

**“Body and Earth Are Not Two”:
Kawaguchi Yoshikazu’s NATURAL FARMING and
American Agricultural Writersⁱ**

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An old phrase which has recently become popular again in Japan is “Shindo-fuji.” This means, literally translated, “Body and Earth Are Not Two.” That is, our human bodies and the land from which we get our food are closely connected. This phrase is commonly used for promoting a closer relationship between consumers and farmers and also for promoting greater self-sufficiency regarding agricultural produce. In this context, the phrase generally supports the slogan “Produce locally, consume locally,” that is good for the health of both humans and the land. The popularity of this phrase reflects the increasing awareness of ecology and eco-economics in the society. Behind this awareness are things such as increased anxiety about the safety of food in Japan and increasing international pressure on Japan to import more agricultural produce.ⁱⁱ

Today I would like to talk about the works of a Japanese farmer and agricultural writer, Kawaguchi Yoshikazu. Kawaguchi, who was born in 1939, is the leading representative of the second generation of the Natural Farming movement. His works exemplify the spirit of the phrase “Body and Earth Are Not Two.”ⁱⁱⁱ I shall be focusing in particular on Kawaguchi’s thought and practice regarding the links between the health of the body and the health of the earth. And I will relate Kawaguchi’s works to the works of American agricultural writers such as Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry.

The first person to advocate Natural Farming was the great Japanese agricultural thinker, Fukuoka Masanobu. Fukuoka was born in 1913 and wrote his best-selling book *The One Straw Revolution* in 1975. Some of you may remember that in his preface to *The One Straw Revolution*, Wendell Berry wrote, “Mr. Fukuoka’s

techniques will not be directly applicable to most American farms.”(*One Straw Revolution* ix). I believe this is quite correct. If one takes it as simply a matter of “techniques,” Natural Farming may well “not be directly applicable to most American farms.” In fact, as it has turned out, Fukuoka’s techniques have proved difficult to apply even on most Japanese farms.

Kawaguchi himself converted from conventional farming to Fukuoka’s famous ‘do-nothing’ techniques around 1979. Perhaps he should have called them “growing-nothing” techniques because he failed completely, harvesting almost no crops for two years. However, he persisted with Natural Farming, not as ‘techniques’ but as a set of principles, and after struggling for ten years he finally succeeded in finding his own way of farming. He did so by observing the four principles laid down by Fukuoka, that is: no plowing, no fertilizers, no weeding, and no chemicals. Kawaguchi has said that at first he was not fully convinced by Fukuoka’s do-nothing theory, but once he understood that the aim of Natural Farming was to cultivate the land as it must have been in the earliest days of cultivation, some ten thousand years ago, rather than to let it go totally wild, he saw the light. He didn’t name his approach ‘the Kawaguchi Method’ because he claimed that potentially there could be as many methods of Natural Farming as there are people who practice it.

I believe that if Kawaguchi’s ideas and practices were better known, the four principles of Natural Farming might become applicable much more widely, not only in Japan but also in America and other places in the world. Of course, the techniques might need to be adapted according to the local conditions, but the principles can be applied almost anywhere.

I would like, now, to consider briefly the relationship between the leading figures of the two generations of the Natural Farming movement. Both of them share a view of nature epitomized by the phrase ‘do nothing unnecessary’ which reflects the traditional view of benevolent nature in East Asia as well as philosophical traits deriving from Taoism and Buddhism. Fukuoka Masanobu began his career as a scientist, a plant pathologist in fact. After working as an agricultural customs inspector for a few years he decided to give up his job and practice farming for himself. Influenced by both specialized scientific training and the nature-views of ancient East Asian philosophy, he tends to theorize in a grand way, and his farming method

is sophisticated despite its simple appearance. In contrast, Kawaguchi Yoshikazu started out as a farmer who spent much of his youth aspiring to be a painter while tending his small farm only periodically. His approach, which is based on his own experience of a simple rural life on a small farm, is very practical. His style of expression and teaching is artistic rather than scientific; more intuitive than theoretic; more insightfully delighting than gravely warning.

Summarizing the differences between them, I have detected in Fukuoka the prototype of a very strong, authoritative grandfather figure, whereas in Kawaguchi I find the prototype of a gentle father figure. Their different approaches to Natural Farming reflect the characteristics which are pertinent to each prototype. For instance, Fukuoka practiced a ‘direct seeding’ method in his paddy fields using his unique ‘clay pellets’ technique which involves scattering the rice seeds covered with a clay coating directly into the paddy. Kawaguchi, on the other hand, does not use such ‘direct seeding’ methods: instead he uses nursery beds to raise the rice seedlings and only plants them in the paddy when they have established themselves. The strong grandfather approach of Fukuoka is too technically demanding for most people to follow. Kawaguchi’s gentle father approach is practical and easier to follow and thus open to ordinary people. Indeed, the concept of ‘gentleness’ which was induced from the awareness of vulnerability may be the key to understanding Kawaguchi’s thought. He says that he was much relieved to have accepted human vulnerability, his own vulnerability in particular which, while young, he had hated and groped in the dark for ways to overcome. He also argues, juxtaposing humans with crops, that all you need to do is give a little care and support to your crops in their infant stage when they are vulnerable; after that you should just trust the life force of Nature to do the rest. Thus the acceptance of vulnerability seems to have paradoxically enabled him to open a channel to a larger, stronger source of vitality.^{iv}

The explanation that Kawaguchi gives for why he started Natural Farming is highly revealing. He says that for the twenty-two years before he started Natural Farming, he had been engaged in the conventional kind of modern farming which was dependent on the heavy use of chemicals. In the constant struggle to increase yields he had to use huge quantities of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, and this had a harmful effect on his health. In particular, he suffered from severe liver damage. He consulted many doctors but none of them could cure him.

