

## Buddhism, Diet and Vegetarianism

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*The concept of diet in relation to meat eating varies among Buddhist sects and schools. Theravāda doctrine allows meat eating while Mahāyāna Buddhism has a tenet that promoting the Buddha mind (Bodhicitta) in all sentient beings, thus preferred vegetarianism. Despite the fact that Theravāda followers can eat meat, ten kinds of creatures are prohibited. No matter what meat allowance or non-allowance, the ultimate end of Buddhist teaching is the same. That is the insight of reciprocal existence and interdependence.*

In Buddhism there are some views on diet and vegetarianism. We can find these views in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna doctrines. Although there are sectarian variations in the interpretation whether human should eat meat, an emphasis on mutual dependence through compassion is crucial in all schools. The interesting point is to explore in depth the scope of meat allowance or non-allowance that lies in the Buddha's true teaching for the sake of creatures.

In its long history, Buddhism has influenced and been influenced by Jainism and Hinduism. As we know, most of their devout followers are vegetarians. Moreover, these traditions have influenced the west for a long while – now more than ever. Together, they emphasize the importance of ahimsa, or the respect for life.

Ahimsa was incredibly important to King Aśoka of India, who changed from being a brutal conqueror to a peaceful king. He set up hospitals for animals and spread his compassion for humans

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and animals alike. The world has not been the same since Buddha, Aśoka, and countless compassionate beings during the axial age and thereafter.

Theravāda and Mahāyāna offer different interpretations on many issues, including diet. This can attributed to their world views. As Huston Smith, author of **The World's Religions**<sup>1</sup> writes:

“For Theravāda Buddhism progress is up to the individual; it depends on his or her understanding and resolute application of the will. For Mahāyānists the fate of the individual is linked to that of all life, and they are ultimately undivided”.

Thus, we will explore Theravāda concept of diet first, and then Mahāyāna views on vegetarianism will be considered.

## 1. Theravāda Overview:

The story is that long ago an ailing monk asked a woman for soup made with meat. Her maid went around the market but found no meat, for it was prohibited that day. Afraid that the monk might die and wanting to keep her promise, she decided to cut a piece of flesh from her thigh, which she sent to the monk<sup>2</sup>. The Buddha rebuked the monk and thereafter declared the inappropriateness of eating human flesh for his monk disciples.

During the time of natural catastrophe that led to the death of a large numbers of animals, including royal elephants and horses, poor starving peasants ate the flesh of these royal victims. Some were given as alms to monks. The rumors dispersed and made some people worry about the welfare of monks if the king found out.

The king might be angry and stop supporting Buddhism. People also repulsed the consuming the flesh of elephants and horses, for they were animals of high status. Hearing this kind of news among the crowd, the Buddha stated the inappropriateness of eating these two animals for his monk disciples. Whoever violated the rule was to be punished.

Somewhere in the deep forests while monks went on pilgrimages, faithful hunters often provided them with wild food – including the flesh of lions, tigers (*Panthera tigris* Linnaeus), leopards or panthers, yellow tigers (*Panthera pardus* Linnaeus) and bears. According to accounts, when these animals realized that their brethren were being eaten, they attacked the monks. To protect his wandering monk disciples, the Buddha then prohibited them from eating such forest lives.

Furthermore, the Buddha did not allow the eating of dog's meat because of its unhygienic nature. In order to protect the health of the monks, who did not cook for themselves and would follow social norms – thus helping to ensure the health of the monks and compassion for the animals, the Buddha prohibited them from eating dog's meat.

Moreover, snakes belong to a class of spiteful animals who were ready to attack if their relatives got injured. Snakes were also viewed as the lower-classed relatives of Nāgas. Nāgas, the half-snake, half-human creature with supernatural powers, might harm or even kill monks who ate the flesh of snakes. Thus, the Buddha did not allow his monk disciples to eat snakes.

Monks in the Buddha's time had the strong intention to liberate themselves from the cycle of birth. Their main concern was the practice of meditation and contemplation. They lived a simple and easy way of life. They took alms, begged food, ate one meal each day and did not cook. They ate whatever food offered by devout people. In order not to put burden on devotees, the Buddha allowed meat to be given to the monks except ten types of creatures<sup>3</sup> aforementioned.

The Buddha allowed monks to eat fish, pork or chicken so long as they did not see, hear or suspect that the animal was intended just for the monks<sup>4</sup>. If a monk knew that an animal would have been killed merely to feed him, he could not touch that food. If he did so, then mental sufferings would accrue while the process of penance among the monks would be placed on him.

## 2. Mahāyāna Overview:

The Mahāyāna doctrine is that all creatures derive the potentiality to become Buddhas as all of them possess the Buddha mind. This implies the inner capacity to liberate everyone; it also shows the connection each person has toward other sentient beings. Our beings reflect other lives and desires outside of us, even their defilements and sufferings. And it is best to be empty of evil karmic aspects.

If animals are impure, we are also impure. If they are anxious and hurtful, we are also in a vulnerable state and get sick. The subtlety of Mahāyāna teachings have been explained through the web of mutual dependence that links all lives together – like Indra's net of gems, each reflecting the brilliance of the others. By this reason, harming and eating animals will cause negative effects to all lives in the birth-death cycle.

Mahāyāna teachings support the avoidance of meat eating through the concept of bodhisattvahood. Bodhisattvas are the ones who make a vow to help sentient beings as much as possible to liberate from worldly sufferings. To be able to do so, they have to be mindful and follow the Middle Way, seeking the consummation of wisdom and compassion. On the way to carry out their vows, bodhisattvas have to preserve the special set of fifty-eight precepts to keep their bodhisattvahood – among them is the precept to refrain from eating fish and meat.

