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# Buddhist vegetarianism

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**Buddhist vegetarianism** is the belief that following a vegetarian diet is implied in the Buddha's teaching. In Buddhism, however, the views on vegetarianism vary between different schools of thought. According to Theravada, the Buddha allowed his monks to eat pork, chicken and fish if the monk was aware that the animal was not killed on their behalf. The Mahayana schools generally recommend a vegetarian diet; according to some sutras the Buddha himself insisted that his followers should not eat the flesh of any sentient being.<sup>[1]</sup> Monks of the Mahayana traditions that follow the Brahma Net Sutra are forbidden by their vows from eating flesh of any kind.

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## Early Buddhism

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The earliest surviving written accounts of Buddhism are the Edicts of Asoka written by King Asoka, a well-known Buddhist king who propagated Buddhism throughout Asia and is honored by both Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism. The authority of the Edicts of Asoka as a historical record is suggested by the mention of numerous topics omitted as well as corroboration of numerous accounts found in the Theravada and Mahayana Tripitakas written down centuries later. <sup>[2]</sup> Asoka Rock Edict 1 dated to c. 257 BCE mentions the prohibition of animal sacrifices in Asoka's Maurya Empire as well as his commitment to vegetarianism; however, whether the Sangha was vegetarian in part or in whole is unclear from these edicts. However, Asoka's personal commitment to, and advocating of, vegetarianism suggests Early Buddhism (at the very least for the layperson) most likely already had a vegetarian tradition (the details of what that

entailed besides not killing animals were not mentioned, and therefore are unknown.)<sup>[3]</sup>

## Views of different schools

There is a divergence of views within Buddhism as to whether vegetarianism is required, with some schools of Buddhism rejecting such a requirement. The first precept in Buddhism is usually translated as "I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life". Some Buddhists see this as implying that Buddhists should avoid meat consumption, whereas other Buddhists argue that this is untrue. Some Buddhists do strongly oppose meat-eating on the basis of scriptural injunctions against flesh-eating accorded in Mahayana sutras.

## Theravada View

The Buddha in the Anguttara Nikaya 3.38 **Sukhamala Sutta**, before his enlightenment, describes his family being wealthy enough to provide non-vegetarian meals even to his servants. After becoming enlightened, he accepted any kind of food offered with respect as alms, including meat,<sup>[4]</sup> but there is no reference of him eating meat during his seven years as an ascetic.

In the modern era, the passage cited below has been interpreted as allowing the consumption of meat *if* it is not specifically slaughtered for the recipient:

... meat should not be eaten under three circumstances: when it is seen or heard or suspected (that a living being has been purposely slaughtered for the eater); these, Jivaka, are the three circumstances in which meat should not be eaten, Jivaka! I declare there are three circumstances in which meat can be eaten: when it is not seen or heard or suspected (that a living being has been purposely slaughtered for the eater); Jivaka, I say these are the three circumstances in which meat can be eaten. —**Jivaka Sutta**, MN 55 , *unpublished translation by Sister*



A vegetarian dinner at a Korean Buddhist restaurant.



A vegetarian dinner at a Japanese Buddhist restaurant.



A vegetarian dinner at a Taiwanese

Uppalavanna<sup>[5]</sup>

Also in the Jivaka Sutta, Buddha instructs a monk or nun to accept, without any discrimination, whatever food is offered in receiving alms offered with good will, including meat, whereas the Buddha declares the meat trade to be wrong livelihood in the **Vaniija Sutta**, AN 5:177

Monks, a lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, *business in meat*, business in intoxicants, and business in poison. These are the five types of business that a lay follower should not engage in.<sup>[6]</sup>

But this is not, strictly speaking, a dietary rule. The Buddha, on one particular occasion, specifically refused suggestions by Devadatta to institute vegetarianism in the Sangha.<sup>[7]</sup>

In the Amagandha Sutta in the Sutta Nipata, a vegetarian Brahmin confronts Kassapa Buddha (a previous Buddha before Gautama Buddha) in regard to the evil of eating meat. The Buddha countered the argument by listing acts which cause real moral defilement and then at the end of the verse, he emphasized that the consumption of meat is not equivalent to those acts. ("... this is the stench giving defilement, not the consumption of meat").

