



Mindful Consumption

By *Thich Nhat Hanh*

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Deer Park Monastery

photo by Paul Davis

Good morning, dear Sangha. Today is the twenty-first of September in the year 2007. We are in Deer Park Monastery on our retreat with the theme *Awakening Together*.

Eating to Preserve Compassion

The Buddha told a story that he must have heard from a refugee, called the *Sutra of the Son's Flesh*. It tells about a young refugee couple with a little boy who fled their country. They had to cross a desert and they did not calculate well, so halfway across, they ran out of food. They knew that they were all going to die. After much thinking and debate, the parents decided to kill the little boy and eat his flesh, so that they could survive. They told each other, "We can have another little boy later on. We have to kill our little boy now so we can live." So they killed their little boy, and each of them ate one piece of his flesh. They hung the rest over their shoulders to dry in the sun as they walked. Each day, they ate one piece of flesh, but soon they asked, "Where is our beloved little boy now?" They beat their chests, pulled their hair, and cried. Finally the couple got through the desert and they were accepted as refugees in the new country. That is the first part of the sutra.

After having told the story to the monks and nuns, the Buddha asked them, "My dear friends, do you think that couple enjoyed eating the flesh of their son?" Of course, the monks and the nuns said, "No, dear teacher, it's impossible to enjoy eating the flesh of our own son." The Buddha said, "Dear friends, we should eat in such a way that preserves our compassion. Otherwise, we will be eating the flesh of our sons and daughters."

UNESCO told us a few decades ago that every day, 40,000 children die from lack of food and nutrients. And in Europe and America, many of us overeat. Some of us eat because we have pain and sorrow in our heart. We eat to forget the suffering and despair in us and we get fat. Many of us have become victims of obesity.

We have cultivated a lot of corn and other cereals not to feed hungry people, but to feed cattle. In order to produce a piece of beef, we have to use a lot of cereal, which instead could help wipe out hunger in the world. But we use it to make meat and alcohol. If you drink alcohol mindfully, you see that this alcohol might be the blood of your own son or daughter. If you eat meat mindfully, you may see that you are eating the flesh of your daughter or your son. Mother Earth suffers deeply because of our way of eating and drinking. The Fifth Mindfulness Training proposed by the Buddha is mindful consumption. Mindful consumption is the way to heal ourselves and to heal the world.

More than ten years ago, I gave a Dharma talk on this subject in the United States, and I made some calculations about the land, the water, and the forest, and how we use our resources in the United States for food.

Concerning land: 87% of all agricultural land in the US is used to raise animals for food. That is 45% of the total landmass in the US.

Concerning water: More than half of all the water consumed in the US is used to raise animals for food. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce a pound of meat. It takes only twenty-five gallons of water to produce a pound of wheat. A vegetarian diet requires 300 gallons of water per day, while a meat-eating diet requires 4,000 gallons of water per day.

Concerning pollution: Raising animals for food causes more water pollution in the US than any other industry. Animals raised for food produce 130 times the excrement of the entire human population—97,000 pounds per second. Much of the waste from factory farms and slaughterhouses flows into streams and rivers, contaminating water sources.

Concerning deforestation: More than 260 million acres of US forest have been cleared to grow crops to feed animals raised for food. An acre of trees disappears every eight seconds. Tropical rainforests are being destroyed to create grazing land for cattle. Fifty-five square feet of rainforest must be cleared to produce just one quarter-pound burger. Each vegetarian saves one acre of trees per year.



illustration by Brother Phap Ban

Concerning resources: In the US, animals raised for food are fed more than 80% of the corn that we grow and more than 95% of the oats. To grow cattle alone consumes a quantity of food equivalent to the caloric needs of 8.7 billion people, more than the entire human population on Earth.

So mindfulness helps us see that our way of eating and producing food can be very violent. What the Buddha said in the sutra is true: we are eating our children because of our way of growing food and producing meat.

One European scholar said that if the West reduced meat eating and alcohol consumption by 50%, it would change the world. With that awakening, we could take action that could save the Earth. Awakening is crucial for our transformation, healing, and survival.

The Nutriment of Sense Impressions

You can find my translation of the Sutra of the Son's Flesh in the Plum Village chanting book.¹ In it, the Buddha spoke of

four kinds of nutriment. The story of the young couple is about the first kind of nutriment, called edible food.

The second source of nutriment is called sensory impressions. We consume through our eyes, our ears, our nose, our body, and our mind. When we watch a movie, we consume sensory impressions. When we read an article in a magazine or see an advertisement, we consume. When we listen to a conversation or a Dharma talk, we consume. What we consume can contain a lot of toxins. If we ingest these poisons, we are destroying this body, this consciousness, transmitted to us by our parents, our ancestors.

