

# Vegetarianism



Bodhipaksa

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# About the Author

Bodhipaksa was born Graeme Stephen in Dundee, Scotland, in 1961. He has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1982, and became a member of the Western Buddhist Order in 1993. He has been teaching meditation and Buddhism since before his ordination, and taught for two years in the University of Montana's religious studies program. While at the University of Montana, he developed approaches to teaching meditation using the multimedia capabilities of the internet, and now runs a website, Wildmind, at [www.wildmind.org](http://www.wildmind.org), which offers online meditation courses as well as news, book reviews, and articles on Buddhist meditation. Wildmind also publishes guided meditation CDs.

Previous publications include *Wildmind* (revised edition, Windhorse Publications, 2009) a step-by-step guide to meditation, and *Reinventing the Wheel*, - a chapter in *Spiritual Goods: Faith Traditions and the Practice of Business* (Philosophy Documentation Center, Virginia, 2001), and overview of Buddhist business ethics. Bodhipaksa holds an interdisciplinary Master's degree in Buddhism and business studies.

Bodhipaksa lives with his wife, Shrijnana, and their two children, in New Hampshire, where he sometimes teaches at Aryaloka Buddhist Center. Bodhipaksa has a long-standing interest in teaching meditation and Buddhism to prison inmates, and leads weekly classes at the State Prison for Men in Concord, New Hampshire.



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# Preface

WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I AM A BUDDHIST, that my name is a Buddhist name given to me at my ordination, I meet many responses: 'You don't look like a Buddhist,' 'What are you allowed to do?' and, 'That's all very well in an ideal world but what about the real world?' as though to live a Buddhist life one would need to look and dress in a particular way (with shaved head and robe?), have a restricted lifestyle imposed by some authority, or be living out a pleasant but irrelevant and unrealistic dream. That is not the kind of life I lead, nor is it the life of those many Buddhists with whom I have been practising for the last thirty years, nor would we choose to live such a life. In fact some aspects of such a life would be anathema to the practice of Buddhism.

So the practice of Buddhism does not necessitate one particular lifestyle - in which case, why this book? The importance of living a Buddhist life lies in the fact that the practice of Buddhism is for the whole person. It concerns our actions of body, speech, and mind - no aspect of our life is exempt. The teaching of the Buddha has been summed up in a single phrase, 'actions have consequences.' Our thoughts, words, and deeds all have their effect in the world, for good or ill, creating either happiness or suffering.

Unskilful actions - those proceeding from states of mind based on craving, ill will, and ignorance - create suffering. Skilful actions create happiness and proceed from states of mind based on generosity, love, and wisdom. To be able to

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recognize and distinguish mental states we need to be aware. So a Buddhist lives, or attempts to live, with awareness, and imbues, or tries to imbue, every area of life with these qualities of generosity, love, and wisdom. It is not an easy task but it is one that gives rise to many benefits.

Buddhist practices - of meditation, ritual, and study of the Dharma (the Buddha's teaching) - are undertaken in order to develop greater awareness and kindness, leading ultimately to wisdom and compassion. In addition, our everyday activities provide infinite opportunities to practise and to change ourselves. In this way we guide and direct the lives we create, both individually and collectively. With consistent effort we can reach the point of Insight, direct experience of 'things as they really are', at which point that process of change becomes an ongoing momentum.

Vegetarianism is a good start because food is so basic to our lives. We all eat. In the West, most of us have a great deal of choice in what we eat. What we choose to eat can also be challenging as we can be very attached to certain foods, either out of habit or out of desire. I was raised on the traditional 'meat and two veg' of the average British family. Influenced by the hippie ethos of my generation I became more inclined towards vegetarian food until two experiences finally convinced me to adopt a wholly vegetarian diet. One was going 'back to the land' on a self-sufficient farm in Ireland, where we lived off the vegetarian produce that we grew. Following this, I travelled in India for a year and was very influenced by seeing the majority, rather than the minority, of the population living by tradition or choice on a vegetarian diet. Since that time, forty years ago, I have been healthily and happily vegetarian.

Coming into contact with Buddhism ten years later gave me a wider and more profound context within which to

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affirm my decision. The first of the five Buddhist precepts observed throughout the Buddhist world is, 'I undertake the training principle of abstaining from harming living beings.' Positively formulated, this can be expressed as a commitment to act with loving kindness. This precept embraces all living beings in its scope, those of the human realm as well as animals, birds, and creatures of the sea. As well as abjuring the killing or harming of these beings, it also means affirming, encouraging, and supporting all life in whatever form. Adopting a vegetarian diet is a clear and immediate way of practising and demonstrating this affirmation of life. And if anyone needed further encouragement, there is also the evidence that raising cattle for meat is extremely wasteful of both land and food resources, as well as giving rise to an estimated twenty percent of the methane gas produced worldwide - an enormous contribution to global warming. A shift to vegetarianism would go a long way towards feeding the hungry and reducing the damaging effect of greenhouse gases.

