

Buddhism and Vegetarianism

Dharma Lectures by the Grand Master Wei Chueh

“The great compassionate mind is the Buddha’s Mind. The spirit of Buddhism is compassion and equality. If we wish to attain a mind of compassion and equality, first, we must not kill; second, we must save and protect lives; third, we must practice vegetarianism. If we can accomplish all three, our compassionate mind will manifest.”

To Practice Buddhism is to learn from the Buddha, learn from the Buddha’s purity of body, speech, and mind. “To learn from the Buddha’s body” is to emulate the Buddha’s actions. All the actions in our daily lives should be proper and meet the highest standards. “Learning from the Buddha’s speech” is to always be proper in our speech – no bad-mouthing, backbiting, lying, or frivolous speech. “To learn from the Buddha’s mind” is to constantly examine and reflect upon the arising and impact of all our thoughts so that they are of the highest standard of perfection, truth, virtue, and beauty. Thus, we will attain the Buddha’s compassion, wisdom, samadhi, and even his spiritual powers and marvelous abilities.

Misconceptions about vegetarianism

There are many expedient means to help us attain purity of body, speech, and mind. Expedient means can be thought of as a bridge or a pathway. Whether at work or in spiritual cultivation, it will not be easy to succeed without using expedient means. In cultivation, a first expedient means is to practice vegetarianism. The spirit of Buddhism is compassion and equality. If we wish to attain a mind of compassion and equality, first, we should not kill; second, we should save and protect lives; third, we should practice vegetarianism. If we can accomplish all these, our compassionate mind will manifest. A compassionate mind is the Buddha’s mind. Therefore, even though practicing vegetarianism seems ordinary, its significance is profound and far-reaching.

However, many people nowadays feel that they need not be vegetarians to practice Buddhism. Some scholars have even publicized mistaken views which have influenced vegetarians to start eating meat. For example, they say that the Buddha did not teach vegetarianism and that it is not related to one’s cultivation; they even think that being a vegetarian cannot help eradicate bad karma or help one attain the Way or liberation. They also give many examples that misguide people, saying that animals such as cows, horses, and elephants eat grass but still are butchered and suffer in the three wretched realms; therefore, being a vegetarian does not help our cultivation.

In practicing Buddhism, if our viewpoint is wrong, the direction of our cultivation will be in contradiction to our goal; even though we spend much time and effort, we gain no benefits. Cultivation is in this very mind; the slightest error leads to endless mistakes. Acting against the Way, we stray further and further from the Way. If we encounter steep cliffs and precipices, we will fall into the precipice, creating problems for ourselves.

Being in accord with the compassionate mind

If we investigate the view that being a vegetarian cannot lead to liberation and that we may even become animals, we will see that cows, sheep, and horses eat grass not because of their own resolve. They have to eat grass, or they will die; therefore it is a form of retribution, a form of suffering. In Buddhism we must examine our intention. Only when our viewpoint is correct can we benefit from our practice. We should understand the true aim of vegetarianism. Cows and sheep are herbivores but they do not resolve to do so. We are vegetarians out of a mind of compassion and equality.

Furthermore, many people who have no religious beliefs are also vegetarians. This is due to their fear that animal flesh contains too many antibiotics, hormones, and poisons. They worry that eating meat will cause hardening of the arteries or cancer. Many in the health professions advocate vegetarianism, even raw vegetables. These views are based on the wish to maintain health. If the capacity of their mind is constrained to self-interest, then it is not in accord with the mind in Buddhist practice. Hence their blessings can be much less.

“To be in accord” means to have the mind of compassion and equality. To have a mind of equality and compassion is to be like a buddha or bodhisattva. The *Lotus Sutra* says, “When all sentient beings are happy, all buddhas are happy.” A mind of great compassion is the foundation of all bodhisattvas. Great compassion gives rise to the bodhi mind, and the bodhi mind gives rise to enlightenment. What is a compassionate mind? It is what the Confucian sage Mencius said, “Seeing it alive, we cannot bear to see it die; hearing its voice, we cannot bear to eat its flesh.” When we hear the loud and pitiful cries of animals before they are slaughtered, we know that it is cruel and feel very sad. Therefore, from a mind of compassion, we do not eat the flesh of sentient beings. The Buddhist sutra says that savage animals also have Buddha nature. Both humans and animals desire to live and fear death; that is their awareness. Therefore, the first reason for being a vegetarian is entirely based on the mind of compassion and that all sentient beings possess the Buddha nature.

