



Buddhism & Vegetarianism Fiveteen Questions & Answers

by
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Q . Didn't the Buddha eat meat?

A. This is a claim sometimes made by Buddhists of all traditions. There appear to be some sutra references about the Buddha eating choice foods which could include meat before he was enlightened, while he was living in the palace. This is before he made the great renunciation and left the householder's life and became a recluse (monk).

His final meal before enlightenment is reported to be rice cooked in milk (which is vegetarian). In the sutras after his enlightenment we do not find one sentence, one sutra indicating anywhere that he ate meat. In fact, he defines delicious foods as choice hill rice with curry (Sutta 7, Majjhima Nikaya). In another sutra, Buddha and Ananda compare the teachings to a sweet honey ball which consists of flour, ghee, molasses, and honey (Sutta 18, Majjhima Nikaya).

At his death in the paranirvana sutra, the food that poisoned him and led to his death was at one time translated as pork. The terms have been translated as "*pig's truffles*" which was originally mistranslated as pork. Modern scholars including, Arthur Waley, K. E. Neumann, and Mrs. Rhys David have corrected this to "the food of pigs" which are mushrooms. Today, it is the consensus that the Buddha ate poisonous mushrooms which led to his death at the age of 80.

Further evidence that the Buddha did not eat pork can be seen in the fact that Cunda was a blacksmith, the one who offered the final meal to the Buddha. On a recent trip to India I learned from a Hindu-Buddhist scholar that the three highest castes do not eat pork or other foods from pig meat. As a blacksmith, he was a member of the third caste and therefore, could not have prepared pork.

Q. What about the famous three-fold rule that the Buddha allowed meat eating if one did not hear, see, or order the animal to be killed for one's consumption.

A. The main premise behind the three-fold rule is to graciously accept what one receives in your bowl when going for alms round. This rule was meant and spoken to monks and nuns, not to lay people. "*Beggars can't be choosers*" in modern terms. So for the vast majority of Buddhists who are lay people, a conscious decision must be made.

In the Pali scriptures and the Sanskrit Mahayana scriptures (Buddha's discourses) there are many references to the Buddha's compassion for animals and his wish for animals not to be killed, including statements in the Dhammapada and other sutras about how all animals do not wish to be killed and how we should avoid killing at all possible costs. The Buddha was most concerned about intent. If we accidentally kill and there is no intent, then there is no negative karma accumulated. But, if we purchase meat at a grocery store, can we honestly say that we do not intend for another animal to be killed?

The monks and nuns were required to go on alms rounds for their foods during the time of the Buddha. So this apparently removed some of the "intent." But lay people must choose and can

make a conscious decision at the grocery. The butcher and slaughter house workers are just doing the dirty work for the demand raised from the grocery stores by the consumers.

An interesting fact is that this three-fold rule does not exist in the Mahayana version of the sutras. The Mahayana sutras parallel much of the Pali Canon, including a version of the Pali Vinaya (code of rules for monastics) and the Abhidhamma (scientific-psychological analysis), but with the noted exception of no three-fold rule. It could be quite possible that the three-fold rule was added later by some monks to justify the consumption of meat. In both the Theravada Pali and the Mahayana Sanskrit traditions, the sutras remained oral for a few hundred years before being written down. There are few, if any, Buddhists who claim that every word in the sutras, Pali or Mahayana are the exact words of the Buddha.

In far more instances, we see the Buddha stating that no living being should be killed or caused to kill.

"For fear of causing terror to living beings, Mahamati, let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion, refrain from eating flesh."

The Buddha, Lankavatara Sutra

"The eating of meat extinguishes the seed of great compassion."

The Buddha, Mahaparinirvana Sutra

Q. The above quotes and most of the sutras that are pro-vegetarian are from the Mahayana tradition and their scriptures. Are there any pro-vegetarian sutras in the Theravada Pali Canon?

A. The Pali Canon is permeated with sutras that also espouse the virtues of not killing or causing to kill.

"All beings tremble before danger, all fear death. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill. All beings fear before danger, life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill."

Dhammapada, 129-130

"Whereas some ascetics and Brahmins, feeding on the food of the faithful, remain addicted to the enjoyment of stored-up goods such as food, drink, clothing, carriages, beds, perfumes and meat, the ascetic Gotama refrains from such enjoyment."

