

WESTERN BUDDHIST MOTIVATIONS FOR VEGETARIANISM

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Abstract

Buddhist motivations for abstaining from meat-eating draw from a wide range of traditions. Theravada themes emphasize non-harming, Right Livelihood, and detachment; Mahayana themes highlight interdependence, Buddha-nature, and compassion; Tibetan themes consider rebirth implications for human-animal relationships. These and other contemporary themes overlap with traditional western arguments promoting vegetarianism based on animal welfare, personal and environmental health, world hunger, and ethical development. This paper surveys these themes, then discusses two studies based on survey data that indicate that western Buddhists and Buddhist centers have a wide variety of practices regarding meat-eating. The first survey reports on institutional food choice practices at western Buddhist centers. The second study reports on individual food practices among western Buddhists, with data on food choices and rationales for these choices. In both surveys, Buddhist principles interact with western arguments, leading to diverse decisions about what to eat. As interest in Buddhism grows in the west, Buddhist moral concerns regarding food could influence western food choices in a significant way.

Keywords: Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, vegetarianism, meat-eating, non-harming, food ethics

Introduction

The issue of eating or not eating meat is a classical ethical dilemma for many contemporary westerners, particularly those who are aware of conditions for animals being raised for consumption. As a moral issue and personal life choice, vegetarianism has been a focus for debate across continents and centuries. Much has been discussed regarding the religious, social, and environmental imperatives for abstaining from meat-eating. In the twenty-first century, this debate has intensified with expanding concerns for food security and the environmental impacts of food production. A typical bite of food eaten today in the U.S. now travels an average of 2000 miles from field to fork. Cash crops for industrialized countries often displace locally needed subsistence crops. Food-based disease spreads easily in the globalized economy. Vegetarianism has become a matter of not only moral but pragmatic concern.

This article reflects a long-term interest in the practice of vegetarianism and in religiously-based ethics regarding food practices. In my classes in environmental philosophy and unlearning consumerism, students are very interested in exploring the arguments for vegetarianism. Many are already experimenting with meat-free diets; some are committed vegans, avoiding dairy and eggs as well as meat. I have been particularly interested in the Buddhist philosophical legacy on abstaining from meat to cultivate self-discipline and compassion. Buddhist motivations among western students today tend to focus on non-harming, mindfulness practice, and cultivating compassion for the suffering of animals.

Here I report on two surveys of western Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist centers regarding food practices. The first survey was distributed to 185 practicing Buddhists in centers across North America and Europe; the second survey went to 423 centers in the U.S. and Canada of Zen, Ch'an, Tibetan, and Theravadan lineages. Return rates yielded significant samples that showed some surprising trends. Contrary to the popular stereotype that all Buddhists and Buddhist centers are vegetarian, the data reveal a more complicated story, reflecting differences in both lineage and personal ethics.

To place these surveys in context, I briefly review the traditional western arguments for vegetarianism and the key themes from the major streams of Buddhist thought. This is not meant to be a complete overview of Buddhist texts on meat-eating but rather a place to start for evaluating western Buddhist motivations in taking up vegetarian practice. I want to see whether Buddhist rationales reinforce western views and which perspectives are actually engaged by western Buddhists in their food choices. I suggest that Buddhists may actively promote non-harming through food choice as a form of socially-engaged Buddhism. As interest in Buddhism grows in the west, I believe we will see increased receptivity to Buddhist moral concerns which could influence western food choices in a significant way.

Traditional Western Arguments for Vegetarianism

Traditional Western arguments for not eating animals have a long and rich philosophical history. Western Buddhists considering the moral imperatives of vegetarianism will likely have been exposed to one or more of these arguments which then may contribute significantly

to their motivation. Many may have even come to Buddhism as practicing vegetarians, already persuaded by some of these well-established arguments.¹

Concern for the rights and interests of animals

This concern addresses the impacts on animals who will be raised, killed, cleaned, processed, and eaten by humans for food. Three issues are often named on behalf of food animals, all of which challenge the dominant views of animals as less aware, less valuable, and less intelligent than humans. First, animal proponents argue that animals suffer cruelty or harm in the process of being grown and slaughtered for food. Peter Singer, in his classic text *Animal Liberation*, first described the extensive animal suffering from routine mutilations such as debeaking of chickens, branding of cattle and castration of hogs; from cramped living space in battery cages for chickens and crowded hog pens; and from inhumane slaughter procedures, particularly for beef cattle. Today over five billion chickens and 100 million cows, pigs and sheep are raised on factory farms in the U.S. alone (Singer 1975: 111). Genetic engineering, antibiotics, and assembly line processing are all standard practice in modern day treatment of food animals.²

Second, advocates argue that animals are intelligent and aware, challenging the objectified view of animals as unconscious or incapable of feeling or reasoning. Animal rights philosopher Tom Regan uses the "subject of life" criterion to state that any creature who is sentient, who experiences, who is the "subject of a life" has the right to that life.³ The animal regards its own life and life experience as valuable, though humans may not be capable of understanding just what this experience is. Clearly animals range in neurophysiological complexity and responses to pain and injury vary. Pluhar (2004) argues that even invertebrates may feel more than can yet be documented and certainly behave as if they prefer not to be killed or damaged. Thus vegetarians should consider the experience of any animal as viable and thus respect all animals by not eating them.

Third, proponents of vegetarianism cite evidence that a number of animal species are capable of altruism—helping members of their families, their species, and even others outside their species. Particularly heroic are the accounts of dolphins who rescue stranded young ones or dogs who save lost children. Chimps and gorillas who function

in a highly structured group situation also demonstrate behaviors formerly thought to be limited to the human species. Animals with highly developed group sensibilities, it is argued, suffer more when subjected to factory farming or harvest conditions. The great outcry against whale hunting since the 1970s reflects this concern for the remarkable behaviors of whale social groups.

