

Should Buddhists be vegetarians?

By Dr. D. P. Atukorale

All Buddhists are expected to observe the five precepts. Out of these, **when we observe the first precept**, we promise not to take the life of any living being and not to harm any such being. It is quite clear that **we cannot consume flesh without someone else killing the animals for us**. If **we do not consume meat** or meat products, there **will be no killing of animals**. The first precept is an injunction against destroying life and hurting others.

The Buddha also tells us not to hurt others according to the first precept. According to passage number **131 of Dhammapada**. "*He who, for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness*". Therefore according to Buddhism not killing and not hurting living beings are very important.

Passage no 225 of Dhammapada says "The wise who hurt no living beings and who keep their bodies under self-control, may go to immortal "Nirvana" where once gone they sorrow no more".

Again Dhammapada passage no. 405 says "A man is not a great man because he is a warrior and kills others, but because he hurts not any living beings, he in truth is called a great man".

Dhammapada passages 129 and 130 say "All beings fear before danger, life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill".

According to Buddhism all animals such as fish, mammals and birds are sentient creatures and should not be killed or hurt. According to Buddhism, Buddhists should not be hunters, fishermen, trappers, slaughterhouse workers, vivisectionists etc.

What about Eating Meat?

Some people **argue that**, as long as people don't kill animals themselves, it is all right to eat meat. But passages nos 129 and 130 of Dhammapada specify that we should not kill or cause to kill. **When somebody buys meat and meat products he or she must necessarily cause someone to kill these animals.**

By accepting meat served to us by someone else, **we are causing others to kill.** Dhammapada passage no. 7 says " He who lives only for pleasures and whose soul is not in harmony, who considers not the food he eats, is idle and has not the power of virtue, such a man is moved by "Mara", is moved by selfish temptation even as a weak tree is shaken by the wind".

Why Should Buddhists Be Vegetarians?

The main reason is mercy. Mercy is an important way of learning to be a better person. Being without mercy is incompatible with being a Buddhist. Having a merciful and a compassionate heart will show up in all aspects of one's life. Think of the intense pain you would get when a bee or a wasp or a centipede attacks you. A person who has ever seen **how a crab is cooked in boiling water** and its desperate and doomed efforts to crawl and jump out betray the unbearable pain it experiences, will never eat crabs. Finally the crab gives up the life in sorrow as it turns bright red. What a painful end.

A person who has ever seen the **excruciating pain suffered by a cow** when the **slaughterer cuts a part of the neck**, bleeds the animal and skins the animal long before it dies will never have the heart to eat beef. Not eating the flesh of these animals is an expression of mercy.

For meat-eaters, every banquet, **every wedding and every birthday party** and every wedding anniversary **means death of thousands of animals.**

Preventing the suffering of living creatures by not using their flesh to satisfy our taste buds and hunger is the minimum expression of compassion we as Buddhists can offer.

To shoot, knife, strangle, drown crush, poison, burn or electrocute or otherwise intentionally to take life of a living being, purposefully to cause pain on a human being or an animal is to defile the first precept. Another way to defile the first precept is to cause another to kill, torture or harm any living creature. Therefore to put flesh of an animal into one's belly is another way to cause another to kill.

If fowls, cows and fish are not eaten, they would not be killed. **Therefore meat eaters are responsible for the violence and destruction of animals.**

Buddhism also teaches us that there is not a single being that has not been our father, our mother, husband, wife, sister, brother, son or daughter, in the ladder of cause and effect through countless rebirths. In other words the creature that is the cow today might have been our mother during the last birth. The chicken you are going to eat for your dinner tonight might have been your brother or sister during your last birth. Therefore rights of nonhumans should not be ignored or trampled upon. How can a monk seeking liberation from suffering, persistently eat the flesh of animals, knowing the excruciating pain and terror caused to them at the time of their slaughter?

Did The Buddha Sanction Meat Eating?

The laymen and Buddhist monks who eat meat quote the Jeewaka sutra in which the Buddha is said to have been addressed by one Jeewaka. Buddha is quoted as saying.

"I forbid the eating of meat in 3 cases. If there is evidence either of your eyes, or of your ears or if there are grounds of suspicion. In three cases, I allow it, if there is no evidence of your eyes or of your ears and if there is no ground of suspicion".

Are not domestic animals such as cows, goats, pigs and hens slaughtered for those who eat their flesh? If no one eats their flesh, obviously they would not be killed.

Can anyone imagine a monk saying to his "dayakaya" who had offered him meat, "Sir, it is kind of you to donate this meat to me. But as I have reason to believe that the animal from which it came was killed just for me, I cannot accept it."