**"[t]aking life, beating, wounding, binding, stealing, lying, deceiving, worthless knowledge, adultery; this is stench. Not the eating of meat."  
(Amagandha Sutta).**

There were monastic guidelines prohibiting consumption of 10 types of meat: that of humans, elephants, horses, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, leopards, bears and hyenas. This is because these animals can be provoked by the smell of the flesh of their own kind, or because eating of such flesh would generate a bad reputation for the Sangha.

Paul Breiter, a student of Ajahn Chah, states that some bhikkhus in Thailand choose to be vegetarian and that Ajahn Sumedho encouraged supporters to prepare vegetarian food for the temple.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the Pali Canon, Buddha once explicitly refused suggestion by Devadatta to institute vegetarianism in the monks' Vinaya.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Mahayana view

According to the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, a Mahayana sutra purporting to give Gautama Buddha's final teachings, the Buddha insisted that his followers should not eat any kind of meat or fish, even those not included in the 10 types, and that even vegetarian food that has been touched by meat should be washed before being eaten. Also, it is not permissible for the monk or nun just to pick out the non-meat portions of a diet and leave the rest: the whole meal must be rejected.<sup>[10]</sup>

The Aṅgulimālīya Sūtra quotes a dialogue between Gautama Buddha and Manjushri on meat eating:

Mañjuśrī asked, “Do Buddhas not eat meat because of the tathāgata-garbha ?”

The Blessed One replied, “Mañjuśrī, that is so. There are no beings who have not been one’s mother, who have not been one’s sister through generations of wandering in beginningless and endless saṃsāra. Even one who is a dog has been one’s father, for the world of living beings is like a dancer. Therefore, one’s own flesh and the flesh of another are a single flesh, so Buddhas do not eat meat. “Moreover, Mañjuśrī, the dhātu of all beings is the dharmadhātu, so Buddhas do not eat meat because they would be eating the flesh of one single dhātu.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Certain Mahayana sutras do present the Buddha as very vigorously and unreservedly denouncing the eating of meat, mainly on the grounds that such an act is linked to the spreading of fear amongst sentient beings (who can allegedly sense the odour of death that lingers about the meat-eater and who consequently fear for their own lives) and violates the bodhisattva's fundamental cultivation of compassion. Moreover, according to the Buddha in the Angulimaliya Sutra, since all beings share the same "Dhatu" (spiritual Principle or Essence) and are intimately related to one another, killing and eating other sentient creatures is tantamount to a form of self-killing and cannibalism. The sutras which inveigh against meat-eating include the Nirvana Sutra, the Shurangama Sutra, the Brahmajala Sutra, the Angulimaliya Sutra, the Mahamegha Sutra, and the Lankavatara Sutra, as well as the Buddha's comments on the negative karmic effects of meat consumption in the Karma Sutra. In the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which presents itself as the final elucidatory and definitive Mahayana teachings of the Buddha on the very eve of his death, the Buddha states that "the eating of meat extinguishes the seed of Great Kindness", adding that all and every kind of meat and fish consumption (even of animals found already dead) is prohibited by him. He specifically rejects the idea that monks who go out begging and receive meat from a donor should eat it: ". . . it should be rejected . . . I say that even meat, fish, game, dried hooves and scraps of meat left over by others constitutes an infraction . . . I teach the harm arising from meat-eating." The Buddha also predicts in this sutra that later monks will "hold spurious writings to be the authentic Dharma" and will concoct their own sutras and falsely claim that the Buddha allows the eating of meat, whereas he says he does not. A long passage in the Lankavatara Sutra shows the Buddha speaking out very forcefully against meat consumption and unequivocally in favor of vegetarianism, since the eating of the flesh of fellow sentient beings is said by him to be incompatible with the compassion that a Bodhisattva should strive to cultivate. This passage has been seen as questionable.<sup>[12]</sup> In a translation by D. T. Suzuki, a note is made that this section:

