

Walking our talk

Vegetarianism in the forefront of spreading the Dharma

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Introduction

I am most grateful for having found the Dharma, teachers, and a Sangha to practice in. I am also very grateful to be able to meet in this kind of Mahasangha with fellow practitioners from all over the world and would like to thank our host for bringing us together.

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Personally, I am grateful for having found a way of thinking, a practical way of living, and a transcendental perspective on life all wrapped into two neat words: the Buddha's Dharma. It satisfies some of my deep-seated needs or values and enriches my life.

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What might interest people in the Dharma? I have a background in economics and I am used to asking *what does the other person, client or customer need?* If you are hungry, but only have 30 minutes to order and eat, a delicious five-course meal might be wasted on you. I appreciate this question from the Buddha: *what does the other person need in order to live a more awake life?*

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So, what do people today need (and want) to be interested in the Dharma, to practise it, to become more aware, and to contribute to the welfare and happiness of all?

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I am cautious about generalisations; nevertheless on this occasion I will try to answer this question. I will make some observations and reflections from a Western perspective. I suspect that these observations are also valid in industrialised and post-industrialised countries everywhere. I have not had long to prepare this paper, and will therefore be brief and to the point. I want to acknowledge the help of Dharmachari Ratnaprabha, David Welsh and Kevin Reeder for their comments on both language and content.

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I want to share with you some criticisms of and alternatives to a materialistic, industrialised approach to food. I think this approach is unsustainable, and I would like us to join forces to support a more sustainable way of life more in line with the Dharma. I could have submitted this paper under the theme of sustainable development. Instead I want to argue that a wise and compassionate approach to animals and food is a strength in promoting the Dharma.

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People want loving kindness

At the bottom of their hearts, people have, a longing for connection and loving kindness. Through the Buddha's teaching on ignorance (*avidya*) I appreciate that people sometimes seek and express this longing in downright stupid ways. When I was young, I expressed my affection for my sister by fighting with her (she was teasing me!). When I thought that I was unfairly treated by my friend and teacher Mokshapriya, I would sometimes 'punish him' by withdrawing my contact and friendliness from him.

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In the West I think people want to learn how to connect with loving-kindness and how to express it in their lives. There are many ways to do this, and a very immediate one is to reflect loving kindness in what we eat. In this regard I often meet people who are beginning to

explore Buddhism and who hold the view that most Buddhists are vegetarian¹. I affirm that I am, but acknowledge that it is probably not the case with the majority. I brought this up with Ajahn Sumedo when he visited Norway. He agreed with this assessment and the desirability of incorporating vegetarian living as part of our practice.

In order to demonstrate loving kindness and inspire people with it, we have to understand it and practise it. At first we may be reluctant to acknowledge unhelpful views and practices in ourselves, and we might see this reluctance in others. This is not unlike the Buddha's experience – first with Mara, and then with people he met. There are opposing forces inside us and in the world. I would now like to suggest some points for reflection and practice.

How non-vegetarian living causes harm and suffering

Killing

The most obvious harm caused is that the animal in question is killed. I recall the Dhammapada:

All beings tremble before danger, all fear death.

When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.

Most nonvegetarians today do not themselves kill animals, but they have others kill for them, whether at a slaughterhouse, a farm or elsewhere. To the animal, the effect is the same. One could argue that by having others kill for me, I avoid some bad karma. Consider then the karma for those who kill for you. Would you like them to accumulate bad karma?

In the Jivaka Sutta the Buddha declares:

I say that in three situations flesh can be partaken of – when it is not seen, heard, or suspected (that the animal has been killed for a monk)²

I think this refers to a situation when monastics are doing an almsround and pay a surprise visit to a household. That is not the time to beg for any particular kind of food. If on the other hand Buddhists – monastics or lay – are invited to eat, they may suspect that an animal has been killed for them. Likewise, flesh for sale is intended to be eaten by those who buy it and according to the advice cited above we cannot partake of it.

