

# Ecological Eating: Gary Snyder's Existential Koan\*

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Food has always been one of the most urgent and essential priorities that we must secure to guarantee our survival. But as of late, food security has been aggravated by climate change, which has brought both unpredictable droughts and floods that directly affect farming, from which our food is produced. What's more, our food itself is increasingly being contaminated by toxic chemicals and hormones used by industrial agribusinesses to secure the highest production yield in a shortest amount of time. Having undertaken this issue as one of his main topics of writing, Gary Snyder investigates humanity's relationship with nature through the lens of the food chain, which he sees as an energy transfer among all life forms in the ecosphere. Nothing other than this very condition of eating and being eaten manifests more explicitly our interdependence and interbeingness in the global ecosystem. By successfully integrating his extensive knowledge of Buddhism and the science of ecology, Snyder expounds his own idea of ecological eating through his poems and prose works. He reinterprets Indra's Net, one of the most important creeds of Hua Yen Buddhism, from an ecological point of view. He recasts it as a metaphor for the food chain and the food

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web, and employs it to explain the fundamental interconnectedness of all things in the universe. Despite the importance of eating for Snyder, no scholars except David L. Barnhill have delved into this topic in depth yet.

As Simon Estok argues, food is not only about money, but also “about class and race and ethics and taste. It’s about gender and species and knowledge and ignorance. It is about consciousness and sexuality and work”(681).

Food and eating involve a myriad of complex ideas, beliefs, and environmental factors, among other things. Presently, eating is made much more complicated because our food is contaminated and real food is replaced with “food-like substances,” to use Michael Pollan’s words. Eating has thus been degraded into a practice of taking in nutrients supplied by the larger food industry and nutritional scientists. This industrial attitude radically simplifies our eating as physical activity humans must engage in to nourish our bodies for survival, thereby depriving all other dimensions of eating. Snyder stands firmly against this kind of myopic, reductionist thinking and argues for a greater consideration of the spiritual and religious implications of eating. As Barbara O’Brien nicely summarizes, “From a Buddhist perspective, eating is more than just taking in nourishment. It is an interaction with the entire phenomenal universe.”

From the very beginning of his long poetic career, one of the main concerns Snyder voiced was about the problem of eating. According to Yamazato Katunori, a leading Japanese ecocritic, Snyder explored the very question of “just where I am in this food-chain” (*Earth* 32) during his sojourning in Japan in the 1960s (16). James W. Kraus also indicates in “Gary Snyder’s Biopoetics: A Study of Poet As Ecologist” that the food chain was one of the key ideas through

which Snyder investigates “the movement of energy” - his core interest both as a poet and as an ecologist (75). By linking Indra’s Net, which teaches the inextricable interconnected of all things in the universe, with the food chain, Snyder approaches the issue of eating not only as a physical necessity but as a religious problem. Barnhill aptly illuminates this point when he says: “‘Where am I in the food chain?’ For Snyder that is a religious question, because ecological interdependence is a fundamental fact of the universe and the food chain is the basic physical structure of this interdependence. In Indra’s Net of death-and-life, the food chain is the universe’s structure of generosity, the system of the mutual sustenance of all things by all things”(“Indra’s”25).But the issue at stake is that the food we eat is someone’s body or part of it. In other words, we have to kill other life forms to maintain our life, as Snyder captures in his words that it is “not that we’re cruel - / But a man’s got to eat” (*Myths* 20). For Snyder, the burden of this problem presses so much on his consciousness that he calls it his “existential koan” (*A Place* 72):

If you think of eating and killing plants or animals to eat as an unfortunate quirk in the nature of the universe, then you cut yourself from connecting with the sacramental energyexchange, evolutionary mutual-sharing aspect of life. And if we talk about evolution of consciousness, we also have to talk about evolution of bodies, which takes place by that sharing of energies, passing it back and forth, which is done by literally eating each other. And that’s what communion is. (*The Real* 89)

Through deep meditation on this issue, Snyder uncovers an insight that our eating is not just ingesting nutrients to survive but has far deeper ecological and spiritual meaning: that is, eating is a

sacred act of sharing energies and a means through which we participate in the great cycle of universal energy exchange.

