



Taking a Stand

By Ven. Abhinaya

Some time ago I picked up a Buddhist magazine, on the cover of which was a design purporting to show the hand of the Buddha turning the Dharma-wheel. On the back cover, however, there was a commercial advertising, among other things, meat and fish for sale. Strange companions, front and back!

Certainly, I am aware that money must be raised for the publishing of such magazines; it doesn't grow on trees. But I also think that discretion should be used in the selection of advertisements to be included in Buddhist magazines, even if it means rejecting some and thereby losing some funds; after all, the purpose of publishing such magazines is to propagate the Dharma, is it not? If we compromise our principles, we defeat our purpose. By allowing the pages of a Buddhist magazine to be used for advertising meat for sale, we are—even if only indirectly—condoning killing.

Indefensible

Feel free to disagree; it won't prevent me speaking out. Some Buddhists maintain that the Buddha never said we should be vegetarians, and that monks (who the bulk of the Buddhist rules apply to), may eat whatever is offered to them, as long as they do not see, hear, or suspect that the animals, fish or fowl were killed especially for them; if they so see, hear or suspect, they are forbidden to eat the flesh. But this standpoint is totally indefensible, as anyone who looks at things a little objectively can see. And to say, as some people do, that by eating meat, they are helping the animals with their spiritual growth, is too ridiculous and transparent to be seriously considered for a moment.

Firstly, the Buddha never called anyone to believe or follow Him; instead, He urged people to see for themselves and find out what is true. Even so, many Buddhists become prisoners of books, repeating things like parrots or tape-recorders, without investigating, thereby missing the great value of the Buddha's Way, which is a Way of self-reliance. He exhorted people to "Test my Teachings as a gold-smith would test gold," and "Work out your own salvation with diligence" (according to the Buddhist scriptures, these were His last words), and not depend upon Him to save them, because "Buddhas are only Teachers; they do but point the Way"—which is the most that anyone can do; belief in saviours is regarded as a myth, with no foundation in fact.

Metta-Karuna

To use scripture to justify the disgusting and cruel habit of eating meat is both dishonest and unworthy. I've never been able to reconcile the preaching of Metta-Karuna (Loving-Kindness & Compassion) with the practice of meat-eating; they contradict each other. And as to seeing, hearing or suspecting that the animal was killed especially for someone, well, for whom is the animal killed if not for those who eat its flesh? No amount of twisting, juggling and verbal gymnastics can get around that. If nobody ate meat, the butcher would not kill the animals. This is not only obvious to everyone except those who refuse to see, but is in line with the Buddha's teachings about the Law of Dependent Origination, or Cause-and-Effect in the moral realm, whereby it is shown how one thing leads to another in a chain-like sequence.

Let us examine the eating of meat by this doctrine, and see what it involves:

- ◆ The Consumer
The consumer likes to eat meat, and his desire to do so is the main force that keeps this Killing Wheel turning.
- ◆ The killer
Because of people's habit of eating meat, others see a way of earning a living and take up the gun and knife to engage in butchery. There will always be butchers and war and senseless destruction of life, as long as people condone killing; it is a matter of demand-and-supply: if there is a market for meat, some will try to supply it—just as with drugs, sex and weapons.
- ◆ The animals
The animals are victims of the unwholesome desire for flesh. Though it may be the karma of the animals to be killed—as some believe—that does not excuse the killer. The cause produces the effect, and the effect, in turn, becomes the cause of other effects, and so on.
- ◆ The buyer
The butcher kills for money. If nobody ate meat, the butcher would have to find another job. Those who buy and eat meat keep the butcher's hands bloody, and the only people to whom this is not clear are those who do not want to see.

Demand

It is like the trade in ivory and rhinoceros-horn: because of the demand for these things, elephants and rhinos have been hunted and killed to the point where they are now in danger of extinction. Ivory is prized for its beauty and rhino-horn for what is believed to be its aphrodisiacal-properties, which is probably just another silly and cruel superstition. In order to boost their libido, or sexual energy—so they believe—people are prepared to let these magnificent animals be shot and left to rot on the African veldt. The poachers who kill them cannot be totally blamed for this, as they are just one link in the chain, and not the main link, either. Most of them are just poor tribesmen who also need to live, and the possibility of making big money far outweighs the risk of getting caught and prosecuted. No, the buyers and users of the animal products are the real cause of this, and there is no getting away from the fact. Stop the demand, and the supply will cease. What a pity people are so selfish and stupid—much moreso than the animals on which they look down with scorn!

