

MASANOBU FUKUOKA

'One Straw Revolution'

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Fukuoka the author of 'One Straw Revolution' which inspired many a person all over the world to convert to Natural Farming is no more. He passed away at the age of 95 on the 16th August, 2008. The common point between Gandhiji and Fukuoka is that they practiced first and preached later. One of the remarkable statements of Mahatma was "My life is my message". Though Fukuoka made no such statement, his life is his message in relation to Natural farming. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind Gandhiji's life and message have universal application for truth, non-violence and village based economy, whereas Fukuoka's message is restricted to Natural Farming.

Fukuoka was inspired by Buddha and Gandhi. In Fukuoka's words "I believe that Gandhi's way, a methodless method, acting with a non-winning, non-opposing state of mind, is akin to natural farming. When it is understood that one loses joy and happiness in the attempt to possess them, the essence of natural farming will be realized. The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings."

Again Fukuoka says in some other place in this book "Fast rather than slow, more rather than less—this flashy "development" is linked directly to society's impending collapse. It has only served to separate man from nature. Humanity must stop indulging the desire for material possessions and personal gain and move instead toward spiritual awareness". Does this not sound like Gandhi?

As a young man, Mr Fukuoka left his rural home and traveled to Yokohama to pursue a career as a microbiologist. He became a specialist in plant diseases and worked for some years in a laboratory as an agricultural customs inspector. It was at that time, while still a young man of twenty-five, that Mr Fukuoka experienced the realization which was to form the basis of his life's work and which was to be the theme of this book, "The One-Straw Revolution." He left his job and returned to his native village to test the soundness of his ideas by applying them in his own fields.

The basic idea came to him one day as he happened to pass an old field which had been left unused and unplowed for many years. There he saw healthy rice seedlings sprouting through a tangle of grasses and weeds. From that time on, he stopped flooding his field in order to grow rice. He stopped sowing rice seed in the spring and, instead, put the seed out in the autumn, sowing it directly onto the surface of the field when it would naturally have fallen to the ground. Instead of plowing the soil to get rid of weeds, he learned to control them by a more or less permanent ground cover of white clover and a mulch of rice and barley straw. Once he has seen to it that conditions have been tilted in favor of his crops, Mr Fukuoka interferes as little as possible with the plant and animal communities in his fields.

All three methods (natural, traditional and chemical) yield comparable harvests, but differ markedly in their effect on the soil. The soil in Mr Fukuoka's fields improves with each season. Over the past twenty-five years, since he stopped plowing, his fields have improved in fertility, structure, and in their ability to retain water. By the traditional method the condition of the soil over the years remains about the same. The farmer takes yields in direct

proportion to the amount of compost and manure he puts in. The soil in the fields of the chemical farmer becomes lifeless and depleted of its native fertility in a short time.

In the area of Shikoku where Fukuoka carried on his experiments, rice is grown on the coastal plains and citrus (orange/lime varieties) on the surrounding hill sides. His farm consisted of one and a quarter acres of rice fields and twelve and a half acres of citrus plants.

He adopted four principles for farming this land, which are as follows:

The first is No CULTIVATION—that is no plowing or turning of the soil. The second is No CHEMICAL FERTILIZER OR PREPARED COMPOST. People interfere with nature, and try, as they may, they cannot heal the resulting wounds.

The third is NO WEEDING BY TILLAGE OR HERBICIDES. Weeds play a part in building soil fertility and in balancing the biological community.

The fourth is No DEPENDENCE ON CHEMICALS. From the time that weak plants developed as a result of such unnatural practices as plowing and fertilizing, disease and insect imbalance became a great problem in agriculture.

These four principles of natural farming comply with the natural order and lead to the replenishment of nature's richness.

Ultimately, it is not the growing technique which is the most important factor, but rather the state of mind of the farmer.

A SELF-SUPPORTING FARM

Apart from agriculture, Fukuoka also practiced animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries and bee keeping—these factors ensured that life in the farm was self-supporting—the attainment of Gandhian ideal village where the entire requirements were locally produced.

Fukuoka had become a legend in his own life time. Naturally there were a stream of visitors and admirers not only from different parts of Japan, but from all parts of the world. Visitors were accommodated in mud huts like in Sevagram of Gandhi and had to participate in daily chores. To quote a visitor, "there are no modern conveniences in Fukuoka's farm. Drinking water is carried in buckets from the spring, meals are cooked at a wood burning fire place and light is provided by candles and kerosene lamps. The mountain is rich with wild herbs and vegetables. Fish and shell fish can be gathered in nearby streams and sea vegetables from the Inland sea a few miles away.

"There are the daily chores of cutting firewood, cooking, preparing the hot bath, taking care of the goats, feeding the chickens and collecting their eggs, minding the beehives, repairing and occasionally constructing new huts, and preparing soybean paste and soybean curd."

The first sentence of the first chapter of "One Straw Revolution" "Look at this Grain", begins like this: "I believe that a revolution can begin from this one strand of straw. Seen at a glance, this rice straw may appear light and insignificant. Hardly anyone would believe that it could start a revolution. But I have come to realize the weight and power of this straw. For me, this revolution is very real."

Elsewhere, he says "Spreading straw might be considered rather unimportant, but it is fundamental to my method of growing rice and winter grain. It is connected with everything, with fertility, with germination, with weeds, with keeping away sparrows with water management. In actual

practice and in theory, the use of straw in farming is a crucial issue. This is something I cannot seem to get people to understand.”

But what has become popular now as Organic Farming or Natural Farming is a little too different from Fukuoka's methods. The organic farmers prepare compost, vermi compost, Panchagavya, Bio fertilizers, Bio pesticides etc. These methods are foreign to Fukuoka—who just left the soil to do its own work.

Yet, a word of caution would be in order. In some place in his book Fukuoka says "the geography and topography of the land, the condition of the soil, its structure, texture and drainage, exposure to sun light insect relation, the variety of seed used, the method of cultivation etc. are essential factors. These vary from place to place.

Fukuoka's own farm was somewhat exceptional. It had a humid climate with rain dependency falling throughout the spring months. The texture of the soil was clayey. The surface layer was rich in organic matter and retained water well.

If Indian farmers tried to follow Fukuoka's do nothing after scattering the seeds in the dry belts of central and southern Tamil Nadu, or for that matter in any part of the world with scanty rainfall, or a sandy or loamy soil, the results would be disastrous.

Nevertheless, Fukuoka has created a new trend in farming. His method could be copied at least in some places. In other places with different soil and climatic conditions, one can avoid chemical fertilizers and pesticides and use organic fertilizers.

Lastly, what is inspiring as one reads through Fukuoka's 'One Straw Revolution' is that he reminds PEOPLE of Gandhi for his truthfulness, simplicity, spirituality and living with nature as part of it with minimal interference. □□□