The Case of Vegetarianism
- A Buddhist Perspective-

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I

In the West, until thirty or even twenty years ago, vegetarianism was, by most people, regarded as nothing more than a fad. Thus explicitly Friedrich Nietzsche and Eduard von Hartmann (INGENSIEF [see fn, 7]: 96 and 97).

Many Christians would even have frowned upon ethically motivated vegetarians as a kind of heretics, basing themselves on the creed, going back to Classical Antiquity, that animals have been created just for the sake of being used or consumed by man.

To be sure, in Classical Antiquity there were also authors who

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1) Thus explicitly Friedrich Nietzsche and Eduard von Hartmann (INGENSIEF [see fn, 7]: 96 and 97).

advocated vegetarianism and respected animals as fellow beings, but they failed to influence the mainstream of Christianity.

Influential Christian thinkers like Origenes or Augustinus rather sided, in this point, with the other, decidedly anthropocentric strand, the most extreme advocates of which were the Stoicus.

In the Middle Ages not eating meat was one of the practices of the Cathars, and the refusal to eat meat or, for that matter, to kill a chicken was used by the mainstream church as a criterium for identifying and executing them.

There was a gradual re-emergence of vegetarianism and animal ethics form about the 18th century onward, but it is only during the last decades that the situation has changed markedly and that vegetarianism has, so to speak, become presentable in most Western countries.

Even on the country-side, most restaurants nowadays offer at least one or two vegetarian dishes, saving the poor vegetarian traveller from the uncomfortable choice between compromising or starving.

At the same time, many people have become interested in the ideas and ways of living of other cultures and religious traditions, including India and Buddhism.

Actually, as regards the attitude toward vegetarianism, the situation in India has been quite different from the West.

In India, the social reputation of vegetarianism has, for many centuries, been very high, most members of the highest caste, the Brahmans, being vegetarians, apart from other groups like the Jains.

In a historical perspective, however, things have not always been like this.

In Vedic times, animal sacrifice and consumption of meat was sanctioned practice, and a deliberate diet without meat was restricted to special ritual situations or periods.

In the texts of early Buddhism, we hear of butchers who slaughtered cattle, sheep and pigs as well as of hunters, fowlers and fishermen.

3) E.g., the Orphics, Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, Empedokles, and, later, Plutarch and Porphyry: see DIERAUER, op. cit.: 12-20: 26f.: 32-40. A key-word of Porphyry is τὸ ἀκαθάρτιον (non-injury), which corresponds to the Indian concept of ahimsa: cf. DIERAUER, op. cit.: 48f.

4) DIERAUER, op. cit.: 53-55.

5) DIERAUER, op. cit.: 29f.


7) Cf. Jans Werner INGENSIEP, "Vegetarismus und Tierehricht im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert - Wandel der Motive und Argumente der Wegbereiter", in: LINNEMANN & SCHORCHT (see fn. 2): 73-105. It is, however, worth noting that still around 1900 up to 90% or the members of vegetarian associations were motivated by reasons of health, not by ethical reasons (INGENSIEP, op. cit.: 88).

8) Indian influence can be observed already in the writing of some of the pioneers of modern Western vegetarianism, e.g. Thomas Tryon and John Oswald: INGENSIEP, op. cit. (see fn. 7): 79 and 81.


11) For goṛghāṭaka, cf. e.g., DN II 294 = MN I 58: I 244: I 364
At the same time, Buddhists and Jinas - monks as well as lay followers - were advised to practise non-injury (ahimsa), or abstention from killing any living, sentient being, including, of course, animals. Still, this did not necessarily imply abstention from meat-eating.

II.

1.1. In the Buddhist Vinayas, meat and fish are enumerated among the five kinds of basic food (bhogajanta), and at the same time they are also reckoned among the exquisite food-stuffs.

Thus, meat and fish are, as a matter of course, presupposed to be part of the human diet.

In addition, there is no indication that monks (or nuns, for that matter) were prohibited from accepting meat and fish.

The only restriction found in the Prātimokṣasūtra is that unless they were ill they were not allowed to expressly ask for meat and fish, just as for the other exquisite food-stuffs like milk or honey, because this would have detracted from their seriousness and ascetic decorum.