This chapter on meat-eating is another later addition to the text, which was probably done earlier than the Rāvaṇa chapter....It is quite likely that meat-eating was practised more or less among the earlier Buddhists, which was made a subject of severe criticism by their opponents. The Buddhists at the time of the Laṅkāvatāra did not like it, hence this addition in which an apologetic tone is noticeable.<sup>[12]</sup>

In several other Mahayana scriptures, too (e.g., the Mahayana jatakas), the Buddha is seen clearly to indicate that meat-eating is undesirable and karmically unwholesome.

Some suggest that the rise of monasteries in Mahayana tradition to be a contributing factor in the emphasis on vegetarianism. In the monastery, food was prepared specifically for monks. In this context, large quantities of meat would have been specifically prepared (killed) for monks. Henceforth, when monks from the Indian geographical sphere of

influence migrated to China from the year 65 CE on, they met followers who provided them with money instead of food. From those days onwards Chinese monastics, and others who came to inhabit northern countries, cultivated their own vegetable plots and bought food in the market.<sup>[13][14]</sup> This remains the dominant practice in China, Vietnam and part of Korean Mahayanan temples.

Mahayana lay Buddhists often eat vegetarian diets on the vegetarian dates (齋期). There are different arrangement of the dates, from several days to three months in each year, in some traditions, the celebration of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's birthday, enlightenment and leaving home days hold the highest importance to be vegetarian.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Vajrayana

Some Vajrayana practitioners both drink alcohol <sup>[16][17]</sup> and eat meat.<sup>[18][19]</sup> Many traditions of the Ganachakra which is a type of Panchamakara puja prescribed the offering and ingestion of meat and alcohol, although this practice is now often only a symbolic one, with no actual meat or alcohol ingested.

One of the most important tertöns of Tibet, Jigme Lingpa, wrote of his great compassion for animals:

Of all his merit-making, Jigme Lingpa was most proud of his feelings of compassion for animals; he says that this is the best part of his entire life story. He writes of his sorrow when he witnessed the butchering of animals by humans. He often bought and set free animals about to be slaughtered (a common Buddhist act). He 'changed the perception' of others, when he once caused his followers to save a female yak from being butchered, and he continually urged his disciples to forswear the killing of animals.<sup>[20][21]</sup>

In *The Life of Shabkar, the Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi*, Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol wrote:

Above all, you must constantly train your mind to be loving, compassionate, and filled with Bodhicitta. You must give up eating meat, for it is very wrong to eat the flesh of our parent sentient beings.<sup>[22]</sup>

The 14th Dalai Lama and other esteemed lamas invite their audiences to adopt vegetarianism when they can. When asked in recent years what he thinks of vegetarianism, the 14th Dalai Lama has said: "It is wonderful. We must absolutely promote vegetarianism."<sup>[23]</sup> The Dalai Lama tried becoming a vegetarian and promoted vegetarianism.<sup>[24]</sup> In 1999, it was published that the Dalai Lama would only be vegetarian every other day and partakes of meat regularly.<sup>[25]</sup> When he is in Dharamsala, he is vegetarian, but not necessarily when he is outside Dharamsala.<sup>[26]</sup> Paul McCartney has taken him to task for this and wrote to him to urge him to return to strict vegetarianism, but "[The Dalai Lama] replied [to me] saying that his doctors had told him he needed [meat], so I wrote back saying they were wrong."<sup>[27]</sup>

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche became vegetarian in 2008.<sup>[28]</sup>

Arjia Rinpoche became vegetarian in 1999.<sup>[29]</sup>

On 3 January 2007, one of the two 17th Karmapa, Urgyen Trinley Dorje, strongly urged vegetarianism upon his students, saying that generally, in his view, it was very important in the Mahayana not to eat meat and that even in Vajrayana students

should not eat meat:

There are many great masters and very great realized beings in India and there have been many great realized beings in Tibet also, but they are not saying, "I'm realized, therefore I can do anything; I can eat meat and drink alcohol." It's nothing like that. It should not be like that.

