of the hills were colored orange by a sea of ripening *mikan*, and trees, weeds and insects were everywhere. Sunbeams pierced through the foliage and it was fun watching the battles waged by the insects while they did their jobs. I was told this year was a good year for citrus and in no time I filled up my basket, capable of holding 9 kilograms of *mikan*. The look of the *natsu-mikan* from Masato's farm was not as beautiful as those sold outside, but they were delicious. Above all, my mind was at ease, a feeling which is irreplaceable. Crops, I have come to realize, can be grown without the use of chemicals.

Natural Farming: Labor-saving, Economical

"Every 10 years or so, you don't have a good harvest, but I think it is the same whether you use chemicals or not," says Masato. As the price of petroleum shoots up and the resources for producing chemical fertilizers become scarce, modern farming becomes a costly business. Besides, once you are dependent on chemicals and chemical fertilizer, the land and the crops lose their latent vitality, and farming becomes labor-intensive. What makes matters worse is that, as import barriers fall for trade liberalization, prices of farm products fall and farming makes little money. If you are to grow things without chemicals with the use of greenhouses built like no-germ factories, you have to create a suitable environment with air-conditioning, lighting, and so on. If that requires the consumption of a lot of petroleum, the practice becomes uneconomical.

In contrast, the system of natural farming as advocated by Mr. Fukuoka requires no plowing, no insecticide, no prepared fertilizer, and no weeding. It is labor-saving, you don't have to pay for chemicals and chemical fertilizer, and you don't use petroleum. Moreover, since natural farming enriches the soil every year, it is not necessary to rest the land, making this farming method extremely economical and efficient. Through natural farming, Mr. Fukuoka grew rice and wheat alternatively. He had *mikan*, he grew vegetables like weeds, and in his book he proposed crop rotation when growing vegetables. Whatever he grew, he tried to identify the natural cycle and kept to this cycle as closely as possible. Whether one can do so is the key to success in natural farming.



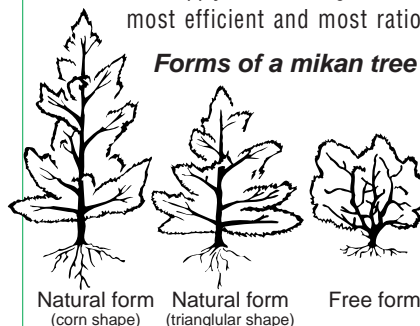
People of Fukuoka Natural Farm: Masato (third from right in back row), his wife Rieko (middle in front row) and youths taking over earth-friendly agriculture for the future



"Natsu-mikan" citrus growers pluck the fruit by climbing up the tree on a steep hill.

What Does "Natural" Mean?

It is very difficult to define "nature." Whether desert, or mankind – if you call them part of nature, they are part of nature. When Mr. Fukuoka faced the riddle, "What would be the natural form of a *mikan* tree," he took a careful look at the world of nature and came back with the answer: the natural form of a *mikan* tree would consist of one trunk in the middle with branches sprouting out from there. When you backtrack this method of definition and apply it to farming, "nature" means growing crops in the



most efficient and most rational manner. There lies Mr. Fukuoka's philosophy. He believes that nature is the most perfect thing in this world. This is the alpha and omega of Mr. Fukuoka's system of natural farming.

Source :
"Mu[III]Shizen Nohou"
by Masanobu Fukuoka, p.353,
Shunjusha Publishing Co.

Mr. Fukuoka's Legacy

"*The One-Straw Revolution*" has been translated into more than 20 languages, and it is said more than one million copies have been published worldwide. When Mr. Fukuoka was 25, he was puzzled by the meaning of life, but salvation came with this sudden realization – that human knowledge can't hold a candle to nature. From then on, Mr. Fukuoka sought to confirm this conviction step by step by way of cultivating crops; he proved it through experiments and the result was "*The One-Straw Revolution*." Mr. Fukuoka's belief, "just follow nature," has served as the problem-solving key and has given hope not only to farmers, who have nearly forgotten that "crops are grown by nature," but also to us all when we fall into a cul-de-sac in this age of faith in science. **J.S**

Mr. Masanobu Fukuoka died of old age on Aug. 16, 2008, only two months after the interview. May his soul rest in peace.

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