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### **Buddhist Food Practices and Attitudes among Contemporary Western Practitioners**

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This paper delves into the subject of food as an emerging aspect of the Buddhism and ecology connection. Although often overshadowed by the ecological impacts of gas-guzzling automobiles and dumping of toxic waste, food is an environmental issue of primary importance. The raising of livestock, swine and poultry for food occupies over 60 percent of the land in the United States. This industry produces large quantities of runoff from fertilizers, pesticides, animal wastes and erosion which affect water quality; methane emissions and energy derived from fossil fuels contribute to air pollution and the greenhouse effect. Conventional, industrial agriculture contributes to toxic and common water pollution, uses fossil fuel and water for irrigation and depletes the natural diversity of the landscape. Plastic, glass, metal, paper and cardboard from food packaging create veritable mountains of garbage.<sup>1</sup> Even the processing of food accounts for 16 percent of the greenhouse gases produced related to the cultivation, transportation and sale of food.

Wendell Berry, an American nature philosopher, wrote:

Eaters...must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines to a considerable extent the way the world is used.<sup>2</sup>

Many people have chosen either a vegetarian or vegan diet for a number of reasons including economics, environment, health and ethics. For some, including many Buddhists, the choice is based on religious practice. A vegetarian diet normally excludes all red meat and poultry. Fish is sometimes included in this diet based on grains,

1. See, for example, Michael Brower and Warren Leon, *The Consumer Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999).

2. Wendell Berry, 'The Pleasures of Eating', in Robert Clark (ed.), *Our Sustainable Table* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 125-31 (129).

legumes and vegetables. A vegan diet excludes all animal products including meat, fish, eggs, dairy and honey. Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of vegetarians in the West, a 1993 *Vegetarian Times* survey found 12.4 million self-reported vegetarians in the United States.

Excluding meat, poultry and fish from one's diet does not eliminate all adverse environmental impact; eating organic and locally grown foods also greatly reduces the ecological impact of one's food choices and dietary habits. Organic farming aims to grow food within integrated natural systems of soil, plants, insects and animals. Using fewer mechanized methods, less irrigation and fertilizer, cover crops and crop rotation help to improve soil quality, lower water use and pollution and foster a diversity of plants and wildlife, which in turn creates healthier ecosystems. Growing one's own food and buying from local sources can also help to reduce pollution caused by transportation of food from field to store. Based on this evidence, the six principle elements of an ecologically sound diet would emphasize minimal meat intake and animal products, minimally processed foods, minimally packaged foods, organically grown food, locally grown food and free-range animal products.

In all Buddhist traditions, daily life ideally becomes one's spiritual practice. Likewise, eating also becomes practice. Modern interpretations of Engaged Buddhism reinforce the attitude that everything is practice. In this way practitioners become intimately involved with and aware of the products they use and the activities they engage in. This research is a preliminary investigation to determine current attitudes and actions of contemporary Western Buddhists as they engage in choosing food and eating. Though some Buddhist teachers and historians have explored the role of food choices and attitudes,<sup>3</sup> there have been no empirical studies to date (to the best of our knowledge) documenting Western practices.

This research investigates three primary questions: (1) What eating practices and attitudes toward food are practiced by contemporary Western Buddhists? (2) Do contemporary Western Buddhists choose more ecologically sound food or dietary habits? (3) Do Buddhist beliefs or principles support contemporary Western Buddhist food choices?

3. See for example, H.L. Seneviratne, 'Food Essence and the Essence of Experience' in R.S. Khare (ed.), *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 179-200 (187-89).

*Early Views of Vegetarianism*

According to canonical stories, the Buddha did not advocate fasting or starvation as a form of spiritual practice. He himself discovered, through his experience as an ascetic, that self-mortification did not lead to enlightenment. Rather it was through the Middle Way of neither indulgence nor complete abstinence that one could engage in effective practice. A common point of contention in Buddhism around food focuses on the significance of meat eating versus vegetarianism.

The oldest Dharmic instructions on eating are contained within the Hinayana Vinaya (the monastic disciplinary code of precepts). The Buddha's instructions in the Jivaka Sutta allow a monk to eat meat, providing that it is 'pure in three respects': that the monk had not seen, nor heard, nor suspected that the animal was killed specifically for the monk's consumption.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in at least two passages, the Dhammapada (collection from the Pali Canon) specifies that one should not 'kill, nor cause to kill'.<sup>5</sup> The First of the Five Grave Precepts (no killing) also prohibits causing others to kill. Some argue that by choosing to eat flesh foods, one causes another to inflict suffering upon and kill other beings and thereby violates the First Precept.

However, since the monastic community in the Buddha's time relied upon the laity for alms, it was highly impractical to refuse any food offering. Accepting all offerings from the laity, including meat and seafood, enabled monks to interact with and positively influence those engaged in wrong livelihood, such as butchers and fishers. Another passage in the Pali Canon warned against the dangers of spiritual pride that can result from abstinence of meat eating, leading one to feel superior to others. While eating meat was allowed and often condoned, meat was usually a peripheral dish or small portion rather than the main course.

