

# Meat, Garlic and Onions: An Analysis of Eating Restrictions in Buddhist Culture

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*“There once was a great monk who, out of compassion for all sentient beings, was a strict vegetarian. In fact, he claimed he had never in his lifetime consumed the flesh of any animal. One lady, deciding to test the monk’s claim, prepared a dish for the monk. She told him it contained only vegetables, but in fact it contained a small piece of meat. The monk gratefully accepted the dish and the lady left, believing she had fooled him. However, the monk saw through her trick, and tossed the dish down to the earth. The next morning he awoke, and found that the food, embedded in the earth, had sprouted into 2 shrubs: one garlic and one onion. This is why Buddhists do not eat garlic and onions.”<sup>1</sup>*

The above story discusses two significant prohibitions regarding Buddhist eating customs: that of meat, and that of ‘pungent’ vegetables. Due to the strong emphasis on compassion and love for all living beings found in Buddhist teachings, it might appear that vegetarianism is the norm for Buddhists. However, this is not the case. Many (and in some sects the majority) of Buddhists are in fact not vegetarians. This paper shall focus on the ethical, spiritual, doctrinal, and cultural grounds for vegetarianism in the Buddhist tradition. Included will be a discussion of how the disciplinary code was produced and worded in a manner that did not concretely prohibit the eating of meat. Specific focus will be given to Theravadan interpretations of the moral code, as well as a few examples from Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism. Following this, attention shall be given to the prohibition on garlic and onions, and why the above story

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<sup>1</sup> This story is presented as told by Ah Seng, an Indonesian Buddhist and Edmonton vegetarian restaurant owner.

creates a link between these foods and meat. I will then conclude the paper with a brief explanation of my own interpretation of Buddhist morality concerning the treatment of animals, and how it has inspired me to adopt a vegan lifestyle.

The origin of vegetarianism in India has often been linked to the cow<sup>2</sup> protectionism and veneration associated with Hindu culture. This characteristic is believed by some to have originated in the pastoral Aryan culture that populated the Indus Valley sometime after 2000 BCE. The Aryans brought with them the sacred Vedas, which, along with the ascetic tradition, was a contributing source for Buddhism. Certain analyses point out that that the Vedas call for non-violence towards of all bipeds and quadrupeds, and the eating of meat entails punishment (Chandra 1971: 153). In some passages, the killing of a cow is even equated with the killing of a human (Ram 1927: 40). Based on this, many modern Hindus are aghast at the suggestion that any of their ancestors killed or ate animals, especially the cow. Many of them reject as propaganda evidence that is used in attempts to regard cow protectionism as a very recent phenomenon (Chandra 1971: 149). However, other analyses of the Vedas argue that while meat eating was quite rare, there was in fact no restriction against it. Cows were venerated, but they were also commonly used for sacrifice. If used for sacrifice, they could then be eaten, but only under the supervision of a Brahmin priest (Spencer 1995: 74). This Brahminical sacrifice is thought to have developed after 1000 BCE, and it is in fact the influence of Jainism and Buddhism that ultimately contributed to its demise. These new traditions developed partially as a reaction against Brahmanism, and condemned its excessive use of animal sacrifice (Ram 1927: 71). Instead, they advocated the use of sacrificial statues or other means of worship, as well as the idea that outward faith was not even really necessary. This contributed to a slow transition within Hinduism from occasional cattle sacrifice to a total ban on beef eating (71).

An important idea within the Buddhist tradition was the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence), which was also extremely important to Mahavira and the contemporary development of Jainism (Ram 1927: 63). This idea revolved around the interconnectedness of all beings and *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. From this perspective, all beings were kin. Therefore, the Buddha advocated compassion for all sentient beings. He recommended that, “no living thing be harmed by hand, by scourge...no injury be wrought” (62). This belief was taken to the extreme in the *Kakacupama* and *Nipata* sutras, in which the Buddha stated that we must

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘cow’ is used here to refer to all bovine cattle.

express universal love to all beings as a mother loves a child, and this love extends even to one's murderer. The Buddha spoke out against butchery, fishing, and sacrifice, and one who mistreated an animal was regarded as not *ariya* (noble) (Wijayaratra 1990: 70). However, it is interesting to note that the Buddha was most likely not completely vegetarian and it is said that one of his last meals may have contained pork (Gombrich 1971: 260). An explanation for this lies in the development of the *Vinaya*, or code of monastic discipline.