Concerns for personal health

A vegetarian diet is said to bring many physical health benefits—from increased energy and reduced illness to weight loss and detoxification. In contrast, meat-eating is thought to breed diseases of affluence, accompanied by lower life expectancy. Western health newsletters recommend eating less meat to reduce high rates of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, all correlated with high intake of animal foods. Evidence suggests that standard chemical additives to meat—antibiotics, growth hormones, and vermicides have toxic impacts on consumers. The use of antibiotics for disease prevention in factory farmed animals has had the unintended consequence of creating a variety of strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and potent varieties of *E. coli* that can cause diarrhea, pneumonia, and even death (Leon and DeWaal 2002).

Proponents of “health” vegetarianism (in contrast to “ethical vegetarianism”) also argue that a meat-free diet promotes mental health, a calm disposition, and less vulnerability to the passions of lust and anger. Reported benefits have included: feeling more peaceful and less aggressive, an increase in compassion for others, a sense of mental stability, and greater mental clarity. These states of mind may come from reducing the intake of toxic hormones and pesticides from animal products and eliminating the intake of animal adrenaline (released at death and said to be still present in the processed meat). In giving up meat, people also report suffering less guilt (from causing animal suffering) and experiencing an expanded sense of relationship with the natural world.

Concern for the environment

Environmentalists and western ecophilosophers have joined those who question meat-eating, citing the many deleterious impacts of factory

farming on ecosystem health. Cattle ranching, in particular, is known to contribute to soil erosion, degradation of stream habitat, deforestation, and desertification. Local wildlife populations are displaced by grazing animals or feedlots. Manure alone has a major impact, with the average 1100 pound steer producing almost fifty pounds of manure every day. One estimate calculates annual worldwide manure production from cattle at one billion tons per year, more than four times the weight of the entire human population on earth (Hill 1996: 112-113). This waste runs off into lakes and streams or leaches into soils, altering the chemical balance of nitrogen and phosphorus, causing lakes to "die" from algal blooms that deplete oxygen supplies. Methane produced by decaying manure increases greenhouse gas emissions, adding to global climate change. The Union of Concerned Scientists has calculated that cutting the average U.S. household's consumption of meat in half would reduce food-related land use and water pollution by 30% and 24%, respectively (Brower and Leon 1999: 96).

Further environmental concerns are raised about the widespread use of pesticides in industrial agriculture used to grow grain for cattle and chicken feed.⁴ In the last few years these issues have been almost eclipsed by the growing public clamor over GMOs (genetically modified organisms). GMO corn and soy, two key sources for animal feed products, are now widely planted in the United States and in neighboring Mexico and Canada. Environmentalists are concerned about genetic drift and contamination as well as multiplier effects along the food chain (as is now well documented for pesticides and hormones). They support organic farming as a way to reduce GMOs and improve agricultural ecosystems (Rissler and Mellon 1996).

The western philosophical argument is based on valuing healthy ecosystems, with at least part of this value being the support of humans and other beings dependent on these ecosystems. Wenz (2004) develops the "vegetarian implication" that people in industrial societies have a duty to not eat meat raised or harvested under modern industrial methods because of the moral need to avoid needlessly impairing the health of any ecosystem. He further suggests that, where possible, people ought to restore or improve the health of ecosystems, reducing the unhealthy impacts of meat production.

Concern for world hunger

Proponents for vegetarianism argue that much of the grain being fed to cattle and other farmed animals would be more calorifically effective if fed directly to the many starving people in the world. Francis Moore Lappe, author of *Diet for a Small Planet*, points out that it takes 16 pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef; the other 15 pounds are used by the cow to produce energy, grow body parts we don't eat, or are excreted. That same pound of beef also requires on average 2500 gallons of water (Lappe 1999: 212-213). Half of the water consumed in the U.S. goes to growing food for pasture, hay, and corn production. The argument for vegetarianism based on world hunger points to the vast caloric gap between the First and the Third World and the possibility for much more equitable food distribution. Because of complex political relationships regarding food trade, food production, and food aid, it is not clear that a First World person converting to vegetarianism could have a tangible impact on a starving Third World person. However, a widespread shift in eating habits in the First World could free up grazing land for grain crops and support local food security and sustainability in the Third World.

Concern for ethical development

Abstinence from meat-eating has traditionally been identified with vows of religious or ascetic practice. Western Buddhists carry a strong cultural inheritance from the historic Christian church where abstinence or various forms of fasting were encouraged to overcome the vice of gluttony (Berkman 2004). Such disciplinary practices were said to develop spiritual discipline and draw one closer to prayer. The sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict, for example, instructed monks to refrain from eating meat unless they were ill and weak. Much of modern vegetarianism is motivated by virtue ethics, the desire to do good oneself and make the world a place where more good flourishes (Clark 2004). Many people today have been exposed to and influenced by Gandhi's powerful example of moral vegetarianism as a demonstration of *ahimsa* or nonharming (Gaffney 2004).

Some argue that meat-eating culture promotes an instrumental or abusive attitude toward animals. Further it condones denial and reinforces a kind of ethical distancing from one's food (Adams 1990).

Taking up the practice of vegetarianism helps people develop empathy and ethical sensitivity, with an expanded sense of responsibility for others besides themselves (Gruen 2004). In most religious traditions this concern for others is the core of human ethical development. Whereas meat culture condones and even promotes misuse of other beings, vegetarianism is based in ethical consideration of others. Through developing self-restraint and awareness of human impact, vegetarians raise important concerns that can contribute to human ethical development in a morally complex time.

Buddhist Resources for Vegetarianism

Western Buddhists considering the practice of vegetarianism may be motivated by these western concerns of animal suffering, personal health, environment, world hunger, and ethical development. But they are likely to also draw on Buddhist philosophical resources or practices that support vegetarianism. Many central Buddhist teachings seem consistent with the practice of not eating meat, and a number of Buddhist texts and teachers advocate clearly for abstaining from animal food. As Western Buddhists look for ways to express their spiritual intentions, food choice can be an obvious arena for practice.