Despite the allowable regularity of meat eating during the Buddha's time, certain masters and practitioners began to express disapproval and encourage a more vegetarian diet. After his conversion to Buddhism in the third century, the Indian king Asoka decreed, along with other restrictions on the treatment of animals, that animal flesh consumption be reduced and eventually eliminated from the Indian diet.

4. Rosemary A. Amey, *Animal Rights and the Dhammapada*, <http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/~bp239/dhamma.html>.

5. Juan Mascaro (trans.), *The Dhammapada* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), verses 129-30, pp. 54, 75..

The nineteenth-century Tibetan lama Patrul Rinpoche wrote at length on the evils of eating meat. He admonished those who claimed to practice *bodhicitta* (wisdom-seeking mind) even while indulging the whims of their carnivorous palates:

The beings with unfortunate karma that we are supposed to be protecting are instead being killed without the slightest compassion, and their boiled flesh and blood are being presented to us and we—their protectors, the Bodhisattvas—then gobble it all up gleefully, smacking our lips. What could be worse than that?<sup>6</sup>

Although some assume that it is only the person who kills the animal who generates negative karma, Patrul Rinpoche states that each person involved receives the full karmic effect of killing the animal; the negative karma cannot be divided up among many people.

Certain Buddhist traditions, more than others, emphasize the importance of a meat-free diet. Chinese (Ch'an) and Japanese (mostly Zen) Buddhists have a primarily, if not exclusively, vegetarian diet. Conversely, most Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhists consume meat on a regular basis. Complete abstinence in this tradition is observed only on the days of Buddhist observances three times a month: the new moon, the last day of the lunar month and the fifteenth of the month. Contrary to some initial assumptions, vegetarianism in Buddhist countries did not arise solely from climatic or economic circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the adoption of cultural vegetarianism appears to be more closely linked with two principles: the Mahayana *tathagatagarbha* doctrine and the principle of *ahimsa*. *Tathagatagarbha*, a popular doctrine developed in Mahayana Buddhism, refers to the 'Buddha within' or what is more commonly known as Buddha-Nature. According to this concept, all sentient beings have within them the potentiality to become Buddhas; thus the chicken on one's plate might someday be a Buddha.<sup>8</sup> Among the Mahayana sutras that preached the doctrine of *tathagatagarbha*, the Lankavatara Sutra most overtly condemned the practice of eating meat, regardless of whether it was pure in the three respects. Most contemporary writings on Buddhism and vegetarianism cite the principle of *ahimsa* or 'non-harming' as the primary motivation for vegetari-

6. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (trans. Padmakara Translation Group; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 207.

7. D. Seyfort Rugg, 'Ahimsa and Vegetarianism in the History of Buddhism' in Balasooriya Somaratna (ed.), *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980), pp. 234-41.

8. Philip Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist View of Animal Slaughter and Meat Eating* (Rochester, NY: The Zen Center, 1981).

anism, not Buddha-Nature.<sup>9</sup> *Ahimsa*, as it appears in the first precept, dictates ethical treatment of other sentient beings. Depending upon one's view of sentience, edible beings may fall within this designation, which requires an extension of an attitude of compassion and *ahimsa* towards one's food as well.

#### *Contemporary Views*

Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa<sup>10</sup> and Zen priest Bodhin Kjolhede<sup>11</sup> ask whether the consumption of meat is truly necessary or practical in the Western world. Sivaraksa explains that meat production within a simple agrarian lifestyle might be feasible and even healthful. However in our modern industrial society meat production is ineffective and detrimental; animals are mistreated and seen merely as another consumable product. Kjolhede feels there is little true need to eat meat in Western societies. Most people in North America, Europe and Asia have access to abundant, healthful and non-flesh foods, yet Americans and some Europeans along with Australians and New Zealanders are some of the largest meat consumers on the planet. There are myriad ecological reasons to refrain from eating meat. Arguing for vegetarianism, Zen priest Philip Kapleau urges students not to support soil erosion, feedlot pollution and fossil fuel expense—all results of intensive cattle grazing.<sup>12</sup>

Meat consumption in affluent countries also contributes to world hunger. The same plot of land growing grains and vegetables that feeds one meat eater could feed twelve people if those people were to eat the grains and vegetables directly. Eating meat contributes to human suffering in other ways. In developing countries, local and indigenous peoples are pushed off their land to make way for cattle ranches. To keep up with the demand from richer countries for imported flesh foods, many farmers in these countries must grow animal food crops rather than foods to feed their own families and country. The issues around meat eating, environmental degradation and human suffering are intertwined in complex ways; Kapleau argues that a Bud-

9. Gary Snyder, 'Indra's Net as Our Own', in Thich Nhat Hanh (ed.), *For a Future to Be Possible* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 127-35.

