



Andreas Michalsen

Healing Through the Power of Nature

A Plea for Modern Naturopathy

With assistance from Dr. Petra Thorbrietz

Edited by Friedrich-Karl Sandmann

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Introduction

Fasting, yoga, Ayurveda, medicinal herbs, mindfulness, a vegetarian diet – themes of naturopathy are as topical as never before. But it is difficult to find guidance. Some treatments are commended, which should rather be called into question. On the other hand, doctors who have no knowledge or experience of them sometimes disparage effective naturopathy treatments. However, these days the majority of people who fall ill want treatment that includes naturopathic methods. It is therefore high time for an evaluation that considers experience, practice and research in equal measure.

Medicine needs naturopathy – now more urgently than ever. An increasing number of chronic illnesses are spreading far and wide and conventional medicine's attempt to submit them to the same high-tech treatments as emergency cases, i.e. with operations, interventions and new medication, leads to ever more side effects and exploding costs.

For thousands of years, traditional natural healing methods have kept humans alive and treated them surprisingly effectively – although they are based only on experience. Then along came modern medicine with its scientific approach and the amazing diagnostic and therapeutic possibilities, and a lot of old knowledge was forgotten, because it was considered old-fashioned or even wrong.

Today, latest research methods from modern biology and medicine show that naturopathy is not a thing of the past, but rather highly relevant. It offers solutions for the current crisis of modern medicine with its climbing costs for therapies and a high proportion of chronic illnesses amongst the population, it shows ways of forcing back existing illnesses and preventing new ones from developing. The central focus is not on the respective diagnoses, but rather on the individual person, who does not necessarily have to become chronically ill.

Natural healing has shaken off its fusty image and has become a scientifically substantiated discipline. It no longer stands next to so-called conventional medicine, but has instead become its partner. Renowned university clinics such as the Berlin Charité support and integrate it.

As Professor of Clinical Complementary Medicine at the Charité University Medical Centre Berlin and Head of the Department of Internal and Complementary Medicine at Immanuel Hospital Berlin, a German naturopathy institution rich in tradition, I deeply care about conveying the huge potential of naturopathy to the public

– to close the divides that always seem to open up between ‘high-tech’ medicine and empirical knowledge. It is not a question of division, but of integration and combination – on a scientific basis. Using this approach, we successfully treat thousands of patients every year.

As a young boy, I observed my father, who was himself a physician using natural healing practices, help patients on a daily basis. Today, I am delighted that I am able, together with dedicated colleagues, to research the modes of action of many methods, including ones he used, and use them in clinical application – and to keep on learning.

I am happy that with this book, I can pass on important knowledge and hopefully helpful information to patients, to all interested readers and maybe even to some colleagues!

Professor Andreas Michalsen

EXCERPT FROM:

Chapter 6: The Value of Restraint

Fasting as an Impulse of Self-Healing

‘There is no love sincerer than the love of food’ – says the dramatist and vegetarian George Bernard Shaw, and yet hunger can still be one’s best friend. In order for you to understand what I mean, I must first offer some observations on the significance of nutrition.

Admittedly, precise figures vary as to what extent major chronic illnesses, which afflict the western world but increasingly also Asia and Africa, can be prevented through healthy eating. But one thing is certain: It is a high percentage. We are talking about arthritis, rheumatoid inflammations, high blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, dementia, heart attacks and strokes as well as the many cancer related illnesses that increase year after year and that fill hospitals and doctors’ surgeries.

Nutrition and prevention are extremely important but unrewarding topics. Experts describe the problem as ‘deferred gratification’. What does a youth or young adult care whether he might suffer a stroke in fifty years’ time? And when, forty-eight years later, the illness begins to become apparent, then of course it is rather late to do something about it. No other topic makes the importance of raising awareness quite as apparent. Believe me: Your nutrition dictates whether you spend the second half of your life in good or bad health or even whether you might die early.

The Right Diet Protects from Illness

The other factor that renders the discussion so difficult are the contradictory statements made by ‘the scientific community’. When it comes to food products, many lobbyists and pseudo-scientific institutes step in, industry sets off smoke bombs, and this creates the impression that no one quite knows what really is healthy after all. However, the opposite is true.

