

All Beings are Equal but Some are More Equal than Others: Buddhism and Vegetarianism in the U.S.

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Abstract

Since the first precept of Buddhism is abstaining from harming living beings, the question arises whether Buddhists should be vegetarian. However, though it has received little attention in Buddhist literature, the topic is worthy of further examination and should be widely discussed by those concerned about Buddhist ethics. This paper investigates the arguments for vegetarianism and for meat-eating by examining Buddhist texts and their interpretations by Buddhist scholars. The authors' conclusion is that given what society knows about the detrimental effects of meat eating on the environment, of the treatment of non-humans and of the effects on human health a firm vegetarian Buddhist ethic should be considered for the 21st century.

Introduction

In the U.S. there are at least 1.5 million Buddhists. From 1990 to 2001 there was a remarkable increase of self-described Buddhists, with a 170% growth in Buddhism, making it the fourth most-practiced religion behind Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Lampman, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Buddhism is generally considered an animal-friendly religion because its first precept, abstaining from killing living beings, applies to all sentient beings and because it is based on compassion and loving-kindness toward all (Sarao, 2008). The Buddha was reported to have told his disciples that it is necessary to approach all living beings as if they have the same nature as people with the same potential for awakening as humans (Lankavatāra Sūtra 8:246, Page, 1999/2000:106–107). However, the Buddha’s compassion for animals has not translated into a commitment to a vegetarian diet in the U.S. (Phelps, 2004:XIII). This has caused concern for some individuals within the Buddhist community. Dietary practices for U.S. Buddhists vary: a small percentage are vegan (strict vegetarians who consume no animal products); ovo-lacto vegetarians, who eat no meat but consume other animal products, such as dairy products and eggs; and the vast majority, who consume meat. All these claim to have the Buddha on their side. In the U.S. most Buddhist teachers seem unwilling to address the topic of vegetarianism. A search of two major online collections of dharma talks,¹ which includes hundreds of lectures given by a wide variety of teachers across the U.S., reveals that only one talk covers Buddhism and vegetarianism (Gaziano, 2013). However there appears to be more interest in vegetarianism among the general population of Buddhists (Steele & Kaza, 2000; Kaza, 2005; Nath, 2010).

¹ <http://www.audiodharma.org/>; <http://www.dharmaseed.org/>

Where Buddhists find support for their differing views on vegetarianism

The ethical dilemma concerning meat-eating is not solved by referring to the Buddhist scriptures. Different scriptures have been used to argue both vegetarians and meat-eaters, each claiming that the Buddha is on their side. There are a large number of Buddhist scriptures and each Buddhist sect accepts certain texts, while ignoring others. There are many subdivisions within Buddhism but most can be classified into three major branches: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. The Theravāda and the Vajrayāna schools (South East Asia, Sri Lanka and Tibet) tend to allow meat-eating while Mahāyāna practitioners (China, Korea, and Vietnam) advocate vegetarianism (Kaza 2005).

In the Pali Canon, the standard collection of suttas in the Theravāda school, the Buddha is said to have given specific instructions to monks and nuns as to when meat could be consumed. He declared that meat should not be eaten under three circumstances: when it is seen or heard or suspected that a living being has been purposely slaughtered for the eater (*Jīvaka sutta*, MN 55). In other words, it is not permissible to give your consent to the killing of living beings, but it is acceptable to eat animals that are already dead.

During their daily alms rounds, monks and nuns were instructed to accept whatever food was placed in their begging bowls (*Sekhiya Rules 27–9*, cited in Ariyesako, 1999). The reasoning appears to be that to reject such an offering would constitute an insult to the lay people and deprive them of an opportunity to gain merit and blessings. Since the animal was already dead and was not killed specifically for the monks and nuns, eating it was permissible. However, another interpretation of the three circumstances when meat should not be eaten concludes if an individual sees meat in one's food, hears from the lay person that there is meat in the dish or if the monk or nun suspects there may be meat in the offering, it is wrong to accept it

(Jīvaka Sutta MN 55, cited in Kahila, 1999). The exception would be if an individual was not aware he was consuming meat.