Second, everyone is subject to the causality of the three periods of time – past, present, and future. If we now eat the flesh of animals, the pain and suffering we inflict upon them will similarly

be inflicted upon us in the future. Everyone knows that if we eat eight ounces, we have to return half a pound. The principle of causality never changes, so we should not eat meat.

Third, all sentient beings were and are our relatives. Therefore, we should save and protect all lives as we treasure the lives of our families.

In order to be grateful and repay kindnesses, we must have compassion. It is due to previous karmic affinities that we are together with our parents, teachers, brothers, and fellow cultivators in this life. But, there are good and bad affinities. If we have formed good affinities with others in the past, we will get along with them in this life and help each other. If we stole from or cheated people, or did not get along with them, then when we meet them in this life, they will be our enemies. This is due to the causality of the three periods of time. If we observe carefully, we will realize that causality affects every aspect of our daily lives.

The suffering of transmigrating in the six realms

Once there were two great masters, Han Shan (“Cold Mountain”) and Shi De (“Foundling”), who were the incarnations of Bodhisattvas Majushri and Samantabhadra. One day, when Han Shan was traveling and teaching amongst people, he saw a wedding feast in a village, with over a hundred banquet tables, accompanied by drums and cymbals. Everyone was having a good time. But Han Shan began to sob. When relatives and friends of the wedding party saw this, they scolded him: “You are crazy; this is a joyous occasion, why are you weeping?” They wanted to chase him away. Han Shan replied, “I am not crazy. You are the crazy ones!” They said, “You are acting like a fool. Why do you say that we are crazy?” Han Shan then sighed and recited the following poem:

*Transmigration in the six realms is suffering!
The grandchild is marrying his grandmother,
Cows and sheep sit in the honored seats,
Relatives of the wedding party are being cooked in the pot.*

Most people do not have the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, or the heavenly (deva) eye; therefore, they cannot see the transmigrations in the six realms. They do not know that the bride and groom were actually related as grandchild and grandparent in the past. That is why Han Shan lamented that everyone is living in delusion and confusion. “Cows and sheep sit in the honored seats; relatives of the wedding party are being cooked in the pot.” The wedding guests were cows and sheep that were killed in a previous life, and were born into this life as humans, sitting in the honored seats. The chickens, ducks, fish, and other meat that are being cooked were relatives of the wedding family from previous lives. The buddhas and bodhisattvas have the power to see into the

past so they can see karma clearly. That is why, based on compassion and equality, they tell us not to eat the flesh of sentient beings.

Transmigration in the six realms is great suffering. If, from life to life, we do not practice the Way diligently, we will be reborn unceasingly. Of the six realms, the highest is the heavenly realm. If we practice the ten virtuous acts, the four dhyanas¹, and the eight concentrations, we can ascend into the heavenly realms. The second is the realm of the asuras. Asuras have the blessings of heaven but not the heavenly virtues; they have ugly features. Third is the realm of human beings. We are now in this realm, yet each of our blessings and retributions is different. Fourth is the realm of animals, and fifth is the realm of hungry ghosts. Sixth is hell, the realm of greatest suffering; it is filled with great sinners. If we do not practice diligently, we will continue to transmigrate within the six realms and endure the endless suffering of birth, old age, illness, and death. After we have used up all the blessings of heaven, we will descend into the human realm, and if we have created bad karma, we will again descend into the wretched realms and become animals, hungry ghosts, or hell beings. So, like a carriage wheel, we are transmigrating endlessly in the realms of heaven, humans, hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. Human life is but a sea of sorrow and endless suffering.