If you look at all the research there is – experimental testing in laboratories and on animal, epidemiological surveys, clinical studies and experiences – there is no question as to what constitutes healthy eating. However, each of these five areas of research has its weaknesses. This is why the results are being twisted and turned, until

for example a single population study has to hold out for animal fats not being ‘that unhealthy’ after all.

This is questionable, as it is not possible to draw conclusions about what constitutes healthy eating from a single population study. Imagine: On a certain day in a certain year a patient is asked to fill out a survey regarding his eating habits. Maybe he’s having a bad day that day, maybe he hasn’t been eating healthily the last few days and would prefer to forget that – and maybe he gives some false answers. Maybe he generally does not pay much attention to what he eats, or to the ingredients of his meals, because he tends to eat in restaurants or canteens or his wife cooks for him at home.

In any case, twenty years later, when this patient suffers a heart attack, this questionnaire will be consulted and conclusions drawn whether food might have had anything to do with it. It is not difficult to see that this method is highly prone to errors. Neither do laboratory and animal testing offer ambiguous results. From medical research, we know that of the substances that initially tested positively, ultimately only 10 to 20 per cent get approved. Why should it be any different with nutrition?

So we really should gather all data including doctors’ experiences and good common sense. The healthiest food is vegetarian or vegan, meals with ingredients like lentils, beans, rice, spinach or carrots – but have you ever seen an ad for broccoli in the papers or on television? Money is best made with fatty, salty and sweet convenience food products that entice with brightly coloured packaging. And as research for this is readily funded, there are also studies that serve to corroborate their harmlessness or some functional additional value. So it can then be argued that Coke is healthy because it contains a lot of water. But let’s go back to the beginning. Which nutrition really is healthy?

What Damages the Body Above All is Excess Food

I found the first answers to this question during my time as a junior doctor at the then Chair for Naturopathy in Berlin under Malte Bühring. I was caught by surprise right on my first day, in March 1999. After all, I came directly from the cardiology department, where we were saving lives by means of hearth catheters, the most up-to-date medication, operations and intensive-medical measures – in other words, the whole repertoire of high-tech medicine. And now I stood in a hospital room where none of this was apparent. The two male patients were having their lunch: One of them was

seated before a small plate of pale vegetable soup, while the other was slowly chewing small slices of a dry bread roll and spooning some milk. The former was fasting following the instructions of Doctor Otto Buchinger, one of the founders of therapeutic fasting, the latter according to the method of the Austrian doctor Franz Xaver Mayr. Despite their meagre meal, both gentlemen were evidently in high spirits and enthusiastically recounted how dramatically their symptoms had diminished after just a few days of fasting.

Opponents of this method argue that fasting is unnatural. It is true: In the history of evolution, the search for food has been the most important driving force. Yet nonetheless, fasting did play a role: Many animals stop eating when they are ill, intuitively supporting the healing process. There are many creatures who go into hibernation or hold similar periods of rest and whose metabolism shifts in the process. And finally, millions of people around the world fast every year and go through periods of not eating.

Fasting as a religious practice is almost as old as human history as we know it. There are corresponding rituals in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism (Yom Kippur), but also in Bahaism, Jainism and many other religious traditions. It is said of Buddha, Moses and Jesus that they each fasted for forty days. Sometimes medicine is so fixated on scientific data and details that it can't see the forest for the trees. Basic common sense tells us that humans would have died out a long time ago if not eating for a few days caused serious health issues. The body must have precise programmes for such times of need in order to also be able to regulate body temperature, the bloods' pH value or the sugar supply to the brain's nerve cells in altered circumstances.

Until a few decades ago, it was more or less a rule of human life that food was not available round the clock. There were good and bad harvests, harsh winters, and all too often food was fought over. Our body had adapted perfectly in its genetic development to this regularly occurring deficit.

Due to this long period of adjustment, the human body is perfectly able to deal with hunger and periods of fasting. However, there is no corresponding ability to deal with excess supply of food, as our genes have not yet adapted to this. Every year, there is an increase in the number of overweight people (especially men) and in the number of serious chronic illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure, but also cancer and arthritis. And not only because we are getting older. Despite all successes in selective areas of cardiology and high blood pressure therapy – prevention in this sector

is a history of failure. 90 per cent of the risk factors for cardiovascular illnesses could be excluded if we eat well, exercise a lot and avoid a hectic lifestyle.

