More than Food

The question “what do you eat?” can generate an overwhelming array of answers. To say the least, different diets and tastes in food can be attributed to the various cultures that exist all over the globe. One culture in particular, the Inuit, is sustained on fat and protein. To the surprise of many anthropologists, these Northwest Alaskans exhibit greater health than most other Americans who eat less fat and more grains and vegetables. “The Inuit Paradox” presented here by Patricia Gadsby exemplifies more than just a difference in diets. The disparity in health between the native Inuit and Western cultures also reveals a difference in fundamental characteristics, namely their worldviews. Worldviews provide people with a framework of beliefs through which they gain an understanding of reality. It is shaped by a culmination of experiences that allow us to interpret the tangible, intangible, and the abstract. Any worldview is composed of three main components: self, society, and cosmos. These elements will be used to assess the Inuit’s traditional diet, using both Western and Buddhist beliefs as backgrounds for comparison.

A heavy reliance on fatty animals and protein, though necessary for the Alaskan natives, does not sit well in the eyes of Americans and Buddhists. In Western society, fats are stigmatized based on a preoccupation with the self (Gadsby, 83). A thin physique is highly valued among Americans and other Western societies. This emphasis on physical appearance reflects the underlying importance of the individual. This is common in many Western worldviews. An appropriate self-image cannot be attained on an Inuit diet. In contrast, the self in Buddhism is
muted. Self-image is unimportant because the individual is merely an illusion—it is impermanent (Brannigan, 259). The excess of meat, however trivial, would be seen as a path away from enlightenment. This refers to the Buddhist belief in the Middle Way, or living a life of balance. It advocates that we should avoid the extremes of excess and deficit. In the case of the Inuit, they should eat less fat and protein. This, of course, would not be beneficial to their survival. Agriculture and farming are not options because of “glacial temperatures, stark landscapes, and protracted winters,” limiting their diet to foods that can only be hunted and gathered (Gadsby 81). Any edible plants found in the area are few and provide little nutritional value. Considering these dire conditions, relying heavily on caribou, whale, and fish meat provides them with essential nutrients such as vitamin C and carbohydrates that cannot be acquired from any other accessible food source (Gadsby 82).

The subsistence way of life in Northwestern Alaska does not only provide the Inupiat with their necessities, it also gives them an appreciation for the natural world around them. Patricia Cochran, a native from the area, says that in Inuit culture “‘the connectivity between humans, animals, plants, the land they live on, and the air they share is ingrained in [them] from birth’” (Gadsby 84). Their notion of society goes beyond human relationships to include all creatures and elements that they interact with. Likewise, Buddhism teaches that there is an inherent interconnectedness between all things, or pratityasamutpada. Life “is an intricate web of mutual and symbiotic cause-and-effect” (Brannigan 259). These delicate relationships engender a reverence for the animals and plants that the Inupiat hunt and gather. This same respect for the natural world is almost nonexistent in Western worldviews and we are seeing first-hand the negative effects of our faulty, self-absorbed beliefs through global warming. The idea that humans have authority over nature greatly influenced western development and
contrasts deeply with Buddhist teachings. Similar to the Inupiat, the notion of harmony in this community-based tradition suggests that humans should revere animals and nature. Western societies, however, reflect their anthropocentric views through the enactment of higher orders of reality.

While some areas of the cosmos have been touched upon, it is important to note that Western societies like the United States have extremely different generalizations of what constitutes life. Referring back to humans living apart from nature, we see that Western worldviews uphold capitalism and technology to realize human authority over the earth. In such an industrial environment, it is no surprise that “‘we’ve lost that creature feeling, that sense of kinship with food sources’” (Gadsby 84). It is this kinship that Buddhism and the Inupiat have realized as important. The self-fulfillment goals of capitalism, growth, and development have uprooted this relationship with the animals and plants we eat. Instead of the pigs and cattle, we see bacon and hamburgers. Even if Western worldviews contrast with the Inuit’s reliance on a high-fat, high-protein diet and their subsistence living, they still fail to recognize that their own processed foods are unhealthy. Here, we see people and corporations who push society and community to the lower echelons of importance. Using modern chemical transformations such as hydrogenation, our once natural foods are becoming dangers to our health in the forms of trans fats (Gadsby 83). Techniques such as this minimize costs and increase profits—all for individual, monetary gain.

The following shows Western and Buddhist worldviews in the form of mandalas. A mandala illustrates the order of all that has moral value for a particular being or group. This will help to visualize the relationship between both worldviews while looking at Inuit culture.
My own worldview largely agrees with the Inuit people’s subsistence way of living. While it may not be practical to live completely apart from grocery stores, we see that subsistence living promotes a strong relationship with the natural world. In accordance with Buddhist teachings, I feel that because all things are interconnected we should respect our environment and have reverence for our food. The anthropocentric, self-absorbed views of the West can be seen as dangerous because such beliefs do not promote community. The diet of the Inuit should not be seen has path away from enlightenment because of an excess in meat—it is a diet that grew out of necessity for survival. They do not exploit their food sources, which is something that the West has been known to do.

Acknowledging the diet of the Inuit can open a window into their worldview. Cochran states that “how we get our food is intrinsic to our culture” (Gadsby 84). They build a sense of community through hunting and foraging, appreciating the lives of animals and plants that sustain them. As citizens of the global community, it is important that we understand the views and practices of not only the Inuit people, but other worldviews as well. According to philosopher Ninian Smart, understanding other worldviews helps us to form our own worldviews. Perhaps we can take bits and pieces from the Inuit and Buddhist beliefs that might help Western society improve.
Works Cited
