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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

The following "Verses for Silent Meals" was distributed to people attending a Dharma Course given by Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh at Latrobe University in Melbourne during the Venerable's 1986 Australian Tour. (1)

It describes the purpose of having silent meals and it provides guidance on how we can use eating meals as mindfulness practice

Verses for Silent Meals

Introduction

The purpose of eating a meal in silence is to help us appreciate the food we eat and the presence of others at the meal. This awareness is possible only when we practice mindfulness while eating. Doing this will not tire your mind or your digestive system. It is not difficult. To the contrary, it gives us peace, strength and enjoyment. Silence makes our meditation successful.

The food we are eating can reveal the interconnections between the universe and us, the earth and us. Each bite of vegetable, each drop of soy sauce, each piece of tofu contains in itself the life of the sun and of the earth. We see the meaning and the value of life from those precious, morsels of food. Be aware that we are sitting here at the table together with other people, and hence we have a chance to see them more clearly. We have a chance to smile at each other, the authentic smile of friendship and understanding.

The images in the verses are all real and practical. We should be able to see them and use them in order to look deeply into things. Your very first silent meal may cause you to feel embarrassed, but once you become used to it, you will realize that meals in silence bring much peace and happiness.

Looking at an Empty Plate

The plate is empty now
But I know
That it will soon be filled
With food for today's lunch.

Note: The word "plate" can be replaced by the word bowl when appropriate. Likewise, "lunch" can be replaced by "breakfast" or "dinner".

When the Plate is Filled with Food

My plate is now filled
I see clearly the presence
Of the entire universe
And its contribution to my existence.

Note: This verse helps us see the principle of dependent co-arising through the image of the Food, and enables us to see that our life and that of all species are inter-related.

When Sitting Down

Sitting here is like sitting under
the Bodhi tree,
My body of mindfulness is upright,
I am not assailed by any disturbance.

Note: This verse is a promise to oneself to not forget to practice mindfulness throughout the meal.

While Looking at the Plate Filled with Food

All living beings are struggling for life,
May they all have enough food to eat today.

Note: This verse helps us nurture love and understanding and reminds us of those who are unfortunate.

Just Before Eating

The plate is filled with food,
I am aware that each morsel is the fruit
of much hard work.
By those who produced it.

Note: This verse helps us see the hard work that the farmers put into the food, and the presence of tens of thousands of children who die every day because of lack of food.

While Eating the First Four Mouthfuls

With the first mouthful, I promise to practice loving kindness,
With the second, I promise to help relieve the suffering of others,
With the third, I promise to see others' joy as my own
With the fourth, I promise to learn the way of non-attachment.

Note: This verse is said during the first four mouthfuls of each meal, to remind us of the Four Immeasurables: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and non-attachment. They are the four abodes of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

When the Plate is Empty

The plate is empty
And I am now satisfied,
The Four Gratuities,
I vow to live up to them

Note: This verse reminds us of the Four Gratuities; to parents, teachers, friends and all organic and inorganic species.

Holding a Cup of Tea

This cup of tea in my two hands
Mindfulness is held perfectly,
My mind and body dwell
In the very here and now.

Note: This verse brings us back to the present and helps us see the presence of the tea, of the people beside us, of the world around, and of the small details which are important to life at this moment.

Reference:

(1) Refer B.D.C. (U) Ltd. Newsletter No. 21, February 1987, pp 12, 13