Also in the Pali Canon, the Buddha rejected a suggestion from Devadatta, a cousin, brother-in-law and fellow monk of the Buddha, that all monks be vegetarian. Instead, the Buddha declared meat-eating to be karmically neutral and suggested that any monk that adopts vegetarianism for the purpose of impressing others with their superior spirituality commits a violation of monastic orders (Anandajoti, 2012).

Unlike the Pali Canon, the Mahāyāna scriptures seem to unequivocally promote vegetarianism. For example, in the Lankavāṭara Sūtra the Buddha is said to have specifically forbidden the consumption of animal flesh under any circumstances. He stated: ‘I have never approved, do not approve, and will never approve of a meat diet’ (8:244). He also said, ‘Killing animals for profit and buying meat are both evil deeds’ (8:257). Likewise, in the Parinirvāṇa Sūtra the Buddha declared: ‘Eating meat hinders the development of compassion... Do not eat food if you see that there is meat in it; if you do you will accumulate demerit’ (1:605a).

While its unknown how many U.S. Buddhists believe in rebirth, it is interesting to note that the Jātaka Tales, stories that depict previous lives of the Buddha, reflect the unity of all life forms (Ashliman 2006). In many of these narratives the Buddha, lived in animal forms. Each story conveys altruistic deeds performed by the Buddha and suggest little or no difference between human and animal moral behavior. These folktales also suggest that most nonhuman animals have at some point in the reincarnation process been a mother, father, husband, wife, sister, brother, son or daughter of most humans (also in Lankavāṭara Sutra 8:246; Kapleau, 1981, 20). Therefore, any living animal might be a reborn dead relative, and if an individual looked far enough back in their infinite series of past lives, they would eventually perceive every animal to be related to them in some way.

This paper will explore both sides of the vegetarianism–meat-eating argument. We will then offer reasons why contemporary Buddhists, in order to live up to the first precept of non-harming and of compassion, should refrain from eating animals.

The Buddhist meat-eating point of view

Some Buddhists argue that it is not necessary to be vegetarian because the Buddha was not a vegetarian. He was born into a privileged and wealthy family and enjoyed a comfortable upbringing that probably included meat-eating (Sukhamala sutta, AN 3.38). It is also possible that during his seven years as an ascetic he accepted whatever food was offered him and this might have included meat (Bodhipaksa 1999; Kahila, 1999). According to some accounts the Buddha even died from eating meat by consuming tainted pork (Mahānibbāna sutta, DN 16). He also is said to have given instructions to his monks and nuns that under certain circumstances meat could be eaten (Jīvaka Sutta, MN 55). On still another occasion, when the Buddha was challenged over the evils of meat-eating, he countered by stating that many other types of behavior, such as, stealing, lying and adultery were much worse (Amagandha Sutta, Sn 2.2).

Contemporary meat-eating Buddhists also rely on the Pali Canon, referring to the ‘alms-bowl exception’, which allowed monks and nuns to eat whatever was placed in their begging bowls (Phelps 2004:69). As long as one follows the instructions of the Buddha and makes sure that the animal was not killed specifically for the person, then eating meat it is acceptable. For modern Buddhists (Goldstein, 2003:59) this ancient practice transforms into the belief that a person can buy meat, or eat meat in a restaurant and not violate the first precept because the animal was not killed specially for the individual. However, a violation of the first precept would occur if someone was for instance to

dine at a restaurant and select live lobsters or fish from a tank for their meal.

It is also argued that the Buddha listed only certain types of animals that could not be eaten. Among them were horse, elephant, dog, snake, tiger, leopard and bear. Since only certain animals are specifically forbidden, it is reasoned that eating other animals is permissible (Vinaya-Piṭaka; O'Brian, 2011). Some meat-eating U.S. Buddhists also assert that it is impossible not to kill when eating any type of food. They contend that even vegetarianism leads to the killing of many living beings when farmers till the soil and harvest crops. It has been argued that more beings lose their lives from farming of vegetables than from raising grass-feed cows for food (Davis, 2002).