Brahmajala Sutra, Digha Nikaya

In the following verse, the Buddha describes the only thing that should be killed:

"What is the one thing, O Gotama, whose killing you approve? Having slain anger, one sleeps soundly; having slain anger, one does not sorrow; the killing of anger, with its poisoned root and honeyed tip: This is the killing the nobles ones praise, for having slain that, one does not sorrow."

Samyutta Nikaya, chapter 2

In the following verses, we find even more direct causal connections to refrain from meat eating in the Theravada Pali Canon:

"Monks, one possessed of three qualities is put into Purgatory according to his actions. What three? One is himself a taker of life, encourages another to do the same and approves thereof."

"Monks, one possessed of three qualities is put into heaven according to his actions. What three? He himself abstains from taking life, encourages another to so abstain, and approves of such abstention."

Anguttara Nikaya, book of threes, 16

"He should not kill a living being, nor cause it to be killed, nor should he incite another to kill. Do not injure any being, either strong or weak, in the world."

The first precept in both the Mahayana and the Theravada is not to kill or cause to kill any living being. The above quote from the Sutta Nipata clearly states not causing the killing of any being, nor inciting another to do so. The Buddha, who was quite familiar with cause and effect (four noble truths, dependent origination, among many other teachings) would not be blind to the obvious effect of ordering or purchasing meat from a grocer or butcher.

Q. If meat eating was not allowed why were there some verses prohibiting the eating of certain animals, such as tigers, lions, and apes?

A. There are also sutras prohibiting the eating of human flesh or the intake of alcohol and intoxicants. All of this shows that the three-fold rule has flaws in it. If the monastics are not allowed to refuse any food, even if it is meat, then why would the flesh of some animals not be allowed? Shouldn't the monastic also be required to take and eat the offered tiger flesh, human flesh (if offered), or even alcohol? No monastic in the time of Buddha or today would accept those offerings, which shows that monastics *are* allowed to refuse. There are also sutras which state that food offerings even at the wrong time of day can be refused. So why is there this conflict with many sutras and the one sutra which contains the three-fold rule?

The answer is found in research done by the Tibetan monk scholar, Shabkar. He did extensive studies of the sutras and found that the misleading sutras indicate that the Buddha gradually phased out the permission of meat eating. When the Buddha began teaching most of the people followed some version of Hinduism and many of them still ate meat. The Buddha always presented his teachings in the context of his audience, their intelligence and what they were ready for.

"... One of the greatest obstacles to the birth of bodhichitta in our minds is our craving for meat." "If there is no meat eater, there will be no animal killer ..."

Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol

Food of Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining from Meat

Q. What about evolution? Does not evolution show that all animals must kill and eat as members of the food chain?

A. Some people argue that we as humans should be eating at the top of the food chain, like other large animals or because of our "superiority." However, if we are truly superior to other animals we do not need to show it by being the greatest inflictors of violence.

Rather, it is better to show moral superiority by being the most compassionate. Not all large or intelligent animals eat at the top of the food chain. For example, elephants, rhinos, some whales, and gorillas are all very large, very strong, and very intelligent animals which eat at the bottom of the food chain. Some whales have a sort of filter at their mouths which catch tiny plankton for their meals. You need a microscope to view plankton.

Because of our close connection to animals biologically (evolution) and spiritually in the re-birth process, the Buddha was opposed to violence towards animals. An understanding and acceptance of the theory of evolution is important because without that acceptance there is a perception of a great separation between humans and animals which simply is not true.

As time goes on, people will realize that it is not even just a biological connection. If we are animals as evolution shows us, then animals must also have a soul if humans do (or Buddha-nature or capacity for enlightenment or any other spiritual terminology). There is no way around it since we all evolved from the same source.

Q. Devadatta, who was a monk and the cousin of the Buddha, made a list of suggestions which the Buddha refused to make mandatory. The list by Devadatta included a list of ascetic type

practices, including: (1) that monks should dwell all their lives in the forest, (2) that they should accept no invitations to meals, but live entirely on alms obtained by begging, (3) that they should wear only robes made of discarded rags and accept no robes from the laity, (4) that they should dwell at the foot of a tree and not under a roof, (5) that they should abstain completely from fish and flesh, even if it died naturally. Since the Buddha refused to accept this list, isn't he saying that meat eating is allowed?

