

Eating the Body of the World

By Michael I. Roehm

As we all know, living the Dharma is living conscientiously, which means taking responsibility for our whole life. And taking responsibility also means being aware of how we exist within the interconnected web of existence. It includes how we relate to others, how we drive, and how we eat. How we conscientiously eat includes the whole interdependent web involved in the act: what we eat, how we eat it, how we get our food, and how all this affects others and the planet.

This is not a theme dealt with in any detail in the ancient texts, but by thinking outside “the sutra-box,” by learning from Buddhist and non-Buddhist writers, we can find congruence between the Dharma and skillful ways to address today’s concerns about food, hunger, and malnutrition. Here I will be citing Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and Wendell Berry’s “The Pleasures of Eating” (from *What Are People For?* excerpted in *Mountain Record: The Zen Practitioner’s Journal*, Spring 2008, 18-23).

As our most intimate relationship with the rest of the world, our food literally becomes us: “What we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it” (Pollan, p. 11). We never eat alone. Eating is simultaneously an agricultural, ecological, ethical, political, and spiritual act. And so too are the acts that produce food, and the choices we make in buying food. What we eat and how we eat is intertwined with the suffering, health, and wellness of countless others: plants, humans, and other animals. It is our caloric footprint or “foodprint.”

Most Americans and much of the affluent world have become industrial eaters: consumers of industrial food products, products far from their natural origins. These products are often made from genetically modified foods and abused animals, and include numerous chemical additives. We are oblivious to much of what we eat. The typical American consumer sits down to “a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, purified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made ... into the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality” (Berry, p. 20).

And the food companies such as ADM, Tyson, Perdue, Cargill, Monsanto deliberately obscure “the connections between food product and farming because it wouldn’t help if the consumer knew that the burger she is eating ... came from a steer who spent most of his life standing in his own excrement in a feedlot, helping to pollute the local streams ... or that the coleslaw comes from a mile-square field of cabbage, from vegetables grown in huge monocultures that are

dependent on toxic chemicals—just as animals in close confinement are dependent on antibiotics and other drugs” (Berry, p. 20).

The food industrialists have convinced most consumers to prefer prepared food. Awareness of the interconnected web of agriculture, food, and eater has been obscured or lost, and we “have become passive and uncritical.” For many of us, buying food is like filling the gas tank or buying clothes—anything but agricultural (Berry, p. 18). Under these conditions, we can expect recurring problems with industrially grown crops like spinach, tomatoes, and peanuts.

As Pollan and others have noted, the industrial food economy relies on large-scale, mechanized operations that have decreased the natural fertility of the soil and so have resulted in dependence on chemical fertilizers. Pollan further observes (pp. 7-8) that industrialized food production “has supplanted a complete reliance on the sun for our calories with something new under the sun: a food chain that draws much of its energy from fossil fuels instead.” Such agribusiness monoculture is in radical contrast to the diversity and complexity of natural agricultural systems. “By replacing solar energy with fossil fuel, by raising millions of food animals in close confinement, by feeding those animals foods they never evolved to eat, and by feeding ourselves foods far more novel than we even realize, we are taking risks with our health and the health of the natural world that are unprecedented” (p. 9). The current problems of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are also directly related to this.

The vast and powerful export agribusinesses have had a negative impact on developing countries, causing the displacement of their citizens as well as a decline in their nutrition. There is considerable research and reporting on this social and environmental injustice. What can we do? Wendell Berry offers some helpful suggestions (pp. 21-22):

1. Be aware of what is involved in eating by “reclaiming responsibility for one’s own part in the food economy.” See how eating takes place “inescapably in the world” and “is inescapably an agricultural act.”
2. If possible, “Participate in food production to the extent you can” by growing and preparing some of your own food.
3. “Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home.” When possible, “deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist.”
4. “Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production.”
5. “Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience, if possible, of the life histories of the food species” and “what is involved in the best farming and gardening.”

In being mindful and participating in such eating, we understand and express our gratitude for the interdependent web of existence that sustains us. This attitude of gratitude then motivates us to care for this source and respond to those in need with loving-kindness, wisdom,

compassion, right action, and more.

Again, Michael Pollan (p. 411): “Imagine for a moment if we once again knew, strictly as a matter of course, these few unremarkable things. What it is we are eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in a true accounting, it really cost. ... [W]e would no longer need any reminding that however we choose to feed ourselves, we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and *what we’re eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world*” (my emphasis).

Michael I. Roehm is senior international student advisor at American University, Washington, DC. He has a background in Theravada and Korean and Soto Zen. He has facilitated a sutta study class for fifteen years and lectured at the Yin-Shun Foundation Summer Dharma Retreats. Mr. Roehm is on the Advisory Board of BGR.