



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

FOOD

A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 “Breakfast in Bumthang,” by Noa Jones
- 2 “The Joy of Mindful Cooking,” by Laura Fraser
- 3 “How a Tomato Opened My Mind,” by Anam Thubten
- 4 “Eating Just the Right Amount,” by John Kain
- 5 “Mindful Eating,” by Jan Chozen Bays
- 6 “The Bhikkhu Diet,” by Clark Strand
- 7 “Just the Right Amount,” by John Daido Loori
- 8 “Instructions for the Tenzo,” by Zen Master Dogen
- 9 “Thought for Food,” by Venerable Yifa
- 10 “Food for Enlightenment,” by Sandra Garson
- 11 “Eating and the Wheel of Life,” by Sandra Weinberg
- 12 “Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master’s Lessons for Living a Life that Matters,” by Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields
- 13 “Brown Rice Is Just Right,” by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
- 14 “Almond Joy,” by Noa Jones

1

B R E A K F A S T I N
B U M T H A N G

A wholesome, warming, and nutritious recipe for porridge

N O A J O N E S

One of the local radio deejays told me that the first breakfast café is opening soon in Thimphu, the busy capital of Bhutan. Breakfast is a Western concept that has crept in along with all the other changes Bhutan faces. Aid workers posted in the country from places like Scandinavia and Philadelphia have needs and desires: they suffer from withdrawal from their morning comforts of cappuccino, muesli, baked goods, and cream cheese. You will not find muesli on the shelves of your village general shop, or if you do it's often stale and flavored with the diesel fumes of the journey it took to get here. Cornflakes are common in Bhutan, but they are not the crispy melt-in-your-mouth kind of cornflakes you may be used to. Bhutanese cornflakes are hard as dimes and meant to be soaked in hot tea. Furthermore, Bhutan is not a place where eating out is considered a treat, unless you're talking about picnicking. Eating out is for those lonely people who do not have a family and a cook. Home-cooked meals are the preferred norm. And early morning is especially not a time when you'd find a Bhutanese wandering the streets looking for a good brunch spot.

So the appearance of a breakfast café is just one more sign of change.

“I guess it’s good for the bachelors but not for the families,” remarked my friend Phuntsho Wangmo, who has hosted me for countless breakfasts. I have stayed with her family many times over the years; her doors are always open, and I’ve become like one of those stray cats she feeds from time to time.

Phuntsho is from eastern Bhutan, and the food on her table is true to her roots. You won’t find her at a breakfast café. So what does Phuntsho have for breakfast?

Nowadays at Phuntsho’s we often have red beans, fried rice, maybe a sunny-side-up egg on the side, plus tea. But even that is a change. “At home in the village, first thing, someone goes to fetch the water and the work begins, while another prepares the meal, which is usually made from whatever is left over from dinner,” she says. “But most of the time we have porridge.”

Porridge is a universal peasant food; in the West we usually think of oat porridge, but in other parts of the world corn, barley, and rice are just as common. It seems that warm soupy cereal grains were the breakfast staple of everybody’s grandmother: congee in China, kicheree in India, risotto in Italy, lugaw in the Philippines, champurrado in Mexico, grits in Texas.

Phuntsho, being from eastern Bhutan, grew up on cornmeal porridge. Some Bhutanese turn up their noses at cornmeal. There’s even a saying: *Karap bopi tho mangi; solo khamthang pa mangi* (“Corn porridge is not food, chilies are not meat”). But the secret is, everyone kind of loves porridge if it’s made right. “Corn porridge is always considered a poor man’s food, but it really tastes good, eh?” Phuntsho says with relish. “It is so tasty.”

Until Indian rice became readily available, only wealthier Bhutanese and those from central Bhutan typically would eat red rice por-

ridge, called yomri, for breakfast. It was reserved for special occasions in the east. The recipe varies a bit from valley to valley, from household to household. It's definitely a recipe to be fiddled with, but once you get it right, it's a lovely way to start the day. Wholesome, warming, and nutritious.

Or, if you are a modern Bhutanese bachelor, skip the yomri. Instead, wake up alone in your flat in Mothithang, go to the new breakfast café, and order a cappuccino with white toast and eggs, then get into your government-owned Land Cruiser Prado and sit in your office reading Facebook updates with half-lidded eyes. Know that you are a symbol of change.

As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche wrote in *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*:

Nothing that exists or functions in the world, no constructs of the imagination or of the physical plane, nothing that passes through your mind, not even your mind itself, will stay as it is forever. Things might last for the duration of your experience of this existence, or even into the next generation; but then again, they may dissolve sooner than you expect. Either way, eventual change is inevitable.

But breakfast café or not, maybe porridge is forever.

Recipe for Rice Porridge

Base

- 1 cup Bhutanese red rice—you can also use any other nubby rice, preferably whole grain, like French Camargue.
- 3 tablespoons oil, butter, or ghee—butter is the best, but it's expen

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

sive in Bhutan, so many use cheap oil and round out the taste with a teaspoon of butter at the end.

1/2 cup of cheese cut into pea-sized pieces—generally a dried Bhutanese cheese like chugo, soaked overnight so it's chewy. Otherwise try medium-to-mild farmer's cheese that won't melt. Feta can work. The idea is to have little chewy bits floating in the porridge.

Salt to taste

Garnish

A dash of chili powder

Thengay, otherwise known as Szechuan pepper

1 tablespoon of crushed ginger or 1/2 tablespoon of garlic

Cilantro or spring onions

Shitake mushrooms

Grated carrots

Make the garnish after you've finished with the base so that the ingredients retain their fragrance. The chili, thengay, and ginger are essential, but the rest are optional and can be added to taste.

Method

Cook rice thoroughly with extra water. You can use leftover rice, but it's not as tasty. Put into an earthenware pot over an open fire (or any old pot on your stove). Add the butter and salt, then stir in enough water to make it soupy. Use a polished branch to blend well (or just use a blender). Add the cheese and cook for about 15 minutes. Don't let it dry out; keep adding water so that it has the consistency of gruel. Add then-gay, ginger, and a pinch of chili, and let cook for 5 more minutes, but

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

don't boil after you add these, so that the mash stays fragrant. Thengay is a powerful pepper berry that numbs the tongue. Some people hate it. Use sparingly, just 1 to 3 peppercorns finely ground. if you want to add cilantro, do so at the last minute, then serve. Fetch Grandma from the altar room. Gather the children. Sit in a circle and eat while discussing the harvest. You can serve with tea, but as Phunthso says, "Tea is only for people who don't drink *ara* [Bhutanese liquor]."

Noa Jones writes fiction and creative nonfiction.

2

THE JOY OF MINDFUL COOKING

Practicing awareness in the kitchen

LAURA FRASER

Dinners at the Nevada ranch where Dale and Melissa Kent work as caretakers are potluck. Whoever is visiting or living on the former dude ranch—now a private retreat, set up against the Eastern Sierras— shows up with a big pot of *pozole*, fresh greens from the garden, handmade tortillas, or a peach crumble made with fruit picked from the orchard outside. The wide-open kitchen is infused with the cheerful spirit of its former owner, Maya, who passed away a couple of years ago at 90; I can still see her kneading the sourdough bread she made in the quiet mornings, doing nothing else with her great intelligence and energy, at those moments, but kneading bread.

The ranch dinners are always fresh, and the various dishes made with love, but I've noticed, visiting over the years, that Dale and Melissa's contributions to the meals taste brighter and are presented more beautifully than, say, the goat cheese and crackers I plop onto a plate. Even their simplest dishes, mere vegetables cooked with some olive oil and salt, are somehow transformed; they're not just yummier, they're mysteriously more satisfying to the soul. Nor do the Kents ever seem

frantic getting something to the table on time, fret about the result, or burn anything in their haste to finish cooking already. It's as if their food is seasoned with grace.

That cooking magic has something to do with the fact that they spent seven years at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the renowned Buddhist monastery in California's Ventana Wilderness, where Dale did a two-year stint as *tenzo*, head of the kitchen. Tassajara has a long lineage of great cooks and cookbooks starting with Zen priest Edward Espe Brown and his *Tassajara Bread Book*, *Complete Tassajara Cookbook*, and *Tassajara Recipe Book*; and including Deborah Madison (who wrote *The Greens Cookbook* with Brown, along with her own books *The Savory Way*, *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone*, and many others) and Annie Somerville (*Fields of Greens* and *Everyday Greens*). Like these other Tassajara cooks, Dale and Melissa Kent don't just practice cooking; they've made cooking a practice, one that benefits not only what is on their plates and in their bellies but what is in their hearts.

The Kents' next-generation Zen-inspired cookbook *Tassajara Dinners & Desserts* (Gibbs Smith) sets down recent recipes from the monastery, along with their own thoughts about mindful cooking and words of wisdom from guest cooks who have passed through those gates. The recipes are simple, calling for improvisation, and focus on seasonal, organic, and local ingredients, as well as some ethnic and exotic ingredients that are more readily available now than they were at the time of earlier Zen cookbooks.

Each time I relished their meals, I wondered whether I could also learn to cook more mindfully—but without spending years in a monastery. My cooking is usually messy and distracted, except when I make soup, because you can't screw up soup, and something about chopping vegetables and tossing them in a pot restores my calm and equanimity.

But I never know how anything else will turn out: when I made my great-grandmother's recipe for fig-filled cookies shaped like delicate sand dollars, for instance, the friend I was baking with observed that mine came out looking like "mud huts." My scattered haste in the kitchen is even dangerous: I once sliced off my entire index fingernail along with the onions. And let's not discuss what I have burned.

I had no idea how to begin to cook mindfully, or really what that meant. I had an image of slow-motion cooking, of a Zen monk taking an hour to slice one carrot, pausing to breathe, focusing on its texture, color, smell, and the miracle of its being alive, as if studying it on high-grade LSD. I pictured it as cooking in a trance, which struck me, given the knives and heat, as quite dangerous, too.

I asked Edward Brown, whose cookbooks are ragged in my kitchen from twenty years of thumbing through for simple, reassuring recipe ideas, about my notion of slow, mindful cooking. He told me that Zen monks like to eat on time like everyone else. "Some people think they're being mindful by working very slowly, but they're confusing being mindful with being quiet, still, and composed—which are different qualities," he said. "You can work extremely diligently and quickly and be mindful."

Mindfulness, he says, is more about simply being present when you cook, fully engaged with the food and your relationship to it, from the earth it was grown in to the table. It's being aware of the food with all your senses, and of how you transform it with your hands, knives, herbs, and heat—making it taste alive, nourishing yourself and those who eat your meals. "Your awareness can be in bringing the activity alive and giving it some energy, vitality, and exuberance," he said.

When you see Brown cook, as in the 2007 film about him, *How to Cook Your Life* (from the German director Doris Dörrie), he fairly spar-

kles with that vitality, passing energy from his body and hands to the bread dough, and vice versa. But I wondered how you accomplish that trick of mindfulness, of making your experience and the food you cook come alive, when the temptation in busy times is to put packaged meals into the microwave, carelessly throw together a sandwich while on the cell phone, or, for special occasions, fearfully measure and rigidly follow a recipe, hoping it turns out to be perfect.

Being a Zen priest, Brown didn't offer me any easy answers, only a few ideas to chew on. "Mindfulness is much more about receiving your experience than dictating it," he told me. "Most people's habits of mind and activity, when it comes to cooking, are about making it come out the way it's supposed to, rather than receiving and appreciating it the way it is." The mindful focus is more on the kale in your hands—its curly leaves, earthy smell, and deep-green color—than on the casserole you hope will come out of the oven crisp and browned at precisely seven o'clock.

Brown offered a quote from Zen master Tenkei about how to cook mindfully: "See with your eyes, smell with your nose, taste with your tongue." That sounds obvious, but cooks are often so used to going through the motions, so focused on a recipe, a habit, or the product of our efforts— not to mention a million other distractions—that we forget to stop and experience the food we're cooking. The nature of awareness, Brown says, is to resonate with the object of awareness; with cooking, it is responding to the food you choose in the market, wash, and place on the cutting board in the kitchen. It's establishing a connection to the food, a relationship with it. "You're waking up to the way things are," he says. "Smell, see, taste, touch. Start to notice." His simple recipes aren't exact instructions for cooking, but permission to experiment and a structure within which to explore a deeper sort of joy of cooking.

Brown's other instruction about mindful cooking is one he says is classic Zen: "When you wash the rice, wash the rice; when you stir the soup, stir the soup." Give your attention to what you're doing, rather than to the preoccupations and daydreams scampering through your mind. "This is what some people call reinhabiting your body—extending your consciousness into your feet and hands, finding the life and vitality in your body and activity, rather than going through motions so it's a chore and drudgery." With cooking, you can use your awareness to inhabit physical movements that may be new, he says—cutting, washing, examining, mixing, folding—until, with practice, there is an invigorating flow of energy in those physical experiences, a delight.

Such energy, focus, and wholehearted attention nourishes yourself and those you feed, Brown writes in the introduction to *The Complete Tassajara Cookbook*: "Cooking is not just working on food, but working on yourself and other people."

Dale and Melissa Kent, who met at Tassajara in 1997, were both attracted to the monastery partly because of the cookbooks; the way to their hearts, they said, was through their stomachs. "I found *The Tassajara Bread Book* in a used bookstore and wrote to the address on the back," said Dale. A promising philosophy student, he confounded everyone in his life by finding work as a baker instead of going to graduate school. "I was following my breath while doing repetitive tasks, and feeling real peace," he said. "*The Tassajara Bread Book* described what I had been doing and encouraged me to pay attention, to treat pots and pans and knives as friends. Its poetry and sweetness spoke to me."

After two years at the monastery, Dale began to work in the kitchen. At Tassajara, monks work in silence, except for occasional functional speech ("What's burning?"). From the various tenzos he cooked with, Dale says, he learned different lessons—how to taste food and pay atten-

tion to the details of a dish, when to salt, how to be generous and fearless, how to plan and move quickly, how to be playful, and to be patient. He also learned how energy, intention, and mood affect what you cook. “If someone was angry and making the bread, they would turn out these angry little loaves of bread.”

I wondered how cooking mindfully would be different outside the monastery, whether it would be more difficult to have a sense of spirituality in your own kitchen. Melissa, who was *ino*, or head of the meditation hall, told me that cooking is actually a reminder that the spiritual is always at hand. “When you cook mindfully, you’re honoring an everyday activity as sacred, and an opportunity for peace,” she said. “When people elevate time in the meditation hall above time doing the dishes, they’re missing the point. There’s nothing special about meditating in a monastery.”

Annie Somerville, who was *tenzo* at Tassajara and has been chef at Greens Restaurant for 32 years, says her experience at the monastery grounded her for cooking in the rest of her life. “It’s the hidden storyline,” she says. “All those years of Zen practice were great life training for experiencing all the things that have come my way.” But her practice now is in the restaurant kitchen. “The reason I’m in the kitchen and not sitting in the zendo is that I like to run around,” she says. Cooking, she says, is fully engaging and sharpens her sensory attention—she can see when pasta is done, smell when the vegetables are roasted, and knows the onions are ready because they’re translucent. That kind of attention can be freeing for home cooks, too, she says. “For a lot of people, cooking is a wonderful release from the stresses and strains of your daily life. It’s an escape to get into the kitchen, to make food that is delicious and nurturing and beautiful, and to be involved in that process from beginning to end.”

Deborah Madison, whose latest cookbook is called *Vegetable Literacy* (Ten Speed Press), cooked at the Zen Center in San Francisco, Tasajara, and Green Gulch for 18 years; when she left, she found that cooks could be as mindful in a chaotic atmosphere as in a silent one. “When I went from Zen Center to Chez Panisse, there was opera playing, and people coming through saying hello to each other, but the cooks were in some ways even more focused than in a Zen Center kitchen.” Mindfulness, she says, is about intention and focus, and isn’t dependent on externalities in the kitchen, including silence.

Madison, who lives in New Mexico, says she no longer even consciously thinks of her cooking as a spiritual practice. “I don’t use those words,” she says. “But when I go into the kitchen to cook, I enjoy a calmness and the connection I feel with food I’ve grown myself or that comes from a rancher down the road. There’s a shift in me when I cook with that kind of food, and I always recognize it when I see it in other people’s food—there’s a brightness, cleanness, and energy.”