The *Vinaya* contains guidelines for proper conduct on the part of monks and nuns. It was developed and amended by the Buddha and his followers, and eventually written down centuries after his physical death. The *Vinaya* states that monks are not to work for a living, and the eating of food not made by others was a *pacittiya*, an offense requiring confession (Wijayaratra 1990: 58). Therefore, renunciants were to subsist on food prepared by people of the community, which allowed them more time for spiritual practice, and allowed the laity to accumulate merit by supporting the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, literally meaning "beggars of alms" (60). Furthermore, the thirty-ninth rule in the *Pacittiya* states that monks and nuns are forbidden to request or make known their food preferences, which encouraged moderation and prevented abuse of the benefactor's generosity (69). Also, since the renunciants relied entirely on community support, it was required that they eat whatever was placed in their begging bowl. The Buddha did not wish for the monastic community to be a burden on society, therefore all that he requested was that families offer a portion of what they were already eating. Depending on local food preferences, this may have included meat. He stated that, "monastic discipline would be undermined if monks would start to pick and choose their food" (Conze 1957: 62). It was on these grounds that he rejected Devadatta's proposal for enforced vegetarianism, in that it would have caused difficulties begging. Instead, the Buddhist community adopted the Buddha's "middle way" to dietary practice, in which restrictions were not too harsh (Wijayaratra 1990: 72).

Following the Buddha's death and the transcription of the *Vinaya*, the Theravadan tradition developed the idea that, so long as the animal wasn't killed directly for you, you might as well eat it since it is already dead (Gombrich 1971: 260). Other than this the only real restriction was on the ten "forbidden meats" which ranged from lizard to human flesh (Wijayaratra 1990: 69). Some modern examples from Sri Lanka and Thailand are instructive in order to illustrate how these rules of the *Vinaya*

have persisted, and still govern the customs of the Theravadan *sangha* today.

One author notes that in Sri Lanka, vegetarianism appears to be universally admired, but rarely practiced (Gombrich 1971: 261). In his travels throughout the country, he noted that animals had different degrees of value. For example, beef was the worst to eat, meat itself was worse than fish, and eggs were also worse than fish but not as bad as meat (261). There was also a general hierarchy based on the size, value and apparent closeness to humans of the animal in question. The author also found that unlike some of the stories we often hear in the West, the monks in Sri Lanka didn't care about killing insects. They didn't really deny that it was a sin; they just didn't really care (262). Another noteworthy point is that among the laity, the author encountered many justifications or excuses for the eating of meat. For example many hunters, especially in the more remote villages, would say that they live in a state of poverty due to past sin; therefore they need to hunt to survive. They claim they are caught in a vicious cycle and hope that in their next life they can afford to not eat meat (261). Similarly, many Buddhists raised goats, but would sell them to local Muslim butchers to do the killing. However, it must be kept in mind that while vegetarianism was not common, it did still exist and in many isolated communities Buddhists would boycott local butcher shops (261). The point to keep in mind is that the decision to avoid meat was in all cases an individual one, and not one that resulted from monastic enforcement or recommendation.

Accounts from modern Thailand are similar to those of Sri Lanka. One author notes that throughout her stay in the *Ayutthaya* province of central Thailand, she only encountered one vegetarian. He was actually the highest-ranking *bhikkhu* in the province, and even his reasons for abandoning meat related more to a dramatic childhood experience than to religious morality (Bunnag 1973: 69). However, while most monks were not vegetarians, the author did find that they practiced a much stricter interpretation of *ahimsa* than the laity. For example, there were many rules regarding tilling the ground that avoided destruction of organisms, and some monks even filtered their water before drinking and bathing (70). Among the laity, she found that they had a very liberal interpretation. In general, the five precepts were viewed like all other codes: they could be quoted or ignored as was expedient. In theory they believed that one should observe the rules as closely as possible to avoid *bap* (demerit), and they expressed abhorrence to the destruction of any life. However in practice people did not hesitate from killing rodents, snakes and mad dogs. In many

cases they simply interpreted the first precept as referring to the taking of a human life (143).

The Mahayana tradition also developed out of the Buddha's teachings, but in many cases focused on a more interpretive and less literal understanding of the *dharma*. Therefore, the rules of the *Vinaya* were seen as guiding tools, and could be broken if necessary. On top of this belief, certain groups also pointed to portions of the *sutras* in which the Buddha discussed the adaptability of the teachings. According to one author, the Buddha stated that if his rules were not pure or "clean" in other regions, then local customs should prevail (Shong-yen 1994: 5). The Buddha also told Ananda to dispense with the minor precepts, but unfortunately he did not define which ones these were. Therefore, as Mahayana Buddhism developed and spread throughout Asia, there was no single set of accompanying rules that was universally followed. Certainly the *Vinaya* spread and was translated, but the degree to which it was followed or disregarded varied immensely between groups and regions. It must be noted that unlike the *Vinaya*, the ten precepts were universally accepted; it is only their interpretation that differs.