Snyder tries to tackle this “very sensitive issue” (*The Real* 89) by expanding our notion of eating in such a way as to restore its ritualistic and sacramental quality. In our consumption-oriented society, food is generally regarded as nothing but an item on the supermarket shelf waiting to satisfy our appetites. Because most foods are processed and beautifully wrapped, it is not easy for consumers to recognize that many foods are, in fact, the remnants of a death of an animal. If seen only from the physical point of view, humankind is not much different from the predatory birds living on carrion. Seungho Choi, one of the most famous Korean eco-poets and who is deeply influenced by East Asian thoughts like Snyder, drives home a similar idea in his work. He graphically portrays this fact in “Bald Eagles 2” by saying, “I wonder whose grave is / my hairy round belly?” (*A Rhinoceros* 63). By identifying his own round belly as the grave of the food he ate, Choi exposes the inconvenient truth that humankind is, in reality, “a new god of death on the earth,” so that “when [humankind] pass[es], something is left dead / and all become desolate and dreary.” He equates humankind as “a being who does not die until he or she ruins almost everything” (*Sand* 24).

Despite the grim reality of this issue, Snyder, by expanding our sense of eating to a cosmic level, finds a way to overcome this karmic relation with our food. As we can see in his question, what if “Deer don’t want to die for me?” (*Myths* 28), Snyder’s lifelong concern has been to figure out how one can be free from the karma of eating others. Our “harming” of the world is an inevitable fact that we cannot change, but Snyder asserts that we can instead transform ourselves by cultivating a larger view; that is, approach our eating not just on a personal level, but explore it on a cosmic

level. Deeply influenced by modern ecological science, Snyder asserts, “Although ecosystems can be described as hierarchical in terms of energy, from the standpoint of the whole all of its members are equal” (*A Place* 76). While the law of the stronger eating the weaker prevails in nature among its individual inhabitants, they are all participating in a great transaction of energy flow when viewed from the large scale of the planet. That is the reason why Snyder argues that “to describe nature as ‘red in tooth and claw’ [is] a fundamental misunderstanding” (*Back* 69). Such a conception stems from the ignorance about our ecosystem that is inextricably interconnected through the food chain. As Eugene P. Odum insists in *Ecology and Our Endangered Life-support Systems*, “Contrary to what people may think, nature is not all ‘dog-eat-dog.’ Competition and predation have their place, but survival often depends on cooperation” (96). In a similar vein, Barnhill also says, “This concern with the Great System has aligned [Snyder] with the school of deep ecology, which is based on the principle of biocentricism: what is of value is the biosphere as a whole rather than one species” (“A Giant” 31). It is only when we approach the problem of eating not from a point of view of an individual or particular species, but from “the scales of a whole watershed, a natural system, a habitat,” that we can “acknowledge the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world” (*A Place* 70). In this sense, Snyder goes beyond the first precept of Buddhism, *ahimsa* (不殺生), which literally means “do not take life,” by perceiving our eating in the level of a whole ecosystem. His macro view is similar to Wendell Berry’s insistence in “The Pleasure of Eating” on the importance of knowing “the whole process” of eating: “the beautiful cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again” (150).

Snyder’s perspective informs us that humankind is not a privileged

species that exists above the intricate food chain, but instead plays an integral part in the process of energy transformation. Because humankind is placed at the top of the food chain, we are, in fact, the most heavily dependent on other life forms. In “Four Changes,” Snyder makes this point clear by insisting that “Instead of independence we have overdependence on life-giving substances” (*Turtle* 97). He brings down humankind from the position as a conqueror of nature or arrogant food consumer, and instead reinstitutes humankind as a humble participant of the energy exchange ecosystem: “A key transaction in natural system is energy exchange, which includes the food chains and the food webs, and this means that many living beings live by eating other beings. Our bodies—or the energy they represent—are thus continually being passed around. We are all guests at the feast, and we are also the meal! All of biological nature can be seen as an enormous *puja*, a ceremony of offering and sharing” (*A Place* 76).

This recognition that we are simultaneously the meal as well as guests on the big dining table of earth’s community asks us to change our attitude toward our fellow beings and ourselves. From this recognition arises the heart of compassion, as we can see in Snyder’s words that “The intimate perception of interconnection, frailty, inevitable impermanence and pain (and the continuity of grand process and its ultimate emptiness) is an experience that awakens the heart of compassion” (“Ecology”). No longer can we sit contently as ignorant, self-righteous consumers of food. We must, instead, prepare ourselves to be able to give our bodies to nourish others, as well. Jeremy Lipkin articulates this point in *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of Cattle Culture* when he says, “Eating is as much concerned with eros as with thanatos, with life as with death” (234). The real or imaginary experience of the fear of being eaten by others should

check our own customary, thoughtless behavior of taking other lives.