Western Buddhists represent every living Buddhist tradition from all geographies of the world, and thus they draw on a wide range of Buddhist resources. However, their use of Buddhist materials is eclectic and evolving, and not nearly as well studied as Asian historical and cultural Buddhism. Even defining who is a Buddhist in America is difficult. Nattier (1998) distinguishes between ethnic Asian Buddhists living in the west and Euro, "White", or "convert" Buddhists of western origin who have adopted Buddhism as a new religion. The survey data for this article reflect primarily the second group, whom Nattier also calls "elite" Buddhists, those with enough time, privilege, wealth, or other means to engage Buddhism for its personal appeal. Though this group is small (she estimates between one and two million in the U.S. or less than one per cent of the population), it has had a disproportionate influence on American culture due to high visibility of key figures in the arts and media. Because of this cultural influence, it is interesting to see how western Buddhists may be working with Buddhist rationales for vegetarianism.

In this section I review the primary reasons usually cited as foundational to Buddhist vegetarianism. Different themes derive from the major historical developments in Buddhism—the Theravada traditions of southeast Asia, the Mahayana schools of northern China, Japan, and Korea, and the Vajrayana lineages of Tibet and Mongolia. This is not meant to be a complete textual review of Buddhist commentaries on meat-eating, but rather a mini-primer on Buddhist rationales available and potentially useful to western practitioners looking for guidance.

Theravada themes

Central to Buddhist morality from the earliest teachings is the concept and practice of *non-harming*, *ahimsa*—a primary foundation for ethical vegetarianism. Early Buddhists in India were strongly influenced by the Jain emphasis on non-harming; in its broadest sense non-harming means “the absence of the desire to kill or harm” (Chapple 1993: 10). Acts of injury or violence were to be avoided because they were thought to result in future injury to oneself. The Buddha’s first teaching, the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, lays out the philosophical context for non-harming by explaining the nature, origin, and cessation of suffering. To stop the suffering of anguish, attachment, grasping, desire, one takes up the Eight-Fold Path of practice which includes moral practice or “Right Conduct” based on the principle of non-harming. The first of the five basic precepts is usually stated in its prohibitory form as “not taking life,” or “not killing or harming”. Buddhaghosa offers this commentary:

“Taking life” means to murder anything that lives. It refers to the striking and killing of living beings. “Anything that lives”—ordinary people speak here of a “living being,” but more philosophically we speak of “anything that has the life-force.” “Taking life” is then the will to kill anything that one perceives as having life, to act so as to terminate the life-force in it . . . With regard to animals, it is worse to kill large ones than small, because a more extensive effort is involved . . . The extent of the offense is proportionate to the intensity of the wish to kill.⁵

The Theravada monastic tradition places emphasis on self-discipline, renunciation, and practices of restraint. Southeast Asian Buddhist monks traditionally refrain from eating after noon to train the senses to accept deprivation as conducive to spiritual attainment. Non-

harming in this context means choosing eating disciplines to minimize harm and cultivate compassion for other beings. This would also include not causing another (i.e. the butcher) to kill or harm animals (Kapleau 1981). The assumption here is that plants suffer less than animals, so eliminating animal foods reduces overall suffering.

The Eight-fold Path also includes the practice of Right View, or understanding the laws of causality (*karma*) and interdependence. The Buddhist worldview in early India understood there to be six rebirth realms: devas, asuras (both god realms), humans, ghosts, animals, and hell beings. To be reborn as an animal would mean one had declined in moral virtue. By not causing harm to others, one would enhance one's future rebirths into higher realms. In this sense, the law of karma was used as a motivating force for good behavior, including paying respect to all life. Monks were instructed not to eat meat, since by practicing vegetarianism they would avoid the hell realms and would be more likely to achieve a higher rebirth. Shakbar recounts one of these karmic threats in the Buddhist canon: "If one eats the flesh of animals that one has not oneself killed, the result is to experience a single life (lasting one *kalpa*) in hell. If one eats the meat of beasts that one has killed or one has caused another to kill, one must spend a hundred thousand kalpas in hell" (2004: 68).

Right Livelihood, another element of the Eight-fold Path, concerns how one makes a living or supports oneself. The early canonical teachings of the Buddha indicate that he prohibited five livelihoods: trading in weapons, trading in slaves, selling alcohol, selling poisons, and most relevant to this discussion, slaughtering animals. The Buddha promised a terrible fate to those who hunted deer or slaughtered sheep; the intentional afflicting of harm was thought to be particularly egregious, for it meant the mind was deeply deluded and could not see the relationship between the slaughterer and the slaughtered. Proponents of vegetarianism cite today's large-scale slaughtering of animals for production of fast foods as breaking the Buddha's prohibition. This practice clearly promulgates intentional harm in the confinement, treatment, and technologically-proficient killing of the animals. Vegetarian practice would be a way to eliminate support for the wrong livelihood of today's mass butchering.

To further reduce craving, the first followers of the Buddha were instructed to practice *detachment* through alms practice, going on begging rounds through the village before dawn to obtain their food for the day. Alms practice encouraged both discipline and detachment

since monks were to receive all food graciously, from rich households to poor, with no preference for specific favored or unfavored foods. Food was to be seen entirely as sustenance for following the spiritual path, not as a source of craving. If a lay person made an offering of meat, the Buddha ruled it was acceptable for the monk to eat this meat so long as the meat was pure in three aspects—that the monk had neither heard nor seen the animal's slaughter, and that he did not think it had been killed on his behalf. If any of these three were true, the monk became immediately more complicit with the act of killing. Contemporary Buddhist vegetarian Kate Lawrence suggests this rule may have actually spared animals from being killed as a special honor for monks, a practice perhaps derived in some way from the Hindu practice of animal sacrifice that the Buddha opposed (Lawrence 2002). This teaching was meant to place compassion for the layperson's effort as more virtuous than self-righteous attachment to any particular diet for the monk.