Madison doesn’t use the word “mindful” about cooking much, either. “It can sound scoldy, like ‘Pay attention!’” But the benefits of awareness in the kitchen are clear to her. “Whenever you’re doing something with awareness, it’s a two-way street; things talk back to you. In the kitchen you get a lot of immediate feedback, and consequences to your actions. You have sharp, hot things, you check your email and your turnips are burned, you cut yourself, or you have wonderful tastes.” Cooking, she says, is a wonderful opportunity to observe—the food, yourself, and the magic that can happen between the two.

“People feel so frazzled about their lives, and being in the kitchen, putting dinner on the table, even if it’s simple steamed vegetables, is a way to step into another world and out of that chaos,” she says.

Dale and Melissa and I decided to make dinner together so I could

learn something not only about how to follow their recipes but also about their practice of mindfulness in the kitchen. It was a chilly winter day in Nevada, snow barely sticking to the ground. I have little experience with formal spiritual practice— Vipassana meditation and a little yoga—and so was worried I couldn't cook alongside a couple of Zen pros without revealing myself as a slob, both spiritually and as a cook. But Melissa told me to relax: we were just going to make some pizza.

We started by cleaning all the counters and washing our hands, which had a ritual feeling to it. "You lay everything out very carefully that you're going to use for the meal," Dale said. "Before you pick up a knife, you stand and feel your feet on the ground and take a few deep breaths, bring your attention into your hands and to what's on the cutting board." We turned off the music to focus on the cooking, though they often cook with music on.

We began by dissolving yeast into water, which sounds simple. But Dale's yeast started to bubble alive, and mine did not. He'd said the water should be body temperature, and in my impatience I'd tossed the yeast into hot water without feeling how warm it (or my body) actually was. I started over. When my yeast began to bubble in the water, too, I added flour and salt. I measured from Dale's recipe into my bowl, while he just threw the ingredients into his, telling me to respond more to what I saw in the bowl than to the exact measurements he had written in his book. He showed me how to fold the ingredients together gently so that the proteins in the flour would stay long and pliable, until we had what he calls a "shaggy mass," which was slightly sticky to the fingers. He turned his dough out onto the floured counter, and it bounced around in his hands as if it were alive. Mine needed coaxing. Dale told me to be careful to keep all my dough together, not some on my hands or the side of the bowl, because they didn't like to be separated. It sounded like he

was speaking about little creatures. Dale turned his ball of dough into an olive-oiled bowl. “You go!” he told it. Then he looked at me a little sheepishly. “Some people would say you pray over the dough. It’s about the power of intention.”

“You go!” I said to my dough.

The dough rose, we gently spread it out, nice and elastic, and topped it with what we had at hand. The pizza turned out crusty and flavorful, one sprinkled with onion confit and oozing Gorgonzola, another with tomatoes, anchovies, and olives. Somehow, after having worked with the dough and noticed its texture and its response to my fingers, I found that the pizza tasted better.

Two days later, I tried making pizza myself. It was my birthday, and I have a tradition, borrowed from the Italians, of offering a meal to my friends on that day. So I invited 30 or 40 people over and began preparing that morning. I had just absorbed all this good advice from Zen master cooks, so I felt pretty invincible. I was looking forward to having some relaxed time to enjoy the twin benefits of mindful cooking that Melissa had described, of combining peaceful space with yourself with cooking healthy, delicious food and nourishing your friends.

I began by preparing all the ingredients carefully and putting them into pretty little bowls for later on. I kept in mind what Annie Somerville had suggested about doing things ahead of time to make the experience more enjoyable. “Break a dish down into its elements,” she said. “Then when the time comes, it’s easy, because you’re ready. Everything is in the prep work.”

So for a couple of hours I shredded mozzarella cheese, stirred a simple tomato sauce, tore arugula, sliced anchovies and prosciutto (the Tassajara cookbooks are vegetarian, but I am not), and assembled all the other pizza toppings. My kitchen was calm and orderly, and I felt a

tremendous sense of well-being, especially given that I was a year older that day, and already in my late forties.

Then I started in on the dough. I felt my skin temperature, felt the water, and sprinkled the yeast in the bowl. It bubbled up just right. Then I realized that I hadn't actually written down the recipe for the dough. All I knew was flour, water, salt, olive oil in the pan. I called Dale: no answer, and no reply on Melissa's cell phone. No one answered email. I tore through a bunch of recipe books, but none seemed to have the same recipe as the pizza dough I'd made with Dale. I opened Brown's *Tassajara Bread Book* for advice and got angry that he hadn't thought, in 1970, to include pizza: What? Pizza isn't bread? Then I grabbed his *Tassajara Recipe Book* and found this:

The truth is you're already a cook.
Nobody teaches you anything,
But you can be touched, you can be awakened.
Put down the book and start asking,
"What have we here?"

So I took a deep breath and looked. I added flour and salt, and looked some more. I tried to create a shaggy mass. I felt how sticky the dough was. I oiled the bowls and put the dough somewhere warm, perhaps too warm, to rise. It rose and rose. I cut it into quarters, made little balls, patted them around, placed them on greased cookie sheets, and they rose some more. I put them in the fridge to stop their promiscuous reproducing, and there they combined into one big, flat blob. The dough was sticky and exuberantly unruly. It was suddenly five o'clock, and my guests were coming at six. Maybe I could just serve them a lot of wine and olives, stick a few crackers on a plate with some cheese.

Then I picked up a ball of dough and added some flour. “It’ll be all right,” Dale said when my dough at the ranch had been too blobby. The dough seemed like it would be forgiving. So I worked the dough until it felt more like something you could make pizza out of. Then I greased some pans, spread it out, spun some around for an added Italian effect before laying it out to bake, and added toppings. “You go,” I said before I put it into the oven.

My friends arrived, and the kitchen was full. The pizza came out fine. It was not great; it didn’t have a perfect crispy crust, it was a sad cousin to Dale’s pizza, and it will take some practice. My friends, on the other hand, were wonderful. They threw themselves into sprinkling toppings onto crust, cutting the pies, checking the oven, and eating square after square of different pizzas. Full and content, they talked and laughed and sparkled and even cleaned up afterward as a gift to the cook. It seemed like magic, the way everyone loved that imperfect pizza party.

“The real magic,” Brown writes in the introduction to his *Complete Tassajara Cookbook*, “is that you could grow kind, generous, and larger-hearted in the process of preparing food—because you give your heart to the activity. You are realizing yourself by realizing food. Instead of looking good, you are becoming you.”

Laura Fraser is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national publications. Her latest book, *All Over the Map* (2011), is a travel memoir and a sequel to her earlier best seller, *An Italian Affair*. She has won several awards, including the International Association of Culinary Professionals Bert Greene Award for Essay Writing.

3

HOW A TOMATO OPENED MY MIND

Trying new things

ANAM THUBTEN

Nirvana, or whatever you want to call it, means the complete deconstruction of all of our rigid mental patterns and habits as well as the deconstruction of all of our limiting beliefs. This deconstruction creates a space for true inquiry. When we open our hearts and our minds completely, we are in a place where we can experience something new, a new truth, a new reality, a miracle that we haven't experienced in the past. We can see things differently and they present new, expanded opportunities, new horizons. Therefore an open mind is required. This is true not only in relationship to the truth but in relationship to everyday life as well.

For example, when I first came to the U.S., I was very close-minded and very close-hearted about Western food. I was very afraid of two things, the tomato and the avocado. The tomato reminded me of a clot of blood and the avocado reminded me of some kind of very repulsive grease. I had pictures in my mind and stories about them simply because my mind and my heart were not open to them. I was trying to defend my old belief systems about taste and diet. I wasn't ready to open

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

my heart to the tomato and the avocado. There was no way. All of these negative thoughts kept coming into my mind. “Well, the tomato may be delicious. Perhaps I should try it sometime, but not today. Maybe tomorrow or in another few months I will be ready to taste the avocado, but definitely not now.”

Actually there was really no good reason not to try a tomato or an avocado, but my mind came up with one reason after another. “Maybe it isn’t delicious. Maybe it’s disgusting. It looks like blood, very yucky.” This was enough to keep me from trying either the tomato or the avocado and so my heart wasn’t open for a very long time. Then one day, accidentally, my mind and my heart were totally open to the tomato and the avocado and I tried them. They were quite good. Now I love avocados and tomatoes so much that I actually cannot imagine life without them. They are truly amazingly delicious. They have totally changed my life. Sometimes I feel like holding my palms together in praise to express my gratitude to the tomato and the avocado.

The truth is similar to that. We just don’t open our heart and mind because we haven’t experienced the benefit of that. Once we have experienced the truth, there isn’t even an issue. There is no worry. The whole question of whether we are ready to open our heart and mind to the truth isn’t even a concern.

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4

EATING JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT

The ancient Japanese mealtime art of oryoki reveals the patterns and sticking points of our minds.

JOHN KAIN

Oryoki, often translated as “just the right amount,” is a highly choreographed ritual of serving and eating food—a ceremonial dance of giving, receiving, and appreciation. It is a practice that was codified in China during the Tang dynasty and was the model for the sweeping grace of the tea ceremony. Practiced, with a few variations, throughout the Zen schools, it was also adopted—in America—by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan founder of the Shambhala lineage. Practically speaking, it is perhaps the most efficient, aesthetically pleasing, and least wasteful way to feed a large group of people sitting in a meditation hall, or a single person at home for that matter. Yet more specifically—and arising from Zen’s insistence on blending the sacred and the mundane—oryoki unifies daily life and “spiritual practice.” It is essentially a state of mind, a way of being.

Oryoki practice uses a *jihatsu*, a set of nested bowls: a Buddha bowl, or *zuhatsu*, containing three or four smaller bowls tied in cloth with a topknot resembling a lotus flower. The set also contains—in a narrow cloth pouch—a wooden spoon, a pair of chopsticks, and a small spatula-like utensil called a *setsu*, which is used to clean the bowls. The outer

cloth, when untied and refolded in an exact manner, doubles as a place mat upon which the bowls are laid in a prescribed sequence. To complete the package, there is a regular-sized cloth napkin and a smaller cleaning towel used to wipe the bowls dry after they are filled with hot tea or water and scraped clean with the setsu.

Participants sit in a meditation posture and wait to offer their empty bowls as the servers bring food and, in a series of hand gestures (beyond the chants of dedication and appreciation, oryoki is practiced in silence), fill the bowls to the requested level. The ecology of oryoki is complete: there is no waste. Participants are urged to take just the right amount of food—not a crumb should remain. The cleaning liquid, after it is used to wash each bowl, is partially drunk and the remainder collected and distributed in the garden. Each movement of oryoki is compact, subtle, and designed to unfold in harmony, demanding meticulous awareness to what is happening in the moment.

For beginners, stepping into this dance can be terrifying. The Zen practitioner and author Lawrence Shainberg writes of his early encounter with oryoki in his book *Ambivalent Zen*: “The harder I try, the clumsier I get. Rational it may be, but the ritual seems a nightmare now, one more example of Zen’s infinite capacity to complicate the ordinary.” Oryoki tales abound in Zen. I’ve seen students take too much food (a classic mistake) and then stuff the extra down the sleeves of their robes when they realize that they’ll never finish in concert with the group. Servers have spilled food on people’s heads, bowls have gone flying, minor food fights have erupted, and giggling fits have swept like wildfire through the zendo.

Oryoki is not about living some altered state of sustained “perfection,” nor is it about performance, or even detail—it is simply our lives. Oryoki subtly and steadfastly exposes the patterns and sticking points

of our minds and our behaviors. As Zoketsu Norman Fischer, guiding teacher at the Mountain Rain Zen Community and founder of the Everyday Zen Foundation, says, “The intensity of oryoki practice is such that you get to see your own tendencies in relation to eating and serving a meal. Someone eating can ask for too much food, and a server can give too little—greed and stinginess arise. Oryoki practice develops kindness and clarity and the sense of not overdoing or under-doing anything. It teaches smoothness and efficiency and the sense of acting with a good heart.”

Once the initial clumsiness wears off, oryoki can become a wonderfully vital part of Buddhist practice. The form of oryoki, though controlled and precise, can be seen as formless—it is merely a container into which we pour ourselves. Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara, abbot of the Village Zendo in New York City, pointed to this when she told me, “I can remember one time looking down at my cloth and my bowls and seeing what a mess my mind was. They were all over the place. It was writ large right in front of me, the exact state of my mind in the moment, and I love that because it’s so transparent.”

We bring to oryoki all that our mind contains, yet because our body has very specific things to do—bowing, chanting, placing the chopsticks just so—it is very hard for our crazy and distracted mind to stay stuck in any one place. Natalie Goldberg, longtime Zen practitioner and author of *Writing Down the Bones* and other works, picked up on this when she told me, “I loved oryoki—something finally had order.”

Oryoki is liturgy. It makes visible the invisible. Hakuyu Taizan Mazumi Roshi, the late founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles and a seminal figure in American Buddhism, often underscored this point. In one of his talks compiled in the book *On Zen Practice*, he states, “But we need not think that we are speaking only of eating bowls when we

mean oryoki. More fundamentally, oryoki is just the Tathagata's container ["Tathataga," or "thus-gone," is an epithet for the Buddha]. We can appreciate everything as the container of the Buddha. We are oryoki ourselves. Not only us, but also the Buddha's image. Candle holder, vase, bowing mat, floor, ceiling—each contains everything completely. It is all oryoki."

The roots of oryoki trace back to the time of the Buddha and the wandering mendicant monks who possessed little more than their robes and begging bowls. The robes symbolized the external (clothing and shelter), the bowls symbolized—through the taking of food—the internal. To this day the robe and bowl are handed from Zen teacher to student as the central symbolic act of dharma transmission. Taking just the right amount of food, as the Buddha discovered, is essential to practicing the middle way of Buddhism. In the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra* it is said that "when a person is enlightened in their eating, all things are enlightened as well. If all dharmas are nondual, the person in their eating is also nondual."

As Buddhism moved from India to China, certain cultural influences shifted Buddhist practice. In China, beggars were generally disdained, so the days of wandering mendicant monks came to an end. Monks were encouraged to work. Monasteries were built, and group meditation, not solitary practice, became the norm. Suddenly there were large numbers of mouths to feed, and an efficient and timely system of meal-taking arose as part of a set of rules to regulate the lives of Buddhist monks.

Much of this system still thrives in Zen monasteries today. Master Dogen Zenji, the thirteenth-century Japanese mystic and seed planter for Zen's Soto school, encountered these monastic rules during his four-year stay in China. When he returned to Japan, he refined the rules,

instilling in them his meticulous attention to detail and profound insight. Meal-taking, under Dogen, became oryoki. Dogen writes, “At the very moment when we eat, we are possessed of ultimate reality, essence, substance, energy, activity, causation. So dharma is eating, and eating is dharma.”

Dogen makes it clear that the primal act of eating, our desire and need for nourishment, and the sensuousness of food are in no way opposed to spiritual practice. Oryoki is not about denial. In *Thank You and OK*, David Chadwick’s 1994 memoir of a four-year stay in Japan, he writes, “The use of oryoki . . . intensifies the experience of eating. It zooms one in on the victuals. In keeping with the teaching of just sitting, just working, oryoki encourages us neither to jump at the meal nor to deny it. Just eat it and just enjoy it.”

We must also remember that when we eat we take life. John Daido Loori Roshi (1931–2009), the longtime abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery and founder of the Mountains and Rivers Order, wrote in his book *Celebrating Everyday Life*, “But oryoki is not just a prescribed form of ritual. It is a state of mind. It’s not about chanting and bowing and bells. It’s a state of consciousness. Because food is life, it is of utmost importance that we receive it with deepest gratitude. When we eat we consume life. Whether it’s cabbage or cows, it’s life.”

