

“Introduction: What is Natural Agriculture?”  
from “Farming to Create Heaven on Earth” (Shinji Shumeikai, 2007)

To understand Natural Agriculture, imagine a seed placed in your hand. Its weight hardly registers, and only with intention will you feel its touch against your skin. But however slight, the seed is the place where all earthly food begins, and what you notice about it will tell much about your relationship to food. A gastronome might recognize the seed as a spice or grain. A scientist might tell you its chemical structure or nutritional value. A farmer would certainly recognize its worth. But the average person would see little to remark upon and hand it back shortly.

Those who practice Natural Agriculture would look at the seed and see a provider, a partner, and a teacher. In their eyes, the seed grants physical energy to nourish the body, and spiritual energy to nourish the heart and mind. It partners with the soil and its human caretakers to make the natural world healthier, more complex. And as we humans build that partnership, the seed shows us how to live with respect and gratitude. In the palm of a Natural Agriculturist’s hand, the seed registers a tremendous presence, for there it is brimming with promise, wisdom, and hope.

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The practice of Natural Agriculture is rooted in the teachings of Mokichi Okada (1882–1955), a Japanese man who became at once a spiritual leader and a farming pioneer. His work was informed by two things: the difficulty of life in Japan between the world wars and the difficulty of his own life, which was rife with illness. His philosophy aimed to address and correct these misfortunes through lifestyle. Okada believed that by purifying the spirit, one would build both a healthy body for oneself and a new, healthier society. The latter offered a direct counter to the violence, fascism, and uncertainty that was unfolding across the world. Spiritual purification would lead to a world centered around the health, safety, and fulfillment of all people—a heaven on earth.

When Okada died in 1955, Ms. Mihoko Koyama carried on his teachings in founding the organization Shinji Shumeikai, called Shumei for short. After Koyama’s death in 2003, her daughter, Hiroko, became the group’s leader and has since made great efforts to bring Shumei’s message to an international audience. As of 2005, Shumei has 370,000 members worldwide. The activities are sectarian rather than religious; membership requires no conversion process and is nonexclusive. In Japan, many Shumei members practice both Buddhism and Shintoism as well.

Shumei’s headquarters are located in the Shigaraki mountains just outside Kyoto. Throughout Japan and the world, members are organized on a regional level through local centers. Each has a main building where activities take place, and each center is run

by a director and staff. Although these formal positions offer structure and guidance, the organization is run largely on volunteer work.

Just as in U.S. temples and churches, the personalities of their members and region shape these centers. But what does not change is the basic philosophy guiding them. Mokichi Okada believed that purifying the spirit improved both the life of the individual and the world he or she inhabited. He saw three ways to enact that purification. First was to be in the presence of beauty, such as fine art. Second was to receive what he called *Jyorei*, God's light, a spiritual healing reached through prayer. This he referred to as the art of life. Finally, he believed purification would come from living harmoniously with nature. This was called the art of agriculture.

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Agriculture might seem an unlikely avenue for communing with nature, being as it is a process of extraction. It is even stranger that a philosophy born in the twentieth century would choose agriculture for this role. In this age of supermarkets and industrial-style food production, many see agriculture as being decidedly against nature.

Our more common way of respecting the natural world is reverence based in pure observance, the “take nothing but memories, leave nothing but footprints” approach. But that passive contemplation is relatively new. Indeed, it was made possible only because people evolved enough to secure a food supply—through hunting or farming. Our true link to the earth is actually a working relationship: we take from the land and, in recognizing our dependence, are both grateful and humble. In its original form, agriculture inspires the deepest respect a person can have for nature.

Unfortunately, abundance has eroded our respect. With our food supply ever more secure, we have grown uncomfortable with being dependent on a larger system. As a result, the evolution of agriculture—particularly since World War II—has had a subtext of conquest. We strive to cease being subject to nature and instead command the elements to do our will.

At its core, Natural Agriculture aims to reverse that transformation. Rather than proposing that we seek dominance, it advocates returning to our place as integral members of the natural world. This begins with the simple premise that nature is perfect. Thus, nature already has everything it needs to thrive. Soil naturally has the ability to grow plants and contains the nutrients they need. Plants naturally have the ability to search out those nutrients, as well as to adapt to new climates and contend with insects and diseases. What could be called nonnatural agriculture, which depends on pesticides and fertilizers, is the result of humans ceasing to trust or even recognize that inherent power.

Over the past few years, I have explained Natural Agriculture to numerous people involved with organic farming. They already base their practices in the belief that strong plants don't need the help of pesticides and that building soil is the most important thing

a grower can do. Yet the conversation always stops at the question of the use of compost and manure, which Natural Agriculture forbids. “What about the nutrients?” they say. “How can you extract crops without putting anything back in the ground? How is the soil not depleted?” John Haberern, executive director of the Rodale Institute, once put it this way: “What we do and what Shumei does is similar. It’s just that sometimes we think the soil needs a little help.”

The key to Natural Agriculture is dissolving the hierarchy behind that thinking. We are programmed to believe ourselves superior to plants and soil, to believe that the work of farming involves making up for what plants and soil lack. Instead, Natural Agriculture prescribes an equal partnership, in which we recognize the natural capabilities of plants and soil and believe in nature’s power to heal and maintain itself. The goal is not to produce quantity for our own profit but to encourage the plants’ and soil’s natural development and feed ourselves on the remarkable results.

