

November 13, 2012

Dear Fred,

In the summer of 2011, Thay toured the US and lead numerous retreats throughout the US and Canada. One of his stops was the new monastery in Batesville, Mississippi. Br. Phap Tri asked if I would be willing to sit on a panel of five OI members that would present their practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings to the approximately 800 people attending the retreat. Needless to say, it was an honor to be asked and it was also an opportunity to observe my ego swell with a sense of pride and the feeling I had arrived at something.

The experience ended up being nothing like I expected and was a turning point in both my practice and my commitment to living as a member of the Order of Interbeing. I was assigned the First Mindfulness training regarding not killing. I had attended numerous retreats where a discussion of this Training inevitably turned to the issue of whether one had to be vegetarian in order to be Buddhist. I realized that I was probably not the person to speak on this particular Training because at the time I ate meat, and Thay and his community were committed vegetarians, actually vegans.

During my presentation, I spoke about how I practiced this Training in terms of trying not to support any act of killing in the world, and in my thinking. In answer to a question, everyone on the panel except for me and another woman stated they were vegan or vegetarian. I admitted to the crowd that I was not vegetarian and that, while I ate meat, I tried to do so with as much awareness as I could that the meat I consumed was in fact another being that had given its life to sustain mine. Many in the crowd were pleased to hear what I said. Being in the heart of the Deep South where bacon is a staple, many came up to me to thank me for being in favor of eating meat. One large gentleman thanked me because he “loves his bacon.”

After the panel, as the crowd around me grew with people thanking me and wanting to discuss various justifications for eating meat, I realized that 1) they had misunderstood what I had said (as I was not condoning meat eating) and 2) I also engaged in my own rationalization to make eating meat acceptable under the First Mindfulness Training. I regularly would justify it “because my wife did not want my children to grow up vegetarian” and other hollow arguments. I sensed that the retreatants’ responses and these forthcoming congratulations were creating concern among the monastics in

attendance, since we were all members of the Order of Interbeing wearing brown jackets.

The next morning Thay was scheduled to give his traditional Q & A session. Prior to its beginning, a very young Vietnamese boy was sent up from the back of the tent and asked Thay the question of "What kinds of food do we eat in Magnolia Village?" It was clearly a question that Thay wanted to address first because there were around 15 retreatants already lined up to ask questions. Thay then began by talking about all of his monasteries being vegan, which evolved into a talk about why one should be vegetarian. Thay spent almost the entire hour giving this talk that was obviously very, very important to him. The talk was clearly aimed at what had occurred the night before and, although never using my name directly, was directed to the "OI member that eats meat." Thay spoke not only about why we should not be killing other sentient beings and creating more suffering in the world, but also of the effect on one's body of eating the flesh of beings that had known nothing but horrible suffering their entire lives. Just as ingesting violent images has an effect on our minds, Thay said that ingesting meat raised in horrible suffering deposited the violence and suffering of those beings in our bodies.

Thay's talk was like a splash of ice water and at the same time a warm sun on my face. Thay's public response to what I had said the day before was at first deeply embarrassing and gave rise to an intention within me to "try" being vegetarian again. However, it also made me look deeply at how committed I really was to walking the bodhisattva path. I realized that I was again picking and choosing how to follow the Trainings based upon what was essentially my personal convenience and attachments. Third, Thay's words regarding the effect of ingesting the suffering of animals rang true. At that moment, I was 50 pounds overweight and was experiencing a lot of suffering. There seemed to be a heaviness and somberness to everything I did. The remainder of the retreat involved looking deeply at how committed, or un-committed, I was to all of the Trainings. Many of the answers were painful.

As a result of Thay's talk, I resolved to stop eating meat and to "be" vegetarian, to stop condoning killing in my way of thinking and in my way of life. I also resolved to stop living off the suffering of other beings by taking in flesh that was raised and soaked in suffering. The effect on my life has been wonderful. Besides the loss of around 50 pounds, it has brought lightness and joy to my life that had been drowned in a protein induced haze. After each meal I try to reflect on

the fact that not eating meat at that meal has reduced the suffering in the world and in me by that much. "Being" vegetarian has re-invigorated my practice and my commitment to walking the bodhisattva path as a member of the Order of Interbeing.

May all beings be free from suffering.

With a deep bow,

Andy Solis
True Land of Mindfulness Training (Chan Gioi Do)