Buddhism and Vegetarianism

by

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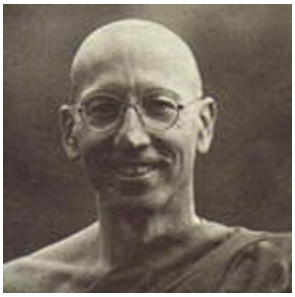

On a previous occasion when I gave a talk on Buddhism and vegetarianism there were some very strong reactions from some members of the audience. People who have strong reactions to talks are people who have very strong feelings about the topic, which means they have very strong views about the topic. This is a great danger, because as soon as we develop very strong, fixed views about anything, it tends to make us rather rigid. We develop a closed mind, which makes us over-react to anything that is said. If it's not in agreement with us it must be against us. That's all we see - black and white - and that is a great shame. The Buddha warned against attachment to views and opinions as one of the fundamental causes of suffering.

We see this over and over again in every aspect of life. Most of the conflicts that we are involved in during our lives arise out of disagreement with regard to certain views about things. These conflicts and due to attachment to our views and our perceptions.

Of course, we need views, we cannot live without them. A view is the way we see something, the way we understand something, our preference with regard to the variety of choices available in regard to things. This is quite natural. As long as we think, perceive, or have been conditioned in a certain way, we will have views, and on some topics these may be very strong and fixed.

Vegetarianism is one such topic. This evening I will talk about the topic as a contemplation. It is not my intention to sit here and tell you what the final word on Buddhism and vegetarianism is. That is neither my intention nor the Buddhist way. My understanding comes from my experience, from my perspective, from my contemplation. You may agree or you may not; it doesn't matter as long as you reflect clearly on the matter and come to your own conclusions. I take a neutral position because I do not feel that this particular topic can be seen simply in terms of black and white. I take the Buddhist position as I understand it.

Scriptural basis

Let's begin with a fundamental question: Is it a prerequisite for a Buddhist to be a vegetarian according to the teachings of the Buddha, as far as we can assess? I would have to say, No, according to the Buddhist scriptures it is not a prerequisite for a person to be a vegetarian in order to be a Buddhist.

People say, "Well how do you know what the Buddha taught, anyway?" It's true. I don't know from personal experience; if I was there, I don't remember it. So what do we have to rely on? We have to rely on these scriptures that have been handed down through the centuries. As to whether we can trust these scriptures depends on whether we accept them as accurate recordings of the Buddha's teaching or not. In the Theravada tradition we have what we call the Pali Canon, the Buddhist scriptures. There are many volumes, the Vinaya Pitaka, the discipline for monks and nuns, the Suttanta Pitaka, which contains the discourses or teachings given by the Buddha, and finally the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which is the system of philosophy and psychology developed from the basic texts. Most scholars agree that the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the 'higher teaching', was developed by teachers of later periods from the basic texts of the Suttas as a system of analysis for easier explanation and for use in debate.

So there are three collections of scriptures. My research is limited to the Vinaya and the Suttas, the books of discipline and the books of discourses. From my studies I have great confidence that what is presented in these scriptures accurately represents what the Buddha taught. However, I do not claim that every word in these scriptures is exactly the word of the Buddha. There have been some changes, some additions and some alterations through the ages, but the essence is there. In essence the texts are a very true and accurate record of what the Buddha taught.

My basis for this reasoning is simply the fact that the people who passed on these teachings and checked them were disciples, monks and nuns who had tremendous respect for the Buddha, just as monks today have, and I don't think that many monks would dare to intentionally change the teachings of the Buddha. Very few monks would be prepared to do that. Any alterations that have taken place were simply an expedient means for making recitation more convenient. There may have been accidental alterations, but I do not think that the texts were corrupted intentionally, certainly not in any serious or major way.

This is verified in particular with regard to the Books of Discipline, which deal with the monastic discipline. Through the ages Buddhism slowly spread from the Ganges Valley throughout India, moving south to Sri Lanka, across to Burma and Thailand, then north towards Tibet and eventually China. Over the centuries it began to fragment into various schools. Some of these schools flourished in different parts of India and more distant locations, and so had very little or no contact with each other. When we compare the Books of Discipline, however, there's remarkable similarity between these different schools. They are so similar that they must have originally come from the same source.

