

CHAPTER FOUR

INHERITING OUR FOOD CHOICES



“People wish to be settled. Only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”

—EMERSON

“It is nothing less than a form of violence to attempt to win children over to the toxic poisons, the coarse flavour and the unsympathetic texture of animal flesh.”

—JON WYNNE-TYSON

“This is dreadful! Not only the suffering and death of the animals, but that man suppresses in himself, unnecessarily, the highest spiritual capacity—that of sympathy and pity towards living creatures like himself—and by violating his own feelings becomes cruel.”

—LEO TOLSTOY

Our Inheritance: Infant Indoctrination

Instead of reducing our intelligence and compassion by denying and destroying the intelligence and purpose of animals, we could celebrate, honor, and appreciate the immense diversity of intelligences, beauties, abilities, and gifts that animals possess and contribute to our world. We could liberate ourselves by liberating them and allowing them to fulfill

the purposes that their particular intelligences yearn for. We could respect their lives and treat them with kindness. Our awareness and compassion would flourish, bringing more love and wisdom into our relationships with each other. We could live in far greater harmony with the universal intelligence that is the source of our life. To do so, however, we would have to stop viewing animals as commodities, and this means we would have to stop viewing them as food.

If we look at animals in general, we realize that there is probably no more fundamental and essential teaching given by parent to offspring than how to feed. In finding, preparing, and eating food, adults of every species teach their young both directly and by example. We humans are no exception. In fact, because we are as infants more vulnerable than other animals, food education is even more important to us. The earliest and most basic connections we have with our parents are around food and eating.

From birth we partake of our mother's milk. For us and all mammals, this feeding epitomizes being loved, nurtured, protected and bonded with our mother and with all that our mother represents. She has birthed us out of her body and feeds us from her breast. She represents the infinite matrix of life, the vast loving intelligence that is our source and the source of all life, that feeds and loves all creatures as manifestations of itself within its boundless being. Feeding at our mother's breast is one of the most powerful symbolic natural acts that we humans can engage in. We are safe, loved, nourished, and directly connected with the vast loving, mysterious source of our life. We utterly trust our mother and her milk.

As we grow older, stronger, and more independent, our mother prepares special soft foods for us. In an event that is highly significant for us as children, we are weaned from our mother's milk and are taught how to eat our own food and to feed ourselves. It's likely that the disturbing loss of breast-feeding imprints the replacement food we are given especially strongly on our young and impressionable minds. We lose the warm, intimate feeding of nursing and begin to be fed our parents' food as softened baby food—including chicken, veal, cheese, and other animal products. As we get older, the amount of flesh, dairy, and

egg we are fed increases and becomes gradually more obvious and undeniable. Our bodies and minds are conditioned by the most powerful forces in our world (our parents and family) and in the most powerful ways (through our care and feeding) to believe that we are by nature omnivorous, even carnivorous, and therefore predatory. It's no wonder it's so difficult to question the foods we eat, and that this taboo runs so deep!

We could not survive without the food our parents gave us, a tangible and consumable expression of their love and caring for us. As we incorporated their food, we partook of them and their values and their culture. At every meal, three times a day, their food *became* us. *Their* culture and food became *our* culture and *our* food.

Most of us resist being told we've been indoctrinated. After all, we live in the land of the free, and we like to think we've arrived freely at the belief that we need to eat animal products and that it's natural and right to do so. In fact, we have inherited this belief. We've been indoctrinated in the most deeply rooted and potent way possible, as vulnerable infants; yet because our culture denies the existence of indoctrination, the reality of the process is invisible, making it difficult for most of us to realize or admit the truth. We may become irate that someone would even suggest that our mother's loving meals and our father's barbecues were a form of indoctrination. Our mother and father didn't *intend* to indoctrinate us, just as their parents didn't intend to indoctrinate them. Nevertheless, our old herding culture, primarily through the family and secondarily through religious, educational, economic, and governmental institutions, enforces the indoctrination process in order to replicate itself in each generation and continue on.

The reason that indoctrinated beliefs resist being contemplated or questioned is that we did not arrive at them freely, on our own. If we are challenged in a belief that we have struggled within ourselves to attain, we feel energized and welcome an opportunity to deepen our understanding, to exchange, to grow. If the belief has been indoctrinated, however, we feel nervous and irritated if it's challenged. It's not *our* belief, and yet we believe it. So we try to change the subject, and if that doesn't work, we create a distraction, or close down, or leave, or attack the one who would challenge our indoctrinated belief. We do whatever

we can to block feedback or questioning. Because we have accepted the belief unconsciously, we cannot defend or support the belief but must remain unaware of any inner or outer feedback that would challenge it.

This forced unawareness becomes a sort of armor, dulling the mind and deadening the vital spiritual spark within us that seeks higher awareness through increased understanding and inner freedom. The price we pay for unquestioned indoctrinated and inherited beliefs is enormous. By uncritically accepting culturally transmitted beliefs and blindly being their agents, we remain children, ethically and spiritually. Because our mind is conditioned and we are unable to question the conditioning, we find it difficult to mature or contribute our unique gifts. Our song may die within us without ever being fully sung, to the loss of everyone, especially ourselves.

The Importance of Leaving Home

If we are to mature spiritually and morally, and if we are to nourish within us the seeds of intelligence, compassion, and freedom, we must practice questioning the underlying assumptions of the family and culture into which we were born. This has been understood for centuries as fundamental both to individual spiritual awakening and to social progress. In Buddhism, this is called “leaving home.” Jesus refers to the same practice when he asks rhetorically, “Who is my mother? And who are my brethren?” (Matthew 12:47) and when he says, “There is no man who has left home . . . for my sake, and the gospel’s, but he shall receive an hundredfold now . . . and in the world to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29–30).

Leaving home is Buddhist shorthand for the spiritual practice of questioning our society’s values and adopting a higher set of values. This is essential to spiritual progress because it brings the maturity that can lead to higher consciousness, greater compassion, and, ultimately, freedom from the delusion of being a fundamentally separate self and the suffering and violence this delusion necessarily causes.

In consciously contemplating and questioning the worldview and practices of our parents, family, and culture, we make leaving home a vital foundation of and prerequisite for our spiritual growth and for