

On Being a Human Being

Bo-Mi Choi

The short—and enlightened—answer would not be what you expect. In my early days as a Zen student, the (correct) pithy Zen answer to this question would merely confound me. Was I not eating (a) to prolong my biological existence, i.e., because I was hungry, and (b) to enjoy one of the few pleasures afforded to being born into a *human* body? And how was it at all possible to eat for any other reason? Back then, the small “I” in me didn’t get that this question, which on the surface addresses an activity as mundane as eating, was not so much about the metabolic sustenance of sentient life (though it is about that, too). Rather, this question was, on a much deeper level, pointing to what it means to be truly a human being.

What is the difference between human beings and animals? Let me propose the following: I have yet to encounter an animal that cultivates its foods and creates elaborate rituals around preparing and consuming food like we humans do. I’d even dare to argue that the practice of eating—along with all the adjacent cultural practices connected with it such as planting, tending, harvesting, cooking, and sharing food in celebrations—differentiates us from animals and is unique to our species.

On a sheer logistical level, it is quite mind-boggling when trying to conjure up in one’s mind the numberless hands involved in the process that made it possible for me to enjoy one single meal. Big agrobusiness creates the illusion of food appearing on our tables as if by magic. But the food that sustains us every day was at some point planted by someone, harvested by someone, packed by someone, transported by someone, and unpacked by someone before we even get to buy it in the supermarket. Contemplating the fact that our nourishment depends on the hard labor as well as the bountiful resources of the planet we inhabit is awe-inspiring and humbling. And when viewed from this perspective, every meal deserves a special ritual to acknowledge the magnitude of the endeavor of feeding ourselves and others.

One of my favorite forms in our Zen tradition is the formal meal during retreat, an eating ritual like no other. Like anything worthwhile, it takes some time to fully get the hang of it, but once you do, it’s the most beautiful of forms—efficient, elegant, and meaningful. It would take another essay to do this form justice in all its intricate details so I will, for the purposes of this piece, just touch on the most relevant aspects. In the formal meal, we eat together in silence, following a set of guidelines that help us embody the teachings in action: (1) you only

take what you need to sustain yourself (otherwise, you are literally left with an embarrassment not so much of riches but your desire mind staring back at you in the form of unsightly leftovers in your bowl); (2) you are responsible to clean up after yourself (enacting the notion of “leaving no trace,” except for clear water to be given as an offering at the end); and (3) by following the exact forms of the meal, you function seamlessly within a larger whole, beginning and closing your meal with everybody else (and thereby tapping into what psychologists call the synchronous energy of a group, which the inner mammal in us needs and thrives on).

On a personal level, the most indelible memories of my childhood revolve around my parents’ valiant efforts in feeding us traditional Korean dishes, even as our family found ourselves in the foreign land of Germany at a time when kimchi was not known beyond the confines of the Korean peninsula. We had our own family food rituals according to the changing seasons and the weather. In the summer, my father would light up the charcoal grill and we’d sit on the terrace enjoying *bulgogi*, a Korean national dish of marinated beef. When it rained, my mother would take to making *pajeon*, savory scallion pancakes, like they do in Korea when the rain keeps people indoors. And on New Year’s Day, she’d feed us *mandu guk*, the dumpling soup that is traditionally served on that day. Family time always involved enjoying some delectable treats or the making of such: whole afternoons were spent making Korean dumplings from scratch, and my parents would repurpose an Italian pasta machine to roll out the dough for the skins to wrap the dumplings. In my family, food was not a substitute for love, but it was how love was expressed. To this day, my mum will spend days in the kitchen to prepare my favorite dishes whenever I go home to visit my parents.

I recently learned that in Korean, the word for “family” literally means “the people with whom you eat.” The English expression “breaking bread” as a way of forging a more intimate connection with another person carries a similar connotation. Sharing food together is the single most effective means of building community, a fact that I can personally vouch for from anecdotal evidence. Having cooked dinner every Tuesday evening for over a decade for my housemates at the Cambridge Zen Center, I know by experience that when food is prepared with care and shared with others, great joy ensues—not only in those who get to eat the meal but in the cook herself who gets to

partake in the happiness around her.

