

# Eat? What's the Point?

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Why do you eat every day? This question seems innocuous, almost banal. When Zen Master Su Bong first asked me in a kong-an interview, I was a little nonplussed. I answered, "Because I'm hungry," thinking, "It's pretty obvious isn't it?" He shook his head. No, not the answer he wanted. In my mind, it was a perfectly serviceable answer and I felt mildly irritated by his rebuff. It was only after more meditation practice that I discovered that there was a greater depth to the question.

Food and eating are central to the fabric of our lives. Many of us love to eat. Some of us live to eat. We often eat to celebrate, to romance, to commiserate, and to comfort. We love to talk, think, and share about food. At restaurants, you will see patrons snap photos of their meals, sharing them *ad nauseam* on social media. We celebrate, even idolize famous chefs like rock stars, because they make great food. We buy their books and watch their TV programs by the millions.

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Eating well is a pleasure that unites us across cultures. We strengthen our social bonds with friends and family over shared meals. We treasure intimate moments with our loved ones over dinner. Our favorite foods can elicit strong memories, and we sometimes crave them so much that we're willing to go a long way just to get a taste of them.

All living things have to eat. It's a question of survival. Our bodies are biologically well-adapted to telling us when they need food. We feel hungry; our stomach starts to rumble. Hunger is unpleasant and we have little patience to endure it. The only way out is to eat

some food.

Most of us now take food for granted. It is available on demand, a few taps of a smartphone away. Not so for the 800 million people around the world who have to go to bed hungry each night, or the 2 billion who are malnourished. For them, the search for food occupies their daily existence as they endure a simple hard truth—food means life.

Those of us who are blessed with an abundance and variety of food often carelessly waste it. In certain Asian countries, ordering more than you can eat is a symbol of affluence and privilege. Leftovers are thrown away. Globally, one-third of all food produced for humans is wasted each year. This unthinking waste of our food brings into sharp focus the question "Why do you eat every day?"

Many Zen students easily find the answer to the kong-an after some practice. I have found that merely answering the question correctly is just the first step. On closer inspection, it directs us to a deeper, more fundamental question: Why are you alive? What does it mean for you to live on this earth?

These questions nudge us to look at our own lives more closely. They prick us to wake up from our soporific dullness to the reality of our existence. Without such questions, it is easy to fall into sleepwalking through life.

Awakening to "Why do you eat every day?" and embracing it as a part of our lived experience leads us on a path to a meaningful life. Putting it into practice, moment to moment, is the work of a lifetime. ♦

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hit of the chugpi means walking meditation. We follow people in single file and walk around dharma hall. The second three hits of the chugpi means the end of sitting. Rain means bring an umbrella. Cicadas mean summer. Crickets mean autumn.

I would like to share an inspiring quote by Zen Master Dae Bong.

We will be able to be responsible for what appears in our life and use it in a way that really benefits everybody. That is what Buddha did, and that is what everybody came here want-

ing to learn how to do. We all can, because that is our true nature.

The whole universe is keeping correct situation to help me. That means when I keep correct situation, I also can help everybody. ♦

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