Someone once told me of a high-ranking Tibetan lama appearing surprised to learn she was vegetarian, and asked her why. And, far from praising and encouraging her for abstaining from meat, he even disapproved of it (maybe because, being carnivorous himself—and greatly attached to the taste of meat—he took it as a criticism of his habit).

Consequences

Some years ago, in Malaysia, I was invited to stay in someone's home, where I was served nice vegetarian food. One day, I went into the kitchen to get some water, but my way was barred by the son of the house; his mother was there eating her lunch. She knew I knew she was not vegetarian, but was embarrassed that I should see her eating meat. However, it was her house, not mine; I was only the guest there. If she wanted to eat meat, she should have done so without being ashamed; the fact that she was ashamed was a sign she had reservations about it.

If a person wants to eat meat, let him at least be honest about it and admit he likes it, and not use the scriptures to justify it, as that is cowardly and unscrupulous. Let him also be prepared to accept the consequences of his involvement in killing, without complaining or blaming others for whatever happens to him, for he is surely involved.

Because of Tibet's altitude, few vegetables will grow there and so the diet of the people is largely

and unavoidably animal-based. The majority of Tibetans are Buddhists and very pious as such. They scrupulously avoid killing anything – even to the extent of beating firewood vigorously on the ground to shake free any insects before burning it. How, then, do they get the meat they eat?

The butchers of Tibet are Muslims, who are regarded by the Buddhists as 'low caste' or 'defiled' because of their livelihood. The Buddhists obviously do not see the discrepancy in their outlook on this, which smells strongly of hypocrisy.

"If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfil yourself," wrote Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching. Are these just empty words? How shall one attain Enlightenment except by opening one's heart and becoming sensitive to the rights and feelings of others? We do not live by and for ourselves alone. What kind of Enlightenment is it if we are indifferent to the pain and suffering of others? Enlightenment is not just something to be hopefully attained as a result of following the Dharma, but should be something that manifests in our lives as we go about our daily living.

Movement

Now, suppose one person here – perhaps you – and another one there, starts to think about this, and reflects thus: "If no-one ate meat or wore furs or skins, the animals would not be killed for such. I do not agree with killing, for the animals have the right to live and do not want to die – just like me. I can live quite well on vegetables, and so, as a protest against killing and as an expression of sympathy for the animals, I will become vegetarian from now on." Let us further imagine what would happen if the 300,000-plus monks in Thailand – where Buddhism, for the most part, has become passive and moribund – decided to stop eating meat, and asked the lay-people to offer them only vegetarian food: Every day, millions of animals – cows, pigs, goats, chickens, ducks, fish, prawns, etc. – would not be needlessly slaughtered; many lay-people would also probably become vegetarians. But I am happy to report that now, at last, there is a new movement in Thailand which is making quite an impression. The monks of this movement are strict vegetarians, which is something I never expected to see there, but am certainly very happy about. They lead simple lives, free from the modern paraphernalia that fills many of the monasteries these days, and wander around preaching. So there is hope; it all depends upon understanding, and begins with people like you and I.

Short-sighted

Many people mistakenly think that, alone, they can do nothing to change the world, and that whatever they might do will make no difference. This is weak-minded, short-sighted and wrong and, because so many people have been touched by the Story of the Stranded Starfish in one of my previous books, I will not ask pardon for repeating it here, so that it might touch others.

Early one morning, a man went to the beach, and, while strolling along there, he noticed, some distance ahead of him, a young boy frequently bending down to pick things up and throw them into the sea. At first, he thought it must be stones the boy was throwing, but as he got nearer to him, he realized it was starfish. When he caught up with the boy, he asked him why he was doing this, and the boy replied that the tide was ebbing and the starfish were stranded on the beach, unable to get back into the water, and would die of exposure as the sun rose higher in the sky and became hotter. The man looked at the starfish all over the beach, and said: "But there are millions of starfish on this beach; how can your efforts make any difference?" The boy looked at the starfish he was holding, then looked up at the man and said: "It will make a difference to this one!" and flung it back into the sea.