Snyder finds the cues for the proper taking of other lives in *ahimsa*, the first precept of Buddhism that teaches against taking lives. But because we cannot sustain our life without taking lives, the word is usually glossed as meaning “cause no unnecessary harm”(A Place 65) - asking humankind to minimize damaging the environment. Snyder’s “Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells” explicates this issuedirectly:

The First Precept goes beyond a concern just for organic life. Yet our stance in regard to food is a daily manifestation of our economics and ecology. Food is the field in which we daily explore our ‘harming’ of the world. Clearly it will not do simply to stop at this point and declare that the world is a pain and that we are all deluded. We are called instead to practice. In the course of our practice we will not transform reality, but we might transform ourselves. Guilt and self-blame are not the fruit of practice, but we might hope that *a larger view* is. The larger view is one that can acknowledge the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world. This is what the image of Indra’s net is for. (A Place 70)

What is at stake is not that our eating should be virtuous or that we must follow the rules of Buddhist dietary of vegetarianism on a personal level. Snyder insists that our eating is a matter of economy and ecology of this planet, because our eating occurs on a scale of “a whole watershed, a natural system, [and] a habitat”(A Place 73).

By reinterpreting the notion of the food web from a Buddhist point of view, Snyder replaces the jewels of Indra’s Net with the flesh of plants, animals, and human beings(Barnhill, “Indra’s”24). This net, comprised of the flesh of other beings, graphically shows how inextricably all constituents of the earth, including human beings, are

interrelated. Therefore, the “larger view” Snyder emphasizes so much is no other than to think of eating as a relationship between the constituents of the ecosystem. When we consider our food not as a thing, but as the sacrifice of another life that is just as important as ours in nature’s ecosystem, our attitude toward our food cannot help but change fundamentally. Pollan raises the same question in his *In Defense of Food*. “

What would happen if we were to start thinking about food as less of a thing and more of a relationship? In nature, that is of course precisely what eating has always been: relationships among species in system we call food chains, or food webs, that reach all the way down to the soil. Species coevolve with the other species that they eat, and very often there develops a relationship of interdependence.” (102)

If we realize this kind of interrelationship and interdependence, we should, Snyder insists, have compassion and gratitude for our food. Genevieve Lebaron, a scholar of global politics and social environment, also says that “Snyder identifies compassion as an irrevocable law of interaction within the earth community,” and further explains that compassion means love, acceptance, and admiration for all species.”

Snyder’s idea of ecological eating, in which the Buddhist attitude toward food and ecological science’s concept of food web are successfully weaved together, stands out when comparing two poems in *Turtle Island*, “Steak” and “The Hudsonian Curlew.” “Steak” graphically portrays the act of mindless eating. Snyder presents two contrasting landscapes, the inside scene of the steakhouse called “The Embers” and the outside scene of cows grazing under the early morning prairie sky. Though the steakhouse,

in which the privileged and wealthy - including the members of a chamber of commerce, a visiting lecturer, and stockmen in Denver suits - eat, displays "a smiling Disney cow on the sign," only "his bloody sliced muscle is / served in; 'rare'" (*Turtle* 10). By deliberately using "bloody sliced muscle" instead of rib eye or sirloin steak, Snyder wants to emphasize that what we are eating is, in fact, the cow's muscle. Words like "bloody" and the underscored "rare" at the end of stanza add poignancy to the cruelty of our eating. Though camouflaged under the pretense of culture, the scene in the steakhouse is not much different from the bloody hunting scene in "Hunting 8: This Poem is for Deer," in which hunters "pull out the hot guts / with hard bare hands" after shooting "That wild silly blinded creature down" (*Myths* 27). Lack of both compassion and gratitude characterizes both actions; the deer or cow is nothing more than an object that exists only to satisfy humankind's appetite. In the eyes of the steak eaters, the cow is no more than a lump of beef; to speak more precisely, they are trained not to see the connection between the cow and the beef. This divide or disconnect has been culturally practiced in the West by renaming meat, thereby dissociating meat eating and meat production (Shin 197). This is also the very point Berry articulates as a problem of our eating in the age of industrial food: "The product of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food" (148). It is hardly possible for eater to acknowledge that "if we eat meat it is the life, the bounce, the swish, that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves" (Snyder, "On"

13). By portraying “beeves” (at least to the eyes of the ignorant consumers) strolling in the field, Snyder presents a radically different perspective on the cows:

the beeves are standing round -  
bred heavy.  
Steaming, stamping,  
long-lashed, slowly thinking  
with the rhythm of their  
breathing,  
frosty - breezy -  
early morning prairie sky. (*Turtle* 10)