Bodhipaksa, having qualified as a veterinary surgeon prior to becoming a member of the Western Buddhist Order, has the advantage of being able to examine and write about vegetarianism from both these perspectives. His introduction to the subject lays bare the sufferings inflicted on animals for the sake of human consumption. He questions why we are prepared so readily to inflict this suffering, looks at the views and myths behind this relationship of human beings and animals, and examines the ethical conflict that many people experience between their conscience and their actions in this area. Contrasted with this is the Buddhist perspective - that all life is interconnected and that the more our actions reflect this truth and the more we live in accord with reality, the greater will be our sense of harmony and happiness.

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We often wish to change the world. Buddhism teaches that we need to start by changing ourselves - but it also demonstrates how, through the cumulative effect of the actions of individuals, we can shape the world in which we live. Through his discussion of vegetarianism, Bodhipaksa shows us how the Buddha's teaching had a profound effect on the habits of almost a third of the world's population with the spread of vegetarianism. In so doing, he demonstrates that by living a life imbued with Buddhist values, we too can be an active force for radical change in the world.

Maitreyi  
Tiratanaloka  
Wales  
August 2009

# Introduction

I'D NEVER CONSIDERED BEING A VEGETARIAN BEFORE - but then I'd never seen an animal being slaughtered, either. My class of fellow veterinary students was touring an abattoir in the third year of our training, and we were being shown how animals are killed. The pig chosen for slaughter was shot in the head with a captive-bolt pistol, had its throat sliced with a knife, and died in a pool of blood on a white tiled floor. It took only a few seconds.

Many people - millions, even - have given up meat in recent years. Vegetarians are no longer a tiny minority but make up a significant portion of the population of the UK. In other parts of the Western world we see the same trend taking place. This represents a major change in eating habits in the last half-century, and a change in our ethical relations with the animal world. As with most changes, there has been some confusion. Some advertisements claim that meat is essential for health and others that it kills us. Some advertisements tell us we need 'Meat to Live'; others that 'Meat is Murder'.

It can be hard to take an objective look at the subject of meat-eating. Even thinking about changing a long-held habit - and we may have been eating meat since before we could walk - can be difficult. Our friends might eat meat and see no problem in what they do, and it is not easy to be different from those we are close to. On the other hand the issue of animal suffering can stir strong emotions. This can be useful, but it can also make it harder to be clear about the issues

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involved. Sometimes it seems easier not to think about the subject at all! But if you've picked up this book then presumably vegetarianism is something you're looking into, and even thinking of taking up yourself.

Can Buddhism help in sorting out the ethical issues involved? Or is the picture in the Buddhist world just as confused - perhaps even more so? At the opening of a new Tibetan temple in the UK, the tables were laden with chicken and other meats for the assembled guests. In a Chinese monastery, the monks are strictly vegetarian, and the laity eat vegetarian food on special occasions. His Holiness the Dalai Lama eats meat, although other Buddhists think that eating flesh is a breach of the most fundamental rule of Buddhist ethics.

It is my belief that Buddhist ethics does support the adoption of a vegetarian, even vegan, diet, and this book aims to encourage those who eat meat to become vegetarian. I hope it will be of particular interest to those who are starting to take Buddhism seriously and are considering the implications that Buddhist principles may have for their lives. I also hope it has something to offer those who may not consider themselves Buddhists but who want to learn what perspectives Buddhist ethics has to offer. If long-established Buddhists, vegetarian or not, find any benefit from reading these words, that is all to the good.

Buddhism encourages us to develop a deeper and more compassionate relationship with the world in which we live. Ideally - Buddhism teaches - we should strive to take responsibility for the effects of our actions so that our lives result in as little harm as possible, and we do as much good as we can. Of course, if we don't know the results of our actions, it is hard, if not impossible, to take responsibility in this way. Particularly in the West we are 'protected' from such an awareness where

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meat-eating is concerned, because those who produce meat know that many of us would be reluctant to eat it if we knew the unpleasant details of its production.

As a step in learning more about the effects of our actions, we'll take a trip down to the farm and the slaughterhouse to see how animals live and die. This will help us to make a more informed choice about whether we want to support those activities. We will investigate the basis of Buddhist ethics, and how it relates to meat-eating. We'll look at some of the most commonly asked questions that arise in regard to becoming vegetarian, and consider whether vegetarianism is healthy. We'll also look at some of the positive consequences of adopting a vegetarian diet - for ourselves and for the planet we inhabit. We will also examine whether the Buddha ate meat, and if he did, whether this provides grounds for us doing so.

But first, to fundamentals....

