



Paleo-diet - © Banksy

# Permaculture Your Body!

**Aranya** considers how we can apply a permaculture design approach to the one place where we spend our whole lives – in our bodies

In essence, permaculture is about meeting our needs, but it does this mostly indirectly, by guiding us in shaping the landscape around us. I wondered, couldn't we also apply permaculture thinking to looking after our bodies *directly*?

As long as I can remember I've been interested in learning about my health. I ran competitively as a teen and into my twenties, something that led me to explore numerous ideas about improving my fitness. Then I began to experiment with my diet, which led me to discover gardening. Later, when permaculture came along, it offered me a whole new set of tools in the garden and connected me into a network of inspiring people. That was 20 years ago, but it's only been in the last five that I began to ponder my own body from a permaculture perspective. I asked myself the question, "What has this thing I inhabit, my physical body, evolved to do?" How can I 'work with my own nature'?

## Gardening Ourselves

Whenever we get out in our gardens into the open air and the sunshine, we're giving our bodies some of the key ingredients for health. Home-grown food is important, of course, and good nutrition has to start with the soil. Eating seasonally ensures that we obtain the same nutrients in each season that our ancestors enjoyed, and that they *needed*. Our bodies evolved in tandem with those foods, maximising our chances of survival in every environment we inhabited. In her book, *The Hunter Gatherer Way*, Ffiona Campbell considers what her Devon ancestors used to forage and how they journeyed through the landscape as the seasons changed. She suggests, for example, that the very foods available to them in the autumn triggered their bodies to put on fat stores for the winter. Those advantageous genes have been passed on to us, but our modern lifestyle has turned them into a curse. Most of those high carbohydrate foods are now available to us all the time so many of us find ourselves struggling with our weight as we 'pile on the fat for the winter' year-round. We're designed to crave those foods, only we don't live in the same world anymore – we live *out of context*. Eating seasonally certainly helps us to address such issues, but that's a big subject for another time; in this article I'd like to focus on a less familiar issue that's affecting our health.



## Human Nature

In permaculture we start with observation. The problem we are trying to solve is fairly obvious – the epidemic of poor health that permeates our modern societies. We're often told that we live longer than our ancestors, but at what cost? Many of us suffer poor health, often recurring pain, despite living in a society that offers us 'a better life' – for a price. Indeed 'health' has become big business, selling us everything from superfoods to diet pills and gym memberships to the latest fitness gadgets. And yet, it doesn't seem to be helping.

So what's gone wrong? We modern humans seem to be unique in this respect. What did a naturally healthy human look like, and can we regain that vitality for ourselves again? What were their secrets for excellent health?

We can look to archaeology to give us clues about how our ancestors lived, but we can also look at our own bodies and read the [hi]story within. We appear as we do because the human body evolved traits best-suited to negotiating the landscapes our ancestors inhabited. The things we excel at now are what they had to do in order to survive, and we must certainly include walking, running, climbing and swimming on that list. While we may be out-swum, out-climbed or out-

Even those of us who play sport or work out, rarely do so for more than an hour a day ...



Tree Girl © CC BY 2.0

sprinted by particular species, we seem to be especially well adapted to performing each of these activities to a fairly high standard. We are fine all-rounders.

The phrase 'form follows function' is well known. It means we're the shape we are because of the different movements our ancestors performed while making their way through their environment. Our ape descendants gave us tree climbing abilities, providing us with safety from ground predators. Settling by water provides many benefits, especially if you can swim. Walking and running have also been selected for in our evolution. Being able to run short distances quickly is an advantage in a tree-filled landscape if you can climb, whereas in a more open environment, being able to run a lot further is more useful. So am I suggesting that we need to do a lot more walking, running, swimming and climbing? Well, that brings us to another issue.

### **Movement Matters**

While form may follow function from an evolutionary perspective, form is also *affected* by function for the individual from the perspective of 'use it or lose it'. Our joints are lubricated by movement, yet our modern culture seems to discourage movement as much as possible. Many of us get out of bed, get into a box on wheels to travel to work, spend our working day sitting down, then make that same journey home, where we might spend a further few hours sat in front of the TV. Some divide our population into 'active' and 'sedentary' groupings, but the truth is that even those of us who play sport or work out, rarely do so for more than an hour a day. That really makes us 'active sedentary' compared to our ancestors who would have spent much of their day on the move. By contrast, when we do move it's often at a high intensity, in order to make up for our lack of movement at other times. This puts us at great risk of injury.

Symmetry is another popular trait we find throughout nature; it permits balanced, smooth movement, yet many of our modern activities are asymmetrical. We learn to do particular things favouring one side. I'm right-handed. Some tools encourage one sided use like scythes, for instance. Long periods of asymmetrical movements throw our bodies out of alignment, again increasing our risk of injury. Those injuries in turn cause our bodies to go into a protective mode, such as tightening around previously dislocated joints. Our body is a system that has to keep working so compensations are made in other places to keep us moving. These compensations often have an effect long after the original injury has healed. In order to regain natural alignment and free ourselves of pain, we need to free up the body and rediscover our original design.

### **Developing Better Movement Habits**

Despite running on and off and maintaining a fairly high level of fitness into my early thirties, I suffered from poor posture. A photo of me from a long distance charity run from this period shows my poor spinal alignment and acts as a reminder of how unbalanced my activities were – all legs and no upper body. Since that time I've explored a number of different approaches to try to remedy this, though in retrospect I realise that most didn't approach the body as a whole system. Even the Alexander Technique frustrated me as it looked right, but felt wrong. Only later did I appreciate that tightness in certain muscle groups had kept pulling me back to my unhealthy 'normal'. Only by releasing some muscles and engaging others have I ultimately freed up my body to move as it was designed to. And that of course is still a work in progress...