Jeewaka sutra also implies that the Buddha approved of butchering and the horrors of the slaughter house. Yet slaughtering is one of the trades forbidden to the Buddhists and with good reason. To say that on the one hand that the **Buddha condemned the blood trades of slaughtering hunting?** fishing and trapping and on the other hand allowed Buddhists and Buddhist monks to eat flesh of slaughtered animals when the animals have not been killed specifically for them is an absurd contradiction.

Who else but the meat eaters are responsible for the blood trades of butchering, hunting and fishing? After all the slaughterers and the meat packing houses that sustain them are only responding to the demands of the flesh eaters.

"I am only doing your dirty work" was the reply of a slaughterer to a gentleman who was objecting to the brutality of slaughtering harmless dumb animals.

Every individual who eats flesh whether the animal is expressly killed for him or not, is supporting the trade of slaughtering and contributing to the violent death of harmless dumb animals.

Was the Buddha so obtuse that, He failed to understand this, He who has been described as the "Perfect one", in whom, all mental, spiritual and psychic faculties have come to perfection and whose consciousness encompasses the infinity of the Universe?

Was the Buddha so imperceptive as not to see that only by abstaining from flesh eating can one effectively end both killing of defenceless and dumb animals and the infliction of terror and suffering upon them.

The Buddha, we are told forbade his monks to eat flesh of such animals as dogs, elephants, bears and lions. Why should the Buddha sanction the eating of one kind of flesh and condemn another? Does a pig or a cow whose meat is supposed to be approved for eating, suffer any less pain, when it is slaughtered than a dog or a bear?

All Buddhists who are familiar with numerous accounts of the Buddha's extraordinary compassion and reverence for living beings, for example, his insistence that, his monks carry filters to strain water they drink, lest the death of micro organisms in the water could occur, could never believe that he would be indifferent to the suffering and death of domestic animals caused by their slaughter for food.

As all Buddhists are aware, monks have a separate code of conduct called the "Vinaya". Surely the Buddha could have demanded of his monks what he could not have demanded of his lay followers.

Monks by virtue of their training and their strength of character, are different from the lay people and are better able to resist the pleasures of senses to which ordinary people succumb. That is why, they renounce sexual pleasure and also not eat solids beyond 12 noon. Why is taking solids after 12 noon a more serious offence than eating animal flesh? Did the Buddha really say the things the compilers of the Pali Sutras would have us believe, he said on the subject of meat eating?

Mahayana Version of Meat Eating

Let us now consider the Sanskrit version as regards meat eating. I quote from "Lankavatara" sutra which devotes one whole chapter on the evils of meat eating.

"For the sake of love, of purity' the Bodhisatva should refrain from eating flesh which is born of semen, blood etc. For the fear of causing terror of living beings let the Bodhisatva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion refrain from eating flesh".

"It is not true that meat is proper food and permissible when the animal was not killed by himself, when he did not order others to kill, and when it is not specially meant for him".

"Again there may be people in the future who being under the influence of taste for meat, will string together in various ways sophistic arguments to defend meat eating".

But meat eating in any form, in any manner, and in any place is unconditionally and once and for all, is prohibited. I will not permit".

Surangama Sutra says "The reason for practising "dhyana" and seeking to attain "Samadhi" is to escape from suffering of life. But in seeking to escape from suffering ourselves, why should we inflict it upon others. Unless you can control your minds, that even the thought of brutal unkindness and killing is abhorrent you will never be able to escape from bondage of world's life".

"After my parinirvana in the last kalpa, different kinds of ghosts will be encountered everywhere, deceiving people, and teaching that they can eat meat and still attain enlightenment. **How can a bhikku who hopes to become a deliverer of others himself, be living on the flesh of other sentient beings?"**

The "Mahaparinirvana" Sutra (Sanskrit version) states **"The eating of meat extinguishes the seeds of compassion"**.

Even before the Buddha's time various religions in India condemned flesh eating as not conducive to spiritual progress. If elder bhikkus of Mahayana were satisfied with Theravada version of flesh eating, they would have remained silent.

The fact that they spoke out so vehemently against flesh eating, shows how deeply disturbed the elder bhikkus who wrote the Sanskrit version of Buddha's teachings were.

The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism points out that in China and Japan, flesh eating was looked upon as an evil and was ostracized and any kind of meat was not used in temples and monasteries. **Meat eating was taboo in Japan until the middle of the 19th century.** People avoided giving alms to flesh eating bhikkus.