According to the Kagyupa school, we have to see what the great masters of the past, the past lamas of Kagyupas, did and said about eating meat. The Drikung Shakpa [sp?] Rinpoche, master of Drikungpa, said like this, "My students, whomever are eating or using meat and calling it tsokhor or tsok, then these people are completely deserting me and going against the dharma." I can't explain each of these things, but he said that anybody that is using meat and saying it is something good, this is completely against the dharma and against me and they completely have nothing to do with dharma. He said it very, very strongly.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Common practices

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### Theravada

In the modern world, attitudes toward vegetarianism vary by location. In Sri Lanka and the Theravada countries of South East Asia, monks are obliged by the vinaya to accept almost any food that is offered to them, including meat unless they suspect the meat was slaughtered specifically for them.

### Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese traditions

In China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and their respective diaspora communities monks and nuns are expected to abstain from meat and, traditionally, eggs and dairy, in addition to the fetid vegetables – traditionally garlic, *Allium chinense*, asafoetida, shallot, and *Allium victorialis* (victory onion or mountain leek), although in modern times this rule is often interpreted to include other vegetables of the onion genus, as well as coriander – this is called pure vegetarianism (純素, chún sù). Pure Vegetarianism is Indic in origin and is still practiced in India by some adherents of Dharmic religions such as Jainism and in the case of Hinduism, lacto-vegetarianism with the additional abstention of pungent or fetid vegetables. A minority of Buddhist lay believers are year-long vegetarians in the monastic way. Many lay followers followed monastic style vegetarianism on Lunar New Year's Eve, Saints days and ancestral feast days as well as the 1st and 15th day of the lunar calendar. Some lay followers also followed monastic style vegetarianism on the six-day, ten-day, Guan-yin (Avalokitesvara) vegetarian, etc., set lunar calendar schedule. Other Buddhist lay-followers also follow less stringent forms of vegetarianism. Most Buddhist lay-followers however are not vegetarians. Some Zhaijiao lay adherents also do not eat any meat.

### Japanese traditions

Japan initially received Chinese Buddhism in 6th century. In the 9th century, Emperor Saga made a decree prohibiting meat consumption except fish and birds. This remained the dietary habit of Japanese until the introduction of European dietary customs in the 19th century. Again around the 9th century, two Japanese monks (Kūkai and Saichō) introduced

Vajrayana Buddhism into Japan and this soon became the dominant Buddhism among the nobility. In particular, Saichō, who founded the Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism, reduced the number of vinaya code to 66. (Enkai 円戒) During the 12th century, a number of monks from Tendai sects founded new schools (Zen, Pure Land) and de-emphasised vegetarianism, Nichiren Buddhism today likewise de-emphasises vegetarianism. However, Nichiren himself practiced vegetarianism. Zen does tend generally to look favourably upon vegetarianism. The Shingon sect founded by Kūkai recommends vegetarianism and requires it at certain times, but it is not always strictly required for monks and nuns.

## Tibetan traditions

In Tibet, where vegetables have been historically very scarce, and the adopted vinaya was the Nikaya Sarvāstivāda, vegetarianism is very rare, although the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa, and other esteemed lamas invite their audiences to adopt vegetarianism whenever they can. Chatral Rinpoche in particular stated that anyone who wished to be his student must be vegetarian. Contradictory to the compassionate Tibetan Buddhist traditions in which a sanctity of life, both human and animal, is cherished, meat is often consumed as a form of sustenance due to lack of vegetation readily available. For example, Tibetan medicine emphasizes the necessity to acquire and sustain a balance between the bodily fluids of wind (rlung), phlegm (bad kan), and bile (mkhns), in which a meatless diet would disturb and eventually lead to fatigue. The 18th century Tibetan religious leader Jigmé Lingpa suggested that Tibetan Buddhists who wish to consume meat, but also do not want to sacrifice their religious beliefs, should recite a prayer over their plate of meat in order to purify it before it is consumed. This is said to create a favorable interconnection between the consumer and the animal, assisting it to attain a finer rebirth.<sup>[31]</sup>