Fasting Strengthens the Immune System

Children have a natural impulse to refuse food when they are sick, for example when they have the flu. Parents – meaning well – often try to convince them: ‘Child, you must eat, you must get your strength back!’ However, there is basic research showing that fasting during an illness does not weaken the body, but actually boosts the immune defence. In 2016, Yale University immunologist Ruslan M. Medzhitov and his colleagues were able to show that the immune system can fight bacteria more efficiently, probably because fasting increases the availability of ketone bodies, metabolic associations that result from energy deficits such as hunger (see pp. 102). Viruses are different: immune cells require energy from glucose in order to resist the illness. As the saying goes: starve a fever, feed a cold. So fasting helps with feverish or purulent infections.

Doctors throughout time have observed the fact that abstaining from food – as long as it is not exaggerated – can be beneficial to health, whether that be Hippocrates or Kneipp. The latter said: ‘Once you notice that you have eaten, you have already eaten too much.’ When I began to be interested in natural healing traditions around the world, I discovered that fasting is practiced in all cultures. In general, it is fascinating that worldwide there are so many therapeutic approaches and methods that have surprisingly similar forms, often without direct contact or exchange between these cultures. This is similarly true of the use of cupping (see p.67) as a method of pain relief.

One of the legendary ‘Blue Zones’, where people grow very old, is Okinawa in Japan. The rule there is that one should only eat until one is 80 per cent full – ‘Hara Hachi Bu’. Similarly, traditional Chinese medicine posits that ‘Chi fan qi fen bao, san fen han’ – he who wishes to remain healthy should only ‘eat until 70 per cent full and dress to one third (too) cold’. The principle in Ayurveda is that one third of the stomach should be filled with liquid; one-third with food and the last third should be left empty.

Regular Fasting Means Being Healthier and Living Longer

The natural healing ward in the Moabit hospital in Berlin, assigned fasting to almost all patients suffering from chronic illnesses. These included, as I have already mentioned, diabetes, high blood pressure, rheumatism, bowel disease and many pain symptoms, especially migraine, arthritis and back pain. But I also quickly realised that therapeutic fasting is much more than simply abstaining from food. The fasting technique applied there was an elaborate system of particular dishes, accompanying therapies such as liver poultices and Kneipp treatments as well as therapeutic baths, exercises and breathing techniques. Particular emphasis was also placed on the correct introduction to the fast and the transition back to normal eating habits. Easing days with fruit or rice slowly and gently prepared the body and intestinal tract for the transition to fasting. Even more important was the breaking of the fast, which envisaged a careful, step-by-step build-up to meals containing a normal number of calories. Together the patients celebrated, so to speak, their first mouthful after fasting in a small ritual by mindfully eating and chewing freshly cut slices of apple.

For all of those fasting for the first time, this moment is a big surprise – how unbelievably tasty and sensual it can be to chew a slice of apple! This experience is fundamental for the motivation to eat more healthily and in moderation in future. The time after fasting offers a good opportunity: taste buds and all senses are particularly alert and sensitive. Things that used to taste good before, a salty sausage or a fatty pizza are now perceived as overly seasoned and hard to digest. The build-up after fasting, ideally over a three-day period, is therefore very important.

As a student I didn't know this and so my first fast – a self-experiment so to speak – went wrong. At the time, I had decided together with my then girlfriend to carry out a small fasting cure in our apartment in Berlin-Kreuzberg. We prepared the juices and soups properly. But once it was over, on the sixth day, we were too impatient and celebrated the breaking of the fast with a pizza. Then we had coffee and cake. We spent the rest of the day with a stomachache feeling sick.

If you inspect the faster's tongue every day and also examine their face and complexion from a medical point of view, you can recognise the wonderful effect of fasting. The facial muscles relax, the connective tissue loses excess water, and the skin calms down. In many patients with back pain, the connective tissue and back muscles

show how the tissue is relaxing. Back pain that has been plaguing patients for months or even years, often disappears completely within a few days.

Through Malte Bühring, I was also introduced to the descendants of the German therapeutic fasting doctor, Otto Buchinger (1878-1966), who in the 1920s healed his rheumatoid arthritis in a self-experiment. The clinics in Überlingen, Marbella and Bad Pyrmont, managed by his grandchildren, are still flagships of therapeutic fasting today. By the way, you should not confuse therapeutic fasting with weight loss programmes – the weight loss is simply a pleasant side effect. Fasting is not about calorie reduction – if you simply want to eat less, the effect is not the same. It is about denying the body food almost completely and so putting it under light stress in the sense of the stimulus reaction described elsewhere (see p. 42); this detoxifies the body and reregulates it.