Mahayana themes

While Theravada themes emphasize restraint and personal discipline (including eating discipline) to achieve liberation from craving, Mahayana schools emphasize the virtue of helping others attain freedom from suffering. Today's western Buddhists draw strongly from the Ch'an and Zen lineages for ethical resources regarding vegetarianism. The Mahayana model of the enlightened being is the *bodhisattva* who returns lifetime after lifetime to help all who are suffering. The Bodhisattva vow to "save all sentient beings" calls for cultivation of *compassion* for the endless suffering of existence. Animals, like humans, are seen as living beings caught in the afflictions of birth, sickness, old age, and death, cherishing their own existence or self with all its desires. Caring for animals by not killing them as food is a way to develop compassion for others. The *Lankavatara Sutra* speaks particularly to eliminating the suffering of fear in animals, which arises from experiencing the human intention to kill. "For fear of causing terror to living beings, Mahamati, let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion, refrain from eating flesh" (Suzuki 1932: 213). Modern Zen teacher Phillip Kapleau has advocated strongly for Buddhist vegetarianism, claiming it is not possible to cultivate compassionate rapport with non-human beings if you are eating

them. He cites the *Mahaparanirvana Sutra* which states, "the eating of meat extinguishes the seed of compassion" (Kapleau 1981: 34). If one takes the Bodhisattva vow, then s/he would be committed to liberating animals as well as humans from suffering, and thus would take up a practice of vegetarianism.

From the earliest Buddhist teachings on, all phenomena in the universe were seen as co-dependently arising from a multitude of causes and conditions at play. The primary model for this teaching was the Twelve Links of Dependent Co-origination, a cycle explaining the endless round of sensation, desire, grasping, and karmic formation. Mahayana schools in China many centuries later emphasized a broader interpretation of *interdependence*, characterized by the Hua-Yen Sutra metaphor of Indra's Net. This net is comprised of many intersecting nets in multiple dimensions with jewels of infinite facets at every node. Each jewel reflects all the others and is interdependent with them in space and time. Though the metaphor is somewhat limited in communicating the dynamic and evolving nature of the multicausal universe, it parallels similar metaphors used today to describe the web of ecological relations. This teaching was not used historically to support vegetarianism, but contemporary western Buddhists have drawn heavily on this principle to raise ecological concerns about meat-eating. They point to the many examples of interdependent relations in the growing, processing, shipping, and marketing today's cosmopolitan food.⁶ Seeing humans as members of Indra's Net, they endorse the reduction of negative impacts such as factory farming that tarnish the jewels.

Buddhist scholar Ian Harris suggests that a Mahayana Buddhist vegetarian ethic was first formulated around the idea that all beings have *Buddha-nature*, the central concept in the *Mahaparanirvana Sutra*. Buddha-Nature is understood to be an embryo of the Tathagata or the fully enlightened being (Harris 2000). "It is in Buddha-nature that all existences, animate and inanimate, are unified and harmonized. All organisms seek to maintain this unity in terms of their own karma. To willfully take life, therefore, means to disrupt and destroy this inherent wholeness and to blunt feelings of reverence and compassion arising from our Buddha-mind" (Kapleau 1981: 19). Taking an animal's life, therefore, is destructive to the Buddha-nature within the animal to be eaten. Thus, to honor the Tathagata and the potential for awakening, one should refrain from eating meat.

Vajrayana themes

Tibetan lineages offer conflicting messages regarding meat-eating for western Buddhists. Mostly due to climate and geography, Tibetans have always been meat eaters, with much of their native lands too inhospitable for agriculture. Yet because of the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, many Tibetan Buddhists support vegetarianism in principle and do make efforts to abstain from meat on certain holy days. Even the Dalai Lama attempted vegetarianism for a while out of compassion for animals and the environment, but it did not agree with his system and he had to discontinue the experiment. However, a small number of Tibetan centers have stopped cooking meat and some of the younger monks and nuns have taken up vegetarian practice (Shabkar 2004). Western Buddhists interested in vegetarianism may find it challenging to find appropriate Tibetan role models for not eating meat.

Yet the Vajrayana literature does have some clear advocates for vegetarianism. Atisha, Milarepa, and a number of other important teachers in the Tibetan lineages abstained from meat, and Patrul Rinpoche was able to more or less abolish the slaughtering of animals to offer meat to visiting lamas in many parts of eastern Tibet (Shabkar 2004: 23). For these lamas to give up eating meat must have been extremely difficult, for one would have to subsist primarily on butter, curd, and barley flour. This would likely have made them less resistant to illness and more vulnerable to the extreme cold of the high altitudes.

Shabkar Rangdrol of the eighteenth century wrote passionately on compassion for animals; his text, "The Faults of Eating Meat" reviews relevant guidelines in a number of Buddhist sutras. He points out that the apparent exceptions granted to Theravada monks were reversed in later sutras. In a long section in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha states: "all meat is utterly prohibited under all circumstances. And therefore, Mahamati, I have not given permission to anyone to consume meat. I do not grant permission and I never shall" (Shabkar 2004: 55). The Vajrayana emphasis on *rebirth* provides a starting point for the western practitioner seeking a doctrinal basis for vegetarianism. Shabkar cites the *Angulimala Sutra* in making a strong case for not eating animals:

There is not a single being, wandering in the chain of lives in endless and beginningless samsara, that has not been your mother or your

sister. An individual, born as a dog, may afterward become your father. Each and every being is like an actor playing on the stage of life. One's own flesh and the flesh of others is the same flesh. Therefore the Enlightened Ones eat no meat. Moreover, Manjushri, the *dhar-madhatu* is the common nature of all beings, therefore Buddhas refrain from eating meat (Shabkar 2004: 64).

In "The Nectar of Immortality", Shabkar explains the seven-point instruction in mind training to cultivate *bodhicitta*, a useful meditation foundation for abstaining from meat-eating.

First, we must learn to recognize that all beings have been our mothers. Second, we must be mindful of the kindness they have shown us, and, third, resolve to repay them. Fourth, we must feel a tender love for them and, fifth, great compassion (Shabkar 2004: 98).

