

# **THE BUDDHA'S VIEW ON MEAT EATING**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Meat eating is a very sensitive topic. There are many different views on this and each may be right to a certain extent, but they may not necessarily be wise. In this case, we should put aside our personal views and be open enough to look at the Buddha's views. This is crucial as he is the Tathagata who knows and sees.

The Suttas and Vinaya will be our source of reference because in AN 4.180, the Buddha said that if some monk claimed that such and such were the words of the Buddha, those words should be compared to the Suttas (discourses) and Vinaya (monastic discipline). Only if they conform to the Suttas and Vinaya can they be accepted to be the Buddha's words.

The next consideration is which Sutta and Vinaya should we refer to? Although various schools of Buddhism have different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings, all generally agree that the four Nikayas (collections), namely, the Digha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya, and Anguttara Nikaya, and a few books of the Khuddaka Nikaya, are the earliest authentic discourses of the Buddha. Furthermore, these earliest books are consistent throughout with the flavour of liberation, while later books sometimes give contradictory teachings.

The Vinaya books of the different schools of Buddhism are all quite similar to the Theravada Vinaya. For this reason, the earliest Suttas and Theravada Vinaya will be our source of reference.

## SUTTA REFERENCES

### **Majjhima Nikaya 55**

This discourse is particularly important because it is here that the Buddha clearly stated his position on meat eating.

The King's physician, Jivaka Komarabhacca, came to see the Buddha. After paying homage, he said: "Venerable sir, I have heard this: 'They slaughter living beings for the monk Gotama (i.e. the Buddha); the monk Gotama knowingly eats meat prepared for him from animals killed for his sake' ...."; and asked if this was true.

The Buddha denied this, adding "Jivaka, I say that there are three instances in which meat should not be eaten: when it is seen, heard, or suspected (that the living being has been specifically slaughtered for oneself) ... I say that there are three instances in which meat may be eaten: when it is not seen, heard, or suspected (that the living being has been specifically slaughtered for oneself)...."

Furthermore, the Buddha added: "If anyone slaughters a living being for the Tathagata (i.e. Buddha) or his disciple, he lays up much demerit in five instances ... (i) When he says: 'Go and fetch that living being' ... (ii) When that living being experiences pain and grief on being led along with a neck-halter ... (iii) When he says: 'Go and slaughter that living being' ... (iv) When that living being experiences pain and grief on being slaughtered ... (v) When he provides the Tathagata or his disciple with food that is not permissible ...."

So we find that the Buddha distinguishes between meat that is allowable <sup>1</sup>with the three conditions versus that which is not. This is the most important criterion concerning meat eating.

### **Anguttara Nikaya 8.12**

The General Siha, a Nigantha follower, was converted to the Buddhist religion after he learnt the Dhamma from the Buddha.

He invited the Buddha and the order of monks to his house the next day for a meal, and served meat and other food. The Niganthas, out of jealousy that such a prominent and influential lay person had gone over to the Buddha's camp, spread the rumour that the General Siha had killed a huge animal and cooked it for the monk Gotama, "... and the monk Gotama is going to eat the meat, knowing that it was meant for him, that the deed was done on his account."

When news of this came to the General's ear, he denied their allegations, saying: "... For a long time these reverend sirs (Niganthas) have longed to disparage the Buddha ... Dhamma ... Sangha; but they do no harm to the Exalted One by their wicked, vain, lying, untruthful slanders. Not for the sake of sustaining life would we intentionally deprive any being of life."

This is one of the discourses which clearly shows that the Buddha and his monks ate meat. Also, we see that meat from an animal that is already dead when it is purchased is allowed to be used, but not if the animal is alive.

### **Anguttara Nikaya 5.44**

This is about a layman, Ugga, who offered several good things to the Buddha; among them was pork cooked with jujube fruit

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of ten types of meat which are prohibited to monks: human, elephant, horse, dog, hyena, snake, bear, lion, tiger, and panther. Refer to Mahavagga, the Books of the Discipline: Book 4, pages 298-300. The Books of the Discipline is the English translation of the Vinaya books (in Pali) by the Pali Text Society, U.K..

which was accepted by the Buddha. Again, it is evident that the Buddha and his disciples took meat.

### **Sutta Nipata 2.2**

Here the Buddha recalled an incident in his previous life during the Buddha Kassapa's time. Buddha Kassapa was his teacher then.