Another line of argument made by Western meat-eating Buddhists is that Buddhism, unlike other religions, does not prescribe specific behavior but merely encourages each individual to find his or her own way. Hagan (1997) and Batchelor (1997) stress that in Western Buddhism there are no doctrines, beliefs, or essential practices. Rather, Buddhism has teachings which people learn and use in their own way. Particularly in the West, vegetarianism is viewed as a personal choice not a guiding principle (Goldstein 2003:59). Buddhist ethics is complicated by the fact that there are so many varieties of Buddhist practices, and so many suttas and sūtras which have been the subject of varying interpretations with no single set of rules or authority to adjudicate. This makes it difficult for Buddhist practitioners to know what rules to follow. Since there are no requirements in Buddhism, only training principles, vegetarianism is sometimes promoted as a way to help improve one's practice but not as something everyone must follow.

Still other meat-eating Buddhists take an extreme position, claiming that even plants are sentient beings and that vegetarians are engaging in killing by eating carrots, broccoli and other vegetables. These Buddhists take the word 'sentient' to refer any living thing rather than beings with consciousness capable of feeling pain (Getz, 2004). Tworikov (1994) states, 'If

we don't kill cows, we kill carrots. If not carrots, then rice. Is the distinction between killing animals and vegetables born of compassion, or anthropocentrism? We have to eat and those who choose meat are not necessarily pro-killing.' However, this argument does seem to avoid the generally accepted meaning of sentience, denoting consciousness, or a level of awareness and ability to feel pain (Regan, 1983).

The Buddhist vegetarian point of view

There is however just as much support in the Buddhist suttas and sūtras for vegetarianism. For example, the conclusion that the Buddha died from eating tainted pork is highly contested. A number of Buddhist scholars have argued that it was a poisonous mushroom that caused his death, not meat (Kapleau 1981:24; Page 1991:121; Phelps 2004:82). There are also numerous sūtras which argue against meat-eating (Buddhist Resources, 2005). In several Mahāyāna sutras including the *Mahāparinirvāna* and *Lotus* sutras the concept of 'Buddha-nature' provides further argument for not eating animals. This Buddhist doctrine contends that all sentient beings possess the potential to become enlightened. Kapleau argues that humans would not eat the flesh of someone with the same nature as themselves because it would be a form of cannibalism (1981:19 The Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sutra: 423 cited in Page 1999:221-222).

A strong argument can also be made that the alms-bowl exemption, where receiving meat was allowed if not specifically killed for the person, is not likely to have occurred. The lay public would not have offered meat to the Buddha and his monks and nuns because they would have known their religious preference for vegetarian food. In fact, it was customary for public donors to consult with Ananda, the attendant of the Buddha, concerning preferred foods that should be offered. It is also known that it was the role of the monks and nuns to educate the lay public so one of the things they would have instructed the

laity on is the importance of a vegetarian diet (Kapleau, 1981; Page, 1999:25).

Vegetarian Buddhists reject the argument that a person can eat animals as long as they are not killed specifically for the person. Page (1999:122) points out that the Buddha directed his disciple, Jīvaka, not to eat meat. Page also examined a passage in the Pali scripture concerning a conversation between the Buddha and Jīvaka. In this discourse the Buddha is responding to Jīvaka's question in which he asks the Buddha if he has knowingly eaten meat that others have killed especially for him. The Buddha responds: 'Jivaka, those who speak thus... are quoting my own words but are misrepresenting me with what is not true, and what is not fact. I, Jīvaka, say that in three cases meat may not be used: if it is seen, heard, suspected. In these three cases I, Jīvaka, say that meat may not be used. But I, Jīvaka, say that in three cases meat may be used: if it is not seen, heard, suspected. In these three cases I, Jivaka say that meat may be used.' (Page, 1999:122-123). This reflects the view that one should abstain from knowingly eating meat but if consumed accidentally the person is not ethically responsible.

