



Nourishing compassion for our bodies, the earth and all beings.

The Joys of Plant-Centered Eating – Interbeing in Action

By Marge Wurgel

Twenty-four years ago I made a decision that has impacted my life more than almost any other decision I've made and I have experienced great joy and peace as a result. My husband, Keith, and I decided to stop eating meat, dairy or eggs and to focus our diet on only plant foods. While I have not been perfect on this path, the well-being and vitality I have experienced personally have been immense. I also know that by choosing this way of eating I care for Mother Earth better than I could have done with any other change of lifestyle. I initially made my decision to go plant-based for my own health and for the health of the planet, but as you will read below, this mindfulness practice strengthened my resolve and gave me even more reasons to continue this path.

Compassion for Animals

While I've been eating almost exclusively plant foods for those twenty-four years, it wasn't until I joined the Plum Village practice 8 years ago that I really came to "get" at a deep level that this way of eating is really an act of compassion for animals, sentient beings that I have come to consider my brothers and sisters. I remember telling friends that my reasons for choosing this path weren't because I had a problem with killing animals for food, but that I chose this way to care for my health and for the environment. I hadn't delved into the issues of animal rights and had not felt much compassion for cows, pigs, fish and chickens. I was looking narrowly at the concept of the environment by leaving out the lives of animals.

But the **5 Mindfulness Trainings** that I committed to at my first retreat profoundly touched me, and the 1st training, **Reverence for Life**, moved me in a very powerful way. It states *"Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals."* That was my introduction to interbeing, and I reflected on how my food choices not only helped keep me healthy and cared for the environment, but also profoundly impacted the lives of so many beautiful creatures of the world, beings that had as much right to live as I did. In contemplating the Mindfulness Trainings I saw that the lives of animals often eaten as food were intimately linked to me in a way I had never experienced. I saw that they suffered, both in the way they are treated while being raised, and in their being killed for consumption. By not eating animal foods I am able to honor the lives of my animal brothers and sisters by leaving them to do what they were put on earth to do. Had I not already committed to eliminating animal food from my diet, I would have made that change for reasons of compassion after committing to the Mindfulness Trainings. By eating only plants, I save the lives of up to approximately 21 cows, 14 sheep, 12 hogs, 900 chickens, and 1,000 pounds of other animals that either swam in the ocean or flew in the air (an estimate of the number of animals the average American consumes in a lifetime). I am sometimes challenged by people saying that I am taking the lives of plants, so what is the difference? By eating the plants directly myself,

rather than eating the animals that live by eating plants, 10 times fewer plants are ultimately consumed, so I am practicing this reverence for life very concretely.

Spiritual Act

For me, eating is a spiritual act, and I feel great peace and deep joy with the food choices I make. My plant-centered diet reflects my growing reverence for life, for my health as a contributing member of my community, and for the health of the earth. My everyday ritual of plant-powered eating, or eating low on the food chain, reveals the sacred to me and expresses my belief in the goodness of life and creation. In choosing such a life-sustaining diet I know I am making a difference in the world. Food is a gift from the earth, and my daily experience of eating ties me directly to the earth. I eat at least 3 times a day, and this gives me several opportunities to enhance life or detract from life, to respond with loving kindness to other beings and the planet, rather than be destructive. This life affirming way of eating seems to me to be one of the most powerful tools I have for living peacefully with all around us, for honoring the interbeing nature of all existence.

Love of the Earth

The love of Mother Earth is one of Thay's deepest teachings, and that love is one of my greatest motivators for eating a plant-centered diet. My food choices allow me to live in harmony with the earth herself. The **Five Contemplations** we recite regularly in this practice before eating a meal say *"May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that reduces the suffering of living beings, stops contributing to climate change, and heals and preserves our precious planet."* By eating only plants I am able to care for my home, Mother Earth, by using fewer precious resources. I use approximately 1/10, on average, of the water, land, energy, pesticides and fertilizers with this dietary choice. I create dramatically fewer greenhouse gases, and I know that **plant-based eating is the most powerful single action that an individual can take to help prevent global warming**. A 2006 United Nations report revealed that the "livestock sector" generates more greenhouse gas emissions than all the cars, trucks, trains, ships, and planes in the world combined! While the numbers aren't uniformly agreed upon by different scientists, if we all went plant-based we could save up to 51% of greenhouse gases being put into the atmosphere. I feel great joy knowing I am contributing significantly to reducing climate change!