The verb “thinking” shows that cows are not a dead lump of “beeves,” but living beings that are capable of cognitive engagement. But we usually don’t recognize that they, too, are thinking beings, or as Eskimos say, that “all our food is souls” (Snyder, “On” 13), and there can be no genuine compassion and communion between us and the cows - our food. To justify our merciless behavior of eating, we degrade and despise our own food, which finally results in “disgust with self, with humanity, and with life itself” (Snyder, “On” 13). However brightly the Disney cow may be smiling on the signboard, it cannot hide the sense of guilt deep in the hearts of steak eaters.

By contrast, “The Hudsonian Curlew” portrays a more ecological way of eating that foregrounds the eater’s humility toward his food, as well as his respect and thankfulness for the shot down birds. The poem depicts the process of cleaning the birds and gathering wood for fire to cook them. But what should be noted here is the speaker’s attitude toward his game; he shows neither his superiority and arrogance nor guilt. Instead, he shows deep thankfulness toward the birds’ bodies:

The down  
i pluck from the  
neck of the curlew  
eddies and whirls at my knees  
in the twilight wind  
from sea.  
kneeling in sand  
warm in the hand. (*Turtle* 55)

The lower case “i” explicitly tells us that the speaker is not a privileged being over the other life forms around him but a plain member of the earth’s community. The beauty of this poem is the speaker’s mutual respect for and communion with all the other elements of nature, even when he is cleaning the birds (Kim, “Looking” 539). The speaker’s kneeling posture symbolizes his respect for all living things. The whole process looks like a sacred rite in which the participant’s utmost care and mind of compassion is fully employed, though it cannot change the core fact of the killing. He is respectfully aware that “the rich body muscle that he moved by, the wing-beating muscle / anchored to the blade-like high breast bone / is what you eat” (Snyder, *Turtle* 56). This clearly demonstrates how Snyder regards this body of the curlew not as meat, but as an “animal food,” to use Val Plumwood’s words. According to Plumwood, “meat is a determinate cultural construction in terms of domination, while animal food is cultural determinable. Meat is the result of an instrumentalist-reductionist framework, but the concept of animal food allows us the means to resist the reductions and denials of meat by honoring the edible life form as much more than food, and certainly much more than meat” (356). Even the twilight wind and eddies and the whirls of the river participate in this ceremony of energy exchange through the process of eating and

being eaten. This eating is similar to the eating of fish Snyder describes in “Suwa-No-Se Island and the Banyan Ashram,” in which “we offered our respects and gratitude to the fish and the Sea Gods daily, and ate them with real love, admiring their extraordinary beautiful, perfect little body”(Earth 139).

The last section of “Hunting” of *Myths and Texts* portrays one of the most beautiful scenes of eating in Snyder’s works. He calls truth as “the sweetest of flavors” (*Myths* 34), referring to the reality that we are all interconnected and interdependent in “the shimmering food-chain, food-web, [which] is the scary, beautiful condition of the biosphere” (“On” 13). When the baby Buddha, who represents humankind here, exclaims, “How rare to be born a human being!” and “I alone am the honored one” (*Myths* 33), his remarks reveal both humankind’s hubris and his ignorance of his place in the ecosystem. His words are so arrogant that a famous Zen Master, Chao-chou, says in response, “If that baby really said that, / I’d cut him up and throw him to the dogs” (*Myths* 33). In contrast to this fellow human being’s ferocious reaction, however, chipmunks, gray squirrels, and ground squirrels each bring a nut to the baby Buddha, painting a scene in which animals are the ones to feed the baby Buddha. In the following section of “Hunting,” Snyder likewise imagines a different picture of humanity’s relationship to animals: “Girls would have in their arms / A wild gazelle or wild wolf-cubs / And give them their white milk, / those who had new-born infants home / Breasts still full” (*Myths* 34). Here the girls’ feeding of the gazelle or wolf-cubs amounts to repaying the animals’ feeding of humankind. Snyder’s words about “Meaning: compassion. / Agents: man and beast” (*Myths* 34) beautifully capture the essence of our eating. In this world, both humanity and beast eat the other but are the other’s food at the same time. Therefore, Snyder demonstrates

that the guiding principle of our eating should be compassion.

