

Vegetarianism in Ancient India



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Miscellaneous Essays

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Vegetarianism is the practice of having a meat-free diet. There are different types of vegetarianism, e.g. lacto-vegetarians will eat dairy products but not eggs, and vegans will eat no products derived from animals. The first evidence for any type of vegetarianism comes from ancient Greece and India. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras (570-495 BCE) advocated vegetarianism and at around the same time in India, Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was also advocating vegetarianism. Despite popular perceptions to the contrary, the Buddha, a younger contemporary of Mahavira, was not a vegetarian and did not explicitly insist on its practice in any of his teachings.

Many arguments are used to support vegetarianism; the health argument (a meat diet causes various diseases), the biological argument (humans are not naturally carnivorous), the economic argument (animal husbandry is an inefficient form of food production), and the humane argument (eating meat requires killing animals which is cruel). Some of these arguments are rather weak, others less so. But from the point of view of Buddhist ethics the most important one is the last one. Does the Pali Tipitaka, the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings, contain anything suggesting that Buddhists should be vegetarian?

There is no place in either the Sutta, the Vinaya or the Abhidhamma Pitaka where the Buddha says his disciples, monastic or lay, should avoid eating meat. Supporters of Buddhist vegetarianism like Philip Kapleau Roshi (*To Cherish All Life*, 1986) have claimed that the Buddha did teach vegetarianism but that all references to it were deleted from the sacred scriptures by meat-loving monks in later centuries. There is no evidence whatsoever of this having been done and this argument can be dismissed out of hand.

There are several places in the scriptures where the Buddha is described as having eaten meat. The Anguttara Nikaya mentions that he was once served *sukara mamsa* with jujube fruit. This term can be translated with certainty as *sukara* = pig or boar, *mamsa* = meat or flesh (A.II,49). In another place it distinctly says that a man sent his servant to the market to buy meat so it could be prepared and served to the Buddha (A.IV,187). Yet another text mentions in passing that a group of people "boiled porridge and rice, made soup and minced meat" (*mamsani kottenti*) while preparing a feast for the Buddha and his monks (Vin.I, 239). On another occasion some men slaughtered a cow, cooked it and then one of them gave "the best cuts of the cooked meat" (*mamse pakke varamamsani*) to a nun who subsequently offered it to the Buddha (Vin.III,208). These and other references to the Buddha eating meat are incidental and only mentioned as an aside.

One of the criticisms the Jains directed towards the Buddha was that he ate meat. "Many Jains went through the town, through the main roads and side streets, the alleys and the lanes, waving their arms and shouting, 'General Siha has this very day slaughtered a large creature to feed it to the monk Gotama and he is going to eat it knowing that it was slaughtered specifically for him'." (A.IV,187). In this incident the Jains were trying to discredit or embarrass the Buddha for eating meat, which suggests that there was a feeling in India at the time that monks at least should be vegetarian. But this idea could have only been in its infancy because the Buddha became widely respected despite the Jain criticism of him on this issue. And he was not the only one. We read of a particular ascetic who was highly esteemed by the people of Vesali despite having taken a vow to consume only meat and alcohol (D.III,9).

One of several Jain objections to eating meat and the brahmanical idea that it was acceptable to eat certain types of meat, was that it makes one unclean, not just physically unclean but ritually or spiritually unclean too. Such ideas are very widespread even today and many religions teach that certain foods have an impurity apart from any actual dirt or bacteria they may contain. Since its very beginning Buddhism has rejected the idea of ritual impurity, maintaining that it is immoral thought, speech and actions that make one impure. The Amagandha Sutta says; "Being rough, devoid of kindness, back-biting, careless of friends, heartless, arrogant, mean, sharing with no one, this is impure food, not the eating of meat. To be immoral,

refuse to repay one's debts, betray others, cheat in business and create divisions amongst people, this is impure food, not the eating of meat. To kill living beings, steal, harm others, be immoral, cruel, hard and disrespectful, this is impure food, not the eating of meat." (Sn.244-6).

There are several places in the Vinaya, the rules for Buddhist monks and nuns, where eating meat is mentioned or implied, for example where it says particular types of meat such as lion, snake and hyena, should not be consumed, implying that other types can be (Vin.I,218-8). It recommends meat broth as a medicine (Vin.I,206). In the section on medicine in the Vinaya it says that monks are allowed to take the oil, fat and tallow of fish, crocodiles, pigs, bears and other animals for medicinal reasons (Vin.I,200). Monks were even allowed to eat raw meat and drink blood (Vin.I,202-3), which apparently was believed to cure possession by evil spirits.