In a Mahāyāna text, the Buddha is quoted as saying: 'They [Bodhisattvas] should not be closely associated with persons engaged in raising pigs, sheep, chickens or dogs, or those engaged in hunting or fishing or other evil activities' (Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra 143 cited in Page, 1999). Sarao (2008) doubts whether the Buddha ever condoned meat eating. He states that it does not seem possible that the Buddha allowed meat-eating given the fact that he condemned these activities, and that he even required his monks to filter drinking water to protect micro-organisms. He speculates that meat exemptions that appear in the Pali Canon were placed there long after the Buddha was dead in order to justify a meat-eating diet by subsequent cultures. Stewart (2010), on the other hand, makes an argument that the Buddha was vegetarian but most likely he advocated meat-eating to avoid a schism among some of his monks.

Arguments for Adopting a Vegetarian Diet

Treatment of Animals

The typical American diet should pose an ethical dilemma for contemporary Western Buddhists in the 21st century. It has been our experience with several Western teachers in the Vipassanā tradition that when Buddhist teachers are asked how do Buddhists justify eating animals given the conditions on modern factory farms, they respond by stating that vegetarianism is a choice. Phelps (2004:136) and Lewis (2011:30) explain that this deflects from the question of how animals are treated on farms and slaughterhouses to how Buddhists practitioners feel. Given what we know about the conditions of animals raised for food in the U.S, good conscience informs us that a religion that emphasizes non-harming, compassion and loving-kindness cannot ignore this factor. Rather than accepting the Pali Canon as the only explanation for what the Buddha said, and using these suttas as a justification for meat-eating, a debate should be waged in an attempt to explain the spiritual, ethical, and environmental impact of meat-eating.

The way animals are treated on modern farms and slaughterhouses is highly questionable from a Buddhist standpoint; in fact it has been challenged by animal advocates and utilitarian social thinkers (Phelps, 2004:8; Kapleau, 1981:9; Singer, 1975/2009:97). It is enough reason to suggest that vegetarianism is necessary in order to uphold the first precept (abstaining from killing living beings). Modern farms are nothing like the farm conditions the Buddha observed during his lifetime. For example, just to describe a few of the modern agricultural practices: chickens used for eggs are debeaked and forced to live out their lives in a crowded battery cages. Hens are starved for 10 to 14 days in a process called ‘forced molting’ in order to increase egg production. Pigs are castrated and have their tails cut off without any anesthesia. Cows are branded with hot irons that burns off hair and several layers of skin. They are also castrated and de-horned, all without pain killers. Dairy cows are kept in

cycles of continuous lactation. Almost immediately after lactation has decreased due to giving birth they are artificially inseminated to continue the birth and lactation process over again. Their offspring, if males, are transported at one to two days old to veal farms where baby calves spend their short lives (18–20 weeks) chained inside two foot wide wooden stalls that are too narrow to turn around in. This intense confinement deprives the animals of engaging in any of the natural behaviors such as bonding with their mothers. Since dairy farms have no use for male cows and their mother's milk is harvested for human consumption these male cows are either sent to a veal farms or killed shortly after birth (Motavalli, 2001). Cows and sheep are shipped several hundred miles to slaughterhouses with no food and water only to experience a tortured death (Eisnitz 1997:132). Most fish consumed for food are raised on factory farms where fish live in water so polluted it makes it hard for them to breathe and overcrowding is so intense that it often results in cannibalism (Safran Foer, 2009:189–90). By ignoring these farm practices Buddhists are participating in the suffering and death of these animals when they consume them.