During oryoki, when we recite the meal gatha, or chant, we are showing our gratitude for both our practice and the labor and sacrifice that bring us our food. Oryoki is gratitude. And for this reason oryoki is not just a practice performed in the meditation hall. “What I like most about oryoki is the way it influences how I serve myself oatmeal in the morning here at home. It’s a sense of appreciating through awareness,” said Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara. Zoketsu Norman Fischer concurs: “Of course I don’t use any of the rituals if I’m not eating oryoki, but the feel-

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

ing is there and the feeling gets into the body, into the heart, and into the mind.”

Oryoki, though it appears to be complex, is really not that complicated. Whether practicing it at home or in the meditation hall, we should just do it as simply as possible. As David Chadwick told me, “I think it’s good to eat silently but not to make a trip out of it.”

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5

MINDFUL EATING

Five ways to develop a skillful relationship with food

JAN CHOZEN BAYS

How ironic that in America, land of plenty, so many people struggle with food, suffering tremendous emotional distress, guilt, shame, and even premature death. Does Buddhism have anything to offer to relieve this kind of suffering? The facts are startling. Doctors predict that children born in 2000 have a 30 to 40 percent risk of Type 2 diabetes and may live shorter lives than their parents as a result

According to the U.S. Department of Health, nearly two out of three American adults are overweight or obese. It's also estimated that millions of Americans suffer from anorexia or bulimia. One could call this an epidemic of "eating disorders," but I prefer to think of the problem as an increasingly unbalanced relationship to food. One of the primary causes of this imbalance is a lack of an essential human nutrient: mindfulness. Mindfulness is the act of paying full, nonjudgmental attention to our moment-to-moment experience. We can use mindfulness to free ourselves from unhealthy eating habits and improve our overall quality of life.

Mindful eating is a practice that engages all parts of us—our body, our heart, and our mind—in choosing, preparing, and eating food. It immerses us in the colors, textures, scents, tastes, and even sounds of drinking and eating. It allows us to be curious and even playful as we

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

investigate our responses to food and our inner cues to hunger and satisfaction.

Mindful eating is not based on anxiety about the future but directed by the actual choices that are in front of you and by your direct experiences of health while eating and drinking. Mindful eating replaces self-criticism with self-nurturing. It replaces shame with respect for your own inner wisdom.

As an example, let's take a typical experience. On the way home from work Sally thinks with dread about the talk she needs to work on for a big conference. She has to get it done in the next few days to meet the deadline. Before starting to work on the speech, however, she decides to relax and watch a few minutes of TV when she gets home. She sits down with a bag of chips beside her chair. At first she eats only a few, but as the show gets more dramatic, she eats faster and faster. When the show ends she looks down and realizes that she's eaten the entire bag of chips. She scolds herself for wasting time and for eating junk food. "Too much salt and fat! No dinner for you!" Engrossed in the drama on the screen, covering up her anxiety about procrastinating, she ignored what was happening in her mind, heart, mouth, and stomach. She ate unconsciously. She ate to go unconscious. She goes to bed unnourished in body or heart and with her mind still anxious about the talk.

The next time this happens, she decides to eat chips but to try eating them mindfully. First she checks in with her mind. She finds that her mind is worried about an article she promised to write. Her mind says that she needs to get started on it tonight. She checks in with her heart and finds that she is feeling a little lonely because her husband is out of town. She checks in with her stomach and body and discovers that she is both hungry and tired. She needs some nurturing. The only one at home to do it is herself.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

She decides to treat herself to a small chip party. (Remember, mindful eating gives us permission to play with our food.) She takes twenty chips out of the bag and arranges them on a plate. She looks at their color and shape. She eats one chip, savoring its flavor. She pauses, then eats another. There is no judgment, no right or wrong. She is simply seeing the shades of tan and brown on each curved surface, tasting the tang of salt, hearing the crunch of each bite, feeling the crisp texture melt into softness. She ponders how these chips arrived on her plate, aware of the sun, the soil, the rain, the potato farmer, the workers at the chip factory, the delivery truck driver, the grocer who stocked the shelves and sold them to her.

With little pauses between each chip, it takes ten minutes for the chip party. When she finishes the chips, she checks in with her body to find out if any part of it is still hungry.

She finds that her mouth and cells are thirsty, so she gets a drink of orange juice. Her body is also saying it needs some protein and something green, so she makes a cheese omelet and a spinach salad. After eating she checks in again with her mind, body, and heart. The heart and body feel nourished, but the mind is still tired. She decides to go to bed and work on the talk first thing in the morning, when the mind and body will be rested. She is still feeling lonely, although less so within the awareness of all the beings whose life energy brought her the chips, eggs, cheese, and greens. She decides to call her husband to say good night. She goes to bed with body, mind, and heart at ease and sleeps soundly.

When we are able to fully appreciate the basic activities of eating and drinking, we discover an ancient secret, the secret of how to become content and at ease. The Zen teachings talk about the exquisite taste of plain water. Have you ever been very, very thirsty? Maybe you were on a long hike, or sick, or working without a break in the summer heat.

When you were finally able to drink, even plain water, you remember how wonderful it was. Actually, each sip of liquid and each bite of food can be that fresh and delicious, once we learn again just to be present.

Mindful eating is a way to rediscover one of the most pleasurable things we do as human beings. It also is a path to uncovering many wonderful activities that are going on right under our noses and within our own bodies. Mindful eating also has the unexpected benefit of helping us tap into our body's natural wisdom and our heart's natural capacity for openness and gratitude. Here are five principles we can use to help us to cultivate mindfulness as we eat:

1. SLOW IT DOWN

In America we eat very quickly. Many people have told me that their attitude toward meals is to “just get it over with as soon as possible.” The American habit of eating fast is not new. Foreigners visiting early American taverns recorded their astonishment at how quickly food was eaten. The technique was dubbed “the three G’s” for “gobble, gulp, and go.” A Tennessee historian records that a European visiting the colonies was puzzled by the “haste, hustle, and starving attitude the inn frequenter displayed. Everyone stuffed himself at uncanny speeds.” Another visitor “was amazed that in barely twenty minutes he had witnessed two series of meals in his hotel.” Our propensity to eat and run has not diminished over the intervening two centuries. Research shows that North Americans spend only eleven minutes eating lunch at a fastfood restaurant and thirteen minutes at a cafeteria in their workplace.

There are many ways to slow down our eating and drinking. You might experiment by trying each of the following techniques for one week:

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

Make a point of pausing.

Here are some methods for helping yourself to slow down your eating by creating pauses:

1. Pause before beginning the meal. Look at each item of food, taking it in with the eyes. Notice colors, textures, shapes, arrangement on the plate or bowl.
2. Take a moment to say grace. Thank the animals, plants, and people who brought this food to you. Be aware of their gifts as you eat.
3. Begin the meal by pausing to inhale the fragrance of the food. Imagine that you are being nourished by just the smell.
4. Eat food like a wine connoisseur tastes wine. First sniff the food, enjoying the bouquet. Then take a small taste. Roll it around in the mouth, savoring it. What ingredients can you detect? Chew slowly and swallow. Take a sip of water to cleanse the palate. When the mouth is empty of food and flavor, repeat the process.
5. If you notice that you are eating without tasting, stop and pause to look at the food again.

Drink slowly.

When we gulp drinks, we don't taste them. As a result we drink more, trying to get more taste sensations. We can slow down our drinking in two ways. The first is to enjoy what we're drinking by holding the liquid in the mouth for a few seconds before swallowing it. Swirl it around a bit and enjoy the taste before swallowing. Pretend you are in a TV ad, show-

ing the audience how much you enjoy this drink.

The second method is to put the cup or glass down while tasting and swallowing. Only when the mouth is empty and the taste is fading do we pick it up and take another drink.

Put down the fork or spoon.

This is one of the most reliable and simple ways to slow down your eating. Each time you put a bite of food into your mouth, put down the fork or spoon, onto the plate or into the bowl. Don't pick it up again until the bite you have in your mouth is chewed and savored completely and swallowed. For real appreciation of the bite that is in your mouth, you can close your eyes as you chew and swallow.

When that one bite has been thoroughly tasted and is gone, then pick up the utensil, take another bite, and put the utensil down again. Watch the interesting impulses that arise in the mind with this practice.

2. RIGHT AMOUNT

The next guideline for mindful eating has to do with how much we eat. The concept of "right amount" comes from the Buddhist teaching of the Eightfold Path to enlightenment. Each part of the path is described with the adjective "right": right view, right mindfulness, right effort, and so on. In the Buddhist teachings "right" means appropriate, beneficial, leading to happiness and freedom. What, then, is "right amount"?

I first heard of right amount from my Zen teacher Maezumi Roshi. He said that when we considered what was ethical to do in any situation, we had to consider several factors: right time, right place, right people, and right amount. I didn't understand the last factor, right amount, very well until I began practicing mindful eating. I saw that mindful eating is ethical action. It is ethical action toward our self, toward all the beings

who bring us our food, and toward all those who are hungry in the rest of the world.

In the monastery, our meals are an essential aspect of our spiritual practice. We eat at least one meal a day according to the ancient Zen ceremony called *oryoki*. Except for chanting, we eat in silence, using a special set of bowls. The bowls are graduated in size so they can nest inside each other. Even the largest bowl is not very big. It holds about one and a half cups. *Oryoki* means “just enough.” The modest size of our eating bowls helps us eat just enough to remain healthy, just enough to feel satisfied, just enough to meditate without becoming sleepy, just enough to not be swayed by greediness.

“Just enough” is not a fixed amount. It changes according to circumstances. To be aware of “just enough,” we have to be mindful. When we practice *oryoki*, we can’t take too much, as we must eat everything in our bowls within the time allotted for the meal. We have to be aware of changing conditions, how hungry we are, how much we’ve been exercising, and how cold it is. The monastery is cold in winter, and we need extra calories to keep our bodies warm. A young man who is still growing and has been working all morning digging holes for fence posts needs portions twice as large as a middle-aged person like me. We all adjust how much we take to the amount of food in the serving bowls, the number of people who will be served, and how much food they need to eat.

The beloved Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah gave these guidelines about right amount:

When you think that after another five mouthfuls you’ll be full, then stop and drink some water and you will have eaten just the right amount. If you sit or walk afterward you won’t feel heavy. . . . But that’s not the way we usually do it. When we feel full we take

another five mouthfuls. That's what the mind tells us. It doesn't know how to teach itself. . . . Someone who lacks a genuine wish to train their mind will be unable to do it. Keep watching your mind.

If we followed the advice of the spiritual masters, we would maintain mindfulness of hunger as we ate, stopping when we were 80 percent full—or at least four or five mouthfuls from being full. Then we would drink some water.

3. THE ENERGY EQUATION

Another way to cultivate mindful eating is to become aware of what I call the energy equation. Food is energy. It is actually sunlight, which is converted into plants and then into animals. When we eat, we are taking in the energy of sunlight. When we live our lives, we are releasing and spending that energy.

If our weight stays constant, it is a sure sign that the energy flowing into our body is equal to the energy flowing out. We are in energy balance. If we are losing weight, it means that the energy out is greater. If we are gaining weight, it means that the energy in is greater. How does the energy flow in? By eating and drinking. As much as we might like to believe that we absorb calories mysteriously from the atmosphere while sleeping at night or just by looking at rich food, it's not true. We ourselves put energy in through our own open mouths.

If we want to lose weight, there are only two ways to do it. We have to decrease the energy flowing into our body or increase the energy flowing out. Conversely, if we want to gain weight, there are only two ways to do it. We have to increase the energy flowing into our body or decrease the energy flowing out.

4. MINDFUL SUBSTITUTION

Most people are aware that they have many voices in their mind. A childish voice may say, “I want something sweet! I’ve worked hard all day, and I deserve a treat! I happen to know there’s a carton of ice cream in the freezer.” A parental voice says, “It’s only four o’clock. No dessert until you eat a good dinner.” An indignant voice exclaims, “Wait a minute! Aren’t you about ten pounds overweight? You shouldn’t even think about dessert for at least a year!”

How can we work skillfully with these conflicting voices and bring peace to the table? It does no good to stifle them; they just go underground, where they can cause mischief. It does no good to indulge them; they just gain strength.

First, we become aware of the voices. Each one contains some measure of truth. It could be simultaneously true that you have worked hard and would enjoy a sweet reward and that you won’t benefit from a jittery sugar high or gaining extra pounds. How to honor both truths? Find a substitute reward.

When we offer the hungry voice a sliced peach drizzled with honey instead of a hot fudge sundae, we are making use of an essential mindful eating practice, that of mindful substitution. When we become aware that there are many voices in our minds—some that are needy, restless, and frightened—we should honor and care for these energies and voices, not in a neurotic, self-absorbed way but in the thoughtful and deliberate way a good parent notices and cares for a young child. This doesn’t mean walking out of a tense planning conference at work in order to indulge your “inner child” with an entire Sara Lee cheesecake eaten in a bathtub full of bubbles. It might mean hearing the worried voice inside or feeling the first tendrils of tension in the body and asking for a short break so

you can sip a hot drink or suck on a hard candy.

Students have told me about many substitution tricks they have invented. They substitute chewing gum for candy, a chocolate hard candy for a chocolate truffle, the slow ritual of fixing hot tea for gulping a soft drink. One student substitutes frozen mango slices or strawberries for ice cream. Another cuts a piece of cinnamon toast in little pieces and eats them slowly in place of a piece of cake and frosting. Another said that when she becomes aware of a craving for sweets, she gives herself a little snack of something sour, finding that it erases her desire for sweets. She uses a small serving of sauerkraut out of a jar kept ready in the fridge. If that doesn't appeal, you could use a few pickles, some olives, or kimchi (pickled cabbage). It helps if the flavor is somewhat intense. If you use substitution and then eat mindfully, you get double the benefits.

The point is to take good care of ourselves, the way a loving and wise parent would do. We don't fall into the extreme of angrily scolding and denying ourselves, nor do we lose track of what is healthy and become overindulgent. We steer a skillful but somewhat wobbly course along the middle way.

5. OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

I am subject to what I call "fits of favorite foods." I'll crave and eat one thing, like licorice, for several weeks and then lose desire for it completely. I used to love chocolate, but a few years ago I developed an allergy to it. Every time I ate chocolate I would get painful blisters in my mouth. I tried every way to get around this sad fact, abstaining for a month, abstaining for six months, to no avail. Even one little chocolate chip could set it off. I felt deprived without my favorite comfort food.

One day I discovered that Reese's Pieces candy had no chocolate! I was so happy that my loving husband bought me a giant bag (cheaper

by the pound, right?) and put it in a drawer of my desk. First I had a few pieces now and then, then a few small handfuls now and then, and then I had gained five pounds. I stepped back to watch how craving for these candies worked in my mind. I found that when I sat where the bag was in my reach, soon an image of the candy would enter my mind. If I pushed it away, it would return, and return again, until I finally gave in and took a few. The farther away I was from my office, the less often the image appeared and the less vivid or compelling it would be.

I moved the bag to a file drawer in my husband's office, several halls and doors away. I was reluctant to enter his office and go digging for the bag under his eyes. I ate less of the candy, and with less reinforcement the colorful candy images appeared in my mind less often. Craving for those little peanut butter delights gradually lessened and finally disappeared. Now I look at them with indifference. They hold no charm. This kind of solution is supported by eating research. Secretaries who were supplied with free chocolate candies in a glass dish ate the most candies if the chocolates were visible on their desk, less if the candy dish was hidden in a drawer, and even less if they had to walk just six steps to reach the candy. People also eat significantly more if serving dishes full of food are left out on the dining table. If a person has to get up from the table and go back to the kitchen to serve themselves seconds, they tend not to go to the trouble.

The researcher Brian Wansink tells the story this way: A man comes into the office on Friday, hungry because he's had to rush to work with no breakfast. On the way to his cubicle he sees a plate of doughnuts left over from a meeting the previous day. He pokes a doughnut and finds that it is hard and stale. He goes to his cubicle, where the vision of the doughnuts keeps reappearing in his mind. He says "no!" to the impulse to get up and go get a doughnut. He says "no!" ten times. Finally he gets

up and heads for the staff room and the stale doughnuts. There he meets a coworker who did not see the doughnuts on his way into the office and has been working all morning without the distracting visions and impulses. Who will eat the most doughnuts? As Wansink notes, the man who has been struggling with the vision and the impulses all morning will always eat more. Because the existence of the doughnuts entered his awareness, because he took in the possibility of eating them and said no ten times, eventually he is likely to say yes.