However, it would seem that the first evidence of a move by Buddhist towards vegetarianism also comes from the Vinaya. Most scholars agree that much of the Vinaya dates from some time after the Buddha so some of the things it says may not necessarily reflect what was believed or done during his time. In the Vinaya, Devadatta is said to have demanded that vegetarianism be made compulsory for monks and nuns. "For as long as life lasts, let them not eat fish or meat (*maccha mamsam*). Whoever does so would be stained by a fault" (Vin.II,197). The Buddha is depicted as refusing to make this a rule. Devadatta is always portrayed in Buddhist literature as a villain. This story suggests that within perhaps a century of the Buddha's passing some monks were advocating vegetarianism although the Sangha as a whole was against it being made compulsory. The Vinaya also mentions what were called *maghata disva*, certain days of the month when animals were not slaughtered and meat was not available in the markets (Vin.I,217). The Jataka likewise mentions *maghata disva* and adds that they would be announced by the beat of a drum (Ja. IV,115). Were these non-killing days a result of a general unease about killing animals, or due to the influence of Buddhism, or of Jainism? We don't know.

After this the next evidence of a Buddhist move towards vegetarianism comes from the edicts of the emperor Asoka Maurya. In an edict issued in 257 BCE he said; "Formerly, in the kitchen of the king, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer, are killed and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed." This edict seems to reflect well the early Buddhist attitude to vegetarianism – it is a good thing, so we cut down our consumption of meat and in time we'll get around to phasing it out. Later, in 243 BCE, Asoka issued another edict banning the slaughter, branding and castrating of domestic animals on certain days of each month. In this same edict he also announced a ban on the hunting of certain wild animals and the setting up of forest reserves where no hunting was to be allowed. After this we get no evidence of Buddhist vegetarianism for several centuries.

A Jain work, the *Suyagada* (2nd century CE), has this interesting though spurious critique of the Buddhist idea that only intentional actions (*cetana*) create kamma and therefore unintentionally eating meat, even human flesh, would be acceptable. "If a savage puts a man on a spit and roasts him, mistaking him for something else, he would not be guilty of murder. In fact, the meat would be fit for the Buddha to feast on." (Suy.2,6,27). This critique of course would only been made because Buddhists were eating meat.

It is commonly assumed that early Buddhism did not teach vegetarianism while Mahayana did. However, this is a perception that needs to be examined more closely. Of the hundreds of Mahayana *sutras* only a handful advocate vegetarianism, the main ones being the *Hastikaksya Sutra*, *Mahamega Sutra*, *Angulimaliya Sutra*, *Nirvana Sutra*, the *Brahmajala Sutra* and the *Lankavatara Sutra*. It is not easy to date any of these *sutras* but all of them were probably composed after the 2nd century CE with parts being added in later centuries. Of these *sutras* the one that most strongly advocates vegetarianism is the *Lankavatara Sutra*. It offers a series of arguments in favor of vegetarianism, some of them sound, others rather puerile, for example, that you will emit a bad odor if you eat meat. However, the vehemence with which these

arguments are presented suggests that many Buddhists at that time were not vegetarian. It is only necessary to argue vigorously against something when there are those who disagree with or oppose it. It is also interesting to point out that while the *Nirvana Sutra* condemns meat eating it also says that one is justified in killing robbers in order to protect monastic property, a weird contradiction of the type still found in the thinking of some strong proponents of vegetarianism.

When the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (602–664) was in India he made careful and extensive notes on the beliefs and practices of Indian Buddhists but makes no mention of them being vegetarian. He noted that people ate meat and that the most important thing was not whether one was vegetarian or not but what kind of meat one ate. Those who ate beef or animals considered impure (dogs, monkeys, pigs, donkeys) were treated as outcasts. About a century after Xuanzang another Chinese monk, Yijing, stayed in India for several decades and wrote a detailed account of Indian Buddhist monastic rules and regulations. He too made no mention of vegetarianism. The literature of Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism, dating from the 7th century CE, often advocates a meat diet. Tantric practitioners even offered meat to the various deities they worshipped. Both Hindu and Buddhist tantras even taught what was called the Five Ms (*pancamakara*), rituals that could include consuming alcohol, eating meat, fish, parched grain, and having sex.

It is clear from all this that some Indian Buddhists were vegetarian while others, probably the majority, were not. During the 10th century Jains were still attacking Buddhists for eating meat. In his *Darsanasara*, written around this time, Devasena launched a scathing attack on Buddhist monks for considering anything placed in their begging bowls to be pure, even meat (*Prakrit Sahitya Ka Itihas* p.319). Two hundred years later another Jain writer, Hemacandra, denounced Buddhist monks as gluttons incapable of genuine austerity because they made no distinction between lawful and unlawful food. By “unlawful food” he meant meat.