If we destroy our body and our consciousness by taking in too many toxins, we are eating the flesh of our ancestors, our own flesh, and the flesh of our children and their children. So mindful consumption is directed not only to edible food but to sensory impressions. What we read, what we watch as film, television, news, the conversations we engage in, are objects of consumption.

The Buddha told the story of a cow that has such bad skin disease that she has no skin left, so she has no means to protect herself. When the cow stands by a tree, the tiny creatures living in the bark of the tree fly out and suck her blood. When the cow lies down, living beings in the soil come up and suck her blood. And when she goes to the water, small creatures smell her blood so they come and suck. Without mindfulness of consumption, we are like a cow without skin, and we allow many toxins to penetrate and destroy us. When we destroy ourselves, we destroy our parents, our ancestors, our children. That is why we have to consume with mindfulness. This is the topic of the Fifth Mindfulness Training, mindful consumption.

By the time a child completes elementary school, she has watched 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television. That is too much. Because we are so busy, we let television babysit for us. We allow ourselves and our children to be intoxicated by what we consume through our senses.

Remember a time when you had a conversation with a person who was full of hate and violence? After one hour of listening to them, you felt paralyzed. Conversation is also consumption. As

practitioners, we have to practice mindful consumption to protect ourselves, our family, and our society.

One day, the former governor of California, Jerry Brown, invited me to come to his city and offer a Day of Mindfulness. Thousands of people came and we practiced walking meditation, sitting meditation, eating mindfully, enjoying a Dharma talk. The next time I came, he told me that the Day of Mindfulness helped decrease violence in his community. So as a mayor, you can practice. As a president of a country, you can practice. As a congressman, as a senator, you can practice to protect your people. As a schoolteacher, as a parent, you can practice mindfulness of consumption to protect your family, your school, your town, your state, your country.

The Bodhisattva Path

If you study the Five Mindfulness Trainings deeply, you see that they are the practice of true love. The first is to protect life. The second is to practice generosity. The third is to protect people from sexual abuse, and the fourth is to practice loving speech and deep listening, to bring harmony and mutual understanding. The fifth is to practice mindful consumption.

About ten years ago, I had the opportunity to sit with a group of friends, including many Nobel Peace Laureates, as we drafted a text called the Manifesto 2000. The United Nations accepted our proposal to declare that the years 2001 to 2010 be a decade of the culture of nonviolence. We are now in the year 2007. We have only three years left and we have not practiced very well.

If you read the Manifesto 2000, you'll notice that the points are similar to the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Sometimes the same phrases are used, like "share your time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need," or "practice listening deeply in order to understand." More than seventy-five million people have signed the Manifesto, including many heads of states. Schoolteachers have played the most important role in circulating the Manifesto 2000, and in India, twenty-five million people signed it. You may like to get the text of the Manifesto 2000 from the Internet and compare it with the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

But after signing the Manifesto, most of us forget and we don't apply the six points of the Manifesto to our daily life. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are much more detailed, with concrete ways to practice mindfulness of consumption. In the Buddhist tradition, you don't just sign your name. When you take the Five Mindfulness Trainings, you take them in the presence of a Sangha, and you promise that you will apply the five trainings in your daily life. You promise to recite the trainings every fortnight, and agree that if you do not recite the trainings at least once in three months, you lose the transmission. You practice in the context of a teacher-student relationship, in the context of a Sangha. You recite the five trainings and participate in Dharma discussion with the Sangha to reflect on your recent practice, and you learn how to better apply the five trainings in your daily life in the context of the family, the community, and society.

So when we take the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we don't just sign and forget. Buddhists have been practicing the five trainings for 2,500 years in the context of a Sangha. When you receive the trainings, you might get a Dharma name. You know that you belong to a community of practice, and you are urged to recite the trainings with other members of your community. You try to practice the five trainings in your daily life, and in the life of your family.

The five trainings are a spiritual path, and if you live according to them, you are on the path of a great being, a *bodhisattva*. Because you have a spiritual path, you don't have to worry anymore, you don't have to be fearful anymore, because you know where to go. The five trainings are the most concrete way to practice mindful living, including mindful consumption. If our awakening is not strong enough, our actions will not be strong enough to save ourselves, to heal ourselves, and to save the world. 

¹ *Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices*, Parallax Press, 2002.

This is an excerpt from Thich Nhat Hanh's Dharma talk on September 21, 2007. It was transcribed by Natascha Bruckner and Eve Heidtmann, and edited by Barbara Casey. To read the full talk, visit tinyurl.com/tnh-mindful.

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