I once had a striking experience that confirmed this observation. I have never liked doughnuts. There is something in them that tastes peculiar to me. My first husband loved doughnuts, so once in a while I'd surprise him on a Sunday morning by going out to get a box of fresh doughnuts. He liked them, and the kids liked them too, but for myself—I tried bites of many different kinds and finally gave up even trying to like them.

Fast-forward thirty years. I had just finished a workshop and was relaxing as a friend drove me home. We stopped at a corner where people were selling something to raise money for their church. Ever sympathetic toward these kinds of fundraisers, my friend handed five dollars out the car window. Back in came her hand, holding a white box. The box, it turned out, was full of doughnuts. "No thanks," I said, "I don't like doughnuts." "These are Krispy Kremes," she said. I had read about the national passion for Krispy Kremes. I was tired and hungry, hungry enough even to eat a doughnut, so I took a tentative bite. Yum! I took a bigger bite. Creamy and sweet! I could see what the passion was about! I ate one whole doughnut, then another, and a third. They were really good!

Over the next few days I noticed during meditation that a new window had appeared on the screen of my mind. The window was full of

... a very enticing KRISPY KREME DONUT! When the thought arose, “But I don’t even like doughnuts!” the Krispy Kreme window would grow larger. “But you DO like Krispy Kremes!” it broadcast. I watched to see what caused the window to appear. I found that it opened when I was feeling anxious, tired, or hungry.

Because I have never liked doughnuts, and because daily meditation created a certain spaciousness of mind, I had a measure of objectivity. I could even be amused by this window winking open in my mind. Fortunately I live at a rural monastery, an hour and a half from the nearest Krispy Kreme outlet, so I didn’t reinforce the sudden appearance of desire by running out to get a doughnut. I just noted the window as it opened and closed. It took about three weeks for the window to shut and never open again. It helped that I heard a rumor (untrue) that Krispy Kremes derived their creamy texture from glycerin. If the desire for a doughnut arose, I could counteract it by imagining a doughnut being injected with mineral oil.

The practice of out-of-sight, out-of-mind works because anything we do not reinforce will lose its strength. It is a principle of conditioning. If we do not think, speak, or initiate action around something, the force of that thing will eventually wither. This involves active substitution, not forceful resistance, for what we resist can become perversely persistent. For example, when my mind began to conjure up Krispy Kremes, I substituted a more beneficial and interesting mental activity such as a breath meditation, a body scan, or lovingkindness practice. When I did not think or talk with others about these doughnuts, did not run out to buy them, and did not smell or eat them, eventually they lost their hold on me.

All of us want to move toward greater freedom, but the experience of freedom does not occur overnight. Often we overchallenge ourselves,

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

as when making New Year's resolutions. This results in frustration and more critical inner voices. We can get off to a good start by lowering our standards and initiating our mindful eating by having one conscious sip of tea in the morning. Take a moment to become aware of the color of the tea, its fragrance. Feel the liquid in your mouth and throat. Open your awareness to the presence of the warm sunlight, cool rain, and dark earth in this one sip of tea. Everything will unfold from this simple act. Just being aware for a few moments seems like a small event. Don't underestimate the power of mindfulness. It is through these small moments of mindfulness that we reverse old habits and initiate an inner movement toward health.

SMALL CHANGES, BIG RESULTS

Consider this list of small lifestyle changes aimed at changing the energy equation to lose weight. If this is a goal of yours, pick one and try it for a month. Or create a small change of your own in the energy equation, and try that diligently for a month. Enlist the support of family and friends to remind you of your project or to join you in the task.

At the end of the month, tell someone what you learned from the task. It could be a mindful eating partner, folks in a mindful eating group on community.tricycle.com, or just a friend.

- Walking across the shopping center instead of getting back in the car and driving to a second store
- Parking several blocks away from my destination
- Taking the stairs whenever I can
- Not buying candy or soda
- Keeping substitutes for ice cream in the freezer, like frozen fruit

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

—Buying the small package of chips and doling them out to myself one by one

—Taking moderate first servings and looking at why I'm taking seconds—hunger or habit?

—Eating the meal first, waiting a while, and then checking with the stomach and body to decide whether to have dessert and how much to have

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6

THE BHIKKHU DIET

Get the body of a bhikkhu—or your alms back

“Theravada monks eat only one meal a day . . .”

That was how it started. A friend I’d known for several years (albeit only by phone) was coming to stay for five days. Of course I knew he was a Theravada Buddhist monk. It wasn’t the basis for our friendship, but I knew it. And so I couldn’t quite grasp the insistence of the woman speaking to me on the phone. “You know it,” she said. “But you don’t *understand* it. That means that he will eat three meals at one sitting—no kidding! So really pile it on.”

“For real?” I inquired. “What’s the use in that?”

“He can explain that for himself,” she answered, a bit peremptorily, I thought.

It was true. Although slim for his build, the bhikkhu could eat like nobody I’d ever seen. I come from the South, from the land of all-you-can-eat barbecue restaurants, and so I know what it looks like to watch someone tuck away half a cow at a single sitting. The bhikkhu left them in the dust.

Only it wasn’t unpleasant to watch. In fact, it was almost beautiful. He would arrive at our house at around ten (he had to stay with a single male friend because bhikkhus are not allowed to sleep under the same roof as a woman—a subject for another column), at which time my wife and I, who had been cooking already for two and a half hours, would begin laying out the feast before the mat we had positioned for him on

the living room floor.

The meal proper commenced with a meal *gatha*, which began (in Pali), “As the waters of the river fill the ocean . . .” Having been trained in the Zen tradition, where the chanting has a vaguely paramilitary tempo, I was a bit surprised to hear how understated his *gatha* was. It was soft, musical, and I had the distinct impression that, were he eating alone, it would have sounded the same. But, of course, he rarely eats alone, for if there is no one there to provide his food, he doesn’t eat. A Theravada monk eats one meal a day and sometimes, due to circumstance, not even that. The rule governing this is ancient and inflexible: Eat before noon, by the generosity of a devoted lay follower, or don’t eat at all. It took an hour to complete the meal: borscht, smoked salmon, roast chicken, prosciutto with melon, salad, banana muffins, asparagus, cheese (two types), fresh bread, oranges, bananas, mangoes, apple crisp, and ice cream.

My wife and I ate too. We’d decided it would be easier during his stay to go with the flow and follow “the bhikkhu diet,” eating only one meal a day. It was difficult that first morning to consume a sufficient quantity of food to last us for a full twenty-four hours. By evening we were ravenous; by morning, positively shaky. But then, by the end of the second bhikkhu meal, the quantity of food we were eating had begun to seem quite reasonable. A bowl of borscht? Sure! Make that three! And add a half a loaf of *pain levain* while you’re at it. By the way, pass the chicken. And all of this before ice cream.

Given the quantity of bread alone, it was amazing to me that the bhikkhu wasn’t pudgy. But when I mentioned this, he explained that it was just the contrary: You had to be careful not to lose too much weight. By eating this much this early in the day, he explained, your body has a chance to digest your food thoroughly, so there isn’t much left over to put on pounds. It was like fasting—every single day.

He was right. By the end of his visit I'd lost seven pounds and was a convert—if not to Theravada Buddhism, then at least to the bhikkhu diet. Over the next two months I lost another twenty pounds. I bought new clothes, became more productive, and exercised more. I felt terrific.

I've read somewhere that eight weeks is about the limit for most Americans where dieting is concerned. It seems that most people are able to go that long following the do's and don't's of any particular regime. And then something happens. What? I can't speak for everyone, but it seems likely that, having met with some success in losing weight or lowering one's cholesterol, the natural tendency is to celebrate—say, with a hamburger and fries or a crème brûlée. Of course, on the bhikkhu diet I could have eaten any one of those (or all three) and still managed to keep my weight down, but eating after noon was strictly verboten, and so my way of “celebrating” began with a nighttime bowl of cereal with whole milk and ended three months later with my having gained back every ounce I'd lost.

I eventually did get my bhikkhu-ish figure back, but not by pretending to any form of monkish discipline. I just stopped eating the whole wheat fig bars I buy in bulk at the local health food store and started running three times a week, and over the course of several months, that did the trick. When I confessed all this to my bhikkhu friend, he wasn't surprised. “It's supposed to be part of a whole lifestyle,” he said. “You take the bhikkhu out of the bhikkhu diet and all you've got is this guy who won't eat anything after twelve noon because it keeps his weight down. Hard to have much commitment to that!” It made me feel foolish, if not a little presumptuous, to hear it put that way. But, of course, he was right.

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7

JUST THE RIGHT
AMOUNT

JOHN DAIDO LOORI

Buddhists are not vegetarians, nor are they carnivorous. Traditionally, Buddhist monks always got their food by begging, and they always begged for just one meal. You couldn't beg for a week's worth and put it in your refrigerator. For each meal, you had to go out and ask for food, and whatever you were given you accepted with deep gratitude, and consumed completely with no waste. Nothing was thrown away. That's the rule: we eat what is available, with no waste. For example, it would be pretty hard to be a vegetarian if you were a Buddhist in the North Pole. They don't have many gardens there. If you intend to survive, you're going to have to eat whale blubber like everyone else. So food is a very funny thing; what you eat has a lot to do with where you are on the planet. If you try to feed whale blubber to somebody on the equator, they would die from the cholesterol in a very short period of time because they're not burning that energy the way those on the North Pole do to produce heat.

What is appropriate food has a lot to do with genetics, with geography, with what's available. The Tibetans, for example, had to eat meat. They couldn't grow many gardens in the high country of Tibet. So, the Dalai Lama eats meat, as do most Tibetan monks. Even those belonging to the most conservative schools of Buddhism, like the Theravadins, will eat meat if they're given meat. Given a choice, though, we usually

prefer vegetarian food. We serve basically vegetarian food at the monastery, except periodically in the winter when people are working outside in the cold chopping wood and need something more than vegetables. If they feel they need more fat in their diet, we'll serve meat, but there's always a vegetarian alternative.

There are many good reasons to be vegetarian, hundreds of good reasons: the way animals are treated, the way they're pumped full of hormones, for example. The precepts, however, are not among them—"Do not kill" is not one of them. We need to understand that there is not a single creature on the face of this earth that takes a meal without doing so at the expense of another life. We all consume life. That is a fact of life on planet earth. Whether the life is a cow or a cabbage, it is a life. It is a profound thing to take a life, and so the way we do it is very consciously.

That leads me to *oryoki*, which is the way we take formal meals at the monastery. Most meals during workshops or during regular practice periods are taken informally, but during *sesshin*, our weeklong silent retreats, most meals are received formally. In the back of the zendo on the shelves are a group of bowls wrapped in cloths, and each practitioner has his or her own set. When we come into the zendo for an *oryoki* meal, we all bow together and take our seats. *Oryoki* is probably the most elaborate ceremony we perform, yet in a sense it is simply the ordinary business of taking a meal. Before we open the bowls, the cook brings in an offering food accompanied by the beating of the temple drum. There is a very dramatic series of drumrolls, each with increasing volume and intensity, while the food offering is being made. You would think that the king is suddenly going to appear, or some profound thing. And that is the point: it is a profound thing. Taking a meal, consuming life, is very profound.

Then the food is brought in. *Oryoki* literally means "just the right

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

amount.” Someone who is large eats “largely” and someone who doesn’t need much eats just a little. Each person takes just the right amount. You hold your bowl out and as the servers put the food in it, you signal with hand gestures if you want more, or just a little bit, or no more.

When everyone has received food, we chant the *Meal Gatha*: “*First, seventy-two labors brought us food, we should know how it comes to us . . .*” The “Seventy-two labors” refer to the very practical things that bring us food—the seeds in the ground, the labor of the sun bringing it to life, the activity of water bringing it nutrients, the person harvesting it, the person who cooks it, and the person who serves it. All of those labors, all of that work has gone into bringing the food to us. That gets acknowledged personally with the chanting of the *gatha*. Each person also gives an offering of food from their bowls. That is collected, and we return it to nature. It goes out for the birds—or the cook eats it!—but it doesn’t get wasted.

Then we begin eating. When everyone is finished (and every grain of rice, every morsel, is consumed), hot water is brought in and poured into the first bowl. You clean the first bowl with a rubber spatula, pour the waste water into the second bowl, and dry the first bowl. You then clean the second bowl and the utensils and pour the water into the third bowl and dry the second bowl. Finally, you drink the water from the third bowl, dry that bowl, and then stack the bowls and fold the cloths back up. We feed sixty-five people in forty-five minutes—with no leftovers, no dishes to wash. The process is very efficient, and it’s very conscious. You can’t have an *oryoki* meal without being deeply aware of every bite of food that you’re taking.

Oryoki is a liturgy in a sense, but it’s a liturgy that doesn’t require formal bowls and a zendo setting. You can do *oryoki* at McDonald’s. It has to do with a state of consciousness, with the way you

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

use your mind. It has to do with the way you receive food, the gratitude that is felt when you receive food. The *Meal Gatha* reminds us why we take this food, what the whole point of it is: it is for all sentient beings. *Oryoki* is about the fact that we consume life, not rocks; we live on life, and we do so consciously and with gratitude.

John Daido Looi (1931–2009) was for many years the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. “Just the Right Amount” was extracted from a question-and-answer period that took place in a Zen workshop.

8

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE
TENZO

ZEN MASTER DOGEN

In a traditional Zen monastery, the position of tenzo, or head cook, is held by a monk who is considered to “have way-seeking mind, or by senior disciples with an aspiration for enlightenment.” Here, Japanese Zen Master Dogen (1200–1253) instructs his monks on the importance of the position of the tenzo as it had been established in Regulations for Zen Monasteries, a Chinese collection of guidelines for monastic life written in the early twelfth century.

Zen monasteries have traditionally had six officers who are all Buddha’s disciples and all share buddha activities. Among them, the tenzo is responsible for preparing meals for the monks. *Regulations for Zen Monasteries* states, “In order to make reverential offerings to monks, there is a position called tenzo.”

Since ancient times this position has been held by accomplished monks who have way-seeking mind, or by senior disciples with an aspiration for enlightenment. This is so because the position requires wholehearted practice. Those without way-seeking mind will not have good results, in spite of their efforts

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

The cycle of the tenzo's work begins after the noon meal. First go to the director and assistant director to receive the ingredients for the next day's morning and noon meals—rice, vegetables, and so on. After you have received these materials, take care of them as your own eyes. Zen Master Baoning Renyong said, "Protect the property of the monastery; it is your eyeball." Respect the food as though it were for the emperor. Take the same care for all food, raw or cooked. . . .

When you wash rice and prepare vegetables, you must do it with your own hands, and with your own eyes, making sincere effort. Do not be idle even for a moment. Do not be careful about one thing and careless about another. Do not give away your opportunity even if it is merely a drop in the ocean of merit; do not fail to place even a single particle of earth at the summit of the mountain of wholesome deeds.

Regulations for Zen Monasteries states, "If the six tastes are not suitable and if the food lacks the three virtues, the tenzo's offering to the assembly is not complete." Watch for sand when you examine the rice. Watch for rice when you throw away the sand. If you look carefully with your mind undistracted, naturally the three virtues will be fulfilled and the six tastes will be complete.

Xuefeng was once tenzo at the monastery of Dongshan Liangjie. One day when Xuefeng was washing rice, master Dongshan asked him, "Do you wash the sand away from the rice or the rice away from the sand?"

Xuefeng replied, "I wash both sand and rice away at the same time."

"What will the assembly eat?" said Dongshan. Xuefeng covered the rice-washing bowl.

Dongshan said, "You will probably meet a true person some day." This is how senior disciples with way-seeking mind practiced in olden times. How can we of later generations neglect this practice? . . .