So there is good reason for confidence in what we call the Pali Canon and to accept that it does represent the teachings of the Buddha. In any case, this is the evidence we have to deal with, because there is no one here who can say, "I heard the Buddha say differently." These scriptures are the most authoritative or the most definitive representation of the Buddha's teachings.

If we study these scriptures very carefully we will find that nowhere is there any injunction to either lay people or to monks with regard to vegetarianism. There is not a single mention of it as a Buddhist injunction on either the monks and nuns or lay people.

If the Buddha had made vegetarianism a prerequisite it would have to be somewhere in the scriptures. Quite to the contrary, one does find a number of instances where the Buddha speaks about food, especially on the rules pertaining to the monks, indicating that, during the time of the Buddha, the monks did sometimes eat meat.

If you'll bear with me I would first like to present to you some of this historical evidence. In these scriptures, particularly in the Books of Discipline, there are many references to what monks are and are not allowed to do. A lot of these rules have to do with food; there are rules about all sorts of things pertaining to food, some of them very unusual. If the monks had to be vegetarian then these rules would seem to be completely useless or irrelevant.

For instance there is one rule which forbids monks from eating the meat of certain types of animals, such as horse, elephant, dog, snake, tiger, leopard and bear. There are about a dozen different types of meat specified by the Buddha which are not allowed for monks. That he made a rule that certain types of meat were not to be eaten by monks would indicate that other types of meat were allowable.

There is another rule: a monk was ill, and as he was quite sick a devout female disciple asked him if he had ever had this illness before and what did he take to cure it? It was some sort of stomach problem, and he said that he'd had it before and last time he had some meat broth which helped to relieve the symptoms. So this woman went off looking for meat to prepare a meat broth for the sick monk. However it was an uposatha (observance) day, so there was no meat available anywhere. It was a tradition in India not to slaughter animals on such days. Out of great devotion this lady decided that the monk could not be left to suffer, so she cut a piece of her own flesh and made a meat broth. She took it to the monk, offered it to him, and apparently he drank it and recovered. When the Buddha heard about this, he made a rule that monks are not allowed to eat human flesh. Thank goodness for that!

So here is another strange rule that would be completely pointless if there had been a stipulation that the monks never eat meat. There are many similar instances both in the Rules of Discipline and in the Discourses. When the Buddha heard a charge that Buddhist monks caused the killing of animals by eating meat, he stated that this was not so. He then declared three conditions under which monks were not to eat meat: if they have seen, heard or they suspect that the animal was killed specifically to feed them, then the monks should refuse to accept that food. At other times, when the monks go on almsround, they are supposed to look into their bowls and accept whatever is given with gratitude, without showing pleasure or displeasure. However, if a monk knows, has heard or suspects that the animal has been killed specifically to feed the monks, he should refuse to receive it.

There are many more examples than I have given here, scattered throughout the scriptures, indicating that it was not a requirement that either the monks or the lay people be vegetarian.

Furthermore, we can see that throughout the history of Buddhism there has not been one Buddhist country were vegetarianism was the common practice of the Buddhist people. This would indicate that it hasn't been the practice right from the very beginning.

Although some Mahayana monks, in particular the Chinese, Vietnamese and some of the Japanese, are vegetarian, the majority of lay people are not. Historically, right up to the present day, Buddhist people in general haven't been strictly vegetarian. This would seem to support the conclusion drawn from an examination of the scriptures, that it has never been a prerequisite for people who want to be Buddhists to be vegetarian.

Of course it can be argued, and it often is argued, by vegetarian monks in particular, but also by lay people, that the scriptures were altered. They argue that the Buddha did teach vegetarianism, but those monks who wanted to eat meat went and changed every reference to it in all the texts. They didn't have a computer to just punch in 'reference to meat' and get a whole list. The scriptures were initially handed down by word of mouth and many monks were involved. No one had it on a disk so that it could be changed in half an hour. It would have been very difficult to change as there are many references to it throughout the scriptures. You could change it in one place but then it would be inconsistent with other references. It is highly unlikely that the monks could have achieved consistency in changing so many references throughout the scriptures, so I think the claim of corruption of the scriptures by meat-loving monks is a bit far-fetched. I think the scriptures are accurate. I think that the Buddha did not make it a prerequisite for people, nor do I think that it was laid down as a rule of training for monks.

