

A Healthy Debate

In our Feb/Mar 2007 feature, "The Case for Not Eating Our Friends," *Mandala* presented a variety of arguments in favor of vegetarianism. Since then, we've witnessed something wonderful: the continuation of discussion – online, in print, and at the water cooler. Two renowned teachers in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Ven. Sangye Khadro, author of the best-selling book *How to Meditate*, and Ven. Robina Courtin, founder of Liberation Prison Project and former Editor of *Mandala*, offer their thoughts on this controversial issue within Buddhist circles ...



A fruit stall in Barcelona, Spain.

“What did the Buddha say about Vegetarianism?”

By Ven. Sangye Khadro

There is a lot of debate within Buddhism about this issue. There are some Buddhists who are vegetarian (no meat or fish), and some who are vegans (no animal products at all, including dairy products and eggs). And there are some Buddhists who eat meat.

What did the Buddha himself say about eating meat? Well, it seems that he said different things at different times. This may sound like he contradicted himself, but the Tibetans say that the Buddha was a very skillful teacher who understood the minds and needs of his listeners and would teach them accordingly. So to some, the Buddha said it was okay to eat meat, provided that they did not kill the animal themselves, or order it to be killed. But to others, the Buddha said that if you are a follower of the bodhisattva path, and truly compassionate, you should not eat meat, and spoke of the harmful consequences of doing so.

In fact, there is an entire chapter in the *Lankavatara Sutra* (a Mahayana sutra which is translated into English) in which the Buddha spoke very strongly against meat-eating.

So as I understand it, the Buddha did not actually forbid his followers to eat meat, but left it up to each person to decide this issue for him/herself. In one way, that was compassionate of the Buddha, because some people live in places and conditions where it would be extremely difficult to abstain from meat, and if they had to be vegetarian in order to be Buddhist, they probably wouldn't be able to do it.

Also, some people are unable to be strictly vegetarian because of their physical make-up or their health. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is an example of this. He tried to be vegetarian, but his health suffered and his doctors advised him to eat meat. But I'm sure he eats as little as possible, because in his teachings he often encourages people (especially the Tibetans who are quite fond of meat) to either give up or at least cut down on the consumption of meat. His advice seems to be working, because I have

noticed in the last few years an increase in the number of Tibetans who have given up meat, as well as Tibetan-run organizations promoting vegetarianism. I even heard that Sera Monastery in the south of India is a meat-free zone! If your health is such that you can get by without meat, or with less meat, and if there are alternatives in the place in which you live, then it might be good to consider vegetarianism. Here are some points to ponder in favor of vegetarianism that are based on the book *Drops of Nectar* by the Indian Hindu teacher, H.H. Swami Chidanand Saraswati:

1) Non-violence: Animals suffer when they are killed, and also in the way they are treated when they are raised for meat. We can get all the protein, calories, vitamins, and minerals we need from non-meat products, so there's no need to inflict such suffering on other beings.

2) Integrity and honesty: Other people kill the animal for us, clean up the meat and make it look nice, and give it another name, e.g. “hamburger,” and we eat it without thinking about what it really is – a part of a once living, breathing creature. Is this not deceptive? If we actually witnessed the animal being killed and cut up, we would probably have very different feelings about eating meat. Also, the people who kill the animals create negative karma for which they will suffer in the future, and by buying and eating meat, we are partly responsible for that.

3) The taste of fear: When an animal is about to be killed, it is terrified and its body is flooded with stress hormones which remain in the animal's tissues. Then when we eat their meat our body also becomes filled with these hormones. Nowadays, people eat more meat than in the past, and this may account for why people are more stressful and violent.

4) Ecology and Economics: Using land to grow grain for cows that will be slaughtered for meat is less efficient than using that same land to grow grain such as wheat for people to eat – fewer people will be fed, more will be hungry. Thich Nhat Hahn, in his book, *Transformation and Healing*, quotes Charles Perrault, an econo-



Ven. Sangye Khadro

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mist at the University of Paris: “If the Western world were to consume 50% less alcohol and meat, the problem of starvation in the world could be solved.”