What about Indian society in general? The evidence shows that from its very beginning Jainism was strongly vegetarian and has been so ever since. There is no evidence that Brahmanism, the main religion during the Buddha’s time, taught vegetarianism. Vedic sacrifices in which animals were slaughtered were still being practiced and are frequently mentioned in the Tipitaka (e.g. A.I,66; II,42; IV,41; etc.). It records one particular sacrifice conducted by a brahman named Uggatasarira during which “five hundred bulls, five hundred steers and numerous heifers, goats and rams were brought to the sacrificial post for slaughter” (A.IV,41). The meat of sacrificed animals was eaten by the officiating priests afterward.

The *Arthashastra* (3rd–2nd century BCE) says that the government should appoint a superintendent of slaughterhouses, probably to make sure they were efficiently run. It also recommends that anyone killing a calf, bull or milch cow be fined 50 *panas*, not because this was considered cruel but because it was economically undesirable (see As. II,26-11). In his *Mahabhasya* the grammarian Patanjali gave words for those who particularly relished meat (*mamsasilah*) and another for those who ate only vegetables (*sakabhojin*), indicating that at that time (2nd/1st cent. BCE) at least some people were vegetarian. The *Manusmṛti*, the most authoritative Hindu law book (2nd century BCE – 2nd century CE), mentions that meat is a suitable offering for the ancestors, that the sacred scriptures should not be recited immediately after eating meat, and that during times of hardship it is even acceptable to eat dog meat, usually thought of as exceptionally impure. One whole section of the *Manusmṛti* (V,27-57) lays down the rules concerning the procuring, preparing and consuming of fish and flesh. The justification for meat-eating is summed up in these words: “The eater is not defiled by eating living beings suitable for eating, even if he eats them day after day. For the Creator himself made both the eater and the living beings to eat.” The *Kama Sutra* (3rd cent. CE) points out that alcohol and dog meat increase a man’s virility but then adds, somewhat halfheartedly, that a circumspect man would nonetheless take neither because they are impure. It also gives recipes for aphrodisiacs, many of them including animal flesh and organs. So once again we have an ambiguous attitude towards consuming meat.

Both the two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* often refer to eating meat as normal and uncontroversial, as indeed it was. In his detailed study of everyday life as depicted in the *Ramayana* Ananda Guruge writes; “The Aryans of ancient India were not altogether vegetarians. Their diet was a mixed one; they ate fish as was offered to Bharata and his party by Guha. Meat too was consumed quite widely. Not only did Rama say that animals are killed by men for their flesh but he also killed many animals – deer, wild boar, antelope, etc., - for food during his sojourn in the forest. Meat was eaten with relish and a verse which describes a meal of Rama and Sita states: ‘He sat on a rock tempting Sita with meat (saying) this is pure, this is tasty and this is well cooked by fire.’ In Bharadvaja’s hermitage Bharata’s army was supplied with venison, mutton, pork and flesh of the peacock and the snipe. Likewise, Kumbhakarna consumed large quantities of venison, beef and pork and drank blood. Although the Vanaras are generally depicted as vegetarians, the Brahmins were actually not. The concept that ‘a purely vegetarian diet is an indication of spiritual progress and an advanced culture’ is a later development in India. Even ascetic brahmins were not strict vegetarians. Although their usual fare consisted of vegetables, they did not abstain from meat-eating as a principle of either religious or social significance. In fact, Agastya is represented as eating rams and he says, ‘I am able to eat comfortably even one whole ram at a Sraddha ceremony.’ There seems to have been no ban on meat-eating by brahmins even at the time of Bhavabhuti for his *Uttararamacarita* depicts Vasistha as eating a tawny calf. Further, Valin’s statement specifically mentions the animals whose flesh could be eaten by Brahmins.” (*The Society of the Ramayana*, 1960, p.147-8).

The chapter on food in the *Susrutasamhita* (1st/4th century CE), the seminal text of Ayurveda, recommends all kinds of fish, bird and animal flesh thereby showing that meat eating was acceptable during that period. In his study of ancient Ayurvedic texts Dominik Wujastyk writes: “To someone acquainted with contemporary Hinduism, it may come as a surprise to see that the meats of many kinds of animals is recommended as a normal food. In fact, the real surprise is not so much that meat is considered part of the diet, but that its use is presented so completely without apology or explanation. The texts of Caraka and Susruta take it utterly for granted, and apparently feel no need even to attempt a justification” (*The Roots of Ayurveda*, 2003).

This and a great deal of other evidence shows that like Buddhists, Hindus were primarily meat eaters, although there was always those in favor of vegetarianism. After the Gupta period Hindu texts like some of the *Puranas* and the literature of the Bhagavatas started teaching abstention from meat. It was probably only after the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries that vegetarianism started to become widespread in India. The reasons for this may have been developments in theology and philosophy, the influence of Jainism and to a lesser degree Mahayana Buddhism, changing economic conditions, and the desire of Hindus to distinguish themselves from Muslims invaders.