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

Personally examine the rice and sand so that rice is not thrown away as sand. *Regulations for Zen Monasteries* states, “In preparing food, the tenzo should personally look at it to see that it is thoroughly clean.” Do not waste rice when pouring away the rice water. Since olden times a bag has been used to strain the rice water. When the proper amount of rice and water is put into an iron pot, guard it with attention so that rats do not touch it or people who are curious do not look in at it.

After you cook the vegetables for the morning meal, before preparing the rice and soup for the noon meal, assemble the rice buckets and other utensils, and make sure they are thoroughly clean. Put what is suited to a high place in a high place, and what belongs in a low place in a low place. Those things that are in a high place will be settled there; those that are suited to be in a low place will be settled there. Select chopsticks, spoons, and other utensils with equal care, examine them with sincerity, and handle them skillfully.

After that, work on the food for the next day’s meals. If you find any grain weevils in the rice, remove them. Pick out lentils, bran, sand, and pebbles carefully. While you are preparing the rice and vegetables in this way, your assistant should chant a sutra for the guardian spirit of the hearth.

When preparing the vegetables and the soup ingredients to be cooked, do not discuss the quantity or quality of these materials which have been obtained from the monastery officers; just prepare them with sincerity. Most of all you should avoid getting upset or complaining about the quantity of the food materials. You should practice in such a way that things come and abide in your mind, and your mind returns and abides in things, all through the day and night.

Organize the ingredients for the morning meal before midnight, and start cooking after midnight. After the morning meal, clean the pots for

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

boiling rice and making soup for the next meal. As tenzo you should not be away from the sink when the rice for the noon meal is being washed. Watch closely with clear eyes; do not waste even one grain. Wash it in the proper way, put it in pots, make a fire, and boil it. An ancient master said, "When you boil rice, know that the water is your own life." Put the boiled rice into bamboo baskets or wooden buckets, and then set them into trays. While the rice is boiling, cook the vegetables and soup. You should personally supervise the rice and soup being cooked. When you need utensils, ask the assistant, other helpers, or the oven attendant to get them. Recently in some large monasteries positions like the rice cook or soup cook have been created, but this should be the work of the tenzo. There was not a rice cook or a soup cook in olden days; the tenzo was completely responsible for all cooking.

When you prepare food, do not see with ordinary eyes and do not think with ordinary mind. Take up a blade of grass and construct a treasure king's land; enter into a particle of dust and turn the great dharma wheel. Do not arouse disdainful mind when you prepare a broth of wild grasses; do not arouse joyful mind when you prepare a fine cream soup. Where there is no discrimination, how can there be distaste? Thus, do not be careless even when you work with poor materials, and sustain your efforts even when you have excellent materials. Never change your attitude according to the materials. If you do, it is like varying your truth when speaking with different people; then you are not a practitioner of the way.

If you encourage yourself with complete sincerity, you will want to exceed monks of old in wholeheartedness and ancient practitioners in thoroughness. The way for you to attain this is by trying to make a fine cream soup for three cents in the same way that monks of old could make a broth of wild grasses for that little. It is difficult because the pres-

ent and olden times differ as greatly as the distance between heaven and earth; no one now can be compared with those of ancient times. However, if you practice thoroughly there will be a way to surpass them. If this is not yet clear to you it is because your thoughts run around like a wild horse and your feelings jump about like a monkey in the forest. When the monkey and horse step back and reflect upon themselves, freedom from all discrimination is realized naturally.

This is the way to turn things while being turned by things. Keep yourself harmonious and wholehearted in this way and do not lose one eye or two eyes. Taking up a green vegetable, turn it into a sixteen-foot golden body; take a sixteen-foot golden body and turn it into a green vegetable leaf. This is a miraculous transformation—a work of Buddha that benefits sentient beings.

When the food has been cooked, examine it, then carefully study the place where it should go and set it there. You should not miss even one activity from morning to evening. Each time the drum is hit or the bell struck, follow the assembly in the monastic schedule of morning zazen and evening practice instruction.

When you return to the kitchen, you should shut your eyes and count the number of monks who are present in the monks' hall. Also count the number of monks who are in their own quarters, in the infirmary, in the aged monks' quarters, in the entry hall, or out for the day, and then everyone else in the monastery. You must count them carefully. If you have the slightest question, ask the officers, the heads of the various halls or their assistants, or the head monk.

When this is settled, calculate the quantities of food you will need: for those who need one full serving of rice, plan for that much; for those who need half, plan for that much. In the same manner you can also plan for a serving of one-third, one-fourth, one-half, or two halves. In

this way, serving a half portion to each of two people is the same as serving one average person. Or if you plan to serve nine-tenths of one portion, you should notice how much is not prepared; or if you keep nine-tenths, how much is prepared.

When the assembly eats even one grain of rice from Luling, they will feel the monk Guishan in the tenzo, and when the tenzo serves a grain of this delicious rice, he will see Guishan's water buffalo in the heart of the assembly. The water buffalo swallows Guishan, and Guishan herds the water buffalo.

Have you measured correctly or not? Have the others you consulted counted correctly or not? You should review this closely and clarify it, directing the kitchen according to the situation. This kind of practice—effort after effort, day after day—should never be neglected.

When a donor visits the monastery and makes a contribution for the noon meal, discuss this donation with the other officers. This is the traditional way of Zen monasteries. In the same manner, you should discuss how to share all offerings. Do not assume another person's functions or neglect your own duties.

When you have cooked the noon meal or morning meal according to the regulations, put the food on trays, put on your *kashaya* [a patched robe worn over one shoulder], spread your bowing cloth, face the direction of the monks' hall, offer incense, and do nine full bows. When the bows are completed, begin sending out the food.

Prepare the meals day and night in this way without wasting time. If there is sincerity in your cooking and associated activities, whatever you do will be an act of nourishing the sacred body. This is also the way of ease and joy for the great assembly.

Although we have been studying Buddha's teaching in Japan for a long time, no one has yet recorded or taught about the regulations

for preparing food for the monks' community, not to mention the nine bows facing the monks' hall, which people in this country have not even dreamed of. People in our country regard the cooking in monasteries as no more developed than the manners of animals and birds. If this were so it would be quite regrettable. How can this be?

In the fifth month of the sixteenth year of Jiading [1223], I was staying on a ship at Qingyuan. One time while I was talking with the captain, a monk about sixty years old came on board. He talked to a Japanese merchant and then bought some mushrooms from Japan. I invited him to have tea and asked where he came from. He was the tenzo of Mt. Ayuwang.

"I am from Shu in western China," he said, "and have been away from my native place for forty years. Now I am sixty-one years old. I have visited monasteries in various places. Some years ago, priest Daoquan became abbot of Guyun Temple at Mt. Ayuwang, so I went to Mt. Ayuwang and entered the community and have been there ever since. Last year when the summer practice period was over, I was appointed tenzo of the monastery. Tomorrow is the fifth day of the fifth month, but I have nothing good to offer the community. I wanted to make a noodle soup, but we did not have mushrooms, so I made a special trip here to get some mushrooms to offer to the monks from the ten directions. "

I asked him, "When did you leave there?"

"After the noon meal."

"How far is Mt. Ayuwang?"

"Thirty-four or thirty-five li [about twelve miles]."

"When are you going back to your monastery?"

“I will go back as soon as I have bought mushrooms.”

I said, “Today we met unexpectedly and had a conversation on this ship. Is it not a good causal relationship? Please let me offer you a meal, Reverend Tenzo.”

“It is not possible. If I don’t oversee tomorrow’s offering, it will not be good.”

“Is there not someone else in the monastery who understands cooking? Even if one tenzo is missing, will something be lacking?”

“I have taken this position in my old age. This is the fulfillment of many years of practice. How can I delegate my responsibility to others? Besides, I did not ask for permission to stay out.”

I again asked the tenzo, “Honorable Tenzo, why don’t you concentrate on zazen practice and on the study of the ancient masters’ words rather than troubling yourself by holding the position of tenzo and just working? Is there anything good about it?”

The tenzo laughed a lot and replied, “Good man from a foreign country, you do not yet understand practice or know the meaning of the words of ancient masters.”

Hearing him respond this way, I suddenly felt ashamed and surprised, so I asked him, “What are words? What is practice?”

The tenzo said, “If you penetrate this question, how can you fail to become a person of understanding?”

But I did not understand. Then the tenzo said, “If you do not understand this, please come and see me at Mt. Ayuwang some time. We will discuss the meaning of words.” He spoke in this way, and then he stood up and said, “The sun will soon be down. I must hurry.” And he left.

Refined cream soup is not necessarily better than a broth of wild grasses. When you gather and prepare wild grasses, make it equal to a fine cream soup with your true mind, sincere mind, and pure mind.

This is because when you serve the assembly—the undefiled ocean of buddhadharma—you do not notice the taste of fine cream or the taste of wild grasses. The great ocean has only one taste. How much more so when you bring forth the buds of the way and nourish the sacred body. Fine cream and wild grasses are equal and not two. There is an ancient saying that monks' mouths are like a furnace. You should be aware of this. Know that even wild grasses can nourish the sacred body and bring forth the buds of the way. Do not regard them as low or take this lightly. A guiding master of humans and devas should be able to benefit others with wild grasses.

Again, do not consider the merits or faults of the monks in the community, and do not consider whether they are old or young. If you cannot even know what categories you fall into, how can you know about others? If you judge others from your own limited point of view, how can you avoid being mistaken? Although the seniors and those who came after differ in appearance, all members of the community are equal. Furthermore, those who had shortcomings yesterday can act correctly today. Who can know what is sacred and what is ordinary? *Regulations for Zen Monasteries* states, "A monk whether ordinary or sacred can pass freely through the ten directions."

If you have the spirit of "not dwelling in the realm of right and wrong," how can this not be the practice of directly entering unsurpassable wisdom? However, if you do not have this spirit, you will miss it even though you are facing it. The bones-and-marrow of the ancient masters is to be found in this kind of effort. The monks who will hold the position of tenzo in the future can attain the bones-and-marrow only by making such an effort. How can the rules of reverend ancestor Baizhang be in vain?

After I came back to Japan I stayed for a few years at Kennin Mon-

astery, where they had the tenzo's position but did not understand its meaning. Although they used the name *tenzo*, those who held the position did not have the proper spirit. They did not even know that this is a buddha's practice, so how could they endeavor in the way? Indeed it is a pity that they have not met a real master and are passing time in vain, violating the practice of the way. When I saw the monk who held the tenzo's position in Kennin Monastery, he did not personally manage all of the preparations for the morning and noon meals. He used an ignorant, insensitive servant, and he had him do everything—both the important and the unimportant tasks. He never checked whether the servant's work was done correctly or not, as though it would be shameful or inappropriate to do so—like watching a woman living next door. He stayed in his own room, where he would lie down, chat, read sutras, or chant. For days and months he did not come close to a pan, buy cooking equipment, or think about menus. How could he have known that these are buddha activities? Furthermore, he would not even have dreamed of nine bows before sending the meals out. When it comes time to train a young monk, he still will not know anything. How regrettable it is that he is a man without way-seeking mind and that he has not met someone who has the virtue of the way. It is just like returning empty-handed after entering a treasure mountain or coming back unadorned after reaching the ocean of jewels.

Even if you have not aroused the thought of enlightenment, if you have seen a person manifesting original self you can still practice and attain the way. Or if you have not seen a person manifesting original self, but have deeply aroused the aspiration for enlightenment, you can be one with the way. If you lack both of these, how can you receive even the slightest benefit?

When you see those who hold positions as officers and staff in the

monasteries of Great Song China, although they serve for a one-year term, each of them abides by three guidelines, practicing these in every moment, following them at every opportunity: (1) Benefit others—this simultaneously benefits yourself; (2) Contribute to the growth and elevation of the monastery; (3) Emulate masters of old, following and respecting their excellent examples.

You should understand that there are foolish people who do not take care of themselves because they do not take care of others, and there are wise people who care for others just as they care for themselves.

A teacher of old said:

Two-thirds of your life has passed, not polishing even a spot of your source of sacredness. You devour your life, your days are busy with this and that. If you don't turn around at my shout, what can I do?

You should know that if you have not met a true master, you will be swept away by human desire. What a pity! It is like the foolish son of the wealthy man who carries a treasure from his father's house and discards it like dung. You should not waste your time as that man did

If anything should be revered, it is enlightenment. If any time should be honored, it is the time of enlightenment. When you long for enlightenment and follow the way, even taking sand and offering it to Buddha is beneficial; drawing a figure of Buddha and paying homage also has an effect. How much more so to be in the position of tenzo. If you act in harmony with the minds and actions of our ancient predecessors, how can you fail to bring forth their virtue and practice?

Excerpted from *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (North Point Press), edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi. This passage was translated by Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi.

9

THOUGHT FOR FOOD

VENERABLE YIFA

When we sit down to eat in our monastery, we try to be conscious of several things. We eat in silence because this way you can concentrate on the food and practice awareness. Then we eat everything on the plate. This is our way of honoring the conservation of resources. We also try to make sure that the conservation of resources takes place before the food even reaches our plate: the portions we receive aren't too large, and this way it isn't difficult to eat all that's been given to us. We also remember the preparation of the food—the work of the cooks and the cleaners and those who picked the vegetables and processed the food. We don't choose what we eat at the monastery. We're not in the monastery to become gourmets. We're there because we need to cultivate appreciation and nonattachment to all things, including food.

These ritual behaviors are part of what we call the “five contemplations.” The first contemplation is to develop *gratitude*. We give thanks for the food and how it came to us. We reflect on the food's growth from seed to flowering plant, its harvesting and journey from the fields to the market; then we appreciate its arrival and preparation in the kitchen, and the effort it took to supply this food. We acknowledge the interdependence of all natural things—how they work together in harmony to bring us what is nutritious and life-giving. We recognize, too, that life forms may have been harmed in the gathering of this food (even though we don't eat meat, we know that animals may have been disturbed by the harvesting of the vegetables, fruits, and grains).

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

The second contemplation is to develop *humility*. In the monastery we're privileged in that we don't pay money for our meals. However, we know the meal is not cost-free. We're also aware that many in the world don't have access to any food, no matter what the price. It's a great blessing to us that we have people who cook for us and prepare the tables. We're always at risk of taking them for granted—just as, in society as a whole, we take for granted the people who work in the factories or the migrant laborers who pluck our fruits and vegetables from the trees and bushes or pull them up from the ground. That we forget all those who work out of sight for our comfort is an unfortunate tendency in our culture. The second contemplation forces us, therefore, at least for a moment, to be aware that they exist and that we should be grateful for them. Perhaps such gratitude will make us more likely to help these laborers as they advocate for better work and living conditions.

I remember once I was eating with a young man who asked: "If I paid five dollars for this meal, why do I still have to say 'thank you'?" "Do you think that your five dollars really bought this meal?" I asked him. "Let's count up the economic cost that led to this food coming together in this form for you. Think about all the causes and conditions that were involved in terms of time and space for this set of ingredients to be cooked in such a way and then be available to eat." And so the young man and I did just that. I can't remember the exact number we came up with, but the amount of money and the perhaps unquantifiable effort involved were considerably more than what he had paid. The young man ate a bit of humble pie with his meal that day!

The third contemplation we perform is to develop *restraint*. Restraint means protecting the integrity of our mind so that we're less likely to depart from our discipline; this way we avoid errors such as greed. So, not only should we not take more than we need but also always prac-

tice consideration in making sure that everyone has what they need. We must be aware not to become selfish, indulge our tastes, and wish to take more than our share—whether it's piling our plate high or making it so that other people don't get enough to eat. We shouldn't ask why we were given the food, complain about the taste, or disparage the skills of those who prepared it. We should accept it with gratitude and grace, thanking everyone involved for their work and care.

The fourth contemplation is the *generation of health-providing thoughts* about the food. We should sense it nourishing us and giving us energy and vitality, coursing through our bodies. That's why the food in the monastery should always be nutritious. The food prepared should be good for the digestion, soft on the palate, and flavorful. There's no reason that it should be devoid of taste or pleasure. The Chinese monastic tradition considers food and medicine to be from the same source. Food is always cooked using herbs and spices together to combine taste, nutritional value, and the healing power of those herbs and spices. This is a different conception of food from that in the West, where nutrition has, until relatively recently, not been thought of as a key component in preventing disease and curing ailments. The fourth contemplation allows us to consider food as a medicinal force.