A. Some teachers point out that the Buddha rejected this list by Devadatta and did not make it a requirement. But what these teachers fail to recognize is the Buddha allowed monks to follow the rules or suggestions by Devadatta, if they wanted to. It was not forbidden to follow the list, if a monk or nun wanted to. The refusal of the Buddha to accept the complete list also does not mean that he disagreed with everything in the list.

In one (Pali Canon) sutra (snake sutta), the Buddha gives 10 analogies to describe how bad attachment to sense desires can be. He compares attachment to sense desires with ten really bad things. This includes things such as a skeleton, a burning torch that is about to burn our hands, and a poisonous snake. The final analogy the Buddha makes to describe something very bad, is that of a slaughterhouse. He used the description of a slaughterhouse as one of the analogies to describe something bad.

The Eight Points of the Lankavatara Sutra

In the Mahayana sutras there is an even greater emphasis on the value of a vegetarian diet. In the Lankavatara Sutra, the Buddha states that he *"does not permit the eating of meat and will not permit it"* and he predicted that in the future there would be people who would twist his words to make it appear that he approved of meat eating.

In the Lankavatara Sutra, the Buddha lists several reasons for not eating meat:

1. Present-day animals may have been one's kin in the past.
2. One's own parents and relatives may in a future life be born as an animal.
3. There is no logic in exempting the meat of some animals on customary grounds while not exempting all meat.
4. Meat is impure as it is always contaminated by body wastes.
5. The prospect of being killed spreads terror amongst animals.
6. All meat is nothing other than carrion (decaying flesh or like "road kill" in modern terms).
7. Meat eating makes the consumer to be cruel and sensual.
8. Man is not a carnivore by nature.

In this sutra the Buddha states: *"There is no meat that is pure in three ways: not premeditated, not asked for, and not impelled; therefore refrain from eating meat."*

The Lankavatara sutra was written some 2,000 years ago or more and although it is a Mahayana sutra, it could be one of the oldest sutras or discourses of the Buddha. This is because this *sutra* is called Lankavatara because it includes the discourses the Buddha gave while he visited Sri Lanka. Historically we know that most of the first Buddhists from Northern India fled to Sri Lanka when India was being conquered by foreign powers.

The other indication that this sutra includes the direct words of the Buddha is the highly scientific and advanced nature of the statements in the Eight Points. For example, number three above: *"There is no logic in exempting the meat of some animals on customary grounds while not exempting all meat."* This statement rings true to so many cultures, including most of the

developed world. How often people cringe at the sight of people eating insects, turtles, or rats, but then sit down to eat a chicken or beef dinner. When you examine the logic, the food choices make no sense. They are all animals, if one looks gross or disgusting to eat, then the thought of eating any animal should look disgusting.

Another example is number eight: *“Man is not a carnivore by nature.”* As we have seen with many of the Buddha’s teachings, they are advanced, progressive, and ahead of his time. The Buddha knew that man is not suited for a meat-based diet. Modern medical science concurs with this finding. Heart disease, cancer, and many other illnesses have been linked to foods too high in animal protein and fat.

History provides more evidence that the Buddha was a vegetarian and advocated a vegetarian diet. In India at the time of the Buddha, the predominant religion was Hinduism. The Hindu Brahmins and priests often made animal sacrifices to the gods. The Buddha rejected animal sacrifices and the Hindus only stopped the use of sacrifices and adopted vegetarianism in large numbers after the time of the Buddha. The famous King Ashoka, of India converted to Buddhism, was a vegetarian, and was the first ruler to pass laws against animal cruelty. He erected many pillars honoring Buddhist teachings and there is much archeological evidence confirming Ashoka’s rule. King Ashoka lived and ruled during the third century before Christ, only a couple of hundred years after the Buddha. One of Ashoka’s edicts read:

“Progress of men comes from the exhortation in favor of non-injury to life and abstention from killing living beings.”

When the Buddhist scriptures were written there was an obvious controversy (which continues to this day) about the consumption of meat. It appears that the monks who liked to eat meat put verses into the scriptures that seemed to allow meat eating. At the same time the vegetarian monks put verses in the scriptures which strictly forbade meat eating.