It was an occasion when an external sect ascetic met the Buddha Kassapa and reviled him for eating meat, which he said is a stench compared to eating vegetarian food.

Buddha Kassapa replied: "Killing ... wounding ... stealing, lying, deceiving ... adultery; this is stench. Not the eating of meat.

... Those who are rude, arrogant, backbiting, treacherous, unkind ... miserly ... this is stench. Not the eating of meat.

... Anger, pride, obstinacy, antagonism, deceit, envy, boasting ... this is stench. Not the eating of meat.

... Those who are of bad morals, ... slanderous ... pretentious ... being the vilest of men, commit such wrong things; this is stench. Not the eating of meat ...."

## **VINAYA REFERENCES**

### **Patimokkha: Pacittiya 39**

In the monastic discipline, a monk is not allowed to ask for preferential food. However, an exception is allowed in the Patimokkha (Monk's Precepts) when the monk is unwell. Under such circumstances, the monk is allowed to ask for dairy products, oil, honey, sugar, fish, meat .... Clearly, fish and meat were allowed to the monks.

**Books of the Discipline: Book Four<sup>2</sup>**

In the Mahavagga, ten types of meat were prohibited to monks: human, elephant, horse, dog, hyena, snake, bear, lion, tiger, and panther. We can infer from this that the meat of other animals was allowed, provided the three conditions for 'allowed meat' are fulfilled, eg. pork, beef, chicken, etc.

**Books of the Discipline: Book Four<sup>3</sup>**

Clear meat soup is allowed to a sick monk.

**Books of the Discipline: Book One<sup>4</sup>**

Some monks were descending the slopes of Vulture's Peak. They saw the remains of a lion's kill, had it cooked, and ate it. At other times, other monks saw the remains of a tiger's kill ... remains of a panther's kill ... etc. ... had it cooked, and ate it.

Later the monks were unsure if it had amounted to stealing from the lion, tiger, panther, etc. The Buddha excused them by saying that there is no offence in taking what belongs to animals. Here again we see that monks ate meat and the Buddha did not criticize or disapprove of it.

**Books of the Discipline: Book Two<sup>5</sup>**

This was an incident when the Arahant nun Uppalavanna was offered some cooked meat. The next morning, having prepared the meat at the nunnery, she went to where the Buddha was living to offer it to him. A monk, on behalf of the Buddha, accepted the offering and said she had pleased the Buddha.

It is clear that the Buddha ate meat; otherwise the Arahant nun would not have offered it.

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<sup>2</sup> Pages 298-300.

<sup>3</sup> Page 281.

<sup>4</sup> Page 98.

<sup>5</sup> Pages 36-38.

### **Books of the Discipline: Book Five<sup>6</sup>**

The monk Devadatta schemed to divide the community of monks by asking the Buddha to implement five rules, one of which was that monks should not be allowed to eat fish and meat.

The Buddha refused, saying: “Fish and meat are completely pure in respect of three points: if they are not seen, heard, or suspected (to have been killed specifically for oneself).”

The Buddha taught that a monk should be easily supported. If a monk refuses to eat certain types of food (whether meat or vegetarian) then he is not easily supported.

## **REASONS THE BUDDHA ALLOWED MEAT EATING**

### **No Direct Kamma of Killing**

The Buddha said: “Fish and meat are completely pure (parisuddha) ....”<sup>7</sup> means that there is no direct kamma<sup>8</sup> (intentional deed) of killing if the animal was not seen, heard, or suspected to have been killed specifically for oneself.

Without these three conditions, unwholesome kamma is involved and, therefore, that type of meat is not allowable.

Although the Buddha allowed meat eating, he said in AN 4.261 that we do create unwholesome kamma if we directly encourage killing, approve or speak in praise of it. Hence in AN 5.177 the Buddha said that a lay person should not trade in flesh, which the Commentary explains as breeding and selling pigs, deer, (cattle, chickens,) etc (for slaughter). Also, it is not

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<sup>6</sup> Pages 276-277.

<sup>7</sup> The Book of the Discipline: Book 5, pages 276-277.

<sup>8</sup> See ‘Only We Can Help Ourselves’ by the author on the explanation of Kamma.

allowed to place an order for say ten chickens the next day if it means that those amount of animals will be slaughtered for one.