Another point of contention arises over the Buddha teaching, as one of the training rules for everybody who wanted to be his disciple, that they are not to kill any living creature. The very first precept for a lay Buddhist is: 'Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.' (I undertake the training rule of not killing any living creature.) This is a training for every Buddhist monk, nun, novice, postulant, layman and laywoman, which is absolutely fundamental to the training in harmlessness.

There appears to be an inconsistency, it doesn't seem to add up, but this is simply due to not thinking clearly about the topic. Obviously the Buddha saw a great difference in these two trainings - the training of not killing and the training regarding diet. They operate at different levels.

The Buddha was very pragmatic. When he laid down training rules, he laid down rules that people could keep, that they had a good likelihood of keeping. For instance, he did not lay down a training rule saying that you must not over-eat. The monks are supposed to be alms mendicants and he laid down a lot of rules about eating for monks - they are allowed to eat only in the morning, when they eat they are not supposed to make chomping or slurping sounds, they are not supposed to drop grains of rice, they are not supposed to scrape the bowl, they are not supposed to look around - yet he didn't make one rule about over-eating. You can really stuff yourself and not break a rule. You would think that the Lord Buddha would have made a rule about that. Why not, when he made all these other rules? It's up to the individual to train oneself to eat in moderation. It is something you take responsibility for and train yourself toward gradually, but it is not a rule to start with.

There is a big difference between eating meat and killing animals, although it can be argued that when we eat meat we indirectly support the killing of animals. There's something to that, and I'll go into it in greater detail later on. There is a big difference

between the two, however, because the killing of animals refers to intentionally depriving an animal of life or intentionally causing or directly telling somebody else to kill an animal. That is what the first precept is about - the intention to kill an animal. That is the purpose behind the action. There is intention, there is purpose and there is the actualisation of that purpose in killing.

If you drove your car here this evening I'm sure that you killed something - on your windscreen there would have been a few smashed insects. When we drive from the monastery where I live in Serpentine to Perth, which is approximately 60 kilometres, the windscreen gets covered with dead insects, especially in the mornings and evenings. I know when I get into the car and ask someone to drive me somewhere that some insects are going to die. I know that, but that is not my intention for getting into a car and being driven somewhere. I don't say, "Let's go for a spin to see how many insects we can squash." If that was my intention then I would be killing, intentionally killing. But we don't do that. We get into a car to go from A to B for a purpose. Perhaps some beings get killed, but it's not our intention to kill them.

That is not killing - there is death but you are not creating the kamma of killing animals. This rule is the foundation of the Buddhist training in harmlessness: you refrain from intentionally killing living creatures.

When people eat meat what is their intention? How many people eat meat with the intention to kill cows, pigs and sheep? If their intention in eating is to kill more cows, that would be very close to killing. If you consider why people really eat meat you will see that it is for very different reasons. Why did people in more basic, rural societies, such as in northern Thailand where I lived, where most of the people were Buddhist, eat meat? They ate frogs, grasshoppers, red ants, ant larvae .... all sorts of things. Why? For protein, they had to survive, they had to have food and it's very hard to get food. What did a caveman eat? He ate whatever he could get. Due to the fundamental drive to survive he would eat whatever he could get. That has a lot to do with what we eat - the primary instinct of survival. It depends on what is available.

Then there is the cultural influence, the way your tastes are conditioned by your upbringing. If you are accustomed to certain types of food, you find those kinds of food agreeable. That is why you buy them. That is the sort of food that you know how to cook. Why are most Australians non-vegetarian? They eat meat because that is what they are conditioned to eat. That is part of the conditioning of the Australian culture.

So when most people who are not vegetarians eat meat, it is not because they want to kill animals. It's just that that is what they have been conditioned to eat since childhood. It is part of their culture, that is what they know how to cook and that is what they know how to eat. It agrees with them, that is why they eat it.

You might say it's ignorance. Well, most people are ignorant; most people have limited scope in their overall understanding of options and possibilities; most people live according to their conditioning. It doesn't have to be that way, but that is how it is for most people.

