Are Buddhists vegetarians?

There are many different views on vegetarianism, which make it the subject of lively debate within Buddhism.

As a monk, Buddha Shakyamuni would accept whatever food he was offered as alms and did not prescribe a vegetarian diet for his monks.

And yet since Buddhism has spread to the West there is a pervasive view that if one is a Buddhist one *ought* to be a vegetarian.

It is interesting to note that **Asian countries that are traditionally Buddhist are not culturally vegetarian.**

The Japanese eat a lot of fish because the geography of their country supports little agriculture. The Pure Land school in Japan does not consider ethical action to be as important as devotional practice to Amida Buddha, so that Buddhist tradition rapidly became very popular with fishermen who were no longer discriminated against on ethical grounds.

Theravadins are generally not vegetarians, and Tibetans live in a climate where vegetarianism is impractical because the stony soil and harsh weather do not support the growth of many crops.

Here is a range of views and arguments that can be used as topics for discussion:

THE KARMA OF KILLING

- Many Buddhists, especially in the West, believe that vegetarianism is the only option if they are to be true to the principles of not killing and non-violence.

  Traditionally, however, Buddhists consider that the karmic effects of eating meat and fish are quite different from the effects of slaughtering animals and fish for market. It is easy to eat a hamburger, but how easy would you find it to slit the throat of a cow?

  The first Buddhist precept is not harming and specifically not killing, so Buddhists in Asia generally refrain from being butchers or working in slaughterhouses, for example. This would be seen as part of Right Livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path.

  However, the act of eating is not the same as the act of killing, so eating does not carry the same karmic consequences as killing. Nevertheless, eating meat and fish is a way of participating in the chain of activities that cause animals to be killed for food, so there is some degree of indirect karmic responsibility involved.

- Other Buddhists point out that vegetarianism is not an ethical solution because of the enormous number of insects killed through the use of pesticides on vegetable and fruit crops. So eating lettuce or drinking tea are ways of participating in the chain of activities that caused the agony and death of thousands of insects. In Buddhism, insects are treated the same as animals: they are beings with minds, and one refrains from killing any animate being.

The karmic argument in favour of vegetarianism would need to be applied to almost everything we eat. Do you think this is reasonable?

Whatever one eats therefore entails some form of taking life. We might conclude that as long as we are in samsara no action or its consequences will be perfectly pure and free from causing harm.

CAUSING UNNECESSARY SUFFERING TO ANIMALS

- Some Buddhists argue that modern methods used to raise and slaughter farm animals are highly insensitive to their physical and mental well-being. Not only do they cause tremendous suffering to the animals they also produce unhealthy meat. These people argue that vegetarianism is the only ethical option for this reason.

Do you accept this argument?

- *If so, does that mean you would accept meat-eating if farming practices improved?*
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MEDICAL ARGUMENT

- The Dalai Lama has said he supports vegetarianism but occasionally eats meat on the medical advice of his doctors.

Do you think this contradicts his vows of non-violence and compassion?