10. Sulak Sivaraksa, 'How Societies Can Practice the Precepts' in Thich Nhat Hanh (ed.), *For A Future to be Possible* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 110-14.

11. Bodhin Kjolhede, 'Compassion for All Beings', *Tricycle* 4.2 (Winter 1994), p. 58.

12. Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life*, *passim*.

dhist aspiration to relieve suffering must take into account *all* links in the interdependent web of causality.

### *Eating as Buddhist Practice*

For poet and author Gary Snyder a 'proper diet' means examining the way all food is raised today including meat, vegetables, fruits and grains and recognizing the widespread environmental suffering from pesticide and fertilizer use, monoculture and genetic engineering.<sup>13</sup> Despite the apparent ecological benefits of becoming vegetarian, this decision does not eliminate all ethical and practical dilemmas. *Tricycle* editor Helen Tworokov highlights the possible hypocrisy of Buddhist vegetarianism, for if one is not killing cows then one is still killing carrots.<sup>14</sup> She questions whether the distinction between the two rises from compassion or from anthropocentrism. Kjolhede warns against vegetarianism as a kind of attachment (which prevents progress toward enlightenment) concealed beneath a guise of Buddhist non-attachment. Snyder explains that each individual must find his or her own way through the first precept; the simple distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian is reductionistic and can lead to false pride. The overwhelming trend in contemporary literature points toward a general attitude of thankfulness and mindfulness towards food. Influential teachers and writers emphasize a deep awareness of one's food choices, the impact they have and the cultivation of gratitude for one's sustenance through increased knowledge or eating practices, such as prayers, *gathas* and mindful eating.

Philip Glass proposes vegetarianism as a practice and suggests that one learn to view all creatures with equanimity—even delicious ones.<sup>15</sup> The practice of equanimity combats the self-grasping and self-cherishing that coexist with the root cause of ignorance. Ignorance, as proclaimed by the Buddha, is at the root of all suffering. Thus vegetarianism becomes a powerful tool for spiritual development, rather than a moral or ethical obligation. For Glass, even a mindful diet that is not entirely vegetarian can be beneficial in this way if it helps one to cultivate an attitude of equanimity and compassion toward all beings.

13. Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995), pp. 65-73.

14. Helen Tworokov, 'Buddha and the Beasts', *Tricycle* 4.2 (Winter 1994), p. 4.

15. Philip Glass, 'Vegetarianism as Practice', *Tricycle* 4.2 (Winter 1994), p. 57.

*Research Methods*

The primary aim of this research was to clarify Buddhist beliefs about and attitudes toward food; to discern differences between Buddhist traditions in attitudes toward food and diet; and to discover whether Buddhists, because of their beliefs, are more likely to be ecologically conscious in their food choices. The research methods consisted of survey sampling of practitioners via standardized questionnaire and on-site field observations of food practices at Buddhist centers. Field visits took place in five locations during the months of June through November, 1999 and survey data was collected in June through October, 1999.

A non-probability sample of eligible participants was chosen that might provide a preliminary gauge of Western Buddhist attitudes and practices. In order to be eligible for the sample all respondents had to be over 18 and involved with a Buddhist tradition. Efforts were made to gain a diverse sampling of the Buddhist population so as not to focus on or exclude any main tradition on the West. Following pilot testing, 185 surveys were distributed by mail to 13 Buddhist centers around the United States and in France. Employing both multiple choice and open-ended questions, the questionnaire was designed to gather information on Buddhist beliefs and attitudes toward food, preference for ecologically valued food choices, and contemporary interpretations of Buddhism and ecology as related to food practices. See Table 1 for centers contacted and number of questionnaires sent. In most cases, questionnaires were placed where they could be picked up by interested participants or were distributed by the contact person to the residents of the Buddhist center. Eighty-five completed questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 45 percent.

Table 1. *Buddhist Centers*

<i>Location</i>	<i>Denomination</i>	<i># of Questionnaires</i>
Ch'an Meditation Center, Elmhurst, NY	Ch'an	25
Dzogchen Meditation Foundation Cambridge, MA.	Tibetan	10
Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, NY	Tibetan/non-denominational	1
Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, Sausalito, CA	Zen	40
Green Mountain Dharma Center, Hartland-Four-Corners, VT	Zen	5
Insight Meditation Society, Barre, MA	Theravada	10
Karmê Choling, Barnet, VT	Tibetan	20

Lerab Ling Roqueredonde, France	Tibetan	20
Naropa Institute Buddhist Studies, Boulder, CO	Tibetan/non-denominational	15
New York Buddhist Church, NY	Non-denominational	7
Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, CA	Theravada	7
Texas Buddhist Association, Jade Buddha Temple, Houston, TX	Ch'an	20
Zen Mountain Center, Mountain Center, CA	Zen	5

Field observations focused on eating practices (meaning any ritual, prayer, offering, etc. that accompanies the meal); general attitudes toward food (e.g. as blessed, sacred, inconsequential, etc.); food choices (food items served, e.g. vegetarian, organic, locally grown, etc.); and attitudes toward and interaction with the natural world at the center. Observations were conducted at five Western Buddhist centers, two of the Tibetan tradition, two of the Zen tradition and one of the Theravadin tradition and, depending upon the activity or event, lasted between two hours and two days.