It is important to make this distinction. Eating meat is not the same as killing animals, because the intention is different. The Buddha laid down this rule, to refrain from

intentionally killing any living creature, as the first step towards respecting life, both human and animal. It's just a start, not the end. And most people can't even do that. How many people in the world can truly refrain from killing living beings? We could get into an idealistic battle as to why everybody should be vegetarian, but you have to admit that the great majority of people on this planet cannot even keep to the level of not intentionally killing. If they could keep to that level, things would be a lot better. The Buddha had a pragmatic approach to things, so he said to at least start at this level.

Thus far I have given you reasons why Buddhism doesn't make vegetarianism compulsory. Does Buddhism then encourage the eating of meat? Nowhere in the scriptures do we read that the Buddha said, "Eat more meat, it is good for you." Nowhere does it say to "give the man meat." There is not a single reference to giving the monks more meat. The scriptures certainly do not encourage the eating of meat; there are no references to it, no suggestion of encouragement for it. What are we to make of this? Simply that each individual must consider this matter carefully, come to his or her own conclusions and take responsibility for them.

Ethical considerations

Now we must consider whether vegetarianism is compatible with the teachings of the Buddha. I would say wholeheartedly that it is compatible. Vegetarianism is a very beneficial practice for one who is developing two conditions which every Buddhist should be trying to develop: compassion and wisdom. That is what we endeavour to cultivate through the spiritual path. Compassion means feeling with, feeling for, being sensitive to the pain of others. The natural outcome of developing such compassion is that we do not want to kill, we do not want to hurt others.

Through wisdom we begin to realise that not only do our actions have direct results, but also indirect results. This is the arising of understanding. I've often referred to one of the fundamental laws of nature, called Dependent Origination or Conditioned Arising - "When this is, that comes to be." In other words, certain conditions bring about certain results. As we develop greater clarity of mind and greater awareness, we begin to see the relationship. Whatever we do has its consequences. The way we live gives rise to causes and results. We begin to see that this is a fundamental law of nature and we become a lot more aware of how we are living and the consequences of our actions. As we become more compassionate and wise we will start to direct our lives so that we become more harmless, or contribute less to the suffering and destruction in life.

Now let's consider this on a broader scale than just vegetarianism, because this topic of 'Buddhism and Vegetarianism' is far too narrow. We cannot discuss vegetarianism as if it was an isolated thing all by itself. There's much more to it; it involves the ecology, it involves every aspect of life. Perhaps 'Buddhism and Ecology' or 'Buddhism and Life' would be more fitting titles.

Once we realise that how we live has its consequences, what effect will this have on how we live and how we regard what we are doing? Everything we do and say has its consequences, because we are part of a system. Every person sitting here is part of the system, the whole universe. There is one system and you are part of it. Everything you do has an effect on the universe.

You may think, "What can I do to affect the movement of the planets and the galaxies?" Perhaps very little, but according to the relationship of interdependence, everything you do affects everything else. If you can't see it as a whole you can certainly see it in this room. What you do here this evening will affect everybody else. What I do is affecting you. What we do affects the outside. Everything we do has its long range effect on everything else.

So when we eat meat, that has its consequences. What are the consequences? We are directly supporting an industry that is based on rearing animals, quite often under terrible conditions, for the sole purpose of slaughter. The meat can then be available in neatly wrapped little packages so that we can buy it can eat it. Our intention when we cook and eat meat is not to kill animals - I don't think anyone has that intention - however the fact remains that by the acts of buying, cooking and eating, we indirectly support the killing of the animal. It's not killing, but it is supporting.

Now, with that understanding, certain individuals may decide not to support killing. They won't want to be part of it; they will want to remove themselves from it. If there is one reason why a Buddhist should decide to be a vegetarian, it should be based on this perspective. There is only one good, valid reason, and that is compassion - not wanting to contribute to the suffering any more than one has to.

Vegetarianism is a matter of individual choice and responsibility, not something that can be forced, but it is certainly praise-worthy and compatible with the Buddha's teaching. But does it stop there? Are you now pure? You've become vegetarian, but are you blameless? Are your hands clean?

