

Chapter 11 – Precious Food

Garchen Rinpoche had a daily quota for his work: the number of bricks he must make each day. Similarly, the other prisoners had daily quotas, a number of items they must make or do for their work. If an inmate didn't meet his daily quota, the Chinese Communist officials would call him "lazy" or would say he has a poor work attitude, and he would be harassed or forced to endure a "struggle session" in which he is questioned, accused, beaten and punished. And, he would get less food or would get no food for the next meal. And that was real torture!



The prisoners were given three meals per day, but what they were served to eat was not nearly enough; it wasn't really a meal.

After all the extremely hard work, all they got every day was a watery rice porridge or a watery soup - just salty broth with some tiny bits of vegetables and sometimes with noodles. Or they might get a little bit of vegetables, mostly cabbage and occasionally some small pieces of carrot or potato.



And they would get a couple of tingmos - steamed buns. That was all they got to eat, day after day.

They received a cup of black tea twice a day, but they weren't given much water to drink. They were extremely thirsty at night after eating the salty food, but couldn't get any water. Compared to their terrible hunger, their intense thirst was much worse! Since the food rations were so small, prisoners were very concerned about the size of the buns or the amount of porridge they received. If the steamed buns were a little smaller than usual, they would be very disappointed. If the soup was up to the brim of the cup, they would be happy. If it was a little less, they argued for a little more. If someone tore off just a bit of their bun and gave it to another prisoner, that prisoner would calm down and feel much better.

After living without enough food for so long, their hunger was so extreme that whatever food they swallowed into their stomach would actually make the hunger worse, because then their stomach groaned for more food. Garchen Rinpoche's cousin was very lucky – he was assigned to work in the kitchen, so he wasn't as hungry as the other inmates. Sometimes he was able to save some scraps of food for Rinpoche.

It wasn't only the prisoners who were starving. After the Tibetan resistance army surrendered in 1960, many Tibetans had been killed or imprisoned, and those who were still free suffered

terrible poverty and hunger. The Chinese Communists didn't allow anyone to own anything. No one could own any land, food, animals, or anything else. Everything, even the grain they grew or butter they made, had to be turned in to the Chinese government, which was expected to distribute it equally among everyone. Their houses were invaded and if there was any little bit of tsampa (barley flour), grain, meat or butter in the house, it was taken away from them and they were accused of selfishly hiding food.

The Communists made rules that were supposed to force everyone to share, but the Tibetans had almost nothing anyway, so the rules seemed ridiculous. For example, no one was allowed to make a fire in their home because that meant someone was being selfish, cooking only for their family, and cooking was supposed to be done only in the communal kitchen for the whole village so everyone eats together. The Chinese Communists appointed people in each village to be monitors to watch whether anyone is violating the rules and to report it to the Chinese.

There were severe food shortages – not enough food - all throughout China, because the Chinese government forced many farmers to work in factories instead of running their farms. So the Tibetan people were given only a little bit of vegetables and nothing else. There was nothing left in the villages to eat, and even the little children were terribly hungry all the time, and looked very thin. If the Chinese army was in the area, bread would be baked for the soldiers and the children would go near the tents where they were making bread, just enjoying the smell of it baking. After the bread was baked and taken to the soldiers, the children rushed to the tents and grabbed any tiny scraps of bread and burned bread crumbs that were left, even licking them from the bare ground.

To fill up the pots and make it seem as if there was more food, Tibetan cooks mixed grass and even tree bark, leaves, grass roots and grass seeds with whatever food they had to make a watery soup or porridge. Even that didn't fill the peoples' stomachs. Without enough nourishing food to eat, many people became sick and died. Many people just starved to death.



In the prison, too, the prisoners always were so hungry that some chewed on the leather of their shoes, and others ate insects, lizards or any other small creatures they could catch from the fields.

Many prisoners suffered from malnutrition, diseases, exhaustion, dehydration from not enough water, and not enough sleep. Some prisoners passed away in their sleep and some even collapsed and died while they were working. One lama was carrying a load of bricks and just fell over and died. Over one million Tibetans, more than one sixth of the Tibetan people, died or were killed between 1949 and 1979.