My impression is that originally monks had just to accept what they got on their alms-round. Since the original idea of living on alms seems to have been that ascetics just received the left-overs of the meals of lay people, the connection of meat-eating with the killing of the animal did not concern the ascetics.

The animal had been killed anyway.

This must have been an important point, still more so since at that time even plants were still regarded as living, sentient beings, so that in the case of vegetarian food, too, it was crucial not to have anything to do with the killing.

For the Buddhists, however, the idea of the sentence of plants seems to have receded into the background quite early.

1.2. The situation with regard to meat (including fish) appears to have become more complicated for Buddhist monks because (or when) living on alms (begged at random at the houses) became optional and accepting invitations allowed.

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16) Unless "fish" is separately mentioned, the word "meat" (mamsa) is to be understood as including fish, as at Mahābhāṣya II: 144, 17; see A. WEZLER, Bestimmung und Angabe der Funktion von Sekundär-Suffixen durch Pāṇini, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1975: 112 with n. 209. Cf. also Mālayarājāvāda-vinaya-saṃgraha (T vol. 24 no. 1458) 586f6f: "fish has not been separately mentioned [in the Mālayarājāvāda Vinaya list of the five kinds of basic food], because it is included in 'meat'" (鱼是肉無 故不別言).
It was then stipulated that monks were allowed to accept meat only if it was "pure from three angles" (trikoti-parisuddhā), i.e. if the monk had not seen nor heard that the animal had been killed particularly for him, nor had any reason for suspecting so.\(^{18}\)

According to the Jivakasutta of the Majjhimanikāya,\(^{19}\) this formal condition had to be supplemented on the spiritual level by the cultivation of the attitude of loving-kindness (mettā).

1.3. With regard to the consumption of meat, pious lay followers (upāsaka) probably have followed a similar pattern if possible, buying their meat from the market,\(^{20}\) but less pious lay people obviously were less squeamish, for we also hear of laymen who did slaughter animals for their own consumption or even for monks.\(^{21}\)

Actually, later sources expressly distinguish between lay followers who merely take refuge and others who in addition also take the five precepts.\(^{22}\)

\(^{17}\) Cf., e.g., Vin I 96.


\(^{19}\) MN no. 55 (I 368-371): no Chinese parallel is known to me.

\(^{20}\) Cf. Vin I 237 where the general Shā declaress that he would never kill an animal, not even for the sake of his life, and in order to entertain the Buddha he had sent a servant to procure \textit{pavatta-marpa}, i.e. meat already available: cf. also I 217 where the lay woman Suppiya does the same, though without success.

\(^{21}\) Cf., e.g., T vol. 22 no. 1425: 486a5f. Cf. also Vin I 192f, where the animal is, however, slaughtered for the sake of the skin.

\(^{22}\) Cf. E. LAMOTTE, \textit{Le traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse}, II

1.4. In addition, most lay followers probably abstained completely from certain kinds of meat that were \textit{taboo} or eaten only by the lowest classes (like human meat or, in India, dog’s meat), and monks, too, came to be prohibited from accepting such meat.\(^{23}\)

1.5. There were also tendencies to forbid monks the consumption of meat and fish altogether for ascetic reasons, but they were not successful in the earlier period.\(^{24}\)

In conservative Buddhism, it seems to be only in very specific situations, especially in the case of monks practising on charnel grounds (śmaśānika), that meat was entirely to be avoided, for the sake of self-protection from demons haunting these places and considered to be stimulated to aggression if the monk were to eat meat.\(^{25}\)

2.1. The position described before remains valid in early \textit{Mahāyāna} and even in a strong strand of later \textit{Mahāyāna}.\(^{26}\)

(Louvain 1949): 830 (note)

\(^{23}\) Vin I 218-220. For parallels see SHIMODA 1989 (see fn. 18): 2-7: 1997 (see ib.): 395-400

\(^{24}\) Vin II 196f. For parallels see SHIMODA 1989 (see fn. 18): 10-13: 1997 (see ib.): 404-407


\(^{26}\) In Bhāvya’s Madhyamakakhyāda (IX, 132-138), it is expressly defended against the vegetarian current in Brahmanic religion.
including Tibetan Buddhism.

