The basic meal for Zen monks is very simple — rice, soup and a side dish.avored guests at the temple are treated to something more special. Here is a type of full-course shojin ryori meal available at some Zen temples.

From the left: Second, main course, and final course.
Main course: Starting clockwise from the top left, (1) cooked squash, carrots and shimeji mushrooms served with a small eggplant that has been fried and then simmered; (2) spinach and tofu with dressing; (3) vinegared dish with lily bulb, cucumber, Japanese ginger and Daitokuji wheat gluten; (4) miso soup with broiled eggplant, nameko mushrooms and oka-hijiki; (5) pickles; (6) rice garnished with fresh boiled soybeans. Nagura Kazuhiro, chef at the Tokyo Grand Hotel, prepared this feast.

In the 13th century, Zen monks from China popularized a form of vegetarian cuisine in Japan known as shojin ryori. The practice of preparing delicious meals with seasonable vegetables and wild plants from the mountains, served with seaweed, fresh soybean curd (or dehydrated forms), and seeds (such as walnuts, pine nuts and peanuts) is a tradition that is still alive at Zen temples today. Stemming from the Buddhist precept that it is wrong to kill animals, including fish, shojin ryori is completely vegetarian. Buddhism prescribes partaking of a simple diet every day and abstaining from drinking alcohol or eating meat. Such a lifestyle, together with physical training, clears the mind of confusion and leads to understanding.

Even in preparing shojin ryori batter, we do not use unfertilized eggs as a binder; we use yam instead, which works quite well. Shojin ryori cooks also make sure not to waste any of the ingredients. We even sauté the greens and peelings of carrots and daikon radish, then simmer them in a little water, or we add them to soup. If there are any byproducts remaining after this, we mix them with leftover rice to make porridge for the evening. Followers of Zen try to eat all of the food prepared during the day, and throw nothing edible away. This “recycling” is easy if one minimizes seasoning, letting the natural flavor of the ingredients define the taste.

The Zen aversion to waste extends to dishware, too. When Japanese people eat deep-fried tempura, they use extra dishes for the dipping sauce. Followers of Zen, on the other hand, feel that sauces are extravagant and prefer to make a mess anyway, so we forget using dipping sauces altogether. In fact, sauces are unnecessary with a little salt in the batter, or if one simmers vegetables in miso-flavored water before deep-frying them.

People ask me if I can maintain a balanced diet while eating only vegetables; the answer, of course, is yes. I have been following Buddhist training and eating only vegetarian meals for more than 50 years, yet have never even caught a cold in all that time. Life at a Zen temple is strict and demands much physical labor, but I can take it in stride because I have the power of seasonal vegetables on my side. Of course, shojin ryori is part of the Buddhist temple regimen, yet it is also my way of maintaining a sound mind and body.