Due to this large degree of variation and interpretation, it is difficult to make generalizations about meat-eating restrictions in the Mahayana community. In one text the Dalai Lama compares the Theravada and Mahayana perspectives of vegetarianism. (2001: 101). He states that the Theravadans only eat what is regarded as "pure meat", meaning that the animal was not killed for you, you did not see it get killed, and you have no information about or connection to that killing. In Mahayana, certain scriptures strictly prohibit any meat eating, such as the *Descent Into Lanka Sutra*, whereas others seem to make no such prohibition. Also, within Vajrayana, the three lower classes of tantra prohibit it, while the highest class doesn't (102). Interestingly enough, the Dalai Lama himself is not currently a vegetarian (Dalai Lama 1990: 179). In 1965 he chose to remove meat and eggs from his diet, but within a year he contracted a severe case of jaundice and Hepatitis B, after which several doctors recommended he return to eating meat, which he did reluctantly (184).

Since there is such a lack of consensus on the subject in the Mahayana tradition, I will focus on a few notable examples of vegetarianism within the tradition instead of trying to make some sort of generalization. In China it appears that the *Vinaya* was translated and adopted somewhere between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE (Sze-bong 1994:



111). However, the early community found these rules very unclear and didn't understand a lot of the reasoning. This problem had largely to do with difficulties of translation and terminology, as well as the influence of other competing systems such as Daoism. Over time the *Vinaya* gradually declined, and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century it was completely replaced with locally defined sets of rules (111). As can be expected, different versions and interpretations appeared, each focusing on certain aspects and ignoring others. Chu-hung (1535-1615), a prominent Pure Land monk, was one of the greatest advocates of vegetarianism in Chinese history. He pointed to Chih-I's sixth century T'ien t'ai text in which one of the light precepts (rules which required confession if broken) was a prohibition against non-practice of releasing and saving sentient beings (Yu 1981: 67). Chu-hung took this very seriously, and devoted much of his life to promoting vegetarianism and releasing captured animals. He believed that by eating meat, you "deny the existence of any meaningful relationship between yourself and other beings" (47). He felt that this objectification of animals led to unenlightened patterns of thought.

While Chu-hung was just one example, even today the Chinese *sangha* is known for its meticulous observance of rules such as chastity and vegetarianism (Yu 1981: 230). Also, vegetarianism in China was certainly not only limited to the monastic community. From a more individual perspective, refraining from eating meat became a means of accumulating merit for the laity. In modern times, there is a lay Buddhist group in China known as the "Vegetarian Sect" who view strict fasting from meat as their most important religious duty (Hackmann 1988: 253). They rely heavily on the concept of interconnectedness, or kinship of all beings, meaning that if you harm or consume a being you have no idea to whom you are doing wrong. They actively seek to save the lives of any beings in danger, and house many animals (254).

Altogether, it seems that vegetarianism was and is a minority practice in all societies, usually freely chosen by individuals. The closest thing to an exception of this rule could be the case of Tibet. In (pre-1950) Tibet, religion and politics were combined. The Dalai Lama was the religious and temporal leader of all Tibetans, and was himself regarded as an emanation of *Avalokitesvara*, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Early travellers' accounts to the region describe a population in which Buddhist ideals such as *ahimsa* were firmly embraced by local inhabitants. Heinrich Harrer describes how, in winter, the Tibetans would break the ice in all the pools to save the fish, and in summer would save them in buckets when the pools froze (1953: 188). At picnics, if a bug crawled up somebody's leg, they

would casually remove it and place it on the ground. He says that, “it is a catastrophe when a fly falls into a cup of tea”(188). In one amusing story, the Tibetans helped Harrer in the building of a dam. If a spade hit a worm, there would be a piercing outcry from the Tibetan worker and all would rush over to tend to the injured bug (234). In another case, Harrer observed a government official purchase a chicken from a Chinese restaurant to save it. Throughout Tibet fishing was regarded as especially cruel, and was actually illegal except for a small number of inhabitants who lived in extremely sandy river valleys where nothing would grow. Since human corpses were often thrown in the river and eaten by fish, many believed that eating a fish could practically be regarded as cannibalism (Duncan 1964: 243).

Despite all these life-preserving actions, it would still be naïve to suggest that all of Tibet was completely vegetarian. Certainly it was illegal to kill animals on monastery grounds, and in many regions it was believed that hunting angered the spirits (Duncan 1964: 244). The killing of certain animals was regarded as especially unlucky, such as the roe deer, *kyang* (wild ass), snakes, eagles, and cranes (245-248). However, there are accounts of certain animals being killed on certain occasions. Leopard cloaks were occasionally worn by the wealthy, and many other animals were commonly sold for large sums of money to Chinese merchants (244). Nomadic groups in some cases also ate yak. Therefore, Tibet was by no means entirely vegetarian, but the value its inhabitants placed on non-violence and respect for all forms of life was perhaps greater than that of any other nation throughout history.