From this point one cultivates the thought of universal responsibility for others (sixth) and (seventh) the attitude of *bodhicitta*, the wish for all beings to attain enlightenment and be free of suffering. This mind training will strengthen the practitioner's capacity to see meat as the flesh of related kin, making it difficult if not impossible to eat.

Contemporary themes

Western Buddhists have drawn on a number of the principles or practices above as supportive teachings for practicing vegetarianism. Several additional themes have emerged, however, in the recent popular lexicon. Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has promoted *mindfulness* as a central stabilizing practice for calming the mind and being present. He works with the teachings of the *Satipatthana Sutta* providing instructions in mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind. Nhat Hanh (1990) offers a series of mindfulness verses for eating—one for regarding the plate of food, one for taking the first bite, one for tasting the first mouthful, etc. In a recent talk he called for awareness of the global impacts of agriculture, expressing his concerns in strong terms:

We are eating our country, we are eating the Earth. We are eating our children . . . Mindful eating can help maintain compassion within our heart. A person without compassion cannot be happy, cannot relate to other human beings and to other living beings. Eating the flesh of our own son is what is going on in the world, because we do not practice mindful eating . . . therefore the whole nation has to practice looking deeply into the nature of what we consume every day. And

consuming mindfully is the only way to protect ourselves, our family, our nation, and our society (Thich Nhat Hanh 2001).

One of his students suggests that mindfulness practice applied to eating can generate more sensitivity to animals, to the health of the environment, and to each other. Using mindfulness, she feels we can become "more aware of how meat consumption feeds violence and anger" (Lawrence 2002: 293).

Mindfulness practice in Buddhist retreat center kitchens also contributes to attentive eating. Dogen's *Instructions to the Head Cook* have been widely read in western Zen centers, and following his instructions, kitchen workers are expected to give full attention to every aspect of food preparation. At Green Gulch Zen Center, for example, there is a "knife practice" for careful washing and storing of knives, a "counter cleaning practice" for returning the work space to readiness, and a variety of "chopping practices" for various vegetables (Fischer 2005: 217). All meals are vegetarian and attentively prepared for contemplative eating. In the meditation hall, eating bowls are to be handled with grace and respect so one can eat silently and maintain a meditative state throughout the meal. Western students seem to find these ritualized practices refreshing and grounding against the usual chaos of western eating patterns.

Environmentally-concerned Buddhists have raised issues about the ecological consequences of meat-eating. Buddhist scholar Kenneth Kraft proposes the term "eco-karma" to cover the multiple impacts of human choices as they affect the health and sustainability of the earth. An ecological view of karma extends the traditional view beyond specific organism rebirth to a general systems view of environmental processes. The eco-karma of meat eating can be analyzed in terms of its ecological footprint, determining how much land, air, and water is used or impacted by the growing of meat animals (Kraft 1997). Tracing such karmic streams across the land points the finger of responsibility back to human choices. On the website for the Society for Ethical and Religious Vegetarians, contemporary Tibetan practitioner Eileen Weintraub takes up these eco-karma questions. She asks,

If concerns arise regarding the karmic consequences of eating flesh, to whom should we give the benefit of the doubt? The living beings who were raised in obscene conditions and who died in terror in slaughterhouses, or our own habitual patterns and taste addictions? (Weintraub 2003)

Among today's western Buddhists, vegetarianism can be regarded as a form of social activism, a practice with an advocacy or social change component. Activism such as this is identified as *socially-engaged* Buddhism, a practice path mostly outside the gates of the monastery. For some Buddhists, this path is seen as an application of the teachings; in the case of vegetarianism, the teachings are compassion, interdependence, mindfulness, etc. For other Buddhists of more activist inclination, the path is the socially-engaged work itself. There is no sense of separation between the activist work and one's practice. Choosing to not eat meat then becomes a practice that engages one fully in the core Buddhist practices. Teaching others about the ecological or personal benefits of vegetarianism can then be seen as a kind of dharma teaching, offered in the spirit of liberating all beings from suffering.

Problems with Buddhist Arguments for Vegetarianism

Is Buddhism, in fact, as ethically sensitive to animals and supportive of vegetarianism as these rationales would seem to indicate? In a comprehensive assessment of Buddhist views of animals, Paul Waldau shows how Buddhist texts are more ambiguous, with numerous endorsements of hierarchical and instrumental views of animals. The early Jataka Tales, for example, attribute great virtue to the lead animal (the Buddha-to-be) but are generally dismissive of other animal capacities. Animals as a general class are seen to be lacking in cognition and wisdom. The dominant view is that animals are members of a realm distinct from and inferior to humans. Several texts portray elephants as property, subject to abusive training practices and military use. The penalties for offenses toward animals are significantly less than toward humans. The "lesser" offenses lump together: harming an elephant, destroying plants, digging in the soil (killing soil organisms), killing a crow, and walking on small beings in the rainy season (Waldau 2002: 124). There is a clear discontinuity between treatment standards for humans and treatment standards for animals. This can be used to rationalize non-equitable relations with domestic animals, a problem for Buddhist vegetarians.

As for the rebirth argument, Waldau points out that in the classic Buddhist worldview, humans are seen as the pinnacle of rebirth. Animal rebirths are seen as very bad; animals are in the so-called

lower realms because they acted badly in their former lives. This concept of hierarchy may motivate the Buddhist monk or layperson to behave virtuously (and choose not to eat meat), but what does it say about the animals? This hierarchical view of animals and humans parallels similar views in the Abrahamic religious traditions that are fundamentally dualistic rather than inclusive. Although in theory all animals can attain full enlightenment, the karma of animals seems to be of much less concern to humans in general.

Western Buddhists have taken up these and other issues in the debate over vegetarianism as a Buddhist moral imperative. In a magazine forum on meat-eating, editor Helen Tworokov noted the enthusiasm Tibetan monks have for Big Macs and the popularity of pork among southeast Asian monks. She acknowledged the impossible challenge in the bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings, since we must kill to live. She sees the question of what to eat as a *koan*, pushing us into "the great mangle of living and dying and being born, where there is ultimately no safety and no pat response" (Tworokov 1994: 4).