Going back as far as the 1990s, other fasting clinics such as the *Kurparklinik* in Überlingen or the *Klinik von Weckbecker* in Bad Brückenau also showed by means of their data and published experiences, that fasting was much more than a pure wellness effect. However, therapeutic fasting was not recognised by the scientific community until many years later. Shortly before Christmas 2015, together with some colleagues from the Charité, I invited Valter Longo from the US as a guest speaker. Longo is an American bio-gerontologist with Italian roots, who holds one of the most renowned Chairs for Research into Aging at the University of Southern California. The auditorium at the Max Delbrück Centre in Berlin was packed. Mesmerised, the many scientist looked at the data being presented. In countless experiments over a period of years, Longo had systematically examined the effect of reduced eating and fasting on bacteria, baker's yeast, worms and rodents. At the end of this elaborate, detailed, research, a surprisingly consistent insight was revealed. His result: For all living organisms on this earth there is a method for focused extension of the life span while staying healthy in the process – by fasting in regular intervals or, as an alternative, not eating one's fill on a daily basis, but rather reducing the calorie intake by between 20 and 40 per cent.

[...]

An Experiment With Surprising Results

Valter Longo's mentor was Roy Walford, the doctor and pathologist who in 1991, together with seven other scientists, spent two years living in a domed structure in the desert in Arizona, closed off from the world. The project 'Biosphere 2', which gained

worldwide fame, had been financed by a patron and was meant to show whether an artificially created ecosystem could sustain itself. NASA supported it because they expected insights into whether inhospitable planets such as Mars could be populated in this way.

However, the experiment was a disaster. The cement construction of the habitat absorbed the oxygen, which is why air soon became scarce and had to be administered from outside. There were issues with cockroaches and spiders, and above all, the vegetable, fruit and cereal harvests stayed way behind expectations. And so the two years of ecosphere meant two years of hunger for the occupants.

Valter Longo was there when the scientists left the station and perceived them as ‘hungry and angry men’. But although Roy Walford and his colleagues were thin as rakes, medical tests showed that they were not malnourished. Almost all risk parameters – from blood pressure to cholesterol levels – had reached an unbelievably low and healthy level. Longo was so impressed that he decided to dedicate himself to research into aging instead of Jazz Rock guitar (a passion that we share).

After his biosphere experience, Walford propagated calorific reduction, meaning permanent light hunger, as the probate way to reaching 120 years of age (he himself died aged seventy-nine from the genetic disease ALS, but reached a ripe age for this incurable disease). A fan community was founded, the CRONERs (Calorie Restriction with Optimal Nutrition), some of whom still practice the principle of daily calorie restriction, amongst them Walford’s daughter Lisa. I met her in Mumbai in 2008, at the celebrations for the 90th birthday of the Indian Yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar. Lisa is a well-know yoga teacher in the US and barely has a gram of fat on her body. The Croners have a daily calorie intake of around 1800 kilocalories (instead of 2000 to 2500 kilocalories).

The Healing Effect of Intermittent Fasting

But the problems of this calorific restriction were and are evident: those who are malnourished over long periods of time pay the price - mood swings, a marked tendency to be cold, and also reduced fertility. Croners would die out. The constant calorific reduction is not attractive to most people. And one certainly has to heed signs of a possible deficiency: some very strict fans may be anorexic. Valter Longo also realised that permanent calorie reduction was not the right way to proceed. So he and his

colleague Luigi Fantana looked for alternative ways. In animal tests, they showed that you don't have to go hungry all the time. It is enough to practice regular fasting periods - in the end this achieves a better effect. The scientists tested different variants, for example, rotating diets such as the Every Other Day Diet: The test animals, rats, were allowed to eat as much as they wanted on one day, and the next day they fasted, in constant rotation. This produced neither weight loss nor malnutrition, but did prevent most lifestyle diseases. The test animals, who had to undergo this intermittent fasting, not only had no diabetes, no high blood pressure and very rarely a heart attack or stroke, the rate of neurological diseases such as multiple sclerosis, dementia or Parkinson was also greatly reduced, as was the risk of getting cancer.

[...]