Dr. Kosheliya Wali in her book, "Conception of Ahimsa in Indian Thought" says, **"Meat can never be obtained without injuring** creatures and injury to sentient beings and is detrimental to heavenly bliss and therefore one should shun meat eating".

"One should consider the disgusting origin of flesh and the cruelty of slaughtering sentient beings and entirely abstain from flesh eating".

"He who permits the slaughter of animals, he who cuts up, kills, buys, sells, serves it up and eats, everyone is a slayer of animals".

"He who seeks to increase his own flesh with the flesh of others and worshipping the gods is the greatest of all sinners".

"Meat cannot be obtained from straw or stone. It can be obtained only by slaughtering creatures. Hence meat is not to be taken".

A Chinese monk once said "You form a company with whatever type of meat you eat. You form a corporation with whatever type of animals you eat. For example if you eat a lot of pork you will become tied up into a company of pigs, same applies to cows, chicken, sheep fish and so forth".

A British vegetarian named Dr. Watch once said **"To prevent human, bloodshed one must start at the dinner table"**.

If a person wants to take joy in Buddhism and enter into mercy and knowledge of the Buddha he must begin at the dinner table.

In Sri Lanka, a wedding party takes hundreds if not **thousands of animal lives.** A birthday party or a **wedding anniversary takes hundreds of animal lives.**

Before the death, living creatures experience, not joy, **but anger and hatred and resentment.**

It is just by not killing with body that you observe the first precept. If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break the first precept.

We must be determined not to condone killing even in our minds. According to Buddhism mind is the base of all actions.

Did Buddha Die From Eating Meat?

Buddhist monks who eat meat under certain circumstances, justify their flesh eating, saying that, Buddha himself ate a piece, of pork at one of his follower's houses rather than hurt the feelings of his "dayakaya". **Some monks who eat flesh, say that, they eat whatever put before them without any aversion.**

But most of the Buddhist scholars contend that **it was not a piece of meat that caused the Buddha's death** and all Mahayana scriptures unequivocally condone meat eating as mentioned earlier.

According to Mr. Rhys David what Chunda offered to the Buddha is some mushrooms. Rhys David says that the term "sukara maddara" has at least 4 meanings.

- (a) Food eaten by pigs.
- (b) "Pigs delight?"
- (c) Soft parts of the pig and
- (d) Food trampled by the pigs.

Chunda being a follower of the Buddha, surely, would not have offered a piece of pork, **well knowing that flesh was not a part of the Buddha's diet.** Very likely Chunda did not eat meat himself as many Indians did not eat meat during the Buddha's time. Why then would he have offered meat to the "World Honoured one", a person so sensitive to suffering of all living beings, that he would not drink milk from a cow during the first 10 days after its calf is born.

Any monk who has been offered meals at the home of a Buddhist knows that, the "dayakaya" usually asks the monk or his attendant or other "dayakayas" known to the monk, what kind of food, the monk normally eats, so that the "dayakaya" can avoid serving food that does not agree with him physically or spiritually. During the Buddha's days there would be donors of meals to the Buddha often consulted by Ananda, the Buddha's attendant.

Buddhist monks who do not like any item of diet offered to them have a pleasant way of rejecting such food, without uttering a single word.

As far as I know the majority of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka eat meat and meat products. Some monks sometimes mention to the dayakaya, items of diet such as chicken which they eat when the dayakaya meets them to book a date for "dana". Quite a number of Buddhist monks especially those living in temples such as "Sasuna" and hermitages **do not consume any form of meat, fish or eggs, because that kind of food rouses passion and is not conducive to their spiritual upliftment.**

It is note-worthy that more and more dayakayas give vegetarian diet for almsgivings and the number of vegetarian monks has been increasing during the past few years.

Buddhist monks can play a great role in reducing the slaughter of animals and the terror and suffering associated with slaughter by requesting their followers not to serve flesh when they meet the monks to invite them for an almsgiving as there are lots of Buddhists who follow the good examples set by Buddhist monks. **The majority of Buddhists have a higher respect for vegetarian monks than for monks who eat flesh.** Buddhist monks who preach "Dhamma" can in no way accept flesh for food without getting into a conflict with "Ahimsa".

Buddhism is a religion to be practised. If the body of **Buddhist monks makes a proper drive for vegetarianism it would save a lot of animals from slaughter** and cruelty and terror that accompanies slaughter. The body of Buddhist monks should lead the way and lay Buddhists, at least a good proportion of them would follow.

With acknowledgements to

(1) "A Buddhist case for Vegetarianism" by Roshi Philip Kapleau.

(2) Dharma Bhandagaraya by Ven. Weragoda Sarada.