All these ideas about food and eating are also captured in Snyder's "Song of the Taste," his first truly ecological poem. As the title suggests, the poem is a celebratory exclamation that our eating is a sacrament in which all life forms of the earth community participate. By placing our eating in the "larger view" and inviting readers to the feast, Snyder makes "the reader feel and know deep inside the connection between man and meat, love, life, and death" (Steuding 85). After cataloguing various items we eat, including grasses, fowls, fruits, and meats, he says that they are, in fact, his lovers whom he kisses lip to lip: "Eating each other's seed/ eating/ah, each other // Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread: lip to lip" (*Regarding* 17). The pleasure of eating is persuasively compared to the joy of sensuous love. Snyder arrives at this kind of deep erotic love with his food in two ways: first, he frees himself of the guilty feelings of *karma* by saying grace; secondly, he redefines eating as an act of love, becoming one with the other. Patrick Murphy also indicates that the poem places "sexuality in the context of all natural fertility and the interconnectedness of food chains" (96).

Grace is, according to Snyder, the "few words we say to clear our hearts and teach the children and welcome the guest, all at the same time" ("On" 13). It is an act of expressing our thanks and respect for food and its sacrifice within the food chain. Behind grace lies the recognition that this act of "eating each other" is the law of nature in which humankind also plays a vital role, not only as an eater, but as food to be eaten, as well. As Yamazato rightly indicates, Snyder, by not specifying the agent of eating in the poem, suggests, "not only humanity but also every being in this world can be the agent of the act of eating" (20). In essence, we are feeding each other in this field of energy exchange. And it is here that our eating of others can

be transformed into a relationship of love:

“Looking closer at this world of one-ness, we see all these beings as of our own flesh, as our children, our lovers. We see ourselves too as an offering to the continuation of life. This is strong stuff. Such truth is not easy. But hang on: If we eat each other, is it not a giant act of love we live within? Christ’s blood and body becomes clear: The bread blesses you, as you bless it.”(“On” 13)

The insight Snyder has gained from the *Avatamsaka* and Tantra Buddhism aptly applies to his idea about eating. He is released from “personal fearful defenses and self-interest strivings” by giving “a love relationship. Through this process, the ‘other’ becomes the lover, and the various links in the net can be perceived” (*Earth 3A*). By regarding his food not as an other to take and consume, but as his lover to kiss and be united with, Snyder overcomes the time-ridden conflict between humankind and food and moves us forward to undertake a new ecological way of eating. In this sense, Snyder reinterprets the ecological notion of interbeing as inter-eating and defines our eating of each other as a love that extends to “animals, rocks, dirt, all of it” (*The Real 4*).

The fact that we must eat to sustain our lives is our biological reality. But our eating, as Snyder insists, should not be limited to a unilateral action of taking other lives to get energy for life on humankind’s part, but should be understood as a bilateral, mutual relationship between humanity and other life forms. By introducing a new concept that eating is a relationship between the eater and the eaten, Snyder argues that how and what we should eat is an ethical matter: “It seems clear enough that a consequence of our human interdependence should be a social ethic of mutual respect and a

commitment to solving conflict as peacefully as possible” (*The Real* 77). He emphasizes the cosmic implication of our eating by insisting that food is the product of a co-working of all the elements of the universe, and it, therefore, should be shared with others: “The Buddha once said, *bhikshus*, if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha” (*The Real* 35). The words of Buddha, which Snyder cites in an interview, are very similar to Chiha Kim’s idea about a bowl of rice. Kim, who has been an icon of the Korean democratic movement and is a pioneering Korean ecopoet, notes, “eating a bowl of rice amounts to knowing ten thousands of things (“Serving” 307); that is, knowing how a bowl is produced and eating it correctly is the most important thing we should know in life. In this respect, in addition to being a way of participating in the process of the universe through energy exchange, eating is also a spiritual experience of acknowledging our essential one-ness and mutual interdependence. Snyder’s words that “All of nature is a gift-exchange, a potluck banquet, and there is no death that is not somebody’s food. No life that is not somebody’s death” (“On” 13) aptly summarizes this idea.