To accurately find out what the intention of the Buddha was we need to look at the basic teachings that all Buddhist clergy and Buddhist schools can agree on. If we ignore the Buddhist scripture references that seem to allow meat eating and also ignore the references which specifically forbid it, we can analyze what the Buddha really taught by focusing on his core teachings. The core teachings of the Buddha, accepted by all Buddhist schools, are found in the Eightfold Middle Path.

Consider the following points:

1. Right Action of the Eightfold Middle Path refers to *“no killing or causing to kill.”*
2. The first precept is to not kill or cause to kill. The precepts are based on the Eightfold Middle Path, moral constituents.
3. When a person buys meat at a grocery store, the meat is definitely going to be replaced by the grocer. The butcher will request another killed animal from the slaughterhouse.
4. Right Understanding of the Eightfold Middle Path includes an understanding of the Four Noble Truths, which are based on cause and effect.
5. Right Livelihood of the Eightfold Middle Path does not permit an occupation of killing animals or handling animal flesh, such as a butcher.

When you consider the above points, all drawn from the core teachings of the Buddha in the Eightfold Middle Path, it is very difficult to imagine that the Buddha would have condoned the eating of meat.

One of the arguments for meat eating is that the meat could be eaten if you do not do the killing or if the animal is not killed specifically for you. If it is okay to eat meat, but not do the killing, then why would the Buddha forbid a job that simply handles the flesh, such as a butcher? What if

everyone were Buddhist? Who would do the dirty work of killing so that others could eat the meat without doing the killing? There is an obvious hypocrisy in the thinking that it is okay to eat meat if someone else does the killing.

Even if you accept the idea that it is okay to eat meat as long as you do not do the killing, that still does not explain why the Buddha specifically forbade the handling of animal flesh, even if it was killed by someone else. The Buddha also required the monks and nuns to carry a filter for their water. He did not want the monks and nuns to even accidentally eat an insect. If the Buddha was this concerned about the life of an insect, we can imagine the extent of the compassion toward a cow or pig.

Even if you still believe that it is okay to eat meat if you are a monk or nun and it is offered to you, then this still does not grant the right to lay people who must make the decisions on which types of food to purchase at the grocery stores. If you feel that lay people must be vegetarian and monks and nuns must accept whatever is offered to them (as most Buddhists believe) then the monastics become de facto vegetarians too, as they receive their foods from the vegetarian lay people.

The Buddha's teachings are centered around cause and effect, including the Four Noble Truths with its answers to our everyday suffering and in his teachings on *karma* and re-birth and dependent origination. The Buddha was like some kind of super scientist who deeply understood cause and effect in every facet of existence. To say that he would not understand the cause and effect relationship between meat eating and the killing of animals is unimaginable.

Vegetarianism and the Middle Way

Q. How does vegetarianism fit with the middle way? Isn't vegetarianism an "extreme" view?

A. Middle way does not necessarily mean "*a little of this and a little of that.*" For example, we know that abstaining from drugs and alcohol is a good precept to follow because if we abuse drugs and alcohol, we can become addicts. We become prisoner to the next fix or dose. Under the influence we can do all kinds of other bad things which we may not even be aware of. An extreme or fanatical view of middle way would seem to suggest that Buddhists would be able to take some drugs and alcohol, since it is a "middle" position between addiction and abstention. But when you start the craving process, addiction can surely follow. How about a little bit of poison? Who wants to ingest some poison that can kill almost instantly, such as rat poison? This is why we need to let go of all views, including Buddhist ones. If we take an extreme view of Buddhist middle way, we might think that "*a little of this and a little of that*" is okay, regardless of the content.

If you feel that you can handle such things as alcohol in moderation and wish to do so you can continue with that experiment and see if your judgment is not impaired, so long as no being is harmed or killed. In regard to meat eating, even in moderation, we can not honestly say that no living being will be killed (to replace the meat).

Middle way or moderation is for wholesome and nonviolent activities and not for obvious actions which harms yourself or others. Perhaps a better way to describe the middle way is, "*everything in moderation, including moderation.*"

Vegetarianism can actually be a "middle way" position when you look at the Buddha's first description and definition of the middle way. The Buddha first described the middle way as not being the extreme of an ascetic where you deprive yourself and torture the body (such as some yogis trying to reach enlightenment through self mortification) and the other extreme of self indulgence.