Thinking back to the vegetarian monk in the story presented above, we can now see that while his lifestyle is not strictly adopted by all Buddhists, it nonetheless provides an example of compassionate action. However, compassion alone does not account for the prohibition against garlic and onions which is also laid down in the story. These are in fact just two of the five so-called “piquant vegetables” or “pungent roots”: garlic, onions, scallions, leeks, and chives (which are all forms of onions and belong to the lily family) (Huyen-Vi 2003). In certain Mahayana groups they are referred to the five *paevayayas*, and eating them is a *duskrta*, a sin requiring confession to another cleric (Sze-bong 1994: 115). It is believed that they cause irritability of temper, and if cooked act as an aphrodisiac (Huyen-Vi 2003). Interestingly, this prohibition is not unique to the Buddhist tradition, and we can perhaps look to other traditions to determine its reasoning. “The Yoga Cookbook” (Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center 1999: 11-13) divides foods into three categories. This includes the

*Sattvic* foods (grains and vegetables), which increase life and purity, the *Tamasic* foods (meat, fish, eggs, and intoxicants), which are impure and putrid and the *Rajasic* foods (anything excessively spicy, bitter, or sour, including the five pungent roots). This last group is believed to over-stimulate the body and mind, thereby destroying the balance that is necessary for happiness.

Similarly, in Hinduism and Jainism certain foods are regarded as 'hot' or 'cold', and are also categorized based on their supposed ability to excite the passions. The five pungent roots are thought to give off strong smells, and it is thought that consumption of them obfuscates the richer and softer tastes and smells associated with vegetables (website: "Vegetarianism in India"). Therefore, based on these factors, we could deduce that the restriction against these roots has no relation to the taking of life (like the prohibition against meat eating), but rather has everything to do with the properties associated with certain foods. If those properties are regarded as negative and disruptive to internal balance, then it is understandable that a tradition like Buddhism, which seeks internal balance through meditation, might suggest we refrain from eating them. The association between the pungent roots and meat most likely arose due to the belief the plants are rooted in the "same conditions of imbalance that would inspire an unenlightened being to slay another for food" (Dan Wright, personal communication, June 11, 2003).

As has been emphasised throughout this paper, there is a large degree of variability and interpretation in the Buddhist tradition regarding food restrictions. It is therefore very difficult to make any sort of generalisations concerning vegetarianism or any other eating prohibitions. In the Theravadan tradition, the rules of the *Vinaya* make it difficult for *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* to have much say in what they consume. In Mahayana, certain sects appear to condemn meat-eating while others make no such restrictions. We could still nonetheless argue that while many Buddhists are not strict vegetarians, there is still one rule that seems to pervade all sects without exception, and that is that an adherent of Buddhism should never needlessly harm any living being. Regarding the prohibition of the five root vegetables, it is very interesting that the story presented creates a link between them and meat in order to encourage practitioners to abstain from them. However, the rationale for these two prohibited food groups is in fact quite different, and in the case of the root vegetables it has more to do with associated qualities than the taking of life.



As mentioned above, I would like to conclude by briefly discussing my own vegan lifestyle, on the grounds that it is influenced by Buddhist philosophy and perhaps represents an extreme, but in my belief justified, interpretation. I do not believe that any rules (*Vinaya* included) should be adhered to if they are not rationally consistent. Using this logic, I don't think that it is rational to condone killing of living beings while at the same time indirectly contributing to their death by knowingly consuming them. I find it a shame that members of certain sects are not free to determine their own diets due to ancient rules and monastic conservatism. If one genuinely wishes to reduce the suffering of all sentient beings, I believe refraining from eating meat is essential. Additionally, I believe that due to the needless suffering caused by modern factory conditions such as confining cages, unnatural diets, lack of sunlight and cramped living quarters, other animal products such as eggs and dairy should also be avoided. I do not adhere to the restriction on the five root vegetables since, in my opinion, this has more to do with the culture in which it emerged and nothing do with preventing harm to living beings. To sum up, I would like to present one author's opinion which, despite being a little idealistic, is nonetheless positive and hopeful:

*“If all citizens of a nation were vegetarians, the strong would surely not oppress the weak, and the intelligentsia would not encroach on the rights of simple folk. Killing one another would in due course of time completely cease, since all would be fully satisfied in their desires. If every person in the world were a vegetarian, all could share in making this world the Land of Ultimate Bliss! (Huyen-Vi 2003).”*

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