For Buddhists who argue that eating plants is equivalent to eating animals it hardly seems necessary to say that removing a carrot from the garden is different from killing a sentient animal. Animals are conscious with minds capable of feelings, memory, emotions, and desires. In fact, recent scientific evidence suggests that some mammals and birds are capable of performing many functions previously attributed only to humans. Some animals use tools, have language, are self-aware, demonstrate empathy and ethics and live in socially structured communities (Bekoff, 2006; De Waal, 1989; Kristin, 2011). It does not seem reasonable to argue that plants and animals belong in the same category. Plants are non-sentient and fundamentally different from humans and other animals. Plants have no central nervous system and there is no evidence that they suffer as animals do (Francione, 2006; Kapleau, 1981:55).

Treatment of People

Processing animals for food not only engenders cruelty to animals but it also exploits people, a concept antithetical to the virtue of *ahimsa* (non-harming). Workers on kill-lines in slaughterhouses are subjected to horrendous working conditions, which in turn generates abuse to animals. Workers often scald, cut, club and dismember fully conscious animals. In addition, workers harm themselves. Accidents resulting in serious injuries and loss of limbs are common, as is carpal tunnel and other repetitive motion disorders. The physical and emotional toll resulting from this type of work is so detrimental that slaughterhouse work is considered the worst job in America and has the fastest turnover of any occupation in the U.S. In addition, it exploits the disenfranchised by employing mostly immigrant workers, many of whom are illegal (Schlosser, 2001:160; Eisnitz, 1997:39).

Environmental Concerns

It should also be noted that there is an ecological price to pay for modern meat production. Ecology has become an important issue among many modern Buddhists in the West (Kaza & Kraft, 2000; Pathak, 2004; Snyder, 1996). The high demand for meat has led to the destruction of rain forests and topsoil erosion. Modern farming methods also deplete fresh water supply. Farmed animal production uses 80% of all fresh water in the U.S. In addition to destruction of the natural resources of land and water, meat production is responsible for much of the pollution to our air. Toxic waste run-off has also led to major problems such as E-coli contamination of the human food supply by residue from factory farms (Hill, 1996). These findings are supported by a United Nations report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*. It found that greenhouse gases (CO²) produced by the livestock industry is the number one contributor to global warming, and is higher than those created by all forms of transportation combined, worldwide. It also concluded, as other studies have, that modern meat production is a major cause of soil erosion, air

pollution and fresh water shortages (Steinfeld, Wassenaar, Rosales, and de Haan, 2006; Goodland & Anhang, 2009).

Effect on World Hunger

Meat eating also contributes to world hunger. More than 90% of soybean crops and 80% of the corn crops in the United States are used to feed animals being raised for human food. The problem is graphically portrayed by Frances Moore Lappé (1991). She writes: ‘Imagine sitting down to an eight-ounce steak. Then imagine the room filled with 45 to 50 people with empty bowls in front of them. For the feed cost of your steak, each of their bowls could be filled with a full cup of cooked cereal grains’ (p.64).

It has been estimated that if meat consumption in the U.S. could be reduced by just 10%, there would be enough grain to feed a population of 60 million (Motavalli 2001). And, if all the grain currently fed to livestock in the U.S. were consumed by people directly, it would be enough food to feed 800 million starving people (Segelken, 1997).

Impact on Human Health

In addition to the way animals are treated in modern animal agriculture, its detrimental toll on the human work force, its impact on the earth and the effect on world hunger, there is also the issue of human health. Many think that it is necessary to eat meat to have a healthy diet even though the evidence points in the opposite direction. The American Dietetic Association (2009) has stated that a vegetarian or vegan diet is healthful and nutritional and provides benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. This was confirmed by one of the largest statistical and longitudinal study ever conducted, *The China Study*. It concluded that people who eat a plant based or vegan diet and avoid consuming animal products, meat, dairy, and eggs will minimize their chances of acquiring chronic diseases, such as heart attacks, cancer, and diabetes. The study also found that as people change from a plant based diet to a Western meat-based

diet there is a significant increase in the occurrence of strokes, obesity and high blood pressure (Campbell, 2004). A similar message was presented by the World Health Organization (2002). A report stated that a diet rich in animal products promotes heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, and kidney failure. It indicated that diets associated with increases in chronic diseases are those rich in sugar, meat and other animal products. It also, condemned governments that urge their citizens to eat animal food. Instead, it recommended that government policies should be geared to the growing of plants.