In addition, since his dream had been to become a painter, he devoted much of his time to work at art schools; consequently the labor of farming was nothing but a chore to him.

Then, more or less simultaneously, he discovered Fukuoka's *The One Straw Revolution* and the practice of traditional Chinese medicine. He says, "The fact that I had damaged my own health made me start Natural Farming and using Chinese medicine at once. The idea of self-sufficiency which promotes the production of one's own food, and the idea of healing one's body and the bodies of one's family by oneself, began to emerge as very important issues for me (*Shizen-No kara, No wo Koete* 12)."

He came to accept his weakness and realized that one only needs to do relatively little to care and help one's body, and that the life force of one's body and the earth will do the rest. He now finds his body experiences delight when he works together with the myriads of living things in his paddies and vegetable gardens where no chemicals are sprayed, and where the soil is fragrant and spongy with the many layers of vegetable and insect remains which have accumulated in it over the years. He has come to see that the human body and the earth are not different. He now knows that it is the intrinsic power of nature alone that can restore and maintain good health, both in the human body and in the earth.

Now, it appears that Kawaguchi Yoshikazu is very close to the American agricultural writer Wes Jackson in that both are pursuing sustainable agriculture by keeping their farms full of weeds! Being free from the conventional notion that farmers are supposed to plow the earth and keep weeds off their farms, both of them recommend farmers stop plowing or weeding. Both are highly aware of how beneficial a variety of covering weeds and their roots can be in preventing soil erosion, and in supplying the soil with nutrients, moisture, and crumb structure. Both of them draw attention to the fact that higher biodiversity, in contrast to monoculture, not only contributes to the balance and stability of the agricultural ecosystem but can also spare farmers from the need to spray chemicals that are harmful to the health of the human body and the soil. Furthermore, both of them are aiming at creating self-sufficient small-scale farms. In short, they both observe the four principles of Natural Farming. Despite having grown up so far away from each other,

in Japan and America respectively, they appear to have so much in common.

Notwithstanding all these points of similarity, however, there is one immense difference between the work of Kawaguchi Yoshikazu and that of Wes Jackson. The difference is that Jackson’s idea of sustainable agriculture depends totally upon his plan to develop a high-yielding perennial grain. Jackson’s book, *New Roots for Agricultural Research*, recounts how his laboratory -- The Land Institute -- has been trying to isolate the genetic traits of high-yield strains from hundreds of wild perennial grasses, and how they have been endeavoring to breed a dream crop through experimental breeding with tens of thousands of possible combinations.

On the other hand, Kawaguchi’s book, *Taenaru Hatake ni Tachite* (Standing in the Exquisite Garden), repeatedly recounts such experiences of his own as illustrating that man can do just a little to care and help for the vulnerable, but that if we do that then nature will do the rest. He says that “All lives converge to One Life” (34), and that “Man lives within the activity of that One Life” (33). Therefore, he believes that “Everything necessary for man already exists in nature. Humans don’t need to produce anything with their distinguishing intellect. Whatever is necessary will be revealed to us through our non-distinguishing intellect” (71). He says ‘non-distinguishing intellect’ is the true intellect which works in the sphere where there are no differences between oneself and others, humans and nonhumans, to live and to die, health and illness, rich and poor, beneficial insect and pest insect, and so on. From this point of view, it appears that the gap between these two agricultural writers may be wider than the Pacific Ocean. That is, the gap there is greater than the difference between the East and the West.

In his generally favorable foreword to Wes Jackson’s book, Wendell Berry nevertheless made the following comment about what he called the “moral worries” about agriculture:

“The things that are wrong with agriculture now all come from the human willingness to manipulate nature. The scientists have found more and more ways to manipulate nature, and those ways have been used by industrialists to convert health to wealth. And now here is Wes Jackson, trying to correct the bad results of that by yet another manipulation of nature” (*New Roots for Agriculture* 71).

Wendell Berry has been expressing his mistrust of science in such ways for many years. Like all other natural farming writers, he thinks neither scientists nor any other kind of humans have the privilege of controlling wild nature. Fukuoka Masanobu wrote that,

“Nature as grasped by scientific knowledge is a nature which has been destroyed; it is a ghost possessing a skeleton, but no soul” (*One Straw Revolution* xii).