Of course, for a farmer who switches to Natural Agriculture, the first season can be disastrous: the natural elements have so long depended on fertilizers and pesticides that almost nothing of themselves remains. But as they build, their strength becomes evident. With each new year free of additives and other intervention, soil regains its natural composition of complexity. Plants are increasingly able to dig deep for nutrients, which builds powerful roots that endure extreme weather. They also develop resistance to insects and diseases. Most pests are natural, after all, existing to curb the populations of other species. Over generations, plants can balance out the cycles of ebb and flow, if only they are left to their own powers.

Meanwhile, the farmer’s labor is to optimize the conditions for plants and soil to develop. This involves obvious chores—planting, supplying water, weeding. It also includes acts such as saving seeds, which allows progress to accumulate through generations. Beyond that, how Natural Agriculture works varies from farm to farm. Because it is not a method of farming, there is no such thing as a standard technique. Instead, each grower fashions the most effective system from the tools that are available. There are no Natural Agriculture research centers or schools, no books about the practice. Farmers do trade information, but because the variables change, often the application is not transferable. Any lesson about Natural Agriculture is ultimately about how to think, not about what to do.

This brings us back to the idea of using fertilizer. On one hand, it seems like a minor infraction. People have been using manure for thousands of years, so certainly one can value soil and still make amendments. But using fertilizer means that, on some level, a person is not convinced that the earth has everything it needs. Inversely, not using it exhibits a vital sense of trust. Such an act implies that rather than change nature to work for the farmer’s own benefit, the farmer will change him or herself to work with how nature already is.

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From this foundation, I believe Natural Agriculture can be understood and experienced on three levels, each one more meaningful than the last. It begins with the farming itself.

Any U.S. farmer will probably doubt that this approach, not oriented toward production, can be financially viable. Agriculture as a business works as a set of equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fertility} + \text{additives} + \text{labor} &= \text{yield} \\ \text{Yield} \times \text{price} &= \text{gross income} \\ \text{Gross income} - \text{cost of inputs} &= \text{net income} \end{aligned}$$

Most farmers have these equations carefully calculated in a way that keeps them afloat. Change one element, and the whole thing shifts. To keep it balanced, other factors must adjust. For instance, decrease the additives and yield may fall. The cost of inputs will also decrease, but the farmer may need to ask for a higher price to achieve the same net income. Or decrease the additives and perhaps the labor increases. That might raise the cost of inputs, which would require a higher gross income.

Natural Agriculture is able to balance the equation because of an added element: the consumer. The system works because the people buying a farmer's products are equally devoted to the philosophy. Similar to the arrangement in a U.S. community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, Shumei consumers ensure a market by buying all of a farm's food—even when that means receiving pockmarked melons or weeks of nothing but greens. These Shumei consumers increase the price factor, agreeing to pay more than they would in a supermarket. They ease the labor cost by helping in the fields. They even volunteer to distribute the food, which eliminates the external middleman and thereby sends more money back to the farmer.

Sachiyo Nishida, a Natural Agriculture leader from Aichi Prefecture in Japan, explained it this way: "In older days, all the neighbors came to help in the busiest work such as planting rice seedlings and weeding. Everyone cooperated to farm. Likewise, CSA members of Shumei are all willing to help. They don't mind sweaty, hard work—even for free. Their acquiring a lifestyle in harmony with nature weighs more."

That's the key: Shumei consumers are just as committed as the farmers are to the idea of growing food with respect for nature. For them, participating in this agriculture is a spiritual pursuit. It brings them to the field as volunteers, where they learn how much it takes to weed rice by hand or to coddle tomatoes into ripeness. They carry this back to their kitchens, where they reflect on how they cook and where their ingredients come from. They carry it to the table, where they notice what the food tastes like and how much they leave on their plates. And they carry it back into Shumei, where they encourage others to get involved as farmers, consumers, or both.

A member of the Kokura center on Kyushu Island put it well. She said that with a linear, industrial style of food production, only food passes from the farmer to the consumer. When you eliminate the middleman and restructure the process so that the farmer and

consumer work together for the same goal, they exchange not only food but love, gratitude, and responsibility.

The result of this is the second level of understanding about Natural Agriculture. Beyond being an approach to farming, it is a new way of thinking about food. In Natural Agriculture, soil, farmer, and consumer are equal partners. No longer is the soil considered lifeless, the consumer dutiless, and the farmer wholly responsible for coaxing life from the former and serving the latter. Each partner is integral. The soil grows and provides. The farmer tends the soil and grows the plants. The consumer participates, appreciates, and educates. The process behind eating changes from being an assembly line to a true food system.

The next step is to recognize this system as part of the larger natural world. Yasunori Sako, who runs the farm at Shumei's headquarters, describes seeing this revelation among children participating in his programs. They learn to care for plants in the field, and when they leave the farm, they show a new sensitivity toward other plants and creatures. Natural Agriculture teaches respect and kindness; it is a philosophy for interacting with the world and with each other.

This is the third level of understanding Natural Agriculture. It is not just about food; it is a practice that can guide every aspect of life. This way of seeing the ground beneath your feet and the food on your plate extends in rings outward, and eventually you can apply it to everything, everywhere. The goals are health and happiness; the tools are love and gratitude.

The first time a Shumei farmer tells you that Natural Agriculture will lead to world peace, it's easy to think he's nuts. But in fact that is the larger goal, heaven on earth. Shumei members believe that gratitude breeds gratitude, that respect and sensitivity are contagious. Natural Agriculture is a process of inspiring those feelings and spreading them around the world. Remember that the concept originally grew like a lotus flower out of the mud of pre- and postwar Japan. Keiko Honjyo, director of the Toyama Shumei center, lived through those challenging years. In 2005, when she was 73, I asked her why she is so devoted to Natural Agriculture.

"Because life depends on it," she said matter-of-factly. "Following this leads to world peace, and there's no other choice. It's a matter of life and death."