However, around 400 A.D. at the latest, another, decidedly (lacto-)vegetarian strand emerges in a number of Mahāyāna-sūtras, especially the (Mahāyānist) Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra, the Angulimalāyaśūtra and the Lankāvatārasūtra.

These texts seem to follow a common Indian trend of the period, which would seem to have gained momentum by the participation, or even initiative, of Brahmanic circles.

As the Lankāvatāra puts: Since even the non-Buddhists don't eat meat, how can Buddhists do so, in view of the fact that the basic principle of their religion is compassion (karuṇā)?

2.2. The central argument of the Mahāparinirvāṇa (which seems to have been the earliest of the above-mentioned sources) is the incompatibility of meat-eating with loving-kindness (maitrī).

As the Mahāparinirvāṇa puts it, the meat-eater emits an aura of aggressiveness, terrifying all creatures around and thus forfeiting the chance of winning their confidence (as he should do as a bodhisattva).

Meat-eating is, according to the Lankāvatāra, the mode of life of predator animals and demons.

or, as Gyōnen (1240-1321) says: humans who do not give up meat-eating are not different from animals.

2.3. Since loving-kindness (maitrī) includes the aspect of affection as between close relatives and even parents and children - for a bodhisattva, all sentient beings are, or should become, like his only son - abstention from meat-eating is not just a matter of spirituality: If all sentient beings, including animals, are felt like close relatives, eating their meat is like cannibalism, even like eating the meat of one’s parents or children.

In the Angulimalya, this aspect is reinforced by the argument that in in the beginningless chain of rebirth every sentient has already been one’s own father, mother or close relative.

The Angulimalya proceeds still one step further: In view of the fact that all sentient beings, including animals, possessing the tathāgatagarbha, or Buddha nature, have the same true essence (dhātu) as oneself, their meat and one’s own meat are essentially one and the same. Thus, eating meat is in reality autophagy.

32) Cf. Lankāvatārasūtra 244:8; 246:3; 250:10f; 254:11f and 15f.
A somewhat different formulation of the same principle is found in Chinkai (珍海, 1093-1152):

"All sentient beings have Buddha nature, shall become Buddhas. How could one Buddha eat another Buddha!?”\(^{35}\)

A related argument is set forth by the Fan-wang-ching: Since in one or the other of one's former existences the elements which at present constitute the bodies of animals constituted one's own body, killing them or eating their meat means killing or eating one's own former body.\(^{36}\)

2.4. From the many arguments presented in the **Lankāvatāra** I shall mention only two.

a) The first argues that meat is impure.\(^{37}\)

This idea sounds very much like Brahmanic concern with purity,\(^{38}\) but it is also found in non-vegetarian Buddhist sources in the context of demonstrating the repulsiveness of food in general and of course exquisite food like meat in particular.\(^{39}\)

\(^{35}\) T vol. 70, no. 2306: 741a16f: 一切衆生悉有佛性皆當成佛. 妄容佛佛自相食.

\(^{36}\) T vol. 24 no. 1484: 1006b12f: 亦殺我故身. 一切地水 是我先身. 一切火風 是我本體. Reference to killing only is an abbreviation since in the preceding sentence, the text had spoken of killing and eating (殺而食).

\(^{37}\) Lankāvatāraśrutī 246.10f: *śūra-śoita-sambhavad api* ... *sukikatātan upadaya* ... *mamam abhaksayam*: cf. also 248.3-7.

\(^{38}\) The argument quoted in fn. 37 is in fact also found in the **Mahābhārata**, crit. ed. 13.117.12.

From this angle, it becomes intelligible that even the meat of animals that died a natural death is prohibited.\(^{40}\)

It would, of course, also be repulsive from the point of view that all animals are like close relatives.