Wendell Berry backs up the point by quoting Wordsworth’s famous lines:

“Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things—
We murder to dissect” (xii)⁹

If such indeed is the case, then the obvious question is: what can we do? Kawaguchi says,

“Scientists fail to see the activity of Life. Science drives the life out of living things. All they look at are substances deprived of life” (*Shizen-No kara No wo Koete* 111.).

“Modern scientists, looking for the causes of disease, just pay attention to things like insects and viruses. But insects are not the enemies of the earth, and viruses are not the enemies of our bodies. The true causes of disease lie rather in the activity of human life or the crop’s life beyond physical entities which are analyzed into pieces” (52-53).

“You can find the right answer when you can see the whole, or the absolute world. Only then can your larger wisdom start working” (82).

In other word, Kawaguchi is emphasizing the limitation of the intellect, and therefore the need to accept human vulnerability without depending on the intellect as a weapon. Just as Kawaguchi recognizes the importance of seeing the activity of life that flows beyond the physical fragments, so Wendell Berry recognizes the importance of connections between aspects of life. He says,

“Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health. And what our society does its best to disguise from us is how ordinary, how commonly attainable, health is. We lose our health—and create profitable diseases and depen-

dences—by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. (*The Art of the Common Place*. “The Body and the Earth” 132)^{vi}

By restoring broken connections, Wendell Berry is trying to restore the wholeness beyond the mere physicality of nature. Thus I find an amazing convergence between Kawaguchi Yoshikazu and Wendell Berry. The title of Kawaguchi’s book, *Taenaru Hatake ni Tachite* (Standing in the Exquisite Garden), suggests that he is beholding an exquisitely beautiful, wonderful world, and that world must be not so far from what Wendell Berry was beholding when he entitled his book *Life is a Miracle*, referring to Edgar’s words in *King Lear* to remind us of human hubris.^{vii}

NOTES

- i This paper was read at the Fifth Biennial Conference of the ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) held at Boston University, June 3-7, 2003. It was one of the three papers presented at the session H12 “DOWN ON THE FARM” on June 6. The other two were “Ecocriticism and the Agrarian Vision” by William Major and “Wendell Berry and the Rhetoric of Economy” by Andrew McMurry. The theme of the conference (“the solid earth! the actual world!”) was taken from Henry Thoreau’s “Ktaadn” in *The Maine Woods*.
- ii This phrase is pronounced “Shin-do-fu-ji.” It is composed of four characters 身 (body), 土 (earth), 不 (not), and 二 (two).
Cf. Hoshi, Kanji. *Yuki-Nogyo no Chikara*. 『有機農業の力』 (The Force of Organic Farming). Tokyo: Soshinsha Co., 2000; Shimada, Akio. *Shindo-Fuji wo Kangaeru*. 『身土不二を考える』 (To Consider ‘Body and Earth Are Not Two’). Akita: Mumyousha Co., 1991; Yamashita, Soichi. *Shindo-Fuji no Tankyu*. 『身土不二の探求』 (A Research into ‘Body and Earth Are Not Two’). Tokyo: Soshinsha Co., 1998.
- iii Kawaguchi Yoshikazu (born in 1939) lives in Sakurai, Nara Prefecture. An increasing number of people, younger and urban people in particular, visit his farm these days. Several local groups have been organized here and there throughout Japan and are actively studying Kawaguchi’s way of Natural Farming.
- iv See *Shizen-No kara No wo Koete*. 30-31.
- v William Wordsworth’s “THE TABLES TURNED” concludes like this:
Sweet is the lore which nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beautiful forms of things;

– We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of art;
Close up these barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

- vi Berry's essay, "The Body and the Earth," was originally included in *The Unsettling of America*.
- vii The title, *Life Is a Miracle*, refers to Edgar's statement in *King Lear*. Wendell Berry argues that Edgar's statement "calls Gloucester back —out of hubris, and the damage and despair—into the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy..." (*Life Is a Miracle* 5).

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3. ———. *The Art of the Common Place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*. Edt. Norman Wirzba. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002.
4. Fukuoka, Masanobu. 福岡正信 *The One-Straw Revolution*. Trans. Chris Pearce, Tsune Kurosawa, and Larry Korn. Preface by Wendell Berry. Edt. Larry Korn. Emmaus: Rodale Press, 1978. (Originally published as *Shizen Noho Wara Ippon no Kakumei* 『自然農法わら一本の革命』 by Hakujusha Co., Tokyo, 1975).
5. Jackson, Wes. *New Roots for Agriculture*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980.
6. Kawaguchi, Yoshikazu. 川口由一 *Taenaru Hatake ni Tachite* 『妙なる畑に立ちて』 (Standing in the Exquisite Garden). Shizuoka: Yasosha Publishing Co., 1990.
7. ———. *Shizen-No kara No wo Koete* 『自然農から農を超えて』 (From Natural Farming, Beyond Farming). Sendai: Katatumuri Publishing Co., 1993.
8. ——— and Toriyama, Toshiko. 鳥山敏子 *Shizen-No* 『自然農』 (Natural Farming). Tokyo: Banseishobo Publishing Co., 2000.