Alas, the well-known Zen parable about the difference between hell and heaven illustrates this very point, and not surprisingly, eating features centrally in it. A young person asks the sage what was the difference between hell and heaven, whereupon the sage opens a door to a room called Hell. Here, people sit at a huge banquet overflowing with delicious food, but they are emaciated, distressed and deeply unhappy. The problem is that they only have extremely long spoons, which make it impossible to get the food into their own mouths, so they end up hungry as they try to eat. The sage then opens the door to the room with a sign that says Heaven. We encounter the exact same scenario, except the people are joyful and happy. The difference? They use the long spoons not to feed themselves but to feed each other across the banquet table!

“Why do you eat every day?” It took some years for me

to attain this teaching, but once I did, it is hard to imagine a better, more correct answer, because it beautifully captures the eternal truth of our irrefutable interdependence, of the fact that none of us is adequately equipped to survive on their own. More important, the teaching not only points to the normative direction of our existence but also contains what makes our life worth living: if it weren't this way, how could I survive, not merely in a physical sense, but live a life of *meaning*? If life is fundamentally suffering, then what makes this life worth living, if it weren't for other sentient beings? And the great love that surrounds us? ♦

Bo-Mi Choi is a senior dharma teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen. She has lived and practiced at the Cambridge Zen Center since 2004 and served, until recently, as its director of development and outreach. She also leads a weekly meditation group at Harvard University, where she teaches philosophy and critical theory.

Eating Is the Most Important.

Kong Tan, under the guidance of Gye Mun Sunim JDPS

There is a saying from the Three Kingdoms period in China: “To the king, his people are heaven. To the people, food is heaven.” In the preface of the Diamond Sutra, at mealtime, the World-Honored One (that is, the Buddha) would get dressed to seek alms together with his disciples. Once the alms-round was completed, he returned, finished eating, put the *sanghati* (kasa) and bowl back in place, washed his feet, and, without further ado, arranged the seat to sit in samadhi.

Only the Elder Subhuti saw through the dharma intention of the World-Honored One as he carried out this concerted mundane routine with his disciples. The Elder Subhuti was in awe of the silent dharma of this mundane routine. He exclaimed: “How rare you are! The World-Honored One. The Buddha supports and cares for all bodhisattvas with kindness, entrusts and beseeches all bodhisattvas with kindness.” Then he proceeded to invite the dharma on behalf of the assembly by asking two questions, which gave rise to the Diamond Sutra. The Elder Subhuti asked, “The benevolent men, benevolent women with aspiration and resolution to attain the Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi mind, how should they dwell? How to subdue their own minds?” The World-Honored One said, they “should just like this dwell, just like this subdue their own minds.”

The Just-Come One (that is, the Buddha), who came from the true way, carried himself as one of the common people. He silently taught the sangha by being a role model. Every day at mealtime, he would get dressed, walk, look for food, eat, tidy up, sit in meditation, and help all beings who had affinity with him. Every day since his complete and

perfect enlightenment, he was like this, just like this, until he entered parinirvana. He did this to benefit others. That is no-self form. The sublime prajna dharma can flow with ease even from trivial routine forms. That is no-dharma form. With no doer and nothing to be done. Food is not so important to the Buddha anymore, yet he looked for food and ate together with everyone. That is the inclusiveness of together action; that is teaching without words and speech. Support, care, entrust, and beseech all who have aspired and resolved to the great mind, and that is no non-dharma form. This is sublime existence in emptiness.

As the Buddhist saying goes: “Borrow from this illusory existence to see true emptiness.” For survival, from primitive to modern humans, all go out to look for food every day. Instead of being affected by the sixth and seventh consciousnesses, how wonderful it would be if all of us aspire and resolve to follow our role model, the World-Honored One. After work, eat; after eating, immediately return to quieten down in order to contemplatively reflect on original mind. We are grateful to the Buddha for demonstrating how to live every day in active dharma of the three practices (precepts, meditation, and wisdom). To use the tangible body of the human being to realize the foremost truth of emptiness, neither grasp nor eradicate. Use the tangible body of a human being to attain our original self, do our original job, help all beings from suffering. ♦

Kong Tan started to practice in Kwan Yin Chan Zen Center in Singapore in 2002 and took five precepts in 2018. She is a volunteer in the Zen center.

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