In a text ascribed to the Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty - who declares to abstain from meat and even from milk products and honey\(^{41}\) - we even find an argument that is otherwise typical of Jaina sources\(^{42}\): a dead body becomes inhabited by innumerable small animals, visible and invisible ones, which are killed when the meat is cooked or roasted.\(^{43}\)

b) Much more important from an ethical point of view is, however, another argument of the Lankāvatāra (which, by the way, also has Brahmanic parallels)\(^{44}\): namely that the consumer is co-responsible for the killing since the consumption of meat inevitably kindles the supply of meat, and hence contributes to the killing of animals in order to satisfy the demand.\(^{45}\)


\(^{41}\) T vol. 12 no. 374: 386b2 = no.376: 869a11 = Peking-Kanjur vol. Tu-55a7: *sai ba’i shā’āng sprangs so*: Lankāvatāraśrutī 235.3f.


\(^{43}\) T vol. 52 no. 2103: 298a14.


\(^{45}\) Lankāvatāraśrutī 252.15-253.9: T vol. 16 no. 670 (Gupabhaddra):
For the *Lankāvatāra*, the co-responsibility of the consumer for the killing implies that he will suffer the same karmic consequences as the killer\(^{46}\) - a subject amply expanded, later on, in Chinese sources.\(^{47}\)

But the *Lankāvatāra* also seems to base abstention from meat-eating on the Golden Rule, by characterizing a bodhisattva as one for whom all beings are like himself (*sārvabhūtātmabhūta*).\(^{48}\)

A concise but explicit formulation is given by the Chinese master Kuan-ting (灌頂, 561-632):

"In analogy to oneself, one cannot want to eat others."\(^{49}\)

c) The important point of the co-responsibility of the consumer, raised by the *Lankāvatāra*, had largely been ignored or expressly discarded by the conservative strand.

It had, however, already been recognized, to a certain, by the emperor Aśoka, probably due to the immediate connection of large scale meat supply and slaughtering at the court.\(^{50}\)

There is also an interesting story in an early commentary (translated into Chinese around 300 A.D.) on a Dharmapada version.

In this story, the Buddha converts a hunter tribe to abandon hunting and adopt a vegetarian mode of life.\(^{51}\)

In this case, too, the immediate connection of meat-eating with killing proves unacceptable from the Buddhist point of view.

2.5. The vegetarian Mahāyāna texts discussed so far are well aware of the fact that their position disagrees with that of the conservative strand.

In order to legitimize their position, they interpret the partial permission of meat-eating in the Vinaya as a provisional step towards the complete prohibition.\(^{52}\)

And the *Lankāvatāra* expressly states that the Buddha himself never ate any meat.\(^{53}\)

3. In pre- and proto-esoteric text, abstention form meat-eating is sometimes required in connection with the application of magically powerful formulas, as an element of ascetic or rather ritual purity and perhaps also for the sake of self-protection.\(^{54}\)

\(^{46}\) Lankāvatārasūtra 257,6f (verse 9): cf. also verses 10-11 and 13-15, and p. 252,5-10.

\(^{47}\) E.g. T vol. 52 no. 2103: 296b7-297a6.

\(^{48}\) Lankāvatārasūtra 248,15: cf. 245,15 (read *bhūtātman upagantu*) and 250,10. The term - which is frequent in the Mahābhārata but also occurs in the Dasawoṣṭiya (4,9) and in Aśoka’s Jatacakamā (ed. VĀDIYA p. 1,19) - is expressly interpreted in the sense of the Golden Rule by Bodhiruci (T vol. 16 no. 671: 562b2-8).

\(^{49}\) T vol 38 no. 1767: 88a21f: 諸已不能而欲啖他.

\(^{50}\) Cf. Aśoka, Major Rock Edict I F-G, stating that slaughter at the court had been reduced from "many hundreds of thousands" of

animals to merely theree.

\(^{51}\) T vol 4 no. 211: 581b.

\(^{52}\) T vol. 12 no. 374: 386a17-20 and a29-b3 = no. 376 : 868a28-869b1 and 869a9-11 = Peking-Kanjur vol. Tu: 54b8-55a2 and 55a5-7: Lankāvatārasūtra 255,1-5 (I suggest that in 255,2 the original reading was nava udāśyakārtri - ignoring the sandhi -, corresponding to don ched kyi mu dgu in the Mahāparinirvāṇapātra [Paking-Kanjur vol. Tu: 55a1]: cf. T vol. 12: 868c29).