Buddhist poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder places Buddhist vegetarian ideals in the context of modern agricultural practices. Most people in the Third World are semi-vegetarian by default, as this is what they can grow and afford. Occasional fish or chicken is seen as a luxury and is much appreciated when available. People in high latitudes or cold climates where agriculture is limited have always depended on animal food. Snyder asks if Buddhists would be so arrogant as to reject these other cultures and food economies. From his interpretation of the bodhisattva vow, the very struggle to exist on whatever limited food is available should call out for compassionate response. Recognizing fully the First Precept as guide, he admits that *taking no life* is impossible to uphold perfectly since "every living thing impinges on every other living thing". He feels that vegetarianism is too simple a solution to the massive harming done to animals by industrialized economies. Instead, "to save all beings, we must work tirelessly to maintain the integrity of these mandala-like places of habitat, and the people, creatures, and Buddhas who dwell in their palace-like spaces" (Snyder 1995: 73).

Western Buddhist Food Practices Today

With such an array of philosophies and traditions to choose from, what, in fact, are today's western Buddhists eating? To gain some insight into Buddhist food practice and attitudes, my students and I carried out two surveys: one of individual practitioners (primarily in the U.S.) and the other of Buddhist retreat centers in the United States and Canada. While these represent only a limited sample, they provide some indication of current trends across diverse lineages and geographies. With the U.S. such a melting pot of Buddhist traditions, the data reflect a wide range of approaches to food, influenced by many different texts, cultures, and histories. And since vegetarianism in the U.S. has been influenced strongly by traditional western arguments, we see an interesting mix of Buddhist and western philosophical rationales for food choices among practitioners.

Retreat centers

In 2002 graduate student Gavin Van Horn and I sent out 423 surveys to Buddhist centers across a variety of lineages in the United States and Canada, aiming for broad geographical representation. The list was drawn from an existing guide to Buddhist centers; we limited our sample to established groups that had their own meeting space, rural or urban. The survey was designed to gather data on ecological practices: greening practices (such as recycling, composting, energy conservation), land stewardship practices, eating practices, environmental programs, training and meditation related to the earth, institutional policies regarding ecological practice, and socially engaged practice. In the section on eating practices, participants were asked to rate their center's degree of participation in serving no meat, serving vegetarian and vegan options, serving locally-grown or organic food, reusing dishware, and observing meal blessings.

The surveys (23% return) were dominated by east and west coast returns, reflecting the prevalence of Buddhist centers in these two areas. While a similar proportion of surveys were sent to each major lineage, the return was heavily Mahayana—55% Zen, and 9% Ch'an complemented by 23% Tibetan and only 4% Theravadan. Of the seven categories of ecological practice surveyed, eating practices was second only to "greening practices" in receiving the highest marks "regularly" (53%). Combining those who either "regularly" or "sometimes"

engaged in the various ecological eating practices, the figure totaled 79%. Of the specific practices, 55% regularly served no meat at their centers, with 58% offering vegetarian food, and 33% offering vegan food. Serving local and organic food were practiced sometimes (48% local, 46% organic) as opposed to regularly (9%, 15%).

Are all western Buddhism centers vegetarian? These data indicate not, since only slightly more than half of the surveyed Buddhist centers serve no meat. Only 5% indicated they never serve meat, with another 10% of the centers indicating they are sometimes meat-free. Vegan options were offered regularly for only 33% of the centers and sometimes for 20%. Yet the fact that some centers were serving local and/or organic foods indicates a more advanced degree of food awareness and institutional choice. Field observations in the second study suggest that Tibetan centers regularly serve meat and some Zen centers offer meat as well.

Individual practitioners

The second survey was carried out by Kristin Steele in 1999 under my supervision for her honors thesis research.⁷ These data were more evenly distributed among lineages, so we were able to compare eating preferences for individuals across different traditions. Steele distributed 185 questionnaires to 13 centers around the United States and one in France, receiving 85 completed responses (a return rate of 45%). The centers were selected to facilitate contact with practitioners and to represent a diversity of Buddhist traditions. Using multiple choice and open-ended questions, the survey gathered information on Buddhist beliefs and attitudes toward food, preferences for ecologically valued food choices, and environmental interpretations of Buddhism as related to food choices.

Respondents represented a range of geographical diversity: 76% from the United States, 22% from Europe, 2% from Canada, and 1% from India. Virtually all were practicing western Buddhists. In the United States, the predominant response was from California (25%), followed by New York (19%), Vermont (18%), Massachusetts (12%), Maine and New Jersey (1% each). As a whole, respondents were well educated, with 85% holding an undergraduate or higher degree. Length of involvement with Buddhism varied; 4% had been involved their entire lives, 32% had practiced for more than ten years, 36% for 5-10 years, and 31% for 1-5 years. Lineage affiliation

included 46% Tibetan Buddhist, 27% Zen, 10% Ch'an, 29% Theravada or Vipassana, and 2% Pure Land. (A number of respondents indicated multiple affiliations.)

For food choices, half the respondents indicated they did not eat meat: 43% considered themselves vegetarians and 7% self-identified as vegans. This is clearly a much higher proportion than the general population of westerners. Of the remaining returns, 35% considered themselves to be meat-eaters, and 15% chose the category of "other", a mix of practices. One person affiliated with several Buddhist traditions wrote, "I am vegetarian most of the time. If I feel the need to eat fish or fowl (occasionally), I do so with great gratitude and mindfulness of the life that supports my own." Regarding specific food choices, half those surveyed never eat red meat, almost a third (30%) eat it only rarely. Almost half (42%) never eat poultry, with a little over one-third eating it more than once a week. The majority (40%) eat fish more than once a week, with only 3% never eating fish. Sixty per cent indicated they eat eggs more than once a week, with 10% never eating eggs. Organically grown foods are eaten at least once a day by over half (57%) of respondents, suggesting perhaps some environmental concerns related to eating.