During a time when many people in the prison had caught some serious illness, Rinpoche had a prison roommate who was a famous tulku named Riglo Rinpoche, about 35 years old, who

caught the illness. He decided to stop eating and give his food away to his roommates, so each would get a couple of extra morsels of food. He said,

“I want to practice generosity. I have to find something to give to people. Right now, people are so hungry so I want to give food to them. As for me, I feel that I am going to die soon anyway. It won’t change anything for me if I keep this food for myself. Then in any case, after I die, my death will be useful.”

In the days following his death, there were fewer people dying. The inmates often heard and told others how many people had died in one night – maybe thirty or eighty people died in one night. But after he died, there were not nearly as many. Garchen Rinpoche thought that through the power of his compassion and giving up all of his food for others, Riglo Rinpoche had given other prisoners great benefit, saving their lives.

Garchen Rinpoche thought about that when, after more than a year in prison, he too became very ill at the age of 25. The prison officials brought him to the prison medical clinic, which was crowded with many people suffering with diseases. Rinpoche thought it would be better if he were to just die right then and there. He decided to fast, to stop eating, like Riglo Rinpoche had done. When Garchen Rinpoche gave up eating, he found that he no longer had that horrible pain like fire in the stomach from extreme hunger whenever he ate just a tiny bit of food. He had a compassionate wish that his hunger and pain would take away all the suffering of others. He thought,

“I am so ill now, and it’s quite likely that I will die soon. This kind of food won’t prevent me from dying, and so, eating at this point has no purpose. So I too should give away my food! If I am going to practice generosity, then I might as well practice it now before it’s too late!”

Garchen Rinpoche then gave away all of his food to the other nine men in his hospital room. They became extremely happy as they took turns sharing his food. In the morning, he gave to one person, at lunch he gave his food to another person, and in the evening he gave his food to yet another man. For a week, he only drank water, but didn’t feel hungry anymore.

Then one day, the roommates began to quarrel. They argued among themselves saying that Rinpoche had given one person more soup than the other, or that this piece of bread was bigger and that piece smaller. They complained that the patient next to Rinpoche always got the best part of his food.

The chief doctor and his attendants heard the commotion and rushed to the room. The doctor was very kind, highly skilled in medicine and well respected. Although he was also a prisoner himself, his job was to take care of the sick patients in the prison. The Chinese authorities believed wholeheartedly in him and did whatever he said to do. He took the covers off of Rinpoche to examine him, and seeing the terribly thin body, he realized Rinpoche was about to die. He looked like a corpse laying there in the bed, and had become so weak that he couldn’t

even get up. The doctor immediately reported this to the prison officials. This kind doctor definitely ruined Rinpoche's plan to die of starvation!

These experiences in the prison changed Garchen Rinpoche's attitude about food for the rest of his life. He tells us never to waste any food. He even licks his plate clean after he eats, although many people stare at him in shock, thinking it's not appropriate. He had done that even before he was in prison. At his upper monastery at Gar Gon high up on the mountain, there was no running water, and it takes a lot of effort to carry a bucket of water all the way up there from the river. So, everyone brought their own wooden bowl to the upper monastery and licked it clean after eating.

Even many years after being in prison, he licks his bowl because he doesn't want to waste any of the precious food, not even the tiniest bit. For people who are starving, each rice grain or oatmeal flake is like a drop of precious nectar.



Garchen Rinpoche eats the tiny green leaves on strawberries, and says that they taste good. He says not to throw away the trimmed ends of onions, carrots or celery but to make good use of them if you can. He says we buy too much food and don't use it all; some goes to waste. He says that if we must throw away some food, then at least while we throw it in the garbage we should say a prayer dedicating it to hungry ghosts, beings we can't see who are always looking for something to satisfy their hunger.