The fifth contemplation aims to encourage *examination of the purpose of our lives*. The entire process of sitting down to eat, reflecting on food and its preparation, and then the eating of it should be a method—one among many—to take us further on the path to enlightenment. This again is why the food in our temples is vegetarian: because we want to emphasize the life-giving nature of food and to discourage the taking of life.

From *Authenticity: Clearing the Junk; A Buddhist Perspective*, © 2007 by Venerable Yifa. Reprinted with the permission of Lantern Books, NY.

10

FOOD FOR
ENLIGHTENMENT

How the Buddha came into your kitchen

SANDRA GARSON

Buddhism began with a meal. Having abdicated the lap of royal luxury to seek the meaning of life, the Shakya prince Gautama Siddhartha wandered the wilderness with a band of ascetic extremists, wasting away until his limbs “were like the knotted joints of withered creepers” and his ribs pierced his skin. “Now I can claim to have lived on a single bean a day,” he later told a disciple, “on a single sesamum seed a day—or a single grain of rice a day.” Yet, rather than glorify the success of this austerity, Gautama went on to report: “Never did this practice . . . or these dire austerities bring me to the ennobling fits of superhuman knowledge and insight.” The disappointing self-mortification brought him instead to accept a small offering of boiled milk with honey. As every biography emphasizes, reinvigorated by physical energy and a sense of well-being, he then sat down under the Bodhi tree and began the meditation that turned him into Buddha, “the awakened one,” a man who forever changed the world.

Because Buddhism has no savior gods but rather a path to enlightenment paved by personal behavior, Buddhism more than any other religion (except, arguably, Manichaeism) is concerned with what and how

human beings eat. “Anyone who has tried to meditate,” the late Buddhist scholar Edward Conze noted, “must have observed that the weaknesses and disturbances of the body are apt to interfere with continuous meditation.” But the idea of purifying oneself of greed, anger, and ignorance through the willful control of behavioral impulses has always held powerful sway over seekers in all traditions.

Indeed, almost fifteen hundred years after Shakyamuni Buddha, the great Tibetan Buddhist yogi Milarepa lived in a cave and tried eating only scavenged nettles until he deemed such dire fasting a futile avenue to awakening. The only result was that his skin turned green. Horrifying bronzes of a severely emaciated Buddha still sit in Asian monasteries as warnings against despising or ignoring the fleshly body.

When Gautama began his spiritual quest by engaging in extreme forms of fasting, he was doing no more or less than following the customs of the wandering holy men of his day. But he rejected this in favor of “the middle way.” His subsequent teachings incorporated detailed instructions on diet, and appropriate etiquette for the taking of meals. This attention to the body, to the strength and physical well-being of the seeker, was a radically new approach at a time when the prevailing spiritual path demanded the subjugation of bodily needs to discipline and willpower. Introducing what we may now call a “holistic” view of body and mind, the Buddha’s view had far-reaching ramifications. It has been suggested that many aspects of Chinese herbal healing remedies, for instance, developed in part because Buddhist missionaries, like many missionaries since, found that they made more converts by helping the sick than by arguing fine points of theology.

Chinese and, equally, Tibetan medicine (the latter a specifically Buddhist study) are based on balancing the humors of the body—bile, phlegm, and wind—through the metabolic process. For example, par-

particular mushrooms, concoctions of roots, or potpourris of herbs are used for the restoration of harmony, or healing. In the way Chinese medics in America recently prescribed eating a stew of almonds, lily buds, and a particular pear to combat my winter bronchitis, and in the way Indians ingest hot curries to cool the body through sweating, early East Asian Buddhists subscribed to a diet of steamed and boiled, spiceless vegetables because it was known to “cool” the body. Such simple meals were digested quickly without inflaming body temperature, which was deemed appropriate to calm a mind for meditation. In the fourteenth century, the Soto Zen patriarch Keizan Jokin described this method of restoration in his work *Zazen Yojinki*, “Precautions to Observe in Zazen,” which admonishes meditators to eat two-thirds of their capacity, consuming rice with particular pickled/acidic vegetables and alkaline seaweeds, food-stuffs that accompanied Zen’s transmission to America.

Abhidharma logic makes alcohol anathema to Buddhists because it dulls the mind; abstinence from intoxicants is one of the five major vows an ordained Buddhist must take every morning. On the other hand, the same logic makes caffeine the drug of choice for those committed to focusing the mind; a cup of tea is still the first thing a visitor to any Buddhist monastery is offered. “It could have been any beverage—examine the relationship of coffee to Islam, wine to Christianity—but . . . it was tea that came to be most closely associated with Buddhism,” Rand Castile writes in *The Way of Tea*. Chinese legend traces the origin of tea drinking in that land to its Buddhist saint Bodhidharma, who upon discovering that he had fallen asleep during meditation was said to have immediately cut off his eyelashes; falling to the ground, they sprang back up as tea bushes. Tea was a stowaway on Buddhism’s travels from the Middle Kingdom to Japan and, more recently, to the United States, where its consumption is creating new taste trends, especially for green tea and Indian spiced chai.

What we Americans know as tofu allegedly originated when Chinese converts to Buddhism tried to please their Indian teachers by catering to their eating habits. They had to solve the dilemma of how a lactose-intolerant people could produce dishes that appeared to contain yogurt and paneer, a curd cheese favored by Indians. Cleverly, they seized upon an obscure local invention, soy-bean curd, which ably imitated both. Dofu, as the Chinese call it, started its journey to our local supermarkets as a prized monastic dairy substitute and evolved into a monastic meat substitute when a new generation of Chinese Buddhists, more fiercely devout than their Indian forerunners, interpreted the Buddha's admonition to do no harm as a mandate for absolute vegetarianism. The Japanese monk Ennin visited a Chinese temple in the 840s and wrote in his diary that wheat cakes and dumplings were the special fare cooks created to greet important guests or to serve as the fancy food at feasts, replacing meat.

It's uncertain whether we therefore owe steamed buns and potstickers to the Buddha, but we do know that during this period, Chinese monasteries doubled as inns for travelers and pilgrims and were thus the country's first public restaurants.

So in the Sung dynasty, when real restaurants began to open inside cities, temple kitchens were all they had for reference, and their menus proudly featured what was called "temple food," dishes cooked in the style of Buddhists. Buddha's Delight and other vegetarian specialties, including many of the tofu variations found in your local Chinese restaurant, were on those menus a thousand years ago.

The opposite of starvation is indulgence, and in the *Dhammapada* we read, "The man who is lazy and a glutton, who eats large meals and rolls in his sleep like a pig which is fed in the sty, is reborn again and again." A surprisingly large portion of the Vinaya's two hundred and

fifty rules advocate a proper way to eat. “A lot of things are based on this idea of eating food properly,” the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught his American students, “which is how to behave as a basically decent person.” The Vinaya, for instance, proscribes such wanton behavior as eating out of turn, hoarding food, and putting in your mouth food that has not been offered.

The Vinaya is also responsible for the difference in the way Western and Eastern food comes to the table. The Buddha was a pacifist whose first precept, still the first vow made by every Buddhist, is not to take or harm life. A thousand years after his lifetime, new Chinese converts, taking his proscription seriously, created an auxiliary disciplinary code to the Vinaya, called the Fan Wan King, which added a ban in their country on owning or wielding swords, clubs, knives, or any object that might kill a living being. Still, they had to eat. By necessity a chef was permitted one knife, which was confined to the kitchen and used to prevent the need for any other implement of violence. It is for this reason that we find so much preparatory chopping involved in the making of a Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese meal; East Asian food evolved to bite-sized tidbits that could be nabbed with chopsticks. The absence of knives among people sitting down to share a meal signals not only the absence of aggression but also how unnecessary it is. Our Western way of serving a slab of meat or half a chicken is so frowned upon that even modern Thais, who have adopted silverware, do not set places with anything but a fork and spoon. Their unwritten cooking rule is that each morsel of meat or fish must be prepared so that when eaten with half a spoonful of rice it makes a complete mouthful.

The Vinaya also specifies when and when not to eat. The right time is when the day is light enough to see the lines on the palm of the hand; the wrong time is between high noon and dawn the next morning. A

maximum of two meals may be taken during the right time. The supposed advantages of this schedule are a large block of time free from thinking about the next meal, a lightness of body that means not waking with a food hangover, and freedom for the laity from having to prepare extra evening meals for holy passersby.

Just as the Buddhist pursuit of self-control delineates right and wrong times to eat, it defines right and wrong foods. Determining the category of a specific food requires a simple test: does it promote pleasure in and thus craving for and attachment to eating? “For food, let them eat what they wish, but let them not taste the poison of enjoyment” is among the tantric sayings of Tibet. The practice of “one taste,” or nondiscrimination among foodstuffs, takes many forms: the happy acceptance of whatever lands in the begging bowl of South Asian monks; the Chinese practice of banning onions, garlic, chives, and leeks because these are “adored foods”; and the Japanese Zen instructions that the cook should not handle plain food carelessly and rich food carefully but should see the Buddha in a cabbage. As Zen Master Dogen said, “The many rivers which flow into the ocean become the one taste of the ocean. . . . There are no such distinctions as delicacies and plain food . . . just one taste.” All ingredients are thus generally equal in Asian cooking.

It is often presumed that meat is a “wrong” Buddhist food, but the Buddha, in his insistence on “one taste,” consumed meat when it was offered. The canon contains his response to his cousin Devadatta’s question about whether or not monks should abstain from eating meat: “The eating of flesh that is pure in three respects, that is to say, that the eater has not seen, heard, nor suspected that it has been killed especially for him, is allowable.” The Buddha also reputedly said that the evils of ill conduct are far more harmful than eating meat. Accounts of his death stress how the infirm and aged holy man saved the life of his disciples

by reserving for himself the spoiled pork innocently offered by a nobly intentioned donor.

Shakyamuni's only known prohibitions on carnivorism are for fish or meat that has not been cooked (purified), or the meat of dogs, snakes, tigers, hyenas, elephants, panthers, lions, horses, and human beings. The actual taboo he propagated—doing harm—was revolutionary at a time when new iron-weapon technology had increased tribal warfare, excessive animal sacrifice, and peasant cruelty. Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of this taboo during the lifetime of the Buddha was the Indian cow, for Shakyamuni's doctrine of “no harm” called into question the orgiastic *Rig Veda* cow sacrifices occurring around him.

The brahmins' ritualistic extermination of cows for their feasting pleasure had created widespread peasant famine by destroying the most productive agricultural tool in all of India. The Zebu cow was the best plow animal, the single source of dairy nourishment and dung for cooking fuel, and did not compete with human beings for food. Although we cannot say for certain whether or not the sacred cow policy began with the Buddha—some argue that it was a development of the Jain sect, a religious movement contemporary with the Buddha that also emphasized non-killing—the policy nonetheless grew in popularity so rapidly that it forced brahmins to reverse their practices from extermination to conservation in order to survive politically. To this day, Indian food does not contain beef.

The relative prosperity that followed India's adoption of the “no harm” precept propelled the idea of the sacred cow abroad as part of Buddhism. The Chinese applied it to their bovines, which they viewed as indispensable agricultural servants, and the veneration of cows became so institutionalized in succeeding generations that even the most vociferous adversaries of Buddhism among the ruling elite of the late 1800s

were vigorously opposed to slaughtering them for food. “Everywhere we went in Fukien,” a Dutch traveler wrote in 1893 in his diary, “we saw these admonitions [against killing cows] posted in cities and towns along the roads and on the bridges. Many have the characters arranged to form a buffalo surrounded by urgent warnings.” Killing cows was a punishable crime, and enforcement of the law was so energetic that an attempt to purvey beef to Western embassies provoked a major diplomatic scandal. A century later, Chinese cooking still centers around fish, pork, and chicken, although nowadays one can occasionally find Mongolian beef included. The sacred cow also accompanied Buddhism from China to Japan, influencing the latter’s meal preferences for a millennium, until postwar exposure to Western culture encouraged the imitation of Western ways, and beef was added, albeit tentatively, to Japan’s culinary repertoire.

Chinese Buddhists took the Buddha’s admonitions one step further, forbidding consumption of any meat or what the rulebook calls “the flesh of any living being”; even the act of encouraging others to kill or eat meat was forbidden. Perhaps this ban was a tempering response to the fact that the Chinese historically had no food taboos whatsoever. Liang dynasty edicts for the preservation of fish and fowl were revitalized during the Tang dynasty, the very time new Japanese converts were busy importing Buddhism to their islands. Zen Buddhism thus started out associated with vegetarianism, a dietary regimen popularized in America after Zen Buddhism captured the countercultural imagination.

As the simple story of the Buddha’s newly full stomach indicates, without food we have no clear mind or strong body with which to perceive and understand reality. The central daily rite of lay Buddhism throughout Asia is therefore the offering of food to monks, Buddhas on a shrine, or lower beings in the wild. In Tibet a family ritually renews

its links to the world of which it is a part: after a ceremony in front of its shrine, the family sits down to tea, and each member, upon being served, sprinkles a few drops in the direction of the four compass points as a symbolic offering to all beings. In Thailand, a pitcher of water is placed in front of the house for the benefit of thirsty travelers, and more rice than required is prepared in case someone unexpected should arrive. “Generosity,” a Tibetan Buddhist meal prayer says, “is the virtue that produces peace.”

Many, if not most, of Asia’s seemingly idiosyncratic food ways evolved from Buddha’s first meal, whether it is the Tibetan policy of subsisting on large animals so that it only takes one death to lengthen their lives, or the Burmese practice of selling only cracked eggs to gain the merit of saving a customer’s soul because truly virtuous Buddhists would never “kill” a potentially living being by breaking the shell themselves. With the world fast becoming an interconnected village, perhaps more of these food-related mores will soon take their place beside our tea, tofu, chopsticks, and curry powder, adding to the Buddha’s delight.

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11

EATING AND THE
WHEEL OF LIFE

How to resist that cookie? Exploring the problem
of craving in a world of abundance.

SANDRA WEINBERG

Knowing how much is enough when eating . . .

This is the teaching of the buddha.

—*Dhammapada*

“Knowing how much is enough when eating.”

It sounds so simple. Yet how often the matter of “enough” trips us up. For much of the world, getting enough to eat is the problem. Here in America we eat too much. Two-thirds of the population is overweight, nearly a third clinically obese; meanwhile, our ideal of physical beauty keeps getting thinner and thinner.

Increasingly, we exist in a love-hate relationship with our bodies and in a state of conflict over food. Denying the body with one hand, we stuff it with the other—then second-guess every morsel we consume. Whether we are ordering a five-course dinner at the Four Seasons or eyeing a plate of Krispy Kremes, our hunger seems to have far less to do with nourishment than with the gratification of desire.

We weigh ourselves against impossible standards, and when reality

falls short of our expectations, self-doubt—even self-hatred—is quick to follow. Judgment for dietary indiscretions is swift and harsh: a recent print ad for Kellogg’s Nutri-Grain health bars suggests how culturally ingrained this view has become. A bikini-clad model is shown reclining pinup-style, an enormous, icing-covered croissant balanced on her hip. The tag line says it all: “Respect yourself in the morning.” Food—the primordial form of nurture—is becoming a primordial source of suffering.

Ironically, the more we focus on the body, the more alienated from it we become. Increasingly, we resemble Mr. Duffy, the protagonist of James Joyce’s short story “A Painful Case” who “lived at a little distance from his body.”

From a Buddhist perspective, however, the body is not the problem. Rather, it is our thoughts about it that undermine our sense of well-being. What is required is a shift in perspective that allows us to understand the nature of craving and to welcome the body, whatever state it is in. When we can relate to the body and our appetites with compassion and acceptance, we will no longer have to live at such a distance from ourselves.

Why do we eat, anyway? Clearly, physical hunger is not the only drive. Eating soothes emotional discomfort and offers escape from unpleasant feelings of anger, disappointment, agitation, fear, pain, sorrow, loneliness, or simply boredom. In times of stress, nearly everyone turns to food. CNN reported that in the days after September 11, consumption of ice cream and sweets rose dramatically in New York City.