Conclusion

It has been our experience as members of a Vipassanā Sangha that the only time vegetarian eating is suggested is at Buddhist retreats. On retreat, participants are asked to follow the precepts, which include not taking life and eating vegetarian. This seems to a form of behavior based on a misunderstanding of Buddhist ethics. If Buddhists take the vow not to kill or harm other beings, can this be interpreted only to apply to special occasions, such as retreats? Teachers do not suggest that retreatants apply this same principle to the other precepts, involving inappropriate sex, stealing, and taking intoxicants. There is an assumption that these precepts are followed whether on retreat or not. It is only the first precept that is treated in such a cavalier manner.

We live in a time when it is not only possible but relatively easy to follow a diet informed by ethical considerations, such as veganism. Western Buddhists who want to justify meat eating have ignored this fact and instead have readily looked to select sūtras or certain Buddhist cultures that eat meat to justify meat eating habits. U.S. Buddhists need to evaluate the conditions under which animals live and die, particularly the way animals are treated on modern farms and in slaughterhouses.

When people eat meat they are supporting the need for occupations that engage in animal exploitation. These are

livelihoods that were rejected by the Buddha (Jīvaka Sutta, MN 55). If butcher, animal farmer and slaughterhouse worker constitute wrong livelihood in Buddhist mandate it is not enough for Buddhists to avoid these occupations. These businesses exist only because consumers buy their products.

Attempts to argue that a meat based diet produces fewer animals killed than a vegetarian diet have been disproven (Lamey, 2007; Matheny, 2003). It is important to recognize that dietary choices are not equal when it comes to loss of life in the production of food. While it is true that even a vegetarian diet results in some loss of life when the farmer plows the fields, the ethical position would be to adopt the diet that causes the least amount of harm to the fewest number of sentient beings.

For many Buddhists the ethical issue of dietary choice may be one that they have not considered. After all, in the U.S. we live in a culture where, for many, meat-eating is something done three times a day. It is common to see people eating bacon and eggs for breakfast, hamburgers for lunch and ham, chicken or steak for dinner. Meat cuisine is a cultural norm that is often accepted without question. This is because meat-eating is so ingrained in the U.S. culture that when meat-eaters encounter vegetarians many ask questions such as, what do you eat? Or, how do you get your protein? Like most Americans they are unaware of alternative eating styles and have no idea of how animals are raised for food. Since their Buddhist teachers are not likely to introduce these issues they have little chance of becoming informed. For many Buddhists the answer may be exposure to humane education (Joy, 2010; Weil, 2009).

A Buddhist ethic for the 21st century that is informed by the first precept of non-harming must take into consideration the life and times in which we live. Modern factory farming with its intense confinement and assembly-line process, with mass production, results in the torture and death of billions of sentient beings in the U.S. alone. At the same time, most of us are lay practitioners with independent financial resources, not monks and nuns relying on the kindness of others for food. We are in a

position to make conscious choices about what we choose to eat. Our ethical code should adhere to a principle that tells us not to kill or cause others to kill or support those that do (Bodhipaksa, 1999).

If Buddhists recognize that animals are sentient beings with Buddha nature then they are obligated to see them as on the same moral plane as humans. There does not seem to be any justification for continuing to support killing animals for food. By eating animals one becomes an accessory to the act of killing (Sarao, 2008). Schmithausen (2002) points out that as consumers we are all responsible. By not eating animals Buddhists are engaging in an ethical boycott of the killing of sentient beings (Bodhipaksa, 1999).

There is still time for us to develop a Buddhist ethic toward animals. Buddhism in the U.S. is in its formative years. Hopefully, with the continuation of proper humane education and dharma teachings that address this issue this trend will be reversed and U.S. Buddhists will live up to their obligation to honor the lives of all sentient beings.

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