**Vegetarianism Not Compatible  
with the Buddhist Monk's Lifestyle**

A monk is supposed to go on almsround (begging) for his meal unless he is (i) invited to a meal, (ii) the meal is brought to the monastery, or (iii) the meal is cooked in the monastery. He is not allowed to cook food, store food overnight, or engage in agriculture to support himself. Thus mendicancy is one of the cornerstones of a Buddhist monk's lifestyle.

This can be seen in a Buddhist country (e.g. Thailand) where a monk has the freedom and support to practise totally in conformity with the Buddha's teachings. There we see not only forest monks going on almsround but also town and city monks begging for food everyday.

Since a beggar must not be a chooser, as the saying goes, vegetarianism is incompatible with the Buddhist monk's lifestyle --which was probably another reason why the Buddha rejected Devadatta's request as mentioned previously.

However the Buddha also said that if a monk does not get sufficient or nutritious food, he should depart from that place.

**Argument of Demand and Supply**

Some argue that even with the three conditions mentioned one is blameworthy because eating meat creates the demand which has to be supplied by the killing of animals. In other words, eating meat under any circumstances encourages the killing of animals.

We must be clear here that there are two types of cause and effect: (i) worldly cause and effect, where intention is not involved, and (ii) Buddhist kamma-vipaka, or intentional actions and their results. Eating allowable meat with the three conditions involves only worldly cause and effect, and there is no kamma of killing. Eating unallowable meat involves

unwholesome kamma and, hence, its vipaka. Hence meat eating must be clearly divided into two classes.

The argument of demand and supply is not a valid one. On this planet, a great number of human beings<sup>9</sup> and countless animals are killed by motor vehicles everyday. Just by driving vehicles or even sitting in them, we are encouraging the motor industry to make more motor vehicles. If we use the demand and supply argument, then just by using motor vehicles we are encouraging the killing of countless animals and a great number of human beings on the roads everyday --which is worse than eating meat!

It is true that we are indirectly involved in the killing of animals but, as explained, there is no kamma-vipaka of killing. This indirect involvement in killing is true whether we eat meat or not, and is something which is unavoidable. We shall discuss this below.

### **Eating Vegetarian Food also Encourages Killing**

We encourage killing even when we eat vegetarian food. Every day monkeys, squirrels, foxes, flying foxes, and other destructive pests are killed because they eat from fruit trees planted by farmers. Vegetable farmers also kill caterpillars, snails, worms, grasshoppers, ants, and other insects, etc.. Similarly, in Australia for example, kangaroos and rabbits are killed every day because they eat the crops.

Many items commonly used by just about everybody cost the lives of living beings. For example, silk is made at the expense of the lives of countless silkworms, and white shellac<sup>10</sup>, of countless lac insects.

Cosmetics contain a huge range of animal derived substances. Many food additives, e.g. colourings, flavourings,

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<sup>9</sup> Two thousand per day according to a newspaper report.

<sup>10</sup> Shellac is used to manufacture many products, including food.

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sweeteners, also use animal derived substances. Commercially produced cheese uses rennet which is extracted from calves' stomach to make the milk coagulate.

Leather and fur are of course made from the hides of animals, often slaughtered for this purpose. Photographic film uses gelatin which is obtained by boiling the skins, tendons, and bones of animals.

Even fertilizers for the vegetables and fruit trees often include dried, ground fish bones, and other fish scraps. Also, the use of cow's milk and honey involve much cruelty to the animals or insects concerned.

All these go to show that it is very difficult not to be involved one way or another in the cruelty inflicted on animals.

So if one does become a vegetarian, one should reflect on the above and refrain from being over-critical of those who eat meat.

**Animals Still Killed Even if  
All Humans Became Vegetarians**

Even if all humans became vegetarians, animals will still be killed. This is because animals multiply so much faster than humans that they could easily become a threat to human survival.

For example many years ago, in some parts of Africa, elephants were protected animals. But now they have multiplied sufficiently to become a menace, and the protection laws have to be relaxed to reduce their numbers.

In some countries dogs without a tag/license are disposed of in case they become rabid and attack humans. Even the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals kill millions of dogs and cats in shelters every year due to insufficient accommodation --in USA, 14 million annually are put to death within a week of being rescued by humane groups.

Ultimately, the idea that vegetarianism prevents the killing of animals is not true. Nevertheless, it is praiseworthy to

practise vegetarianism out of compassion, but not to the extent of being extreme about it.

### **Everyone is Indirectly Involved in the Killing of Animals**

Whether we are vegetarians or otherwise, we are all indirectly involved in the killing of animals.