Self mortification, as practiced by some yogis included long fasts. The Buddha broke the rule of the ascetics when he ate and bathed. Vegetarianism does not require long fasts or even short fasts. The one extreme is fasting and torturing your body and the other extreme is doing whatever you want.

Vegetarianism does not require malnutrition or sacrificing your body or your health.

Self indulgence refers to chasing after pleasures of the senses without regard for consequences. It is an attachment to the senses. If we know that meat eating is not needed for survival and we choose to eat it because we are attached to the taste, that is a form of self indulgence.

If you consider the different levels of vegetarianism, the minimum amount to be called a vegetarian of "Lacto-Ovo" (no meat, but will eat animal products, such as eggs and dairy) does not look so extreme. For example, there are vegetarians who do not eat eggs (lacto-vegetarians), vegetarians who do not eat dairy products (ovo-vegetarians), vegetarians who do not eat any animal products (vegans), and some vegetarians who only eat macrobiotic, organic, raw vegan foods. And then there are those who take even that a step further, like the Jain food diet where, foods are eaten only from plants where the source plant did not die. For example, in this diet you only eat greens that are trimmed from the top of the plant so that the plant is not killed.

In India there are millions of Jains who only eat greens from plants that are trimmed. They check their seats before sitting down to make sure they are not sitting on any insects. The Jains also put a cover on their mouths, thinking that it will prevent the death to microorganisms in the air. The Buddha said that it is the intention that matters so that if we accidentally sit or walk on an insect, it is okay. To be a vegetarian Buddhist, one only needs to eat at the lacto-ovo level or higher. Seen in this way, with all the levels of vegetarian diets, the lacto-ovo vegetarian diet does not look so extreme.

Q. Buddhist vegetarians are attached to their view of vegetarianism. They get angry when they see Buddhists and others eating meat. This is creating defilements and anger in their minds. Is this anger a good Buddhist practice?

A. Vegetarianism is a view as noted by the "ism" at the end of the term. Some Buddhists have tried vegetarianism and later gave it up, because they felt it was an attachment to a view or "ism." When they saw people eating meat they became angry. Rather than trying to change their attitudes, they changed their diet and gave up on vegetarianism.

A meat eater could be equally as angry when they see or hear Buddhists for example, expounding the ideals of vegetarianism when they believe that meat eating is acceptable to Buddhism. Anger and attachment can come with any view, those who are vegetarian and to those who are not.

Although vegetarianism is a view as it is a philosophy of non-violence through the non-eating of meat at meals, it is also an action. In fact it can be more action and very little view. When we eat a meal we are not practicing a view, we are performing an *action*. **Right Action** is a part of the Eightfold Middle Path and includes the precept of no killing or causing to kill. When you eat a vegetarian meal you are not causing the death of an animal. When you eat meat, you are causing the death of an animal.

If we take the view that we do not want to be angry at seeing other people eat meat, so we join them, we are taking an extreme view of the principle of "letting go." If we continue with this logic then we should also kill humans, because we do not want to be angry when we see murderers on the news, so we join them. Taking the extreme view of letting go actually backfires as the person becomes attached to letting go and ignores all precepts.

We must be careful not to be too attached to concepts and views, including Buddhist ones. Another example is the concept of being in the "present." Buddhist meditation is aimed at being in the here and now, in the mindfulness of the moment. There was this Buddhist middle class person who had a master's degree and a high paying job. He met a guru who used Buddhist and new age principles in an attempt to start a cult or new religion or branch of Buddhism. This person gave up his high paying job and sold all his possessions. He followed the guru in search of enlightenment. When asked how he would pay for his housing and meals, this person responded, "***I do not think***

about those matters of the future. I am only in the present moment." This is an example of attachment to a principle, even a Buddhist one can be wrong, if taken to this extreme.

A common theme among the success and longevity of elderly people is that they do everything in moderation, including moderation. It is the same with the middle way. If we become too attached to the concept of middle way, we lose sight of the teachings.

We can avoid feeling angry by taking a middle way position with our attitudes. For example, as vegetarians we should not call meat eaters "murderers." We should not get upset at the sight of people eating meat. Most people were raised in cultures where meat eating is seen as completely normal.

About half of all Buddhists eat meat and another small percentage drink alcohol. This does not make them "bad" Buddhists, as there is no sin in Buddhism. There is simply attachment, aversion, and ignorance that are not realized yet.