Let me tell you that as long as you are alive on this planet, as long as you are a member of this system, your hands will never be clean. It doesn't matter what you eat, you are always contributing to death and destruction, regardless of what you do. You can be a vegetarian, but you still contribute to destruction just because you are part of this system. You can't escape it. You are sitting on chairs, where do they come from? The chairs are on the carpet: where does the carpet come from? The electricity? Air-conditioning? The building, the motor car, the trains, the buses, where does all that come from? It's all interrelated. Everything is interrelated. We're always involved in the whole system, and as long as we live in this system we are always contributing. We make use of the air-conditioning, we make use of the electricity, which means that we are in a way supporting the building of dams, which entails the destruction of forests. There can be no doubt about it. You are wearing clothes, you are wearing shoes. If you don't wear leather shoes, you wear plastic shoes. Who makes the plastic shoes? The chemical companies, the ones that make napalm and poisons. You are supporting them.

As I said, the training for a monk is to accept what one is given and not to ask for anything special. Most of the food we get is vegetarian, but not all. So I can be accused of contributing. I confess, my hands are not clean. Even if I am vegetarian, as I can be most of the time, my hands are still not clean. Where do you think the fruit and vegetables come from? How do those vegetable gardens get to be so free of trees and bushes? What happened to all the trees and bushes? Those huge fields of wheat and corn and the orchards - what happened to all the forests? - gone with the ploughing and spraying. We

have nice vegetables, but for them to be nice vegetables you've got to do something about the insects.

On an individual basis, if you really are compassionate, if you really are wise, you can do as much as you can to minimise the damage. But when you consider that there are some six billion people on this planet, that's a lot of people to feed and clothe, so there has got to be a lot of destruction, either directly or indirectly. Life is like that.

What I am saying is not fatalistic. It is simply making us aware of reality. Within this reality we all can and should consider carefully what we are doing, how we are living and what we are consuming. How much are we contributing to death and destruction? It's not just a matter of vegetarianism. That is praise-worthy if done properly, and, as I said, compatible with the teachings of the Buddha, but there's more to it than that - much more.

Treading lightly

Even if one isn't vegetarian there's a lot to do. Nowadays we are beginning to understand this. We cannot continue to consume more and more, demand more and more, want more and more of everything and expect that this limited planet with its limited resources can supply it for us. One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is to be contented with little. It doesn't mean starving yourself, it's just a matter of being contented, of not being continually caught in the obsession to get more, which is basically the present-day consumer society syndrome, isn't it? Nearly all of us in Western society are suffering from it.

I have an American student who complains because there is such a limited range of food here in Australia. We've only got three kinds of this type of chocolate, she says, whereas in America they have twenty kinds. Twenty kinds of chocolate, one hundred and twenty kinds of ice-cream to choose from - a marvellous achievement for the human race, the apex of human civilisation. This is consumerism, where the word is 'more, more, more'. It's always more, with little or no emphasis on contentment.

You can see where this is going to lead, this hungry ghost syndrome of forever wanting more, of never being satisfied. It's going to destroy the whole planet. The planet is limited and the consequences are very far reaching. One hungry ghost is not so bad, but when you start getting millions of them, this wanting more and more is going to consume the whole world. It already is consuming the world at an alarming rate.

The Buddha was pointing to a very fundamental principle: craving is the source of the problem and it can never be satisfied by feeding it. Contentment, being satisfied with few needs, is so important. Of course this had to be a personal judgement. The Buddha can't sit down and say, "I allot twenty grams of cheese per person per day." That's ridiculous! The Buddha was an enlightened being and he wanted people to become enlightened, to become responsible. The Buddha doesn't take responsibility away from you, it is up to each individual. He offers guidelines which each one of us must use in considering our lives, reflecting on what we are doing, the consequences thereof, and taking responsibility.

How much are we willing to give up? Each person must find his or her own limit. For some people that may be one car, for others two cars; some people may only want a bicycle - that is their assessment of their need.

The more we stress compassion and understanding of the consequences of actions, the more people will be able to make the right choices, to simplify, to develop more contentment and know moderation. This is much more important than just vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is just one factor, just one aspect of the whole picture. The whole is much greater because it deals with how much we consume, even of fruit and vegetables, clothing, shoes, power, air, fuel, everything - because all consumption brings about destruction.