\(^{53}\) Lankāvatārasūtra 255,11-14: 256,2-6.
However, such formulas may also be used just in order to protect against the evil consequences of meat consumption, replacing or supplementing the cultivation of loving-kindness which had a similar function already in the *Jivakasutta* of early Buddhism.

In one strand of later esoteric Buddhism (Vajrayana), consumption of meat, and tabooed meat at that, was practised in a ritual context as a deliberate breaking of taboos, and in the context of compulsion with demonic beings in order to participate in their supranormal power.

4. In the Far East (in contrast to Tibetan Buddhism), the vegetarian strand was quite successful among monks and nuns as well as particularly pious lay people, but as is well-known in this audience abstention from meat was given up by Shinran and the Jodo Shin community as an aspect of futile clinging to precepts and reliance upon one’s own strength, and later on, after the Meiji restoration, by most Japanese Buddhist priests, adherence to a strictly vegetarian diet being nowadays, if I am correctly informed, more or less confined to special places like Zen training centres.

5. On the other hand, many Buddhists in the West (though by no means all of them) now tend to be vegetarians, an outstanding representative being the Zen master Philip KAPLEAU, whose essay *To Cherish All Life*, albeit problematic as regards his view of historical facts, is an impressive plea against meat-eating.

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54) Cf. e.g., the Hastikakasatasra (Peking–Kanjur vol. Tseu 115a1-4 = T vol. 17 no, 813: 781b11-19 and no, 814: 785a7-13) or the Tib. version of the Meghasasra (Peking–Kanjur vol. Ba: 194b5-7: vol. Dzu 292b6-23a2).


Nowadays, however, the creative adaptation should, in view of the modern sense of history, be self-confident enough to acknowledge historical facts even if they are not in harmony with contemporary requirements.

III. 1.

What then are the specific features of our present situation, as far as meat-eating is concerned?

1. In my opinion, the first point to be noted is the fact that the production of meat and fish is now (if we disregard hobby hunters and fishermen) to a large extent in the hands of specialists.

The overwhelming majority of the consumers have nothing to do with the killing. But it is almost exclusively for them, for the anonymous consumer, that the killing is done.

Hence, the respective argument of the Lankāvatāra is more to the point than ever. The consumer is as responsible for the killing as is the producer, if not even more.

2. Secondly, traditional sources are mainly concerned with the killing of the animals: only exceptionally as in the Jīvakasutta, the sources refer to the tortures they have to suffer on their way to the slaughter-place and by the act of

being slaughtered.

Nowaday, however, the tortures they undergo would seem to be much worse than their being killed, and accordingly the focus of modern Buddhists has often shifted from killing to torturing.

Philip KAPLEAU has given a moving description of the atrocities animals have to suffer not only during the process of being killed, but even more so on their transport to the slaughter houses or even during their whole life on account of modern intensive livestock-farming.60)

It is especially the battery-farming of chicken or drift-net fishing that may be called to mind in this connection.

Animals reared for consumption are nowadays no longer allowed to live, at least, a decent, happy life until they end up in being slaughtered but more often than not are, during their whole life, kept in utterly unnatural conditions, comparable only to concentration camps, just for supplying meat or eggs at low prices and yet with maximum profit for the producer.

To the best of my knowledge the Buddhist tradition has never assumed the counter-intuitive Cartesian position that animals are mere automatons without sentience, and at least in the case of the so-called higher animals (modern biologists, as far as I can see, no longer deny their being capable of feeling pain.

In a sense, their situation is even worse than that of humans sinc

60) Ph. KAPLEAU, To Cherish All Life (see fn. 58): 9-14 and 46-51 (whaling).
e they may not have the capacity of transcending actual pain, if only to a certain extent, by the awareness that it will, at least, not go on for ever.

Therefore, the dominant forms of modern animals husbandry and fishery would seem to be altogether incompatible with Buddhist animal ethics, based on the Golden Rule according to which all sentient beings just like oneself are afraid of death, torture and pain.