We should lead by example and explain to anyone who wants to learn about the reasons we are vegetarian from the standpoint of how much better we feel in the body and mind with a vegetarian diet. Since upbringing, culture, and tradition are so powerful, we can not expect meat eaters to just give up meat with a few valid points thrown at them. Forcing morality on people has never worked. There are numerous examples of this, including the alcohol prohibition in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. The best course of action is to balance the principles of non-killing and letting go by being a good example and not forcing our views on others. If you are a vegetarian, explain and show people how much better you feel without forceful or degrading words. I personally do not advocate the legal prohibition of alcohol, meat eating, or even drugs. I would like to see people *voluntarily* choose not to take these substances, but I am realistic and realize that it will take at least another two hundred years or maybe even a thousand years of education, learning, and insight.

Q. In first world countries only about 3 to 5% are vegetarian. What good is one person such as myself in becoming a vegetarian?

A. Every person can make a difference. In a typical first world country, the average person eats about 50 animals per year. This is from cows, pigs, chicken, fish, and others. One person becoming a vegetarian saves all 50 of those highly sentient beings per year. Over a 20 year period that is a savings of 1,000 animals from being sent to slaughter, from grain being fed to animals purposely bred for slaughter, and prevents or slows the pace of the depletion of species in the oceans. This also saves the depletion of rain forests and other deforestation to the environment for the purpose of growing grain for animals to be slaughtered. The deforestation not only hurts the environment to make more room for land to grow grain for slaughtered animals, but this also depletes the supplies of grains and other foods that could have been produced and fed to humans in famine areas. Every small step and every person can and does make a difference.

Q. What about the health of the human. Don't humans need protein to sustain the body?

A. These are some of the myths about the vegetarian diet. Objective studies have repeatedly shown that diets high in fruits, vegetables, and grains are the most healthy and have the lowest rates of heart disease and cancer.

Studies have shown that both vegetarians and non-vegetarians consume too much protein. On average, vegetarians consume about twice as much protein per day as they should. Non-vegetarians consume about three times as much protein as they should. Green leafy vegetables, legumes such as lentils and soybeans are loaded with protein and iron.

Cholesterol is a leading culprit to heart disease and is found in meat and animal products, such as eggs and cheese. There is no bad cholesterol in any vegan whole (un-processed) foods.

Another leading cause of heart disease and also many cancers is trans fat foods. These are saturated fats which clog the arteries and do severe damage to our health. Trans fats include hydrogenated oils which are in some packaged foods, including vegetarian ones. But there is no need to add hydrogenated oils to vegetarian foods and many countries have banned its use. Meat and animal products naturally have trans fats in them. While we could voluntarily remove trans fats from vegan (pronounced vee-gun for vegetarian without animal products) foods, it is impossible to not have trans fats in meat and animal products, because they are naturally there.

Q. What about the health benefits of fish which contains Omega 3 oils?

A. Omega 3 oils found in fish have been shown to be quite healthy for the heart. But you do not need to eat fish to receive this beneficial nutrient. Flax seeds, hazel-nuts, and walnuts have omega 3 oils as well and are just as healthy. Flax seeds and their products can be found in cereals and other foods found at natural foods stores. Although fish contains this valuable nutrient, the negatives of fish consumption outweigh the benefits. Fish still have fatty tissue, even though it is less than the fat found in red meat, it can still be dangerous. Fish also contains mercury which has been shown to be very damaging to people's health. For the environment, fish consumption has been much too high. The oceans are being depleted of fish to a point where many species have gone extinct.

Some people incorrectly believe that eating fish is not meat-eating. Fish are not mammals, like us, but they are members of the Animal Kingdom. Mammals like cats, dogs, pigs, and humans produce milk for their babies. Other animals such as birds, reptiles and fish, do not produce milk. But this does not make them any less of an animal. The Animal Kingdom includes mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, and insects. Fish are animals and their flesh is meat.

Q. What about other nutrients that the vegetarian diet does not provide?

A. The vegetarian diet provides all the nutrients a human needs. The only exception is the vegan who does not eat any animal products could be missing vitamin B-12. This vitamin can be found in miso (fermented soy paste) and shitake mushrooms. The lacto-ovo vegetarian has no problem as animal products contain high amounts of B-12.