This is the Buddhist way of life: beginning to cultivate compassion and understanding, and from there beginning to redirect our lives by making the right choices. It's up to each individual to decide how far he can go, but the direction is toward trying to tread as lightly as possible on the planet, so that our lives won't be the cause of so much destruction.

It is a personal thing. It does no good going around pointing fingers at people and demanding that they stop: "You'd better stop using bleached toilet paper otherwise we'll imprison you." If society reaches that point, then banning such a product may be a good thing, but you can't do so until sufficient people appreciate and understand the need for it. The main thrust of Buddhism is always to encourage compassion and understanding. From there, everything else will come about in accordance with the individual's response and sense of personal responsibility.

You can see why I feel quite confident that the Buddha would not have made vegetarianism compulsory, because that is not the way he would approach it. His main concern would be to set a fundamental standard, but even that would be voluntary. It is then up to you whether you follow it or not. It is up to the individual, through the teaching, to become more compassionate and wise, to take responsibility for one's life. Whether you make a rule or not, what matters is whether people are going to keep it. The Buddha's approach, the main thrust of his teaching, was to try to encourage more understanding and compassion, so that the individual would make the appropriate choices - not only vegetarianism, but about many other things.

Vegetarianism is a very noble choice, but that choice should be made from the right stand point - out of compassion and understanding. Having made such a choice, don't pollute it with aversion for those who are not vegetarian. The goodness generated by such a choice then becomes corrupted, and in some ways you will be worse than non-vegetarians. We make our choice out of compassion. If we are in a position to explain, we explain it to others according to reason and logic, not by being critical of them for not being vegetarian.

I respect people who are vegetarian. They are acting very nobly; it is a gesture of renunciation. It is a small thing but noble, and very much in keeping with the Buddha's teaching of compassion and understanding. But don't stop there. Even if you are not vegetarian don't think there is nothing else you can do. There's a lot to be done in every area of life, in the way we speak, in the way we act, in everything. Be one who treads lightly, be one who doesn't add unnecessarily to the suffering of humanity and all other sentient beings on this planet. Once we have the intention to at least try, to move in the right direction, we are good disciples of the Buddha. Each person has to walk at his or her own pace.

About the Author

Ajahn Jagaro was born John Cianciosi in 1948, in Italy, and migrated with his parents to Australia at the age of ten. After completing a Diploma in Applied Chemistry and working for a short time, he took leave of his home to travel in Asia. With no clear aim in mind, his travels eventually took him to a Buddhist monastery in Bangkok, where a casual interest in meditation developed into a decision to take ordination as a Buddhist monk in 1972. After a year spent in Bangkok and Southern Thailand, he travelled to the north-east, where he met his teacher, Venerable Ajahn Chah, the well-known forest meditation teacher, and spent the next ten years in and around Ajahn Chah's monastery, Wat Pah Pong, and its many branches.

In 1979, Ajahn Chah invited Venerable Jagaro to become the senior monk, or Abbot, at Wat Pah Nanachat, a monastery not far from Wat Pah Pong. Wat Pah Nanachat had some years previously been established by Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho (his senior Western disciple, who now lives in England, Abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Centre) as a centre for Westerners interested in training in the monastic lifestyle of the forest tradition. During his time at Wat Nanachat, Ajahn Jagaro gained invaluable experience in dealing with monastic administrative duties, in addition to developing a reputation in Thailand as a gifted teacher.

In February, 1982, he was invited to Perth, Western Australia, as resident monk for the Buddhist Society of Western Australia. Interest there was sufficient to see the establishment of Bodhinyana Forest Monastery in Serpentine, 60 kms south of Perth, where he led a small community of Buddhist monks and nuns of varying nationalities and acted as mentor for the Buddhist Society of Western Australia up until 1995.

In 1995, Ajahn Jagaro made the difficult decision to disrobe, expressing his gratitude for his contact with Ajahn Chah and all his Dhamma friends within the Buddhist Community. At the time of publication of this talk at Shabkar.Org, in 2006 , John Cianciosi is working for the Theosophical Society in America.