*Sites of field observations* (in order visited):

Green Mountain Dharma Center, Hartland-Four-Corners, Vermont (Vietnamese Zen)  
 Namgyal Monastery, Ithaca, New York (Gelug Tibetan)  
 Zen Mountain Monastery, Mt Tremper, New York (Soto and Rinzai Zen)  
 Lerab Ling, Roqueredonde, France (Nyingma and Rimé Tibetan)  
 Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Vermont (Theravadin Vipassana)

*Survey Sample Demographics*

The respondents in the survey sample represent a wide geographical diversity. The majority of them reside in the United States (76 percent). However, 22 percent currently reside in Europe (France 12 percent, Germany 1 percent, The Netherlands 1 percent and The United Kingdom 5 percent). One respondent spends part of each year living in India. The data on education level and profession reveals an educated group (85 percent finished college or a higher degree) with varied interests and creative careers. The respondents' occupations represent a diversity of employment and interests—from artist to attorney to student to Dharma bum. Many respondents provided a rather lengthy occupation description, sometimes as the result of combining two or more professions, such as meditation teacher/tarot reader/Buddhist staff.



The duration of the respondents' involvement with Buddhism in the West represents a wide range of years of experience. Very few respondents (4 percent) have been involved with Buddhism their entire lives, as is to be expected considering Buddhism was not very popular in the West until late in the twentieth century. Reflecting this evolution, 32 percent have been involved for more than ten years, 36 percent for 5–10 years and 31 percent have been involved with Buddhism for 1–5 years (includes one with involvement of less than one year). Regarding Buddhist practice, 83 percent of the survey sample practices daily. This includes sitting meditation (96 percent), walking meditation (58 percent), prayer (48 percent) and visualization (37 percent). Four percent of the respondents indicated that they practice all the time—that daily life is their Buddhist practice. Mindfulness (8 percent) and chanting (7 percent) were two other practices mentioned. Some unexpected practices included eating, engaged activism and 'everything'.

Most of the major Buddhist traditions in the West are represented in the survey sample. Most respondents (87 percent) indicated affiliation to only one tradition, however the remaining 13 percent acknowledged affiliation with two or more traditions, Buddhist and otherwise. Forty-six percent of the respondents are affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism, 27 percent with Zen, 10 percent with Ch'an, 29 percent with Theravada or Vipassana and 2 percent with Pure Land. (This adds to more than 100 percent, because some respondents have multiple affiliations).

#### *Ecologically Sound Food Choices and Dietary Habits*

The distinction between vegetarianism and meat eating stands in the survey sample as a marker of an ecologically sound diet. Forty-three percent of the respondents consider themselves to be vegetarian and 7 percent vegan, totalling 50 percent of the respondents who do not include flesh foods in their regular diets. The proportion of non-meat-eaters within the survey sample (50 percent) is especially significant in comparison to the proportion of vegetarians in the United States (4.8 percent). Thirty-five percent consider themselves to be meat-eaters and 15 percent put themselves in the category of other (see Fig. 1).

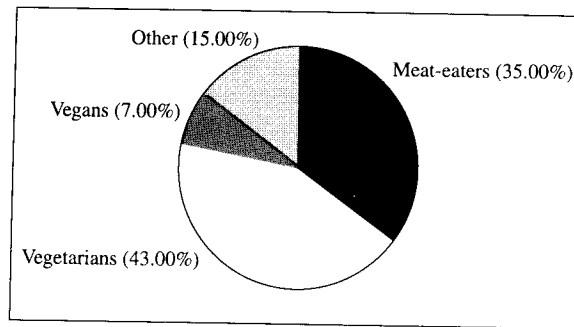


Figure 1. *Dietary Habits in Survey Sample*

A practitioner who is affiliated with Tibetan, Vietnamese Zen and Pure Land Buddhism explained her self-designation of other, 'I am vegetarian most of the time. If I feel I need to eat fish or fowl (occasionally), I do so with great gratitude and mindfulness of the life that supports my own.' A Soto Zen practitioner put it this way:

What is a 'vegetarian'? Is it someone who has never eaten meat? (I have). Is it someone who never again will eat meat? (Who knows?) Is it someone who doesn't kill as the process of eating—(as a gardener I know countless worms, snails and microbes die at my hands daily. Not to mention bloodmeals, fishkills, etc.) All labels and classifications are flawed, yes, but 'vegetarianism' is one of the paradigmatic examples. I am merely a person who is not currently eating meat.