The cause of nearly all diseases, especially in developed countries, is not the lack of any nutrients, but rather the excess of too much food and fat. We do not hear on the news of anyone dying from lack of protein or lack of iron or lack of amino acids. The real problem is too much food and fat. People in developed countries eat too much fat and protein. The excess iron and protein leads to the health problems listed above.

An example is vitamin B-12, discussed above. We only need very miniscule amounts of this vitamin and it is stored in the body. The amount of vitamin B-12 that we need is a very puny one milligram for every 667 days (almost two years)! Yet, some meat eaters continue to argue that vegetarians are not getting enough nutrients such as protein and vitamin B-12. If you watch the news and live in a developed country such as the U.S., ask yourself how many times do you hear of people dying of scurvy or protein deficiency and other nutrient deficiencies? It just does not happen. The problem in developed countries' nutrition is excess protein and excess fat which has made heart disease the number one killer in men and women.

Q. What about the violence vegetarians do to plants and the environment in the construction of their homes and all the insects they kill in the production of their foods?

A. A couple of other arguments meat eaters like to throw back on vegetarians is that the construction of homes and buildings, which vegetarians live in required the displacement of animals and the killing of insects. Also, that the agriculture of plant foods causes the killing of insects too. They also argue that the eating of the plants itself is a form of killing.

The displacement of animals is a far less form of violence to killing animals for food. The

development of homes and buildings does cause death to insects, but this is unavoidable as is accidentally stepping on an ant walking down the street. The difference is the intent. The Buddha said that there is no “crime” when there is no intent. A vegetarian builder does not intend to kill insects just as the person walking down the street does not purposely step on the ant. The consumption of meat, however, is a voluntary choice matter.

It is true that vegetarians do need to kill plants to eat their vegetarian diet, but the point is to inflict the least amount of violence. Another important point is that there is a huge difference between killing a plant and killing an animal. Vegetables and fruits are life forms, but they are not animals, like humans, cows, and chickens. A vegetable does not have a face or a central nervous system and does not scream in pain.

Many fruits and vegetables can be eaten without harming the plant, including legumes, berries, nuts, seeds, pumpkins, melons, squash, okra, and others. Another very important point is that most fruits and vegetables are eaten at the end of their natural life. In fact, fruit trees actually produce their fruit so that they may survive and produce another tree. If the tree could talk, it would beg us to eat its fruit. Seriously, when a human or animal eats a fruit, the food travels down the intestinal tract, along with some seeds. Later, when the human or animal defecates, the seeds end up back on the ground at a different location. The seeds then produce another tree. The tree remains alive and by eating the fruit, we are assisting in the production of another tree.

Now when a person eats an animal, do you think the animal had the same wish to be killed and eaten? Videos of slaughterhouse procedures have graphically shown how the animals feel about being killed. They are prodded, often with electric shock devices into the slaughterhouse. Once their throats are cut, they can be seen crying in pain and kicking with all their might to be free. Gallons and gallons of blood pour out from the cuts. It is quite graphic and would probably need an “X” rating for violence if it were shown in theatres.

Q. What about the plants and minerals? From a Buddhist perspective are we not reborn sometimes in the plant and mineral worlds, so are we not killing and eating our kin when we eat vegetarian foods too?

A. According to the Buddhist cosmology, rebirth occurs into the six realms of hells, purgatory, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and angelic higher beings (impermanent gods). There is no rebirth into the plant kingdom. Plants do not have a developed central nervous system, a brain, or a developed consciousness.

Q. Some have said that what matters is the state of your mind, not your diet. A vegetarian could have an impure mind and a meat eater could potentially have a pure mind, which is paramount in Buddhism, so what difference does diet make?

A. An argument that some meat eating Buddhist teachers make is that what really matters is the state of your mind. They say that a mind that is pure while eating meat is better than a mind that is impure, but vegetarian. This argument takes aim at the importance of mind purification in the Buddha’s teachings. But this argument fails for two big reasons. If we take the view that we can do whatever we want as long as our mind is pure, then we could never convict sociopathic killers. Sociopaths commit crimes such as rape and murder and feel no remorse. They have a clear mind about their actions. They know they are violating societies laws and just do not care. They are care-free and go about their daily routines with no remorse.