Can you put yourself into the place of that starfish? It is most important, on a spiritual path, to be able to identify and empathize with others, including animals.

We cannot force anyone else to change, but we can change ourselves, and thereby change the world, as we are part of the world, and if we change, the world also changes, be it ever so little. Don't always wait for others to make the first move, therefore; if you are convinced a thing is right,

follow it; no matter if it seems that you are all alone, you should know that you are never really alone.

Suffering

Are you concerned about suffering? If so, you should know that it is not something personal, like your private property, but something common and world-wide. If you do not like to suffer, do something. Don't just call yourself a 'Buddhist,' and wait for someone to help you; do something yourself! Calling oneself 'Buddhist' – or any other name for that matter (this is meant not just for Buddhists) – has very little meaning. But to be aware that we can do something to make our world a little bit better, instead of worse, and to do it, that is something! "Morality," as philosopher George Santayana said, "is the desire to lessen suffering in the world." Now, what do you think: Does eating meat increase or decrease the suffering in the world?

People become vegetarians for different reasons, but to abstain from eating meat because one thinks it is better for health or for 'making merit,' or from the consideration that a chicken or fish might have been one's relative or friend in a previous lifetime, are not Buddhist reasons for being vegetarian. A Buddhist abstains from eating meat because he knows it is right to abstain, and not from what he might get, personally, from doing so. He is a vegetarian for the sake of the animals, not for his own sake; he considers the effects of his actions upon others.

Mind of our own

Forget about what the Buddha may or may not have said about eating meat; He died a long time ago, and none of us ever met Him. We are not the slaves of the Buddha – or are we? – but have minds of our own, which He exhorted us to use. The animals are being killed right now, often with our tacit consent and approval. What do you think about this? While it means food for many, money for others and sport for some, for the animals themselves it means suffering and death. Surely, this deserves some thought. We should not be so subjective, always looking at things from our own viewpoint, wondering how we can make use of things for our own ends. The viewpoint we should look at meat-eating from is that of the animals, is it not? Try to put yourself in their position, and see how it feels.

Now, reading this, some people – monks and non-monks – will probably fall back on the old worn-out argument: "But Buddhist monks are not allowed to ask for anything special for themselves, saying, 'I like this' or 'I don't like that.' They are supposed to eat whatever people are kind enough to offer to them, without making a fuss and causing inconvenience to their supporters." Yes, it is good for monks to refrain from being fussy and choosy, but if they were to request people to offer them only meatless food, they would not be asking for themselves, but for the sake of the animals; their asking would be altruistic instead of selfish. And it would benefit the people who offer as well as the animals, for their offerings would involve less suffering and so would be more meritorious. From every point-of-view, therefore – including health and economy – vegetarianism is better. And, as for the lame excuse that, without eating meat, we would not get enough nourishment and would be weak and sickly, well, what about elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes, etc.? They are herbivorous, and are not weak! It is our minds that are weak, not our bodies! So, why hesitate? Is it because of attachment to taste? Is it because we might find it inconvenient to change our diet? Do we live to eat, or eat to live? In order for us to eat meat, the animals must be killed. Is that not a great inconvenience for them?

Attachment

Ah, attachment! Some people may counter what I have said above by saying we can be attached to vegetarianism, too, and that attachment is attachment in any form, and ends in suffering; we can be bound just as firmly with gold chains as iron chains, and should follow the Middle Way that avoids extremes. But is this so? Isn't it a matter of who and how? Following the Middle Way doesn't mean living in a non-committal, wishy-washy manner, without principles or firm

foundations; nor does it mean following a set of rules imposed upon us or adopted from outside. Following the Middle Way means living according to our understanding, and trying to keep Dharma at the center as a focal point, not self; we can still be flexible while holding fast to the essence and not compromising one's principles; it must come from inside – from realization of how things are – not outside. The Middle Way – or Noble Eightfold Path – on paper, is a general guideline, and must be seen as such; the Way is not in the books, but in walking it, not a concept or doctrine, but a living thing of experience. And some of the Buddha's final words were: "Be an island unto yourself; be a lamp unto yourself; be a refuge unto yourself. With the Dharma as your refuge, look not outside of yourself for a refuge." He did not mean cling to it as a personal possession and become attached to it, considering it a thing of self, but to abide by it, live by it, accord with it, for in so doing, we may break free of the idea of self. And the basic Five Precepts – covering our relationships with other living things (not just people) – are designed to help us refrain from causing suffering.