In addition to meat eating, the survey also documented choices to eat minimally processed, minimally packaged, organically grown, locally grown and free-range animal products as the second through sixth principle elements of an ecologically sound diet (see Fig. 2). The respondents were also asked how frequently they ate food from their own gardens. Growing one's own food can not only give one greater power to make intentional food choices, but can also help to re-establish the connection between eater and the environment. However, only one quarter of the respondents have a garden and eat produce from it more than once a day. One Zen respondent explained how growing his own food helped him to see a connection between his life and the environment: 'I worked on the organic farm here, so I've had the opportunity to experience the full life cycle of my food, from growing it in the fields to selling it at market and preparing it for the table.'

Figure 3 compares frequency of food choices for those who consider themselves to be vegetarian and vegan. A large majority of the self-identified vegetarians never consume meat products, including red meat, poultry and fish. This group does not do as well on the second

and third elements of ecologically sound eating; over 50 percent eat processed/packaged foods (such as ready-made meals, mixes and sweets) and prepared foods (including breads, cereals and dairy products) more than once a week. However, over half (57 percent) the group chooses organic foods more than once a day and 85 percent eat locally grown foods more than once a week. Forty-two percent eat free-range products more than once a week.

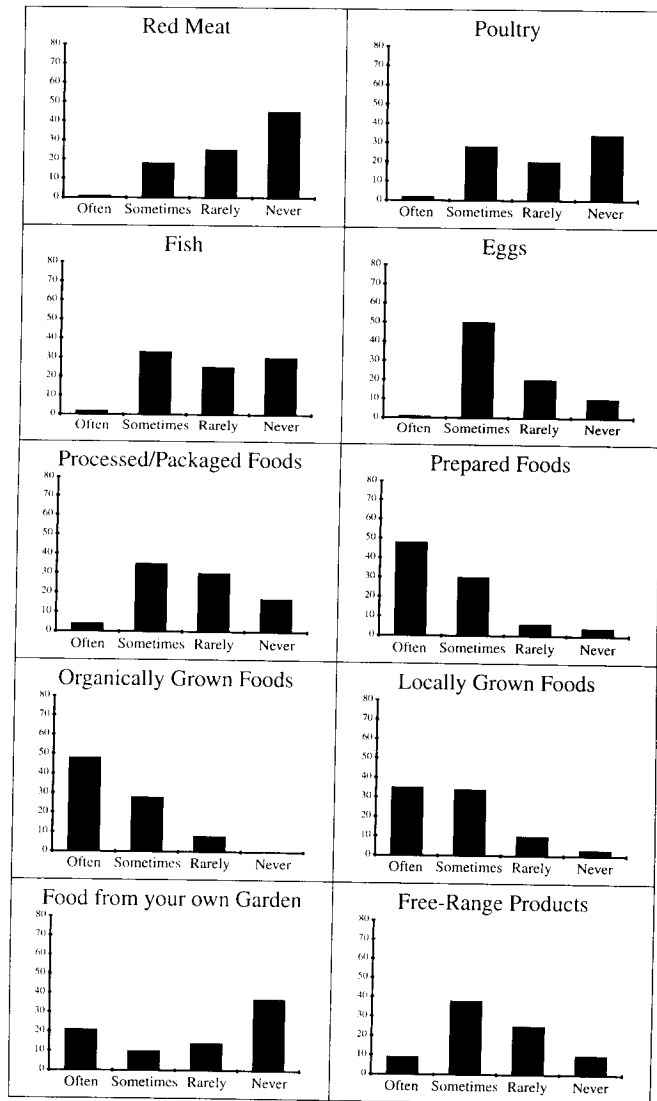


Figure 2. Food Choice Frequency in Survey Sample

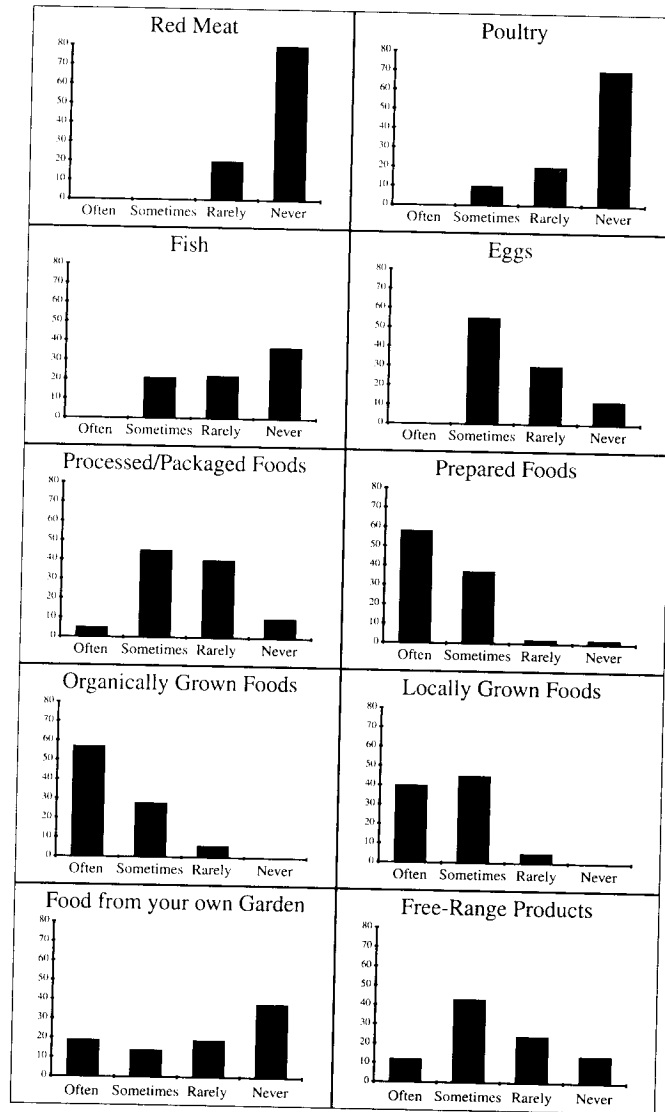


Figure 3. Food Choice Frequency among Vegetarians and Vegans

*Differences in Dietary Habits and Attitudes toward Food between Buddhist Traditions*

The largest percentage of vegetarians is found in the Theravada sample (63 percent), followed by Ch'an (50 percent), then Zen (44 percent). (see Table 2 and Fig. 4).

Table 2. *Table of Dietary Habits by Buddhist Tradition*

	Vegetarian	Meat-eater	Vegan	Other
Theravada (16)	63 %	31 %	0 %	6 %
Ch'an (8)	50 %	38 %	12 %	0 %
Zen (17)	44 %	13 %	13 %	30 %
Tibetan (32)	31 %	47 %	6 %	16 %
No affiliation (3)	33 %	33 %	0 %	33 %
Two or more traditions (9)	44 %	33 %	11 %	11 %

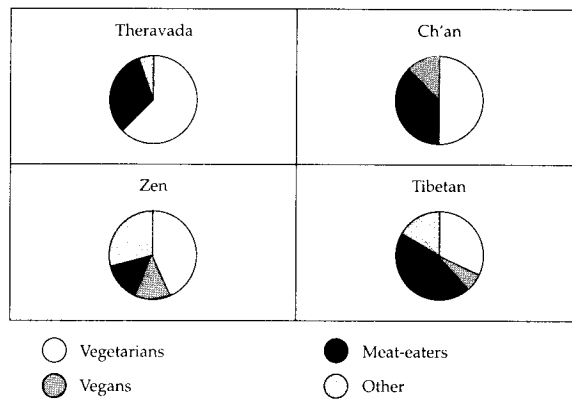


Figure 4. *Dietary Habits by Buddhist Tradition*