This argument that meat eating is okay with a clear mind also fails, because it does not take into account the spiritual and biological effect of the food we eat. When you eat meat you are eating the craving, fear, and poisons which the animal feels or secretes as it is being slaughtered. Since a meditator is trying to alleviate craving and suffering it is best to avoid such poisons which harm others and yourself. The Buddha and modern medical doctors have demonstrated the inter-

connection of the mind-body with the famous saying “you are what you eat.” Many people are vegetarians for the ethical and nutritional reasons and / or the benefits to the environment. But in *vipassana* we realize that there is an advantage for the purification of the mind too. Albert Einstein was a vegetarian and realized this connection with his statement, *“It is my view that the vegetarian way of living, by its purely physical effect on the human temperament, would most beneficially influence the lot of mankind.”*

The Buddhist commentaries on the *sutras* tell a story of two yogis who were very close to full enlightenment. Then they ate some meat. This created an obstacle to the complete awakening, which therefore, did not manifest. (Shabkar)

Since it is apparent that meat eating does effect the mind and continue the craving process and the slaughterhouse process, it is important for dharma teachers to advise their students of the risks to health and mind purification with the consumption of meat. Many teachers have avoided this issue to stay away from controversy or to sell more books or get more followers. It would be good if teachers would change as we have the evidence of the damage meat can do to health and the mind. This does not need to be done in a forceful way, but in a way that recommends as a helpful teacher leading by example, with compassion.

Many famous Buddhist leaders have adopted a vegetarian diet and have advocated a vegetarian diet for their followers. This includes:

- ◆ Thich Nhat Hanh, founder of the socially engaged Buddhist “Order of Interbeing.” He has written at least one hundred books and has centers and monasteries around the world.
- ◆ Ayya Khema, very famous German born nun who has written several dharma books and opened many centers and monasteries in Europe and Sri Lanka. She was one of the first western women to receive full ordination.
- ◆ Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, author of the best selling book, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, and founder and abbot of Bhavana Society in West Virginia is a vegetarian and the monks and nuns at his retreat center are also vegetarian.
- ◆ S. N. Goenka, perhaps the most famous lay Buddhist, who led a successful business and family life along with the teaching of dharma. He has opened several dharma centers and is famous for his ten day retreats using the body sensations, vipassana technique.

“To practice nonviolence, first of all we have to practice it within ourselves. In each of us, there is a certain amount of violence and a certain amount of nonviolence. Depending on our state of being, our response to things will be more or less nonviolent. Even if we take pride in being vegetarian, for example, we have to acknowledge that the water in which we boil our vegetables contains many tiny microorganisms. We cannot be completely nonviolent, but by being vegetarian, we are going in the direction of nonviolence. If we want to head north, we can use the North Star to guide us, but it is impossible to arrive at the North Star. Our effort is only to proceed in that direction.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

In this wonderful quote from TNH, he admits that we cannot be completely nonviolent, but by being vegetarian, we are in the right direction. The violence to micro-organisms, plants, and minerals, or even the displacement of animals for construction is in no way comparable to the screaming and pain of the slaughterhouse to highly sentient beings.

I like his analogy to the North Star too. To me, this says that it is true that vegetarianism is not the goal of practice, liberation is the goal; but it does provide a light and direction for reaching that goal.

Can you be a Buddhist and still eat meat? Yes, of course, everyone is at different places on the path. Can you reach full liberation without following the North Star (vegetarianism), well according to the Buddha's teachings one cannot intentionally violate any of the five precepts (first precept is to not kill, cause to kill, or incite another to kill) and be a stream entrant or higher. A stream entrant is just the first stage of enlightenment (followed by once-returner, non-returner, and fully liberated arahant). To be just the first stage of stream entrant one cannot purposely violate any of the five precepts.

May all beings be happy!

David N. Snyder, Ph.D.

The above contains excerpts from *The Complete Book of Buddha's Lists -- Explained* by David N. Snyder, Ph.D. with a Foreword by the Venerable Madewela Punnaji. For more information and to order the book, please see www.vipassanafoundation.com The book contains 90 lists of the Buddha's teachings with the 29 most important lists explained in detail. The teachings in these lists provide tranquillity, insights, and wisdom which are conducive to the happiness and well being for anyone of any religion and even to those with no religion.