Although sample sizes were uneven across the traditions, comparisons show that the highest proportion of vegetarians was among the Theravada practitioners (63%), followed by Ch'an (50%), Zen (44%), and Tibetan (31%) (see Table 1). Combining vegetarians and vegans, the Ch'an sample (62%) is almost equal to the number of Theravada non-meat-eaters. The Tibetan sample has the largest percentage of meat-eaters and the smallest percentage of vegetarians and vegans. Among Zen respondents, a significant number designated themselves as "other", suggesting either a varied, special, or self-designed diet.

Table 1. Dietary Habits by Buddhist Tradition

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

When asked to list the most important ethical principle for their food practice, respondents cited compassion (43%), the precepts, i.e. Right Conduct (26%), mindfulness (20%), simplicity (17%), and ahimsa (12%). One vegetarian Ch'an Buddhist said, "I see not eating animals as an exercise in not causing pain which is so much more difficult in other areas of life." A Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist wrote, "The transition [to vegetarianism] took a long time to happen but I realized I couldn't consider myself compassionate to beings if I ate some of them." A Theravada/Tibetan practitioner drew on ahimsa "... in the sense of non-harming of myself. I try not to eat too much food with hydrogenated oils, carcinogens, chemical additives."

The majority (69%) indicated that their involvement with Buddhism was important in their choice of food or attitude toward their food. Most (88%) said they believed there was a link between their food and the environment. One Zen/Viappassana student wrote: "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." For 17% of those surveyed, Buddhism provided the motivation for taking up vegetarianism. But another 19% were already vegetarians before they became involved with Buddhism. Of the various Buddhist rationales for vegetarianism, those mentioned most often were restraint, ahimsa, and mindfulness, "facilitating clearer practice". Over half the rationales (right livelihood, detachment, interdependence, Buddhature, rebirth, and socially-engaged practice) were not mentioned at all. A number of respondents cited western arguments for not eating meat as important motivators. Several, for example, were concerned that meat-eating contributes to global hunger, pollution, and other environmental problems.

When asked if they would like to make a change to their diet, 67% indicated they would. Hoped-for changes included eating more organic food, eating "healthier" or simpler food, consuming fewer addictive substances, less fat and sugar, less dairy, less wheat and processed foods, and more fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole foods. Eleven per cent wanted to adopt a more vegetarian or vegan diet; 11% also said they would like to eat less and with less greed or attachment. Personal health reasons were important to 19% of those wanting a change, as were ecological concerns (7%). One Tibetan Buddhist said: "[I would like to] 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." It is striking to note that virtually no one in the sample drew attention to the longstanding western philosophical concern for the rights and interests of animals. (It is possible that respondents assumed this concern was addressed by the First Precept of non-harming.)

The survey data point to a complex mix of motivations for taking up vegetarian practice. Some of the motivations seem driven primarily by Buddhist principles; others reflect more traditional western arguments. While respondents showed a range of knowledge and concern about ecological conditions related to food production, they indicated almost no knowledge and concern about animal welfare issues or global hunger. Personal health concerns were a factor for some of those surveyed, but few people mentioned heart disease, antibiotics, or hormones. Apparently, each person put together the various Buddhist and traditional reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet in his or her own unique way. With this small sample size it is difficult to identify common trends in motivations; the most striking observation is the wide range of reasons for making individual food choices.

How then do Buddhist and western rationales for vegetarianism overlap or reinforce each other? We can speculate that when people feel supported in their vegetarian choice by both cultural and religious reasoning, they are more likely to sustain their practice. Newly committed vegetarians often report faltering in their choices when they feel isolated and unsupported by family, friends, or local culture. A vegetarian adopting Buddhism would feel well supported by Buddhist principles of ahimsa, compassion, and social engagement. A Buddhist adopting vegetarianism might feel reinforced by learning about environment and world hunger issues. Table 2 shows how these various motivators might overlap to strengthen a person's commitment to vegetarianism.

Table 2. Overlaps between Buddhist and western rationales for vegetarianism

	rights and interests of animals	personal health	environment	world hunger	ethical development
ahimsa/Right Conduct	X	X	X	X	X
karma/Right View					X
Right Livelihood	X		X		X
detachment/alms practice					X
compassion/ bodhisattava vow	X	X	X	X	X
interdependence			X	X	X
Buddha-nature	X	X			X
rebirth/kinship					X
mindfulness		X			X
eco-karma			X		X
socially-engaged	X		X	X	X

Reading across the rows in the table, we see that Right Conduct and compassion both fit well with all of the traditional western rationales. Socially-engaged practice is very compatible with four of the concerns and could perhaps also be applied to some of the political dimensions of personal health concerns. Reading down the columns in the table, of the first four western arguments, concern for the environment seems to hold the strongest match for Buddhist rationales. However, if one's primary motivation is ethical development, then every one of the Buddhist principles and practices can be helpful. Some are particularly strong reinforcement: avoiding slaughtered animals as Right Conduct practice or cultivating compassion to expand concern for animal treatment. While a non-Buddhist vegetarian may not specify a religious motivation to their vegetarianism, they can usually identify a clear ethical motivation. In contrast, a Buddhist vegetarian may see food practice as central to their spiritual liberation. In one popular forum Buddhist Philip Glass explains, "equanimity [developed through vegetarianism] is a powerful opponent of the self-cherishing and self-grasping that are at the root cause of ignorance . . . vegetarianism is proposed not on moral or ethical grounds

(i.e. 'you shouldn't eat meat because it is wrong'), but as a potentially powerful tool for our own spiritual development" (Glass 1994: 57).