However, combining the numbers of vegetarians and vegans in the Ch'an sample (62 percent) creates almost an equal proportion of non-meat-eaters as in the Theravada sample. The Tibetan sample has the smallest percentage of vegetarians (31 percent) and the largest of meat-eaters (47 percent). The Zen sample has the smallest proportion of meat-eaters (13 percent). Zen also has the largest number of practitioners who put themselves in the category of 'other', which implies that many eat a special diet or one that varies. Of the practitioners who are not affiliated with any particular tradition, there are equal numbers (33 percent) in the categories of vegetarians, meat-eaters and

other. The majority of the practitioners who affiliate themselves with more than one tradition consider themselves to be vegetarian.

*Eating Practices and Attitudes toward Food*

The majority (71 percent) of the respondents indicated that they have a ritual, prayer, offering or other practice that accompanies their meals. Thirteen percent cited some sort of prayer, many of these personally created. One Theravadin practitioner wrote, '[I have a] very brief personal prayer: "May all beings have enough to eat and drink. May all beings be happy."' Some of the respondents (7 percent) make an offering to accompany their meals, such as offering the energy and merit gained from the food for the benefit of all sentient beings. Another 7 percent bow toward their food. Six percent practice a moment of silence or silent prayer. Ten percent chant a *gatha* or other chant. Others (5 percent) practice a meal ritual only while they are at a retreat center. Many (20 percent) of the respondents practice gratitude or awareness during their meal. A Zen practitioner explained, 'I say, "Honoring and acknowledging the efforts that brought me this food, the human hands that have prepared it, the community and friends I enjoy it with, the body it sustains and the good that flows from it"—a little thing I came up with that seems to sum up my feelings toward food gifts.' A Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist practitioner wrote: 'I thank the animal if there is meat and pray for its next good and higher rebirth.' Only 2 percent follow a traditional formal ritual, such as are formulated and practiced at monasteries, nunneries and Dharma centers. The fact that so many of the respondents have a ritual, prayer offering or other practice that accompanies their meals indicates that food and eating are part of the respondents' Buddhist practice. It also shows that these practitioners believe that food and eating are particular aspects of life that require an attitude of mindfulness and gratitude.