Often we associate eating with happy times and try to recapture good feelings by consuming certain foods. We eat out of habit: “What’s a movie without a bucket of popcorn?” We eat to be polite: “I don’t want to insult my hostess.” Sometimes, we eat in response to a vague feeling of lack, or a fear that there won’t be enough in the future: “I’d better take

one before they're all gone," we reason. "It's just a cookie, after all."

For many people a cookie is just a cookie. Eating it brings a moment of enjoyment—or, at worst, guilty pleasure—and then they give it no more thought. For compulsive overeaters, however, a cookie is the culinary equivalent of a loaded gun: one bite can send them spiraling into a hell realm of insatiable desire.

The Buddha identified three poisons that constitute suffering: craving, aversion, and ignorance. Overeating is among the most insidious of cravings, a form of suffering that carries much shame. In a society that worships svelte bodies and self-control, we are merciless toward those who appear to have neither. The overeater, faced with desire that seems difficult, if not impossible to extinguish, sees no recourse but denial. However, retreating behind ignorance of the consequences only perpetuates the cycle of mindless eating, yo-yo dieting, and morning-after recriminations—and deepens its hold. Like a drunk suffering a hangover, a compulsive eater fresh off a binge has one overriding thought: Help! How can I stop this self-defeating behavior?

This is the very issue the Buddha addressed in his teachings on the nature of human suffering. We all want happiness, he observed, but we chase after it in ways that are sure to bring us pain. One of the Buddha's most profound teachings is the law of dependent origination, which expresses in exquisite detail the twelve interdependent links in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, spelling out how suffering arises and escalates. The principle of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada* in Pali) sheds light on repetitive and compulsive behavior, showing why—and how—the stranglehold of conditioning makes it so difficult to change. Through this teaching we see that in the presence of certain causes and conditions, certain effects are inevitable:

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.
—The Buddha, from the *Samyutta Nikaya*

In Tibetan Buddhism, the cycle of dependent origination is depicted graphically in traditional thangkas, or symbolic paintings, by the *bhavachakra*—the wheel of life, or wheel of *samsara*. The iconography of the wheel of life illuminates the truth that compulsive behavior doesn't arise spontaneously; the seeds are planted long before the moment of acting out. In the language of addiction and recovery, it is said that the “slip”—the lapse into compulsive behavior—happens long before the person takes the first bite of food or sip of liquor.

The images on the outer circle of the thangka depict the coexisting conditions that entangle us in the endless cycle of human suffering. In examining these factors we see not only how suffering arises but also—this is critical—where we can intervene and make an inner shift to arrest the cycle.

The first link is ignorance—*avijja* in Pali. Ignorance is represented, appropriately, by a blind man walking with a staff. If we are deluded—if we fail to see our thoughts and actions clearly—we are bound to repeat our behavior. A key symptom of uncontrolled or unhealthy eating is denial that it is causing any problems. We ignore the reality that eating to get rid of discomfort only leads to more discomfort.

The literature of Overeaters Anonymous, a program of recovery from compulsive eating that follows the Twelve Step model, sums up this process: *First we were smitten by an insane urge that condemned us to go on eating and then by an allergy of the body that insured we would*

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

ultimately destroy ourselves in the process. Until we can awaken from delusion and acknowledge the consequences of our actions, the pattern of self-destructive behavior will continue and even escalate.

The next link in the cycle of dependent origination is characterized by volitional formations (*sankhara*), also known as karmic impulses. This stage refers to the mental conditioning—habitual thinking—and karmic patterns that inevitably lead to certain actions. When we are in denial, we make up stories to rationalize our behavior. Each time we act on one of those stories, we strengthen our belief in it, thereby reinforcing the behavior. The thangka image for this link is a man fashioning clay pots.

I once had a client who weighed over 300 pounds and had had numerous operations on her knees. She persisted in believing that her ongoing knee problems came from having no time to do yoga, not from being vastly overweight. This is an extreme example, but how often we make excuses for overindulging: “Well, there’s no point in starting a diet now; it’s the holidays!” “I know I shouldn’t eat this, but you only live once”; “Just one couldn’t hurt”; “Things have been so tough, I deserve a treat.” Rationalizations like these lash us to the wheel of samsara.

The third link in the cycle is consciousness (*vinnana*), the faculty of knowing, depicted by a monkey swinging through the trees. (Here, the monkey is a symbol of the ever-changing mind.) This link refers to our perception and awareness of sensations as they arise, as well as to our mind state—angry, dull, or yearning, for example—which influences how we interpret sensory information. What gets our attention in the present is colored by our impulses and innate disposition—our habits of thought developed in the past.

Consciousness co-arises with the fourth link, mind and body (*namarupa*), pictured in the thangka as people in a rowboat. Consciousness

shapes how the mind and body function, as in this familiar example: A woman who was dieting and feeling good about her progress got on the scale one morning, expecting a weight loss. Instead, the scale registered a two-pound gain. Frustrated and angry, she thought, “I’ll never lose weight, so why bother?” Her intention to stick to her diet dissolved, and she went out and bought a pastry for breakfast.

The state of the mind and body influences the fifth link, the six senses (*salayatana*), represented on the thangka by a deserted town (also commonly depicted as a monkey in a house with six windows). Here we encounter an important distinction between buddhadharma and Western psychology. In the West, perception is associated with the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching) and their corresponding sense organs. In Buddhism, mind is considered a sixth sense organ, or “sense door,” because it continually interprets the moment-to-moment input of the other senses. Our thoughts and opinions about our sensory experience influence our perceptions and responses, as the *Dhammapada* so eloquently explains:

The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character;
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
And let it spring from love
Born out of concern for all beings . . .
As the shadow follows the body,
As we think, so we become.

When a stimulus meets a functioning sense organ, there is contact (*phassa*), the sixth interdependent link, symbolized by a man and woman lying together in an embrace. Stimuli are constantly moving through us and around us, without our conscious awareness or volition. Contact brings awareness of a particular sense impression to the foreground. For example, let's say a man has just come out of his boss's office after a particularly trying meeting that extended well past lunchtime. As he passes the receptionist's desk, he suddenly sees a basket of candies sitting there that he has never noticed before, and reflexively scoops up a handful.

Whenever there is contact, the seventh link—feeling (*vedana*)—arises concurrently. (The image for this link is a man with an arrow piercing his eye.) Feeling, according to Buddhist thought, is associated with one of three possible sensations: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. There is a deeply conditioned reflex in all organisms to move toward what is pleasant and away from the unpleasant. Some people eat to avoid bad feelings. Some continue eating even when they're full, either because the food tastes so good or because the process of eating is so pleasurable. A client of mine who was going through a difficult period bemoaned, "There's so much I can't do right now, but I need some kind of gratification. The chocolate looks so good. Even though I know I'll regret it later, I'll eat it anyway."

Links three through seven—consciousness, mind and body, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling—are intricately interconnected, arising automatically without our conscious control. Unpleasant feelings naturally lead us to look outside ourselves for a way to feel better; pleasant feelings lead us to look for a way to continue feeling good. That search sets the conditions for the eighth link, craving (*tanha*), to arise.

Here's a simple example of how this process unfolds: One person walks by a bakery without even noticing it. Another walks by and no-

tices the smell of fresh bread, but continues on without stopping. A third person smells the bread and feels a rush of well-being: the scent triggers the memory of a delicious dessert she ate the previous week. Though late for work, she stops in front of the bakery window and debates whether or not to go inside and buy something to eat.

Here we stand at a critical crossroads, where there is still room for conscious choice. The split second between having a feeling (vedana) and giving in to craving (tanha) is the optimal moment to intervene and break the cycle of samsara. This is our opportunity to awaken and move away from self-destructive behavior. With strong intention and the proper tools, we can develop the strength and concentration to withstand temptation. (See “Meditation to Work with Craving” at the end of this article.)

But what happens if we ignore this opportunity and give in to desire? In recovery circles one often hears the warning: Stay away from people, places, and things that trigger the urge to eat. This is skillful advice, but hard to follow. Unlike alcohol, or drugs, or tobacco, food is not a substance we can avoid altogether; it is essential for our survival. One frustrated dieter summed up the problem when he snapped: “You have to eat and not eat at the same time!” Daily life is filled with constant reminders of food, including our own thoughts about eating.

Any powerful association can set off a desire to eat. It may be the smell or sight of a favorite food, or even the sound of someone chewing. A description of a gourmet meal can elicit euphoric recall and intense craving. For a food addict, the most mundane event can be a trigger: one young woman has only to see someone snacking from a brown paper bag and she is off on an eating binge.

The Buddha called craving the root of suffering. *Tanha* literally means “thirst”; the thangka symbol for this link is a man taking a drink,

but it could just as easily be someone eating. At this stage on the wheel of life, the attachment to feeling good and avoiding discomfort begins to trap us in an endless cycle of painful behavior.

Once we give in to craving, we are catapulted immediately into clinging (*upadana*), the ninth link. Here, the mind becomes fixated on the object of desire. It grasps. The image on the thangka is of a monkey in a tree, grabbing for fruit. All possibility of choice fades. As one overeater described it, “Even though my mind is aware, the body seems to have made up its own mind.”

The trance of grasping sweeps us into the tenth link, becoming (*bhava*), depicted in the thangka as a pregnant woman. Now, with the first bite, the overeater’s thoughts constrict, hardening into identification with the drive to eat. All other aspects of one’s being gradually become engulfed in a fog of “more.”

With the eleventh link, birth (*jati*)—pictured as a woman giving birth—the compulsion to eat is firmly entrenched. Having lost the will to try to break the cycle, the overeater surrenders to every impulse; the first bite inevitably gives rise to the next. Yesterday’s relationship with food has set the karmic template for tomorrow’s. The twelfth link—aging and death (*jara-marana*)—is assured. This is the death of possibility, of options. The image for this stage is an old man carrying a corpse on his back. Now the urge to eat is conditioned, and suffering is guaranteed, as the wheel of samsara turns once more. The overeater’s feelings of physical discomfort are accompanied by tortured self-recrimination: *I can’t believe I did it again.*

The Buddha, of course, did not leave us caught in the cycle of suffering with no way out. Just as suffering arises moment to moment, so too does the possibility of freedom from suffering, he said. The Buddha taught from his own experience how to be free of unhealthy attachments:

though we cannot escape painful feelings, we can choose how to react to them. Centuries later, Bill W., the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, echoed that theme in the Twelve Step program of recovery. To break the cycle of craving, we must see the truth as it is, however uncomfortable that may be.

For anyone watching their food intake, life seems to involve an ongoing internal debate: *Should I eat this or not?* But the real question, according to the Buddha, is not *Should I?* It is *What is happening right now?* Looking deeply into our experience, without judgment, we can explore the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that lie behind our desire to retreat into the ready comfort of food. (See “How to Say No,” final page of this article.)

Through mindfulness training, we can ease the grasp of delusion, allowing us to experience the truth of impermanence, the workings of karma, and the power of intention. Desire narrows our awareness till we see only what we crave; mindfulness helps us see other possibilities. As we observe that our cravings—no matter how strong—eventually pass, we no longer feel compelled to act on them. We discover where in the cycle of craving we can effectively intervene. When mindfulness is strong enough to create space between stimulus and reaction, the karmic attachment that leads to automatic behavior is weakened, giving us a chance to make wiser choices. Even our most intractable habits can be changed.

But even with a strong mindfulness practice, there may be times when it is difficult to break a conditioned response without additional support. The Buddha spoke of the importance of *sangha*—like-minded people with the same aspiration. To change harmful patterns, it is helpful to be around others who understand the pull of craving and are doing their best not to give in to it. For an overeater, “sangha” could mean

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

a sympathetic friend, or a professional counselor, or a group of people with a shared intention, such as Weight Watchers or Overeaters Anonymous.

The message of the Buddha is that we are no longer doomed to be prisoners of our compulsions. When we take refuge in the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—we find a safe haven from the false promise of food, and open ourselves to wisdom, compassion, and the promise of liberation. We take refuge in the Buddha both as a historical figure who found true freedom and as the seed of possibility that exists within us all. We take refuge in the Dharma—the universal truth, the Way. And we take refuge in the Sangha, the community of spiritual companions who support our efforts to be free.

May all beings be at peace with their bodies.

May all beings be at peace in their bodies.

The Buddha gave many teachings on what to do about distracting thoughts. Certain practices can be adapted to help us when food cravings arise. What is important to remember is that in any moment, we have options; the practice is to find the skillful means for each situation.

Intention is the key; everything else rests on this. We all have different triggers for overeating; know yours. Also keep in mind what your goals are—not to eat, not to go off your diet—and which foods are important for you to avoid. Consider which emotions make you feel the most vulnerable, and when you feel that way, turn to meditation, affirmation, or visualization for support. Then, set and hold the intention not to pick up a trigger food.

Substitute the thought of food with the thought of something more important. For example, visualize the face of someone you love, or feel

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

gratitude for all the gifts you have in your life. Imagine yourself engaged in some pleasurable activity; see yourself on that vacation you're looking forward to, for example.

Mentally follow the entire process of giving in to the desire to eat. See the whole cycle from beginning to end. If you take the first bite, where will that lead? What has happened in the past? How will you feel the next day? If, instead, you refrain from eating, how might you feel?

Ask yourself: What do I really want right now? What is the feeling behind the urge for food?

Stop whatever you are doing at the moment you feel the urge to eat, and do something entirely different: stretch, yawn, get up and walk, make a phone call. Even a simple action can break the trance.

Cultivate willingness to ask for support. In Buddhist practice, we take refuge in the sangha to support us in our practice. For support in avoiding destructive eating, we can phone a friend who understands our intention, for example, or join a support group for overeaters. On an everyday level, "support" might simply mean asking the waiter to remove the basket of rolls from the table.

Maintain nonjudgment. If you overindulge, don't punish yourself. You will only make your suffering worse. Instead, observe your behavior with a compassionate heart. Then remember the instruction that is the foundation of meditation practice: Begin again, with wise intention.

MEDITATION TO WORK WITH CRAVING

Start by taking a few deep breaths. With a half smile on your face, imagine that you are inhaling a sense of calm and exhaling any tension, any thoughts about food. Allow the breath to return to normal. Bring your attention to your belly and the inner sensation of the breath rising and

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

falling in that area.

When thoughts of eating or of a specific food come to mind, note “thought arising.” Become aware of the pleasant or unpleasant feelings that accompany the thought, then shift your attention back to the body, experiencing whatever physical sensations arise. Cultivate moment-to-moment awareness. Not resisting, not forcing. *Just this, just this.*

Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Allow yourself to experience the transient nature of thoughts and feelings, welcoming everything that arises as *Just this, not me, not mine.*

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12

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE
COOK: A ZEN MASTER'S
LESSONS FOR LIVING A
LIFE THAT MATTERS

BERNARD GLASSMAN AND RICK FIELDS

As those familiar with Dogen's Instructions to the Tenzo know, the cook is considered to be the most important person in the monastery because he is responsible for the welfare of all the other monks. Like Dogen, Roshi Tetsugen Glassman believes that one of the most useful metaphors for life is what happens in the kitchen. Indeed, Zen masters call a life that is lived fully and completely, with nothing held back, "the supreme meal." So the "menu" of Glassman's book, Instructions to the Cook, is divided into the five main "courses" or aspects of life: spirituality, knowledge, livelihood, social action, and community. In it he draws upon Dogen's precepts to tell the story of the Zen Center of New York and the Greyston mandala of businesses and not-for-profits, a foundation he established to integrate the economic, social, educational, and spiritual dimensions of each endeavor. Rick Fields (1942–1999), was celebrated as the author of How the Swans Came to the Lake.

When [13th-century Zen master] Dogen asked the Zen cook in the Chinese temple why he didn't have his assistants do the hard work of drying mushrooms in the hot sun, the cook said, "I am not other peo-

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

ple.” In the same way, we have to realize that this life is the only life we have. It’s ours, right now. If we don’t do the cooking ourselves, we are throwing our life away. “Keep your eyes open,” Dogen instructs. “Wash the rice thoroughly, put it in the pot, light the fire, and cook it. There is an old saying that says, ‘See the pot as your own head, see the water as your lifeblood.’”