To understand ourselves – which is what the Dharma is all about – we must see ourselves in context, for alone and in isolation, there is no meaning; we simply do not exist like that. If we follow the Way from fearful self-concern, far from getting what we hope to get, we only cause ourselves more suffering. To become vegetarian with the idea of getting something in return, such as 'merit,' or better health, demonstrates the kind of attachment that causes suffering; but to do it with the idea of lessening the suffering of others, means abiding in Dharma; we cannot call this attachment.

Support

It is often difficult to talk about vegetarianism to non-vegetarians, for there is always the implication of criticism or disapproval of their meat-eating – indeed, just being vegetarian, without saying a word, is to make a statement – and few of us can accept criticism gracefully, even when it is constructive, as in talk about vegetarianism. But if we refrain from saying what needs to be said because we think people may not like it and therefore might not support us, truth will be fettered and gagged. Is this why there is so little Dharma-propagation in many of the big and rich temples in Asia, where, more often than not, ceremonies and superstition hold center-place, and crowd out all else?

We must sometimes choose between speaking the truth and being popular, as the truth is often unpopular. Maybe this is why Lao Tsu said: "The wise person hears of the Tao [Way, or Dharma], and follows it carefully. The average person hears of the Tao, and thinks about it now and then. The foolish person hears of the Tao, and laughs aloud. If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is." Thus, the laughter of fools, who are unable – or refuse – to comprehend, is a tribute to Tao. The praise of fools is something more to be concerned about than their laughter, while the criticism and censure of the wise should be taken to heart.

If we wish to propagate Dharma, there is an element of risk involved; we must face the possibility of being unpopular, as we cannot please everyone, and if we try, we might end up pleasing no-one. We may dilute the Dharma to suit the tastes of those who are unable or unwilling to accept it as it is, but what would happen to the quality? There would hardly be any flavor left!

Many Westerners, new to Buddhism, spontaneously become vegetarians as a result when they hear the teachings about Compassion and Respect for Life. What a pity, therefore, that many allow themselves to be influenced and persuaded into dropping their gentler mode of eating when they come into contact with forms of Buddhism that do not espouse vegetarianism, instead of persisting in it. It's a pity they lack the courage of their convictions, and conform, for the sake of convenience or so as not to be different.

Should we not find out for ourselves what is right and wrong, true and false? In this world of confusion, where it is hard to resist the pressure to conform, if we know a thing to be right, should

we not try to abide by it? Not to do so would be to lose the precious little integrity we might have and which we must try to increase. Why should we follow others, like sheep? Is it because we think others always know where they are going, while we do not? Using the Dharma and seeing things as they are, we have a way to develop clearer vision and more self-confidence than this.

To conclude: Just as it is natural for a flower to give off scent, so Vegetarianism should be a natural expression of our understanding that, just as we ourselves wish to be happy and avoid pain, other living things feel exactly the same way. Is it really so esoteric that only very few people are able to comprehend this? I don't think so, and therefore I'll continue to stand up for the animals, and say:

Stop killing!

Be kind to animals by not eating them!



About the author

Venerable Abhinyana was born in 1946, in England to a Protestant family. In 1970, during summer holidays in India, he made his first contact with Buddhism and found out this religion was what he needed to follow and practice. Finally, in 1972, he left his home and became Buddhist monk in the Thai Theravada Tradition in Malaysia. From 1979 he started his teaching career here and there, to provide the teachings of Buddha for everyone with the purpose of helping them get rid of their suffering and achieve happiness. Especially, he spent much time in helping Vietnamese refugees in Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand.

Venerable Abhinyana is constantly travelling to offer the Dharma talk for those wishing to learn and practice Buddhism.