It is interesting to note then, whether these attitudes are directly influenced by the respondents' involvement with Buddhism. For this sample, the majority (69 percent) indicated that their involvement with Buddhism influences their food choices, diet or attitudes toward food. Of these respondents, 21 percent explained that their involvement with Buddhism has influenced them in terms of attitude. A Zen/Tibetan Buddhist practitioner wrote, 'I am more aware of the food which I eat (i.e. when eating a string bean, try to only be aware of the string bean). I am also more aware of all the life forces and places and energies that have gone into the food, that merge with me when I eat it. Also I am aware of the pleasure of silent, contemplative company.'

These practices and attitudes are linked to how one envisions one's connection through food to the earth and to others, or whether one sees a connection at all between what is on one's plate and the world outside. Most of the respondents in the survey sample (88 percent) indicated that they believe there is a connection between the food they eat and the environment. One Zen/Vipassana practitioner put it eloquently: 'You are what you eat. The environment and food are the framework of your existence. Food is how you are woven into the web of life and death.' Several respondents brought up the issue of eating meat and how this contributes to global hunger, pollution, erosion and other ecological problems. The problems are not simply in meat eating as this Ch'an practitioner pointed out, 'Much of the food is over processed and overproduced (creating surplus which is wasted and waste matter which is flushed into rivers and seas). And that's just the vegetarian version. The meat industry "wastes" animals it can't auction —feeds 40,000 lb of water to each 1 lb of beef—the suffering! The methane! The politics!'

The majority (69 percent) of Buddhists in this survey indicate that their involvement with Buddhism influences their food choices, diet and attitude toward food. For 17 percent, Buddhist principles affect the food items they buy, select or accept, e.g. choosing shrimp over beef, or organic over conventionally grown lettuce. A Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, who self-designates as both a vegetarian and a meat-eater, wrote, 'I tend to avoid small animals, [it] takes many lives to feed [few] rather than one large animal [feeding] many.'

The survey also assessed dietary habit—the sum total of food choices indicating overall eating style, e.g. vegetarian, vegan or meat-eater. Seventeen percent of those who indicated that Buddhism influences their food choices, diet or attitude toward food listed the motivation to adopt a primarily vegetarian diet. One Ch'an practitioner explained 'I practice vegetarianism as an expression of the first pure precept, "Do not harm", of the first precept, "Don't kill". I see not eating animals as an exercise in not causing pain which is so much more difficult in other areas of life.' Nineteen percent of the respondents were vegetarian before becoming involved with Buddhism; some found support for this dietary choice in Buddhism; others said Buddhism had no effect on their dietary habits.

Several respondents cited influences besides Buddhism that affect their food choices and dietary habits. Sixty-seven percent of the sample wanted to make changes in their diets. These include eating more organic food, eating 'healthier' or simpler, consuming less addictive substances/stimulants, less fat and sugar, less dairy, less wheat and

processed foods and eating more fresh vegetables, fruits and whole foods. Eleven percent of the respondents would like to adopt a more vegetarian or vegan diet. A Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist practitioner wrote: 'Being vegetarian still maintains animal suffering in an indirect way. So it would be better to be vegan.' A few respondents also cited changes including more mindfulness or awareness in eating, eating more free-range foods and locally grown foods. Eleven percent indicated that they would like to eat less food and have less greed and attachment to it. A Zen/Christian practitioner wrote that she would like to 'eat less, grasp less, not treat food as a source of love'.

The reasons for these changes can be classified under four categories: health reasons, 'Buddhist' reasons, ecological reasons and general/unspecified reasons (35 percent). Nineteen percent cite health reasons such as this Theravadin practitioner: 'More organic produce—for my health and to support sustainable farming.' Only seven percent indicate 'Buddhist' reasons (relating to principles e.g. restraint, *ahimsa*, mindfulness, etc.) Another 7 percent cite ecological reasons, such as this Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist practitioner: 'Try not to eat non-organic foods, so that less pollution is made from pesticides and less insects are killed and that the earth is appreciated more.' Thus it is obvious that there are not only Buddhist influences at work in the dietary decisions of contemporary Western Buddhists, but ecological, health and probably societal, political and other influences as well.

#### *Conflicts with the Literature*

Contrary to the assumption that Zen Buddhists are primarily vegetarian and Tibetan Buddhists are not,<sup>16</sup> a significant number (31 percent) of Tibetan Buddhists in the survey sample consider themselves to be vegetarian and 13 percent of the Zen Buddhists consider themselves to be meat-eaters. Even more striking is the contrast between H.L. Seneviratne's observations of Theravadin Buddhists as meat-eaters<sup>17</sup> and the survey results, which show that 63 percent of those involved with Theravada Buddhism consider themselves to be vegetarian. Field observations at the Theravadin center corroborated this data with the fact that all meals at the center are vegetarian.