So how do we regain our good health? How do we do as our ancestors did, when we barely have any free time in the day? The key is to be found in movement. The major cause of our aches and pains is not getting enough. We don't need to do as much as they did, but we do need a diversity of activities, to engage all the muscle groups of the body. Many of us walk or run, but few of us hang or climb. As soon as I started to engage my upper body in these ways my posture changed dramatically for the better. This was a real eureka moment for me. It's not about developing strength (though that will come anyway), but about focusing on regular and natural movement. Balance and good technique

... That really makes us 'active sedentary' compared to our ancestors who would have spent much of their day on the move.

are also key, a number of writers† have been of particular help to me in this area.

If we examine the permaculture principles, we find many apply to the way we use our own body too. **Diversity** of movement has already been mentioned. The movements our ancestors made when for instance gathering food were **multi-functional** – the contraction of muscles helps to pump waste products from the body. Every bone, muscle and tendon needs to be in its optimum relationship with those around it. While they might be attached together, their **relative location** involves correct biomechanical alignment to safely dissipate potentially harmful forces. Can you think of any others?

While these general principles apply to us all, we also have our own unique history of activities and injuries that have taken us away from our optimum. A mirror can help us self-diagnose, but a skilled eye can more easily spot imbalances in the way we move and identify for us our own bespoke interventions. This has been of particular help to me, getting me past issues that wouldn't seem to shift. One session traced an imbalance in my walk to a back injury I experienced 30 years ago, something my body was still protecting itself against!

For me, this journey has been a revelation. I'm still learning to move well, but I feel a smoothness, a flow, and a deeper appreciation for what my body is able to do for me.

† Katy Bowman, Pete Egoscue and Kelly Starrett in particular.

## Permaculture Your Body

with Aranya, Dick Thompson and Lizzie Franklin

4-7 May 2017

At the High Heathercombe Centre, Manaton, Dartmoor

A three-day residential course where we'll be applying permaculture design principles to the care of the place we all spend the most time in – our own bodies! Begin a journey of holistic body health and well-being and come away with your own customised permaculture body design!

More details at:  
[www.learnpermaculture.com](http://www.learnpermaculture.com)

*Aranya has been using permaculture thinking to improve his physical health for over 5 years with great success. He is also author of the popular Permanent Publications book, Permaculture Design: A Step by Step Guide, RRP £14.95, on offer for £13.45 from PM's online independent bookstore at: [www.green-shopping.co.uk](http://www.green-shopping.co.uk)  
Aranya's website: [www.learnpermaculture.com](http://www.learnpermaculture.com)*



**CHANGE THE WORLD**

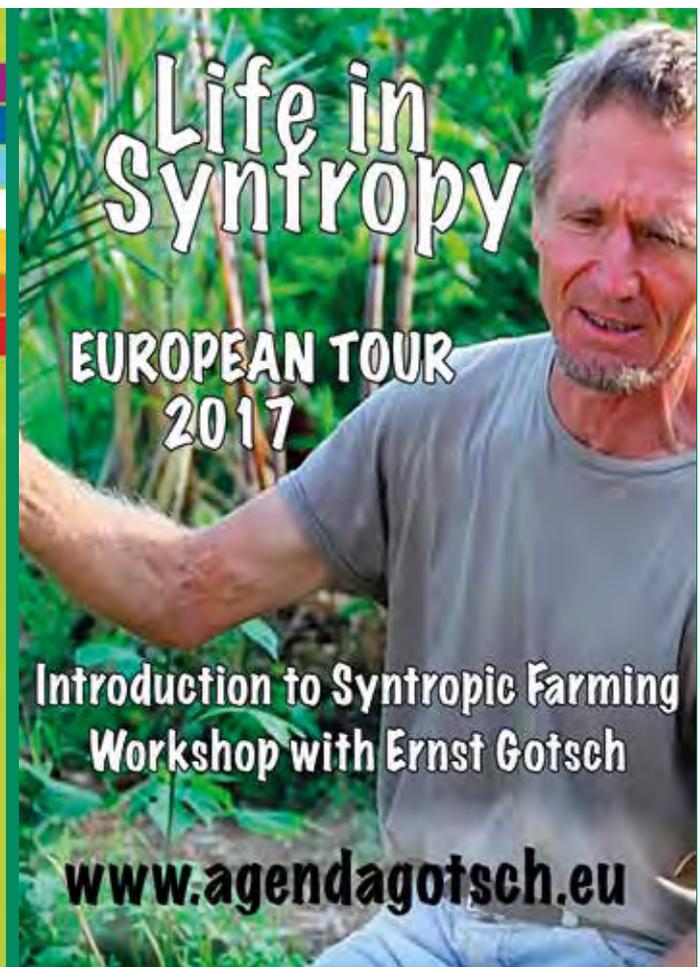
Sign up

GAIA EDUCATION  
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY  
**E-LEARNING**  
400hr course

Hesitant?

Start with the 15hr self-paced Intro to  
**'DESIGNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY'**

Gaiaeducation  
[www.gaiaeducation.org](http://www.gaiaeducation.org)



Life in Syntropy

EUROPEAN TOUR  
2017

Introduction to Syntropic Farming  
Workshop with Ernst Gotsch

[www.agendagotsch.eu](http://www.agendagotsch.eu)