When we cook—and live—with this kind of attention, the most ordinary acts and the humblest ingredients are revealed as they truly are. “Handle even a single leaf of a green in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha,” says Dogen. “This in turn allows the Buddha to manifest through the leaf.”

TRANSFORMATION

Cooking, like life, is about transformation. When we cook, we work directly with the elemental forces of fire and heat, water, metal, and clay. We put the lid on the pot and wait for the fire to transform the rice, or we mix the bread with yeast and put it in the oven to bake. There is something hidden, almost magical about it.

This kind of transformation involves a certain amount of faith. We work hard to prepare the food. We wash the rice, knead the bread, and break the eggs. We measure the ingredients carefully. We mix, stir, blend. But then we have to wait. We have to let fire and water transform the food we’ve prepared.

But we also have to keep an eye on things. We have to be aware of what is going on. For the Zen cook the old adage, “A watched pot never boils,” is only half-true. We leave the lid on the pot most of the time. But we also lift the lid every once in a while to taste the food.

The Zen cook follows the middle way. We have faith that the soup is coming along—but we still check now and then.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

The accomplished Zen cook is something of an alchemist. He or she can transform poisons into virtues.

The Zen cook doesn't do this by adding a secret ingredient, but by leaving something out. The Zen cook leaves out attachment to the self.

For example, anger is considered a poison when it's self-motivated and self-centered. But take that attachment to the self out of anger and the same emotion becomes the fierce energy of determination, which is a very positive force. Take the self-centered aspect out of greed and it becomes the desire to help. Drop the self-orientation from ignorance, and it becomes a state of unknowing that allows new things to rise.

INGREDIENTS

How do we find the ingredients? We simply open our eyes and look around us. We take the materials that are at hand, right in front of us, and prepare the best meal possible. We work with what we have in each and every moment.

Our body is an ingredient. Our relationships are ingredients. Our thoughts, our emotions, and all our actions are ingredients.

The place we live, the leaves that fall, the haze around the moon, the traffic in the city streets, the corner market—all these are also our ingredients. In order to see the ingredients in front of us, we have to open our eyes. Usually we create our own boundaries, our own small view, our own territory, and that's the only place we look. With practice, our territory expands and all the objects of the world become our ingredients.

As we see ourselves as the world, as we see the oneness of life, the whole world becomes available. Then the Zen cook knows that every aspect of life is an ingredient of the supreme meal.

USE EVERYTHING

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

Our natural tendency is not to use ingredients we think might ruin our meal. We want to throw them away or maybe move them way back on the shelf, out of sight, behind everything else. But Dogen instructs us to take the ingredients we think are going to ruin our meal and figure out how to use them so that they improve it.

If something doesn't seem to work as a main course, for example, it might become an appetizer or a dessert. You can't just say, "I don't want it to be like that. I'll leave it out on the table." That's a kind of denial. It's going to be there, whether you like it or not.

Take a group of people starting a new company. Their first step might be to take an inventory of their gifts. But if you decide you don't want the gifts one person has, you could be creating a problem because his or her gifts are part of the company. In any case, that person's gifts will wind up getting used because they are part of the person. The question is, how to use them. If you don't find a way, the person will end up jealous or resentful or bored. The unused gifts will wind up working to rot the company from the inside.

Let's say, for example, that someone is aggressive. But that energy might be just what's needed for certain difficult jobs - dealing with recalcitrant bureaucrats, for example. Or perhaps someone is so preoccupied with details that they are unable to see the larger picture. You wouldn't put that person on your five-year planning committee. But they might be perfect as an accountant keeping track of daily receipts.

Sometimes it might seem that we can't find a way to use someone's particular qualities which may seem toxic or harmful to our goal. In that case, we make a clear decision not to use their particular ingredient in the meal we are cooking. But we don't ignore or deny the ingredient. We acknowledge it, we're aware of it, we may even appreciate it in another context. But we just decide to use zero amount of it at the moment.

CLEANING KITCHEN IS CLEANING MIND

Right now, right in front of us, we have everything we need to begin.

Usually when we want to begin a new project—whether it be a new business or a new relationship or a new life—we're in a hurry. We want to jump right in and do something, anything. But the Zen cook knows that we can't prepare a meal if the kitchen is cluttered with last night's dishes. In order to see the ingredients we already have in our lives, we need to clear a space. "Clean the chopsticks, ladles, and all other utensils," Dogen advises. "Handle them with equal care and awareness, putting everything back where it naturally belongs."

So we always begin by cleaning. Even if the kitchen looks clean, we still have to clean it again each time we want to start a new meal. It's like taking a glass from the cupboards. We wipe it off before giving it to a guest.

The cleaning process itself changes the cook as well as the surroundings and the people who come into those surroundings—whether we're in a Zen meditation hall, a living room, a kitchen, or an office. That is why so much emphasis is placed on cleaning in a Zen monastery.

It doesn't matter whether we think anything is dirty or not. We just clean. The process of cleaning also allows us to discover the ingredients that are already in this space. We begin to see the ingredients we already have. Before we start to reclean the shelves, for instance, we have to take out the jars. In doing so, we see all the jars we have, and find that some are empty, some are almost empty, and others are full. We find out what we don't need, what we have too much of, what's been spoiled, and what needs to be thrown away.

Of course cleaning is an ideal that is never satisfied. Therefore, because we can't fully clean, what we have left becomes part of the ingredients of each new meal. Because we can't clean that glass, our new actions

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

are pre-conditioned by that dirty glass. So we practice to make each new action as clean and unconditioned as possible.

CLEANING THE MIND

Our lives work the same way. Just as we start cooking a meal by cleaning the kitchen, it's helpful to start the day by cleaning our mind. In Zen Buddhism, we clean the mind by the process of meditation, or *zazen*, which literally means "just sitting."

For me, *zazen* is an activity like sleeping, eating, drinking, and going to the bathroom: if I don't take care of these natural functions, I will feel a difference in myself. If I don't eat, for example, I start getting very hungry, and if I don't sleep, I feel tired. And if I don't sit, my stability decreases, and I feel uncentered.

We don't practice to attain enlightenment, just as we don't eat or breathe to be alive. Because we're alive, we breathe. Because we're alive, we eat. Because we're enlightened, we do *zazen*. Dogen says that *zazen* is a manifestation of the enlightened state. We practice and recognize everything we do as a manifestation of the enlightened state.

The basic ingredients are very simple:

A space to meditate in.

A cushion or chair to meditate on.

And your body and mind.

Choose a time of day when your chances of being interrupted are minimal—early morning, before most people have gotten up, for example.

Find a space that is quiet, not too dark or too light, and where you are not likely to be disturbed. If necessary, close the door.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

Make the space aesthetically pleasing. Depending on your taste, include an inspiring image, or a natural object such as a beautiful rock or flower. Candles and incense are optional as well.

Wear comfortable, non-binding clothes.

Assume a comfortable position. Back erect and without tension. Do not lean against the wall or the back of the chair.

Place your right hand up on your lap and left hand palm up on your right hand, thumbs slightly touching. This position is called the cosmic mudra and creates a restful environment for the mind.

If you are sitting on a chair, place your feet squarely on the ground with knees approximately six inches apart.

If you are sitting on a cushion (a folded blanket will also do nicely), adjust the height of the cushion so that both knees rest firmly on the ground. The equilateral triangle formed by this position gives support to both the back and spinal column.

Let your eyes remain half-closed, half-open, lightly resting on a spot on the floor approximately three feet in front of you. This will allow your eye muscles to relax while you keep an alert state of mind.

Place the tip of your tongue at the top of your palate, behind your top front teeth. Keep your mouth closed and breathe through the nose.

Concentrate on your breathing. Notice inhalation and exhalation. As you inhale, count one. As you exhale, count two. Continue to ten and then repeat, from one to ten again.

As thoughts arise, let them come and go. Keep your attention on the counting. When you notice that thoughts have distracted you and you have lost your count—gently return to the counting. Start over at one.

Continue for a minimum of two and a maximum of thirty minutes.

Repeat daily, or at least once a week.

13

BROWN RICE IS
JUST RIGHT

As it turns out, emptiness can be understood
perfectly while chewing rice.

SHUNRYU SUZUKI ROSHI

How do you like zazen?

I think it may be better to ask, how do you like brown rice? Zazen is too big a topic. Brown rice is just right. Actually, there is not much difference.

When you eat brown rice, you have to chew it, and unless you chew it, it is difficult to swallow. When you chew it very well, your mouth becomes part of the kitchen, and actually the brown rice becomes more and more tasty. When we eat white rice, we don't chew so much, but that little bit of chewing feels so good that naturally the rice goes right down our throats.

When we digest food completely, what will become of it? It will be transformed, changing its chemical nature, and will permeate our whole body. In the process it dies within our body. To eat and digest food is natural to us, as we are always changing. This organic process is called "emptiness." The reason we call it emptiness is that it has no special form. It has some form, but that form is not permanent. While it is changing, it carries on our life energy.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

We know that we are empty, and also that this earth is empty. The forms are not permanent. You may wonder, “What is this universe?” But this universe has no limit. Emptiness is not something you can understand through a space trip. Emptiness can be understood when you are perfectly involved in chewing rice. This is actual emptiness. The most important point is to establish yourself in a true sense, without establishing yourself on delusion. And yet we cannot live or practice without delusion. Delusion is necessary, but delusion is not something on which you can establish yourself. It is like a stepladder. Without it you cannot climb up, but you don’t stay on the stepladder. With this confidence, you can continue to study our way. That is why I say, “Don’t run away. Stick with me.”

I do not mean, “Stick to me.” I mean stick with yourself, not with delusion. Sometimes I may be a delusion. You may overestimate me: “He is a good teacher!” That is already a kind of delusion. I am your friend. I am just practicing with you as your friend who has many stepladders.

We shouldn’t be disappointed with a bad teacher or with a bad student. You know, if a bad student and a bad teacher strive for the truth, something real will be established. That is our zazen. We must continue to practice zazen and continue to chew brown rice. Eventually, we will accomplish something.

Thank you very much.

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14

ALMOND JOY

A crowd-pleasing dessert

NOA JONES

*The Bodhimind is a great radiant sun
To disperse the darkness of unknowing,
And it is the very essence of butters
Gained from churning the milks of Dharma.*

*For all guests on the roads of life
Who would take the very substance of joy,
Here is the actual seat of true happiness,
A veritable feast to satiate the world.
—Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva**

The Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier made a documentary in 2003 called *The Five Obstructions* in which he challenged fellow filmmaker Jørgen Leth to remake his own short experimental film, *The Perfect Human* (1967), five times. In each instance Leth was given a set of obstacles designed by von Trier to make his life difficult. For example, the first remake had to be shot in Cuba, and no cut could be longer than

twelve frames; one remake had to be a cartoon, and so on.

Throwing a dinner party these days is a bit like this. Guests are bringing an increasing number of dietary restrictions to the table, creating complicated obstacles for the cook. Coming up with a good meal that satisfies each and every individual's stipulations takes creativity, patience, and sometimes the fun out of cooking.

No wheat, no sugar, nothing that has eyes: those are the most common evils. No peanuts, no gluten, no white foods, no dairy, no fat, no salt, nothing cold, nothing cooked, no nightshade, nothing fermented, nothing caffeinated—the list of obstacles goes on. Sometimes it seems like people are more religious at the supermarket than on the cushion—more passionate, more dogmatic, more afraid of the consequences of their negative actions. I'm sure one could even find sins lurking in a plate of gently steamed, locally grown organic kale. The Internet is very happy to prove or contradict any point of view with cold, hard truthiness. Basically, everything is bad for you.

For a host, mustering up the willingness to cater to everyone's demands can be a challenge. I confess that for me, there is a smidgeon of emotional resistance to “giving in,” to indulging everyone's hypersensitivity. Why get so worked up about wheat? The 8th-century Indian Buddhist scholar Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*: “Health, daily sustenance, and lack of adversity? Life is momentary and deceptive; and the body is as if on loan. . . . For the longevity of all other enemies is not so enduring, beginningless, and endless as that of my enemies, the mental afflictions.”

I try to remind myself that there is no such thing as being right in these matters. My idea of good food isn't the only idea, no matter how right it feels. I hold some strong opinions about what should be eaten, but if I want my feelings about food to be honored, it has to work both

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

ways. I must trust that people know what's nourishing for their own constitutions and what's not. Everyone has his or her own truth, and the compassionate thing to do is to let them have their way and, even better, serve it up good. Of course there is a neurotic element to everyone's consumption habits, a tendency to get self-involved or to be in denial. No doubt if we were more realized, everything would be *amrita* to us, and this would not be an issue.

But since that's not the case, we have to find ways to feed ourselves and our friends. With a little invention and love, food that passes the test can also taste good. My friend Elise (rhymes with easy) is a member of the no refined sugar/no wheat/no meat camp, and yet she manages to produce some sensational desserts that don't leave the sugar fiends and gluten gluttons wanting. She shared one of her recipes with me, something that started out as an accident but was such a hit that she actually took notes and refined the recipe. Vegans, look the other way.

INGREDIENTS:

1 ½ CUPS ALMONDS

2 CUPS PANEER

2 TABLESPOONS MAPLE SYRUP

5 SWEET APPLES

1 TEASPOON CINNAMON

1 TABLESPOON OF FRESH LEMON JUICE

5 SPRIGS OF FRESH MINT

OPTIONAL: RAISINS, GRAPE OR APPLE JUICE

Soak the almonds in pure water overnight so that they become plump (some nutritionists say that nuts are easier to digest when they've been

soaked). Squeezing off the skins is the most labor-intensive part of executing this recipe. You can start with pre-blanching almonds to skip this step. (There are people who claim that almond skins have toxic levels of cyanogens, precursors to cyanide, but most research says this is only true of bitter almonds. If you should ever taste that bitterness when eating almonds with skins, best to spit them out, just as you would an apple seed or the inside of a peach pit. That taste is telling you something.)

After getting naked, the almonds will send you a powerful mental message to start nibbling on their smooth white little bodies, but either try not to, or soak extras for such purposes so you'll have enough to serve.

Put the almonds in a food processor or blender and puree. Add the paneer. Paneer is an unsalted Indian curd cheese with a consistency similar to chewy tofu. The fact that it is made without rennet should please the vegetarians out there. It's basically extra-firm yogurt from which all water has been squeezed. Paneer is becoming more readily available in the U.S., but you can certainly experiment with other white creamy things. Vegans can use tofu as a substitute. Add the maple syrup and give it a taste test.

Elise and I played around with some ideas in an attempt to describe the consistency of the puree—a cloud, a slice of heaven, soft ice cream if it didn't have to be cold. "Joy!" she said decidedly, and somehow that fits. It's nice to leave a few lumps of almonds for texture, but if you prefer uniformity, blend until completely smooth. The almond paneer blend is Elise's invention, and it can work in a variety of dessert situations. But here we are going to use it as a base for stewed apples.

Chop up your sweet apples and stew for a good long time (anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 hours) with cinnamon, maybe some raisins, a little bit of lemon juice. The longer you cook, the sweeter the stew gets. You

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FOOD

can add grape or apple juice for kick, some berries if you have them. This is like a pie filling. It should boil down into a rich, thick, scoopable mass.

That's it. Arrange a hockey puck-sized dollop of the almond joy onto a plate, add a scoop of the apples, and top with a mint leaf. This recipe makes about six portions. Those who have the sheer courage to ingest wheat may consider baking up some nice puff pastry, or you can use oats to make a crust. You've alienated the vegans and the lacto-vegetarians, the raw foodies, the anti-minters, and those who shun apples, but in general it's a crowd-pleaser. Now try to do the preparations wearing roller skates in a kitchen with no counter space while balancing a pencil on the back of your hand, and get back to us.

Noa Jones is a writer of fiction and nonfiction. Her story "Where the Buddha Woke Up" (*Tricycle* Summer 2010) was selected for *The Best Spiritual Writing 2012* (Penguin Books).