Those from the survey sample who identified themselves as vegetarian gave a variety of reasons for their choice. It is interesting to compare these reasons with those that the literature gave as motiva-

16. Ruegg, 'Ahimsa and Vegetarianism', pp. 234-41.

17. Seneviratne, 'Food Essence', p. 186.



tions for vegetarianism. Historically, traditions were divided between vegetarian and meat-eating by which canonical guidelines they followed. Following the Vinaya, some Buddhist traditions, such as Tibetan and Theravada, allowed meat eating within certain parameters. Based on the notion of Buddha-Nature, others such as Zen Buddhists declined to eat the flesh of dead animals. However, most contemporary sources point to the doctrine of *ahimsa* or non-harming as being a primary motivation for vegetarianism. Forty-two percent of the respondents mentioned compassion as an ethical principle they uphold as most significant in life and 12 percent mentioned *ahimsa*. Not a single respondent mentioned Buddha-Nature. Indeed, many of the vegetarians in the survey sample wrote that the aspiration not to harm was part of their decision to stop eating meat.

Field observations revealed that some centers followed what was outlined in the literature in terms of food choice and eating practices, others did not. At the Green Mountain Dharma Center, a center in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, daily meals were entirely vegetarian and eaten in grateful, mindful silence. Formal meals were structured with *gathas* or verses accompanying the stages of the meal. In contrast, at another Zen center meat was served as an option at lunch. Clearly, vegetarianism and Buddhism—even Zen—are not inextricably linked.

At both Tibetan Buddhist centers, traditional ceremonies and guidelines on eating practices were followed. During the birthday celebration for the Dalai Lama at the Namgyal Monastery and at tea-time afterwards, traditional elements such as specific longlife prayers were mixed with more contemporary rituals like singing 'Happy Birthday' to the Dalai Lama. At Lerab Ling during the *Tenshyuk* (longlife) ceremony the food was served on platters and passed around to the retreatants. Tibetan Buddhists, following the points of the Vinaya, are allowed to eat meat while minimizing suffering and possible negative karma. One precaution is to avoid the flesh of small animals, so that many lives are not sacrificed for just one meal. This admonition was apparently followed at both Tibetan Buddhist centers, for no small animals were served during either site visit. Though meat was served during the *Tenshyuk* at Lerab Ling, it was shredded cooked beef (from a large animal).

Survey data and field observations of Theravadin practitioners yielded the most striking contradictions. One Theravadin practitioner wrote on his questionnaire, 'Most Theravadin folks I know eat meat.' This statement is consistent with the literature. However, the surveys showed that vegetarianism is even more frequent among Western Theravadins in the survey sample than among Zen practitioners. Fur-

thermore, all meals at the Insight Meditation Society are vegetarian. At each meal there is also the option of a dairy-free, wheat-free and egg-free dish for vegans and those with special diets.

#### *Food Choices as Engaged Buddhism*

Engaged Buddhism can take on many forms and activities. In his recently published book *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism*, Kenneth Kraft maps out a path through various realms of engagement. Each realm, such as 'Embracing Family', 'Participating in Politics' and 'Caring for the Earth' are distinct, but 'inter-are' as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, meaning that they are all interdependent:

One can enter the Wheel at any point, just as one can begin reading a map at any point... A particular path may amply express the current thrust of one's efforts. Or perhaps some combination of two or more paths may reflect one's present priorities in a useful way... Alternatively, the Wheel can highlight neglected areas of our lives to invite more attention, and suggest new ways to expand practice in those areas.<sup>18</sup>

Responses to many of the questions of the survey reveal different facets of these paths of engagement. That so many of the respondents (69 percent) are affected by Buddhism in terms of their food choices, dietary habits and attitudes toward food and even more (71 percent) have an eating practice to accompany their meals shows a strong engagement at a daily level. Relationship to a larger arena of engagement is supported by 88 percent of respondents seeing a connection between the food they eat and the environment and 76 percent affirming a connection between Buddhism and ecology. It is significant that many contemporary Buddhists have already recognized a connection between Buddhism, ecology and food in their own attitudes, choices and behavior. This finding indicates that more attention could be directed to these issues by teachers, practice centers and writers. Perhaps a manual on eating meditation may be equally useful as the many already published on sitting and walking meditation. Cookbooks and daily calendars could be written tying Buddhism, ecology and food into the activities of daily life as avenues for engaged practice. As Buddhism is embraced and reformulated in the West, new ideas and applications will build upon the old. This research provides a glimpse of what shape this contemporary Western

18. Kenneth Kraft, *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism: A New Map of the Path* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999), p. 21.

Buddhism may take. It also shows an aspect of the evolving connection between Buddhism and ecology that is appropriate and applicable for the individual practitioner in everyday life.

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