Snyder insists that the proper way of eating should include expressing our gratitude and respect for the sacrifice of the food, once we realize this interconnectedness and interrelationship. Such behavior is possible when we clearly understand what we eat, to use Chiha Kim’s words, “has come / from the nearby neighbors of mine / from the soil, grass, trees, insects, birds and fishes” (*Blooming* 87). Berry also reiterates this point when he says that we should “eat with understanding and with gratitude. A significant part of the

pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes" (151). Both Snyder and Berry urge us to get out of our habitual pattern of thoughtless eating, which lacks compassion and restraint. Therefore, being acutely conscious of our eating is - to use the Zen meal chant to which Snyder is heavily indebted - "to reflect on our own work and the effort of those who brought us this food and to be aware of the quality of our deeds as we receive this meal"(O'Brien). This Zen practice helps us to transcend three poisons (三毒) of greed, anger, and delusion, the root cause of our current crisis with food and environment in the Buddhist point of view. This is the reason why Snyder laments, "mankind has become a locust-like blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard for its own children" (Snyder, *Turtle* 97). Similarly, as a remedy against greed, anger, and delusion, Buddhism presents "Three Practices (三學)" of discipline, morality, and wisdom. According to Seokho Choi, a renowned Buddhist monk and scholar, discipline (戒) is to set up a norm with which to live along with others and then to keep the norm; morality (定) is to find happiness not in conquering or owning things but in governing one's own indiscriminate desires; and wisdom (慧) is to recognize the interdependent connectedness of all beings (333). If these three practices are interpreted in this way, they coincide perfectly with Snyder's vision for an ecological way of eating.

The fact that we have to eat other beings is our existential condition, which cannot be done without harming others. But Snyder urges us to "acknowledge the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world" (*A Place* 70) rather than shun away from it, by saying "Everything that breathes is hungry. But not to flee such a world! Join in Indra's Net!" (*A Place* 70). He goes farther to insist that being eaten is joy of all beings, when he says in

“Night Herons” that “the joy of all beings / is in being/ older and tougher and eaten up” (*Turtle* 36). This sort of perception shows how astutely he understands the way ecosystem works through our eating; eating is participating in the foodnet. In this sense, his vision of ecological eating goes over Buddhist teaching. As we can see in the East Asian Buddhist monk’s eating practice (of vegetarianism), traditional Buddhism emphasizes renunciation and self-denial, while newly interpreted American Buddhism urges “a healthy and joyful relationship with food” (Wilson 216). Snyder moves this Buddhist focus on the relationship between the eater and food, into the workings of the whole ecosystem, that is, the energy transfer among the constituents. Though he was deeply influenced by Buddhist idea of eating, Snyder forms his own unique idea of ecological eating, owing to his grounding in ecological science.

Eating and food in the modern age are pressing issues not only for the health of humankind but also that of the earth. However, few writers have delved deeply into this problem from an ecocritical perspective. Yet Snyder has taken the issue of food and eating as one of his main topics from the very start of his career, and he presents his own idea of ecological eating by combining Buddhist ethics about food and his knowledge of the science of ecology. The ecologically re-interpreted notion of Indra’s Net, as a metaphor for the mutual interdependent and inter-penetrated relationship, underlies the core of his vision as a poet and ecologist. By adopting the insight of the ecology and defining our eating in the larger context of the food chain, he emphasizes that we are helplessly involved in this system of mutual sustainment. He recasts eating as something that is not just about consuming nutrients to survive, but a necessary exchange of energy and a sacred rite between living beings in the ecosphere. It is such an intimate and direct relationship we can have

with others that it is similar to love, because we become one with others by eating them in both a figurative and literal sense. By reinstating the religious and philosophical meaning of our eating and thereby suggesting an ecological way of eating, Snyder aims to save an increasingly endangered world. Because eating is a sacrament of energy exchange and sharing of lives, he insists that we should eat respectably and in mindfulness - not in mindlessness. His poems and essays lead us to fundamentally rethink our relationship with food and be hungry to enlarge our sense of eating to a cosmic level.

**Key words:** Gary Snyder, Eating, Food, Buddhism, Ecology

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<Abstract>

## Ecological Eating: Gary Snyder's Existential Koan

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This paper investigates how Snyder forms his idea of ecological eating by successfully combining Buddhist ideas and the science of ecology. He investigates the philosophical and religious meaning behind our eating and diagnoses our eating culture within today's consumption-oriented society as one that has degraded food only as material to be spent to satisfy our desires. Snyder thinks of our food not merely as conduits for nutrients that we must intake to sustain ourselves, but as something that carries religious and philosophical meanings, as well. By reclaiming food as one of the essential constituents of our ecological community and kissing it, Snyder demonstrates a way in which we can regard food not as an "other," but as our "lover." His idea of food serves as a concrete example of his "ecological eros": the most intimate and harmonious relationship between humankind and nature.

**Key words:** Gary Snyder, Eating, Food, Buddhism, Ecology