In some areas of the planet such as the high mountains of Tibet, Greenland and the arctic region it may not be possible to survive on vegetables alone. For the vast majority of people on the planet this is not the case and alternative food sources are available. Some people, like those in the very north of Norway may have grown up accustomed to a meat-based diet. If they move to another region they are free to change their diet. It may be somewhat uncomfortable yet I hope this paper will suggest factors that will outweigh the discomfort.

Living and dying conditions of most animals

To provide the amount of flesh eaten in the West animals have to be raised under factory conditions. Most of these conditions would be considered torture if applied to humans. A trained veterinarian, Dharmachari Bodhipaksa, describes it thus:

Few of us would wish to visit an abattoir [slaughterhouse]. They are hellish places.

The stench of death, the blood-slicked floors, the noise of machinery, chain-saws tearing flesh and bone, the report of the captive bolt pistols that stun animals before

¹ With vegetarianism I mean a diet that does not involve deliberately killing, by oneself or others, of a being with a mother, such as cows, pigs, birds, fish etc. Vegans go further and acknowledge the killing involved in dairy products, eggs, leather etc.

² Evans, D.W., 1991, *Discourses of Gautama Buddha: Middle Collection*, Janus, London, p.162

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they have their throats cut and, above all, the noises of fear and distress as animals are led to their deaths; all contribute to make a slaughterhouse a hell on earth.³

Wasting resources

Many people in the world die of hunger. Considering our rapidly growing global population, and the limited amount of land that can be cultivated for food production, I am concerned that we use our food resources well. If we produced vegetable food we could feed 10 people on the same surface area needed to feed 1 person on meat.⁴ A vegetarian diet is a much more efficient use of this planet's resources. In the future, clean water may become more costly than oil due to its relative scarcity. It is estimated that 1 kilo of steak from intensively reared animals requires 100,000 litres of water.⁵ 1 kilo of soya beans requires 2,000 litres of water⁶

Harming the environment

Rearing animals in an industrial way produces harmful waste. It creates much more concentrated manure than can be used in farming, so what used to be a resource becomes a waste problem. Farm animals produce around 20% of the world's methane which is a greenhouse gas contributing to global warming. Another worrying side-effect of agricultural activity on humans is the emergence of new disease-causing organisms...Some animal viruses and bacteria have the potential to cross into the human population and this is believed to happen on farms...Malaysian farmers [were, in 1999] slaughtering hundreds of thousands of pigs to try to prevent a deadly human epidemic."⁷

Practice for our own awakening

"The familiar arguments in favour of a vegetarian diet are usually based on issues of either health, environment, or ecology. But there remains another approach to vegetarianism, specifically Buddhist in nature, which for me is the most persuasive. Here I mean vegetarianism as an actual practice."⁸

If we take the Buddha's threefold practice of ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, and purifying our heart as our guide, what I have written so far relates to the first of these, ceasing to do evil.

Composer Philip Glass sees vegetarianism as an opportunity to develop equanimity with all sentient beings: May *all* beings be well and happy; not just humans - even delicious tasting animals! It is a practice to let go of our preferences, even habits and customs. This is a hard practice that requires stamina, and it will help loosen or break our habitual tendencies or *samskaras*:

"After being a vegetarian for thirty-five years I still occasionally catch myself regarding fish as food. But my own view has changed enough so that now I truly believe it possible to transform our habitual mental patterns through this practice and to arrive at a perception of fellow sentient beings that is in complete accord with a Mahayana Buddhist point of view."⁹

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³ Bodhipaksa, 1999, *Vegetarianism – living a buddhist life*, Windhorse, p.22

⁴ The Agricultural University of Sweden, 1997, *Vegan, Vegetarians and Omnivores (in Swedish)*, SLU-contact 3.

⁵ Singer, Peter, 1995, *Animal Liberation*, Random House, London, p.166.