QUESTIONS:

1. What would happen if a prisoner didn't make his quota for the day? (he would get less food or no food for the next meal)
2. What felt even worse than the hunger, especially after eating salty food? (thirst)
3. Who else was starving, other than the prisoners? (Tibetan people in their villages)
4. Why were the Tibetan people starving in the villages? (the Chinese Communists wouldn't let them keep any food and they had to turn it in to the Chinese government)
5. What did prisoners eat when they didn't have enough food to eat? (shoe leather, insects, lizards)
6. What did Garchen Rinpoche do with his food when he was in the medical clinic? (gave it to other patients)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Precious Food:

This story is not to be taken as advice to lick your plate and always finish all the food on your plate! That might make your parents upset.

And it isn't for telling your parents, family members or friends what to do.

This is because rules and norms about food are complicated - there are many different factors and situations to consider, and what's best for one person isn't always what is best for someone else.

But this story gives us some things to think about and discuss regarding food.

Let's talk about finishing the food on your plate.

What are some reasons we might not always finish all the food on our plate?

We don't want to eat too much, we don't feel well, we don't feel very hungry, we don't like the taste of the food.

So, when we can't finish the food on our plate, what can we do to avoid wasting food?

First, when we are serving our food, should we just fill our plate? To avoid putting too much food on our plate, what can we be mindful of?

Only serve what you think you will eat.

Be mindful of how hungry you are, what foods you know you will like, how much food is left for everyone else.

What if you are not sure you will like a particular food?

Only serve yourself a little bite of it to try, and come back for more if you like it.

What about serving yourself something to drink. Is there a way to avoid wasting it?

Don't just fill up the whole glass or cup, only pour what you believe you will drink.

Remember where you put your bottle or cup of water or other beverage, and drink all of it.

Write your name on the cup.

What if someone else is serving the food, how can you avoid being served too much?

Sometimes people like to be generous and put a lot on your plate!

You can ask for just a little bit, or say "no thank you."

Many monks put their hand over their plate to signal that they don't want any, to make sure the server understands even if they speak a different language.

What about "seconds" - you ate the food on your plate and you're thinking about having more. Sometimes we love the food so much that we get more, but soon we're too full and end up not eating all of it. What can you do to avoid that?

Before you serve yourself more, pay attention to your body. Are you really still hungry?

Even if you're not full yet when your plate is empty, it may start to feel full soon. It takes about 15 or 20 minutes after we finish eating to feel full. So, wait before taking more food.

Also, it's a good idea to drink a little water or beverage.

Some people feel like eating something when actually, they need something to drink, although they don't feel thirsty. The signals for thirst and hunger can get confused for many people.

Have you ever had a meal at another person's house, and they want to be generous and offer you more and more food?

They may think that if your plate is empty then you are still hungry or want more.

Or you may worry that the host may feel insulted if you don't eat their food.

What can you do in that situation to avoid wasting food or overeating?

You can compliment the host, for example, by saying that the food is very tasty, and ask for just a tiny bit more or serving yourself just a little more.

What if you're feeling full and there is still food on your plate? Should you just eat it anyway?

Usually, it's best not to force yourself to finish all your food.

We form habits when we're young. If we develop a habit of eating more than we need, it's not healthy, and we end up wasting a lot of food over our lifetime by putting unnecessary amounts of food in our bodies. That is worse than leaving a little food on your plate sometimes.

So what can we do to avoid wasting the food left on our plate?

Save the food you can't eat by putting it in the refrigerator.

And make sure to remember to eat the leftover food! Be sure to eat it within three days.

It's not good to keep leftover food for more than three days, because it begins to spoil.

What can we do with food scraps, what we are not going to eat?

Compost it – put it in a compost bin. Then it can be used to nourish plants.

Raw carrots and some vegetables can be given to some dogs, or to wild rabbits in your yard.

But, always ask your parents first before giving it to a pet or to wildlife!

Bread can be given to birds. And crows like to eat many types of food.

But there is a risk that putting food outside can attract mice and rats, so ask your parents first!

If we can't use food scraps and must throw it away, what does Garchen Rinpoche advise we should we do as we throw it in the trash? Offer it to the hungry ghosts.

When we are mindful and when we remember these ideas, we form good habits and avoid wasting food.