Large areas of forest have to be cleared to make housing estates because we want to live in houses. This results in the death of a great number of animals. Because we want to use household goods and other modern conveniences, large forest areas again have to be cleared for factory and industrial sites. Because we want to have electricity, rivers are dammed to obtain hydro-electric power. This results in the flooding of large areas of forest land at the expense of animal lives.

Because we use motor vehicles, countless animals and a great number of human beings are killed on the roads everyday.

Again on account of our safety, stray dogs are disposed of in case they become rabid. In the manufacture of various things that we use everyday, e.g. food, medicines, silk, cosmetics, film, etc., animal-derived substances are used at the expense of their lives.

If we use the demand and supply argument mentioned earlier then we should not live in a housing estate, or use household goods produced by factories, or use electricity, etc.

### **Analogy of Serial Killer**

Suppose we have a serial killer in a certain city who has raped and killed many women so that no woman dares to venture outdoor at night. The whole city is in uproar and the citizens demand that the authorities do their duty and catch the killer. So the police, after several months of pains taking effort, finally nabs the culprit. After this is a long trial and then the judge passes the death sentence on him. On the appointed day the killer is led to the execution platform where the executioner pulls the lever to end the killer's life.

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All this now leads to the question: “Who is involved in the evil kamma of killing a human being (i.e. the serial killer)?” According to the law of kamma-vipaka, the executioner bears the heaviest offence because he intentionally carried out the killing. Next would be the judge for pronouncing the death sentence. These two persons are directly involved in the killing kamma of the execution of the serial killer. The police are only indirectly involved and not responsible for the execution. How about the citizens? Ultimately the serial killer was executed to protect the citizens, i.e. he was executed for the sake of the citizens, or the citizens were the main beneficiaries of the execution. So are the citizens responsible for the killing kamma involved? No, because they did not ask for the execution of the serial killer. But they could be if they demanded his execution.

The scenario is similar to the slaughter of animals for food. The persons who slaughter the animals bear the heaviest killing kamma. The persons who breed animals for slaughter are also involved in the killing kamma. They are like the judge who condemned the man to be executed. But the people who buy the meat of animals already slaughtered are not involved in the kamma of killing even though, like the citizens of the city above, they are the main beneficiaries. But if someone orders a live animal to be slaughtered for its meat, then killing kamma is involved for him.

**‘Chi Zhai’, not ‘Chi Su’**

Many Chinese Buddhists mistakenly think that Mahayana Buddhism teaches the practice of vegetarianism, and confuse ‘Chi Su’ (vegetarianism) with ‘Chi Zhai’ (not eating after noon until the next dawn). In the early Suttas, ‘Chi Su’ is said to be the unbeneficial ascetic practice of external sects. ‘Chi Su’ is practiced by Han Chuan (Chinese Buddhism), not Bei Chuan (Mahayana Buddhism), since Tibetan and Japanese Buddhists are not vegetarians. Chinese emperor Liang Wu Di commanded Buddhist monks and nuns to eat vegetarian food.

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The word 'Zhai' means not eating at certain hours, i.e. fasting. Thus the Muslim fasting month of Puasa is called 'Kai Zhai'. The Buddha taught his disciples to 'Chi Zhai', i.e. not to eat (with exception of medical allowances) from noon until the next dawn (1 p.m. till 7 a.m. in Malaysia). In Han Chuan this 'Chi Zhai' became synonymous with 'Chi Su'.

## CONCLUSION

The Buddha did not encourage us to eat meat or become vegetarians. The choice is entirely up to us. The important point is to take to heart the Buddha's guidelines in MN 55 on the three conditions for unallowed and allowed meat.

A monk is not allowed to cook and has to be totally dependent on the offerings of lay supporters. He is also taught that he should be easily supported and looked after. Since he is not allowed to ask for any preferential food (except during sickness), a monk cannot choose his food. He has to accept what is being offered.

Lay people have more freedom to choose their food, and for lay people it is entirely up to individual preferences when it comes to eating meat or becoming a vegetarian. For the reasons already discussed, it is important not to be too critical of others no matter what our preferences are.

The most effective way to reduce the killing and cruelty in the world is for people to understand the Buddha's teaching. Ultimately, suffering (dukkha) is a characteristic of life, and the way to end suffering is to practise the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha to get out of the rounds of rebirths.