## See also

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- Buddhist cuisine
- Jain vegetarianism
- Buddhist ethics
- Vegetarian cuisine
- Vegetarianism and religion

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3. Sen, Amulyachandra (1956). "Asoka's Edicts" ([http://asi.nic.in/asi\\_books/5282.pdf](http://asi.nic.in/asi_books/5282.pdf)) (PDF). *Archaeological Survey of India*. p. 64. Retrieved 2018-04-01. ""Formerly in the kitchen of the Beloved of the gods, King Priyadarsin [another name for Asoka], many hundreds of thousands of animals were killed everyday for the sake of curry. But now when this Dharma-rescript is written, only three animals are being killed (everyday) for the sake of curry, (viz.) two peacocks (and) one deer, (and) the deer again not always. Even these three animals shall not be killed in the future.""
4. Dharma Data: Vegetarianism (<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/dharmadata/fdd21.htm>)
5. Jiivakasutta (<http://www.vipassana.info/055-jivaka-e1.htm>), this is an undated (and not formally published) translation by Sister Uppalavanna (b., 1886 as Else Buchholtz), originally distributed on the internet by the Sri Lankan website "Metta.LK".
6. Vanijja Sutta: Business (Wrong Livelihood) (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/anguttara/an05-177.html>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20051119074312/http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/anguttara/an05-177.html>) November 19, 2005, at the Wayback Machine.
7. "Buddhism and Vegetarianism, The Rationale for the Buddha's Views on the Consumption of Meat" (<http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha069.htm#note4>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20131007043230/http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha069.htm>) 2013-10-07 at the Wayback Machine. by Dr V. A. Gunasekara" 'The rule of vegetarianism was the fifth of a list of rules which Devadatta had proposed to the Buddha. Devadatta was the founder of the tapasa movement in Buddhism and his special rules involved ascetic and austere practices (forest-dwelling, wearing only rags, etc). The Buddha rejected all the proposed revisions of Devadatta, and it was in this context that he reiterated the tikoiparisuddha rule. (On this see the author's Western Buddhism and a Theravada heterodoxy, BSQ Tracts on Buddhism'
8. Breiter, Paul (2004). *Venerable Father*. Paraview Special Editions. p. xii. ISBN 1-931044-81-3.
9. Phelps, Norm (2004). *The Great Compassion: Buddhism & Animal Rights*. New York: Lantern Books. p. 76. ISBN 1-59056-069-8. "monks would have to accept whatever they found in their begging bowls, including meat, provided that they had not seen, had not heard, and had no reason to suspect that the animal had been killed so that the meat could be given to them."



10. [Buddhism & Vegetarianism \(http://soulcurrymagazine.com/sc/buddhism-vegetarianism-non-vegetarianism.html\)](http://soulcurrymagazine.com/sc/buddhism-vegetarianism-non-vegetarianism.html) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20131021172541/http://soulcurrymagazine.com/sc/buddhism-vegetarianism-non-vegetarianism.html>) 2013-10-21 at the [Wayback Machine](#).
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18. [The Maitreya Sangha Way \(http://www.universaldharma.com/pages/dharma%20pages/msdway.html\)](http://www.universaldharma.com/pages/dharma%20pages/msdway.html) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110717163515/http://www.universaldharma.com/pages/dharma%20pages/msdway.html>) July 17, 2011, at the [Wayback Machine](#).
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## Further reading

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## External links

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- [Shabkar.org: Resources on Buddhism & Vegetarianism \(http://www.shabkar.org/\)](http://www.shabkar.org/) [Direct Link to High-Quality Downloadable Resources \(http://www.shabkar.org/vegetarianism/index.htm\)](#)
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