Mahāyāna Buddhists claim that Prince Siddhārtha prescribed fifty-eight precepts after departing from his palace and majestic family. He drew these rules to be used by only him as an ascetic bodhisattva before the time of enlightenment. Since the avoidance of eating fish and meat had been included, the precept hinted that before a great person achieved the highest wisdom and compassion, he would avoid meat.

For higher souls such as the Buddha, this avoidance of meat implies that a lot of people throughout the ages have been

vegetarians – people such as Pythagoras, Mahavira, Plato, Leonardo Da Vinci, Shelly, George Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant, Gandhi, Linda and Paul McCartney, and a host of others. Vegetarianism is a diet that helps us share goodness and common sense with such luminaries, yogis and other gurus around the world. It is a wise ethic and philosophy that says yes to life.

There are reasons why we should avoid meat in the Mahāyāna way of life. If we are rational beings, our births and experiences will not be viewed as accidental appearācēs. If we adhere to causal explanation, we will not conclude that our lives exist by chance like the fall of dice. Accordingly, people and animals that we face must have some previous relationships with us. It is impossible for two minds without a past relationship to meet and feel something toward each other. Everything happens in accordance with its proper condition.

According to Chatsumarn Kabilsingh<sup>2</sup>:

“The first precept in Buddhism is “Do not kill”. This precept is not merely a legalistic prohibition, but a realization of our affinity with all who share the gift of life. A compassionate heart provides a firm ground for this precept”.

So, the existence of humans and animals is harmoniously based on causal law. In the far course of transmigration, there is not one living being that has never been our father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, or any form of kinship in various degrees. Whoever practices compassion and distributes good intentions equally to other sentient life will eat grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and such other things.

Moreover, Mahāyāna bodhisattvas will refrain from meat eating for the sake of purity. They will not bother other sentient life by the noxious processes of animals being turned into meat. They will also not bring terror to those beings by the image of the “death-dealer”.

How can we help other sentient beings if they watch us with terrifying doubt? How can we propagate the concept of whole

justice and compassion so long as animals are still widely deprived of their right to exist and harmed? And how can we defend Buddha's doctrines if meat eating is promoted? People may suspect the Buddha's teachings and refuse to accept his overall compassion.

There are more and more reasons in supporting the inappropriateness of eating meat. So as to gain higher energies and wisdom, Buddhist practitioners must keep their minds and bodies pure. But eating meat defiles the body while hindering the mind from accomplishing higher objectives. Meat eaters will sleep uneasily and awake distressfully. They will dream of dreadful events and never be satisfied with their tastes. They will be more concerned with taste than nutrition. Finally, they will be more open to disease<sup>6</sup>.

Whether pursuing greater health, energy or purity of mind, or helping other sentient beings, bodhisattvas and kind persons should take up a more compassionate diet. Such a diet is part of our everyday practice of mindfulness and care of the planet, demanding that we live in harmony on this stunningly beautiful planet.

### **3. The Buddhist Overall Perspective:**

Although Mahāyānists hold different opinions from Theravādins, both of them share an ultimate idea in common. Theravāda monks have been allowed to eat any meat except ten kinds of creatures. The meat can also be eaten so long as they do not see, hear or suspect that the death of animals is meant for them. This allowance is, however, much less acceptable in the Mahayana tradition.

The permission to eat meat in the Theravāda tradition is based on a moderate attitude rather than tasteful satisfaction. Monks are taught to be mindful in every moment, especially at the time of eating. They should eat with the feeling of gratitude to alms givers. Deeply in their minds the sorrow should be transmitted to animals that provided food for the monks' welfare. Animals used



for food will be viewed like deceased sons or daughters who die on the way of traveling, while the whole family walks through the hot desert.

The Buddhist metaphor compares monks to parents who cannot avoid the death of their children. Parents have no other better choice than eating the flesh of their children in order to survive. If they survive and try more, the hope of everyone to get out of the desert will ring true. To cross the desert is tantamount to the attempt to liberate from the life cycle.

Monks or parents sometimes eat the flesh of these beloved others. Anytime they eat, whatever merit happened must be transferred to those deceased related lives. Since Theravada monks cannot order their donators to cook vegetarian food for them, what they can do is to eat meat with mindfulness and sorrow.

With full awareness that without the flesh of animals to support the welfare of the whole order, monks may spend their lives in difficulty and the way to liberation will be very strict and narrow. Hence, meat eating in Theravāda Buddhism is acceptable through the respect of life in equality.

Nevertheless, under the allowance of the Theravāda tradition and the non-allowance of Mahayana tradition lie the ultimate doctrine of mutual dependence. Humans exist in relation to the existence of animals and nature. Without them, we can no longer survive. The tortures of animals will cause innumerable diseases and pain to humans. If they are happy, we are healthy. If they are harmed, we are sick. This is the key of relationship well known by ancient sages of all traditions.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Huston (1991) *The World's Religions*. San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *The Vinaya Pitaka, Māhavagga Part II (Book V), Bhesajjakhandhaka, Manussamansapatikkhepakātha*. Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University

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<sup>3</sup> *The Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvagga Part II (Book V), Bhesajjakhandhaka, Hatthimaṇṣādiṭṭhikhepakathā*. Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University (2539) *The Thai (Pali Translated) Tipiṭaka*. Bangkok, Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University.

<sup>4</sup> *The Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvagga Part II (Book V), Bhesajjakhandhaka, Sīhasenāpativatthu*. Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University (2539) *The Thai (Pali Translated) Tipiṭaka*. Bangkok, Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University.

<sup>5</sup> Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn (1990) Early Buddhist Views on Nature. In: Allan Hunt Badiner (editor) *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Berkeley, Parallax Press, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *The Lankavatara Sutra, Chapter VIII*. Suzuki, D. T. (translator) (1973) *The Lankavatara Sutra*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.