

Healthy Diet, Healthy Mind

Chuan Ying / Sutra Study Class

I started having vegetarian diet when I was about 12 years old. That was also the year I took my Three Refuges. At that time, my 15-year-old brother was having tonsil infection almost on a monthly basis. The doctor advised him to cut back fried food immediately – but my brother’s favorite food was fried chicken. As a devoted Buddhist family, my mom had always wanted our whole family to take on vegetarian diet, and so she thought this would be a good starting point. So we started by not having any fried chicken on the dinner table, and then not cooking any meat at home, and then slowly eliminated all kinds of meat at home and eating out. After the change of diet, my brother’s tonsil problem rarely occurred again.

It was a natural transition to me – I made it a habit to tell everyone who invited me to eat together up front that I am a vegetarian. Observing people’s reaction for years, my own conclusion is: most people actually admire vegetarian diet; they know it’s the best diet, and it’s the right thing to do deep inside their heart, it’s just that they could not adopt vegetarian diet at the moment. So don’t be afraid to be different and be asked all kinds of questions, because you’ll never know if they will become a vegetarian one day, inspired by you.

I am very thankful that most of my friends respect my choice of food, and some even tried to accommodate my special diet at their parties. I survived college years mostly eating American food without meat – apple pies, cake, and ice cream were actually my “main courses”! I knew I could not be picky; I had to accept flavorless, plain noodle and veggies while eating out at restaurants that are not as accommodative to vegetarians.

Most of all, I am thankful that I met a husband that is very accommodative to my diet – we had vegetarian wedding dinners at my home country, Malaysia, about 11 years ago, and he and his parents supported me having vegetarian babies, too. When my eldest son, Jay, turned 3, my husband took the five-precepts and decided to become a vegetarian, too. Thanks to the Abbess of Buddha Mind Monastery at that time for all the teachings about no-killing



tirelessly! And thanks to my son Jay, too, for nagging his dad about “why do you eat meat?” at every meal!

Raising vegetarian kids needs lots of planning. A home-prepared vegetarian lunch box is almost always the way to go. As more and more imitative meatless products are available, younger kids need to be able to differentiate which kind is the meatless hotdog, for example, and which is the real hotdog. As it’s become a habit for my 9-year-old and 5-year-old to not take any meat product, I spend more time teaching them the “why” of taking a vegetarian diet. I try to make them understand that all animals have families just like we do, and they will feel the pain just like we do. I also tell them that they have to be responsible for their own actions to other beings, as they will have to repay through karmic retributions – even it’s just stepping on some little ants. I use real life stories, story books, and DVDs to aid them in understanding the importance of not hurting the animals but to protect them.

As for me personally right now, I am struggling to become a 100% vegan and five-pungent-free (which is no garlic, shallots, scallions, leeks, and onions) – you would think it’s easier after 20 some years of vegetarian diet, don’t you? It’s a giant leap that I need to take! It’s going to limit the kinds of food I can take even more and require even more determination. My old vegetarian diet has become a habit, too, and old habit dies hard. But just thinking about how much suffering millions of cows have to bear to provide us milk, cheese, and ice cream, I could not enjoy my favorite pizza and ice cream. Besides, cheese and milk causes phlegm in my throat and invites seasonal allergies.

As the Abbess taught us in Sutra Study Class, the purpose of eating is to nourish our body so that we can survive and learn the Buddha’s teaching. Hunger is a life-long karmic retribution that we all have to bear and eating the food is just temporarily relieving the feeling of hunger. I thought, there are so many nutritious vegetarian foods available, do I really have to cause suffering upon innocent animals just to satisfy my taste buds? Also, do I really need that much food?

As I learn more and more from the meditation class, and as I teach my children of the “why” day-in-day-out, the more I think: if not now, when? If not me, who?