Buddhist Vegetarianism as Activism

But are Buddhist vegetarians abstaining from meat only for spiritual development or for personal reasons? Or could they play a role in advocating for animal welfare, environmental protection, or world hunger? Could Buddhist vegetarians join the movement for socially-engaged Buddhism? Perhaps Buddhist vegetarians might have the greatest influence on other Buddhists, encouraging mindful examination of food choices and their implications. In this closing section of the paper, I speculate briefly on the potential role for Buddhist vegetarianism as a form of moral activism in the West.

Considering animal welfare activism, western initiatives to improve farming conditions have not usually come from the religious sector. There is an extensive network of non-profit organizations devoted to humanitarian animal concerns, the largest of which is the Humane Society, with more than seven million members. While there have been some limited religious partnerships on behalf of animal concerns, generally the advocacy groups remain non-religious in orientation, as this provides the greatest flexibility and the least offense to members. A vegetarian Buddhist might find personal motivation to join these animal welfare efforts, but a specifically Buddhist animal organization would be only a very small player in a big and politically connected field. Thus my own guess is that Buddhist vegetarians will not play a significant role in the western animal welfare movement.

World hunger concerns may be out of reach for most western Buddhists living with assumptions of privilege. Vegetarian options are widely available in the western lands of plenty. One can subsist quite elegantly on Thai frozen entrees, premium pastas, and organic mesclun mix. Hunger is not usually an everyday encounter for most who live in the developed countries. Though at least one Zen center makes regular food offering ceremonies, with donations to Oxfam and other organizations working to address world hunger,⁸ I suspect this is not widespread practice. Thus I would not expect western Buddhists to contribute much to the global actions to reduce hunger and malnutrition.

Buddhist vegetarians might be more helpful with the environmental movement and its attention to agricultural pollution, pesticides, and genetically-modified organisms. This seems more promising because of the rise of the Religion and Ecology movement, supported both by academic work and religiously-inspired environmental activism.⁹ Evangelical Christians have lobbied for endangered species, Protestants are raising concerns about global climate change, and the Greek Orthodox patriarch is preaching about the health of the Black Sea. Buddhists emphasizing non-harming may find a niche in addressing environmental concerns about the impacts of rampant consumerism (Kaza 2005). For this, Buddhist vegetarians could offer the wisdom of their experience in choosing dietary restraint and simplicity.

My best guess is that Buddhist vegetarians may carry the greatest moral weight with their own Buddhist peers, both western and non-western. Moral activism based in vegetarianism easily fits within the expanding movement of socially-engaged Buddhism (Queen 2000). Philosopher and Buddhist activist Donald Rothberg describes four principles of socially engaged Buddhism that seem well represented in Buddhist vegetarian practice (Rothberg 1998). The first is that the “inner” (the person, subjective aspects) and the “outer” (the more public or social aspects) are linked. For the socially engaged Buddhist it is not possible to separate their so-called personal pain from their pain for the world, or in this case, for animals and their inhumane treatment. The second principle is that one assumes “co-responsibility” with others for the state of things. This means not blaming a particular group as evil or at fault, since one can see that all parties are suffering in either the causes or the effects of the actions.

The third principle is that the means are the ends. Thich Nhat Hanh’s famous saying, “Peace is every step” might be restated as “Peace is every bite”. In other words, the practice of vegetarianism itself can help to establish better relations with animals and the earth with every bite of awareness. For Buddhist vegetarians practicing with other Buddhists, this kind of peer influence can be very powerful. Wherever a Buddhist teacher takes a principled stand on vegetarianism it shapes the practices of the entire practice group.¹⁰ The fourth principle is taking the long view of social transformation based on reconciliation rather than defeat. For the issue of meat-eating, this would mean working toward a sustainable situation for animals and society that is deeply rooted in right effort. From a socially-engaged Buddhist perspective, it will not work to hatefully try to

crush factory farming of animals. Rather, Buddhist activists would need to work persuasively and persistently to change industrial scale practices, to provide alternatives, and to offer support for those who have made a commitment to a meat-free diet.

To put this speculation in context though, I must conclude this article on a sobering note. Even with the strongest Buddhist motivations for vegetarianism, even with widespread ethical concern for animals, health, hunger, and environment, the scale of commercial animal farming is more massive than ever. The sheer magnitude of growth in human population and popular demand for meat has overshadowed the most sincere choices of vegetarians, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Western tastes for meat have spread to the rising economic classes of developing countries; fast food meat options are available in every region around the globe. Some authors question whether taking up the practice of vegetarianism can really make any significant impact on factory farming today (Frey 2004).

If vegetarianism is to carry any weight at all in the state of the world, it may be primarily in the realm of ethical development. From a Buddhist perspective, every act of compassion adds to social capacity for peaceful relations. The dilemmas surrounding food choices, to eat or not to eat animals, are all helpful to practitioners and thus to society. It is here that traditional western rationales and Buddhist perspectives on vegetarianism find common ground, as reflected in the two surveys. Ethical development gained from struggling with food choice may not halt the exponential increase in industrial animal production, but it can strengthen one's capacity for struggling with even greater ethical challenges such as war, injustice and poverty.

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NOTES

1. For an overview of these arguments, see Hill (1996).
2. For a detailed discussion of hog raising, see Scully (2002). For detailed discussion of cattle raising, see Schlosser (2001) and Pollan (2002: 44-51, 68, 71-72, 76-77).
3. Cited in Hill (1996: 53); Regan (1991).
4. See Chapter Four in Leon and deWaal (2002), and Fox (1997).
5. As cited in Gaffney (2004: 227).
6. See, for example, a number of chapters in Hunt-Badiner (ed.) (2002).
7. A summary of these data was presented in Steele and Kaza (2000).

8. Vermont Zen Center, Shelburne, Vermont, whose teacher, Sunyana Graef, is committed to vegetarian practice for herself, the center and her students.

9. See, for example, "Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?" *Daedalus* 130(4) 2001 and Gardner (2003: 152-175).

10. A strong example of this is Philip Kapleau and Rochester Zen Center, which has been committed to vegetarianism since its founding. This tradition carries on with Kapleau's dharma heirs such as Sunyana Graef who established the Vermont Zen Center.

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