3. A third aspect is ecological damage.

To be sure, moderate cattle breeding may not normally be ecologically detrimental, nor would moderate hunting and fishing be (though these two are anyway problematic from a Buddhist point of view, especially if practised mainly for fun).

The ecological problem is rather the excessive into which things have grown, and the over-efficient methods employed—not only, to be sure, in the “production” of meat and fish but also, to make things still more complicated, in agriculture.

III. 2.

In my opinion, the specific circumstances of our present situation do require, also from a Buddhist point of view, a drastic change of the general attitude towards consumption, not only of fish and meat, but likewise of eggs and, at least from the ecological point of view, even vegetables.

Cruel forms of rearing, catching or slaughtering animals are, to my mind, incompatible with Buddhist ethics, and some species should perhaps not be killed and consumed at all, be it on account of their specific sensitivity or for ecological reasons, or both.

The consumer’s simplest instrument to counteract the modern atrocities perpetrated against animals is refusing to buy the respective products.

The most radical response would, of course, be to follow the vegetarian strand of Mahayana Buddhism and practise complete abstention form eating meat and fish.

But in order to counteract the specific problems of the contemporary situation it may not be necessary to go that far and taboo meat and fish completely.

Firstly, there may be situations in which consumption has no influence on the supply, e.g. if food that has been prepared anyway would otherwise be thrown away, just as in the case of the early Indian ascetics.

Secondly, there may be persons—like children or convalescents—for whom some meat or fish is indispensable from a dietary point of view.

Thirdly, in some areas, climatic or ecological conditions may force people to include animal protein in their diet and live on

61) Cf. Peter HARVEY, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, Cambridge University Press 2000: 161, suggesting that the danger of negative attachment to meat “is best dealt with by not refusing meat if one is someone’s guest.” This would also make sense from the point of view of the consumption argument, in cases where on has no choice.
livestock or fish, at least to a certain extent.

Though the situation in such areas may nowadays be mitigated by food import, the transport involved creates its own ecological problems.

Hence, in such areas a general taboo on meat and fish it may not be practicable, at least not for everybody.

It may even be meaningful to support, by buying their products, such producers as practise appropriate keeping of animals or ecologically compatible fishing against those who do not.

In such a context, the early Buddhist attitude which allows consumption of fish and meat under certain conditions makes more sense.

Yet, it has the shortcoming that it does not do justice to the indirect responsibility of the consumer because of the interrelation of supply and demand.

For while the consumer who just buys the meat is exonerated, the producers who do the killing (fisherman, butchers, etc.) are deprecated and socially discriminated.

In this regard, the awareness of the Lankavatāra that the consumer shares the evil with the producer is more honest.

Hence, as consumers all of us are responsible.

As I understand the early Buddhist precept of not taking life, it was, originally, more like an ideal: in the case of lay followers, at least, it was up to each individual to decide to what extent he or she was in a position and ready to keep to it.

This would seem to be appropriate in the case of meat-eating as well.

Even a modest reduction of one's consumption contributes to a reduction of the supply.62)

But what today may be more important is to control one's consumption of meat and fish (but also of eggs and even milk-products63)64) in such a way that one does not, at least, support the cruel and ecologically pernicious forms of animal rearing or catching.

Not because this might have any effect on one's own salvation, but for the sake of the animals themselves as sentient fellow creatures, or for the sake of the natural diversity of the biosphere, if this is indeed a value for Buddhists.

Perhaps the most important function of religion is to influence human beings in such a way that they become less unbearable not only for one another but also other creatures, and for this world as a whole.

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62) The German Association for Nutrition recommends to eat not more than 150g of meat and 50g of sausage per week. (LINNEMANN & SCHORCHT 2001 [see fn. 2]: 112).
63) It may even be argued that a high level of consumption of milk and milk products without consumption of meat/beef might entail that cattle would be sold abroad and thus suffer the additional torture of transport and perhaps even brutal forms of slaughter (Eckard WENDT in: LINNEMANN & SCHORCHT 2001 [see fn. 2]: 144).
64) And, at least from the ecological point of view, even vegetables - and other consumer goods as well.