A Stand for Health

Our Mindfulness Trainings also encourage me to take a positive stand for health, and by eating a plant-centered diet I know my food choices support my health, allowing me more years to practice mindful living and be of service through my engaged practice. The 5th of the 5 trainings, ***Nourishment and Healing***, states *"...I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming.... I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the Earth."* The 5th of the **14 Mindfulness Trainings** that I practice as a member of the Order of Interbeing similarly addresses ***Compassionate, Healthy Living*** by stating *"We will consume in a way that preserves compassion, wellbeing, and joy, in our bodies and consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of our families, our society, and the earth."* I feel joy knowing that diet is the most powerful tool I have against disease and sickness, and by eating a plant-strong diet I am less likely to have cancer, heart disease, strokes, obesity, diabetes, autoimmune disease, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's, kidney stones & blindness. I

know I am more likely to live a longer, healthier life by focusing on the plant world. I am a healthy 62 year old, take no medications, have a healthy blood pressure and cholesterol level, had virtually no symptoms with menopause (common when not eating animal foods), and eliminated all pains from arthritis that bothered me before going plant-based. These are all conditions for my joy!

Lest I seem like I do it all healthfully, I do have to admit I have challenges in my attempt at mindful consumption, for I enjoy eating out too much and can be less than mindful with eating sweets. I use these Mindfulness Trainings regularly to remind myself of how much more peaceful I feel if I am eating few desserts and eating more of my home-cooked meals where I make better and healthier choices.

Love of Eating

I admit I am a foodie and love eating! Another joy I have experienced by going plant-based is that the variety of foods I eat expanded enormously. I discovered a whole new array of foods: many new vegetables, grains, beans, seeds, nuts and fruits. I also discovered buying food from a local co-op, a community supported agriculture farm, and local farmers markets when I focused my diet on the plant world. Additionally, I didn't like cooking, but now I enjoy making easy, delicious, healthy, & vibrant looking food. The variety of plant-based recipes available is almost endless, and I've increased my repertoire of recipes way beyond what I used to make. I am also able to eat abundantly without counting calories and still stay at a healthy weight (as long as I limit how many sweets I eat or how often I eat out!), now weighing 50 pounds less than I did before becoming a plant-based eater.

Sharing the Joys

I do not want to keep the joys of plant-centered eating to myself, and one of my greatest desires in life is to awaken other people to the joy, energy, health and well-being of eating a plant-strong diet. Our practice encourages us to engage with the world and be of service, and I believe my calling at this point in my life is to share these life affirming, healthy, planet-friendly messages with my Buddhist brothers and sisters. I reach out to my sangha and participate with the Plant-Powered Earth Holder team about plant-powered living because my food choices feel like a healthy embodiment of our practice and the teachings, and I want others to have similar experiences. I have taught plant-based cooking classes to our sangha, love supporting people wanting to go more plant-centered to answer questions and find resources, and am starting a Plant-Powered Practitioner Support Network of activities for sanghas in the San Diego area.

Releasing Judgment

As I support others in exploring a more plant-centered diet, I have practiced deeply, sometimes painfully, with the 1st of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, **Openness**, *"Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones,"* and the 2nd, **Nonattachment to Views**, to reach a place where I hopefully interact with loving speech and deep listening with those who follow a different path than I do with food choices. While I hope people will make decisions to let go of eating so many animal foods, I honor that others may make different choices than I do. We have deeply ingrained reasons for eating as we do, and I am now careful not to criticize the way any of us eats. Before entering this practice I was quite judgmental about meat eaters, but thanks to the teachings of Thay and the Buddha, I have let go of that discriminative thinking

and talking. I don't expect anyone to do things the way I do. I offer my experience with the hopes it will inspire people to adopt some of the things I've learned, but I don't expect it. I also know this is a path, a journey, not an overnight, all-or-nothing approach to eating. I just want to be a part of the transition for those who are interested in moving toward a more plant-based approach to eating.

Compassion for animals, spiritual peace, care of the planet, health, and joy of eating are the radical results of my adopting a plant-centered diet. How many other simple acts in life create such enormous benefit? I don't know of any! I hope you may consider joining me in moving closer to a plant-powered way of eating!

Marge Wurgel, True Crane Garden, practices with the Open Heart Sangha in San Diego, California. She has been consuming a plant-based diet for 24 years, supports people in making the transition to this way of eating, and chairs the Plant-Powered Team of the Earth Holder Sangha. If you would like assistance or more information on creating a Plant-Powered Practitioner Support Network, contact Marge at margewur@gmail.com.

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