

Eating for Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh

A talk by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh on Mindful Consumption

All things need food to be alive and to grow, including our love or our hate. Love is a living thing, hate is a living thing. If you do not nourish your love, it will die. If you cut the source of nutriment for your violence, your violence will also die. That is why the path shown by the Buddha is the path of mindful consumption.

The Buddha told the following story. There was a couple who wanted to cross the desert to go to another country in order to seek freedom. They brought with them their little boy and a quantity of food and water. But they did not calculate well, and that is why halfway through the desert they ran out of food, and they knew that they were going to die. So after a lot of anguish, they decided to eat the little boy so that they could survive and go to the other country, and that's what they did. And every time they ate a piece of flesh from their son, they cried.

The Buddha asked his monks, "My dear friends: Do you think that the couple enjoyed eating the flesh of their son?" The Buddha said, "It is impossible to enjoy eating the flesh of our son. If you do not eat mindfully, you are eating the flesh of your son and daughter, you are eating the flesh of your parent."

If we look deeply, we will see that eating can be extremely violent. UNESCO tells us that every day, forty thousand children in the world die because of a lack of nutrition, of food. Every day, forty thousand children. And the amount of grain that we grow in the West is mostly used to feed our cattle. Eighty percent of the corn grown in this country is to feed the cattle to make meat. Ninety-five percent of the oats produced in this country is not for us to eat, but for the animals raised for food. According to this recent report that we received of all the agricultural land in the US, eighty-seven percent is used to raise animals for food. That is forty-five percent of the total land mass in the US.

More than half of all the water consumed in the US whole purpose is to raise animals for food. It takes 2500 gallons of water to produce a pound of meat, but only 25 gallons to produce a pound of wheat. A totally vegetarian diet requires 300 gallons of water per day, while a meat-eating diet requires more than 4000 gallons of water per day.

Raising animals for food causes more water pollution than any other industry in the US because animals raised for food produce one hundred thirty times the excrement of the entire human population. It means 87,000 pounds per second. Much of the waste from factory farms and slaughter houses flows into streams and rivers, contaminating water sources.

Each vegetarian can save one acre of trees per year. More than 260 million acres of US forests have been cleared to grow crops to feed animals raised for meat. And another acre of trees disappears every eight seconds. The tropical rain forests are also being destroyed to create grazing land for cattle.

In the US, animals raised for food are fed more than eighty percent of the corn we grow

and more than ninety-five percent of the oats. We are eating our country, we are eating our earth, we are eating our children. And I have learned that more than half the people in this country overeat.

Mindful eating can help maintain compassion within our heart. A person without compassion cannot be happy, cannot relate to other human beings and to other living beings. And eating the flesh of our own son is what is going on in the world, because we do not practice mindful eating.

The Buddha spoke about the second kind of food that we consume every day -- sense impressions -- the kind of food that we take in by the way of the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the body, and the mind. When we read a magazine, we consume. When you watch television, you consume. When you listen to a conversation, you consume. And these items can be highly toxic. There may be a lot of poisons, like craving, like violence, like anger, and despair. We allow ourselves to be intoxicated by what we consume in terms of sense impressions. We allow our children to intoxicate themselves because of these products. That is why it is very important to look deeply into our ill-being, into the nature of our ill-being, in order to recognize the sources of nutriment we have used to bring it into us and into our society.

The Buddha had this to say: "What has come to be - if you know how to look deeply into its nature and identify its source of nutriment, you are already on the path of emancipation." What has come to be is our illness, our ill-being, our suffering, our violence, our despair. And if you practice looking deeply, meditation, you'll be able to identify the sources of nutriments, of food, that has brought it into us.

Therefore the whole nation has to practice looking deeply into the nature of what we consume every day. And consuming mindfully is the only way to protect our nation, ourselves, and our society. We have to learn how to consume mindfully as a family, as a city, as a nation. We have to learn what to produce and what not to produce in order to provide our people with only the items that are nourishing and healing. We have to refrain from producing the kinds of items that bring war and despair into our body, into our consciousness, and into the collective body and consciousness of our nation, our society. And Congress has to practice that. We have elected members of the Congress. We expect them to practice deeply, listening to the suffering of the people, to the real causes of that suffering, and to make the kind of laws that can protect us from self-destruction. And America is great. I have the conviction that you can do it and help the world. You can offer the world wisdom, mindfulness, and compassion.

Nowadays I enjoy places where people do not smoke. There are nonsmoking flights that you can enjoy. Ten years ago they did not exist, nonsmoking flights. And in America on every box of cigarettes there is the message: "Beware: Smoking can be hazardous to your health." That is a bell of mindfulness. That is the practice of mindful consumption. You do not say that you are practicing mindfulness, but you are really practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness of smoking is what allowed you to see that smoking is not healthy.

In America, people are very aware of the food they eat. They want every package of food

to be labeled so that they can know what is in it. They don't want to eat the kind of food that will bring toxins and poisons into their bodies. This is the practice of mindful eating.

But we can go further. We can do better, as parents, as teachers, as artists and as politicians. If you are a teacher, you can contribute a lot in awakening people of the need for mindful consumption, because that is the way to real emancipation. If you are a journalist, you have the means to educate people, to wake people up to the nature of our situation. Every one of us can transform himself or herself into a bodhisattva doing the work of awakening. Because only awakening can help us to stop the course we are taking, the course of destruction. Then we will know in which direction we should go to make the earth a safe place for us, for our children, and for their children.