For those concerned about the environment, it might be interesting to know that for every hamburger, 55 sq. ft. of rainforest is destroyed, and 500 lbs of carbon dioxide (one of the major causes of global warming) is released into the air. Water is another precious and limited resource, and it takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce 1 lb of meat, whereas only 25 gallons are required for 1 lb of bread. So we would use 100 times less water if we ate wheat instead of meat.¹

5) Health: People who eat meat-based diets have two to twenty times higher rates of death from heart disease and cancer than vegetarians.² Also, animals are loaded with antibiotics and hormones which we ingest when we eat their meat. This causes us to become immune to antibiotics (so they no longer work for us when we need them), and to have an excess of hormones in our bodies, which can lead to disease.

Does that mean that you should feel guilty if you need to eat meat or fish? No, not at all, that would be pointless. Instead, you can be mindful that such food was once a part of a sentient being (or came from several sentient beings), who did not want to lose its life, and make prayers that that being will attain happiness and liberation from suffering as quickly as possible. Dedicate the energy you derive from that food toward working for enlightenment in order to be able to help all beings attain freedom and enlightenment for themselves.

Ven. Sangye Khadro (Kathleen McDonald) was ordained as a Buddhist nun at Kopan Monastery, Nepal, in 1974. At the request of her teachers, Ven. Khadro began teaching in 1979 and since then has taught in many countries around the world, most recently at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore, for 11 years. Ven. Khadro also currently serves as the teacher of “Module Two: How to Meditate” in FPMT’s Discovering Buddhism educational series. Her book is a best-selling book of Wisdom Publications, now in its second edition after seventeen printings of the first edition.

“Is eating meat the same as killing?”

By Ven. Robina Courtin

It’s excellent to be a vegetarian, of course it is: certainly for one’s own sake, at least. I remember hearing Lati Rinpoche say at a teaching at Vajrapani Institute in California a few years ago: “It’s possible that eating meat can lessen our compassion.” That really stuck with me.

But don’t think that by not eating meat we stop harming sentient beings; of course we don’t. We are harming them all the time – just by breathing, walking, driving.

There is not an atom of space where you won’t find sentient beings. And look at the beings that die as a result of planting, growing, harvesting, and selling vegetables. We worry about hurting chickens and fish, but we usually never think about the billions of insects that die, their bodies trampled on, cut up, smashed against windscreens. Our very presence on this earth harms others; this world we live in is in the nature of suffering.

As for whether eating meat is the same as killing – that’s a common question. The main factor in the doing of any action is the intention to do it (and then, of course, the motivation behind the intention). “Intention,” the mind engaging in the doing or thinking or saying of something, is virtually synonymous with the word “karma,” or “action.” Clearly, when we eat meat which has been offered to us or even bought by ourselves at the supermarket, there is no intention on our part to kill a sentient being.

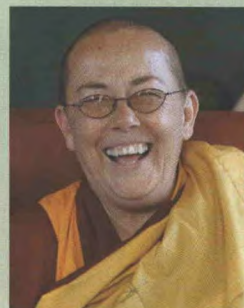
I remember a discussion with Geshe Dawa in Sydney years ago. We were sitting upstairs at Vajrayana Institute. He pointed to the window across the room and said, “If you accidentally knock over the plant on the window sill and it falls out and hits someone on the head, killing them, you could argue that you create no karma at all.” This is because there was no intention.

We can’t say there is not some karmic result from eating meat – or killing a human being accidentally – but it’s not the same action as intentionally killing.

Meanwhile, if we do eat meat, there are practical things we can do for the sake of the animal – and for our own sake. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, “It’s given its life for us; the least we can do is do something for it.” Rinpoche says that simply saying a mantra and then blowing on the meat – “Even a bone that is a thousand years old” – blesses the consciousness that once occupied that flesh. Any mantra will do. Saying it blesses our breath, and blowing on the meat, in turn, blesses the being, no matter where it is now. And we ourselves create some virtue, which lessens our attachment to the meat. ☸

Ven. Robina Courtin was ordained as a nun by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1978. She currently directs FPMT’s Liberation Prison Project which serves thousands of prisoners in the U.S.A., Australia, Spain, Mexico, and the U.K. She travels the world teaching Buddhism to students of all ages and levels. Ven. Robina also currently serves as the teacher of “Module Three: Presenting the Path” in FPMT’s Discovering Buddhism educational series.

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¹ Statistics are pulled directly from *Drops of Nectar: Timeless Wisdom for Everyday Living*, Wisdom Tree: 2007.

² Statistics from *Drops of Nectar*.