⁶ Pimentel & al, 1997, *BioScienco*, Vol. 47, No 2, February. [See also](#)

<http://www.optimumpopulation.org/opt.more.water.html>

⁷ Bodhipaksa, op.cit. pp.53-54.

⁸ Glass, Philip, "Vegetarianism as Practice", in Kaza & Kraft (eds), 2000, *Dharma Rain – Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, Shambala Publications, pp. 342-343.

⁹ Glass, Philip, *ibid.* 343.

I think this holds true for all schools of Buddhism. Some questioning is needed to find out how to learn to do good – the second fold of the Buddha’s advice:

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Some common questions about vegetarianism

Surely it is impossible not to cause harm? Yes, yet we can reduce the harm we do to a minimum, and plants cannot suffer the way animals do.

Why worry about animals when there is so much human suffering? One concern need not exclude the other. By becoming a vegetarian you improve conditions for people too.

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Am I attached to eating meat? Am I attached to my ideals of vegetarianism? Whatever the attachment, I can work on it in my practice without causing harm to other beings.

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Can I survive on a vegetarian diet? Research indicates that a normal human being can get the nutrition needed from a vegetarian diet¹⁰ and this is confirmed in my own vegetarian practice since 1992 and practically without eggs or milk products since 1993. During this time I have taken a black belt in the martial art Aikido, cycled all year round in Norway and regularly gone trekking in the mountains.

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What about donors who want to give me meat, or farmers who may lose their jobs? Donors can be informed about the consequences of their actions and be left to make their own choices. Farmers and the animal industry can be supported to produce other foods and to use the land more efficiently for other purposes, like providing biomass for fuel and energy.

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Having pondered thus, we can become vegetarians. The benefits of becoming vegetarian include a greater congruence between the ideals of non-violence and our practice of the Dharma, and perhaps a lighter conscience. We might look at all animals with loving kindness or *metta*, as our fellow beings. It will be easier to clearly face the facts and consequences of the animal industry. We will live more awake lives. We will be purifying our hearts and minds.

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A way to promote the Dharma

The Dharma’s mix of wisdom, adaptability to new cultures and knowledge, and compassion, gives it broad appeal. The world is changing, and it is changing fast, creating opportunities and problems along the way. We Buddhists have a reputation for compassion and moderation. In marketing language, this is our competitive advantage. Other groups, like Christians have a competitive advantage in being seen as *acting compassion out* through charity work. I want us to make a good use of the competitive advantage we have. This means taking care of it and communicating it. Practising and promoting vegetarianism is a way to show how we care for the world.

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Another advantage of the Dharma is its searching and inquisitive approach to life. The Buddha told us to reflect on the Dharma and find out for ourselves. This is an advantage we have not made enough use of. Buddhists are generally seen as open and good-natured (at least in the East) and perhaps a little too concerned with ourselves, and our own suffering in the West. We can use our potential for wisdom to question the status quo and suggest creative alternatives; this will promote the Dharma. We can join forces with those who already promote vegetarianism to clarify the consequences of the animal industry and support alternative lifestyles. At times this will be met with opposition by those whose interests are at stake or who don’t want to face the facts of their current way of life. This clarification of principles will promote the Dharma more than it will cause difficulties.

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¹⁰ Davis, B. And Melina, V. 2000, *Becoming Vegan*, Book publishing.

An additional advantage is that as Buddhists we have no central authority dictating what we should or should not practise. This allows for a creative dialogue between different schools of thought and practice. If we make use of this – and this conference is an excellent opportunity to make use of it – we can learn from each other and find new (or old) and wise responses to world problems.

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When the Dharma is seen as a provider of solutions to worldly problems – in addition to everything else it offers – its appeal will increase. Vegetarianism is a solution to a number of interlacing problems. It is also a direct expression of wisdom and compassion. It might be difficult to give up meat if you are used to it and like it. The Buddha certainly warned us that practice is difficult. However, I would content that the benefits of practising and promoting vegetarianism surely outweigh the difficulties.

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