Mahayana and Theravada positions on meat eating

Did the Buddha talk about vegetarianism? The Mahayana bodhisattva precepts clearly state that we must not eat the flesh of sentient beings, and must also observe the six fasting days (per month). In the Theravada scriptures, the Buddha speaks of eating the “three pure meats” and “five pure meats,” so we can see that the Mahayana and Theravada sutras both advocate compassion and the protection of life. Eating the “three pure meats” is only an expedient means that is provided because new cultivators and students of Buddhism still harbor the craving for meat. Even knowing that eating meat creates karma, people cannot break their old habits right away; they feel that it is not a real meal without meat. Therefore, the Buddha established the expedient means of the “three pure meats.”

“Three pure meats” must fulfill three requirements so that the meat eaten will be pure and not cause sin: first, not seeing the animal being killed, second, not hearing it being killed, and third, not suspecting that it is being killed for us.

First, “not seeing it being killed.” “Seeing it being killed” means that when people go to the market, they see chickens and ducks being killed, and feel that the meat is therefore very fresh. They not only let the animals be killed, but are eager to buy the meat. They do not have a compassionate mind; therefore, eating this meat creates sin.

¹ Dhyana (禪那): A discipline to train the mind to focus and to develop profound insight.

Second, “not hearing it being killed.” “Hearing it being killed” means that if we hear the agonizing cries of a chicken or duck when it is being killed, we should not eat its meat.

Third, “not suspecting it being killed” means that in the butcher shop or market place, the chicken was bought by the store owner and was not specifically killed for us. This is “not suspecting it being killed.” If we go to a friend’s or relative’s house at New Year, everyone feels that it is a rare occasion to get together, so they enthusiastically have a chicken specifically killed for us. If we eat this meat, we then create evil karma. If we refuse to eat meat, this chicken would not have died because of us. Based on compassion, not only we ourselves do not kill, but also we do not ask others to kill for us. Some people are afraid to kill life themselves; therefore, they ask others to help them kill a chicken or duck or fish and then enjoy eating it, causing others to create bad karma. This is the same as asking others to murder; they are accomplices in crime, their minds are venomous and the act is sinful.

If we wish to protect our lives and have good health, yet cannot become totally vegetarian, we should at least eat the “three pure meats.” After we are used to eating the three pure meats, we will gradually realize our virtuous roots and cultivate a compassionate mind. We then can go a step further and eat the “five pure meats.” Besides the three previous rules, we add two more. One is “died naturally.” If the animal died naturally from illness, old age, or an accident, we can eat it. But people now feel that the meat of an animal that died from illness or old age is unhealthy. Therefore, there is not much chance of eating this type of meat now. Another rule is “remnants from birds;” this is to eat the remains of animals from the mountains that have been eaten by wild animals and birds. Again, this is also rarely done. So we might as well give up eating meat completely; that is to be truly pure.

Observing the six fasting days

Another expedient means of practicing vegetarianism is to observe the “six fasting days.” Many people, out of compassion, abstain from meat for breakfast or on the first day of the month. That is good. But it is not recorded in the Buddhist scripture. It is only an expedient means for people. According to the scripture, to truly attain benefits, we should observe the “six fasting days.” Those are the 8th, 14th, 15th in the first half of the (lunar) month, the 23rd, and the last two days of the month. In those six days we should not only completely abstain from the meat of sentient beings, but must maintain purity of body, speech, and mind. The eyes only see what is proper; the ears only hear what is proper; the mouth does not gossip or slander others; the mind stays away from delusive thoughts; the body only performs good deeds—that is truly observing the six fasting days. Some people also take the eight prohibitory and fasting precepts during these six days or at another time.

All these can increase merits and eradicate karmic obstacles.

There is cause and effect for everything in this world. Why should we observe the six fasting days? Because on the 8th day of each month, the retinues of the four Heavenly Kings come down to earth to inspect the good and evil in men. If we do good deeds on that day, the retinues of the Heavenly Kings will record them and report them to the Kings; then one's blessings and lifespan will increase. If we do bad deeds or are evil on that day, the Heavenly Kings may not wait for our retributions in the next life, but immediately send us great misfortunes in this life. On the 14th day of the month, the sons of the four Heavenly Kings will inspect the human realm. On the 15th day of the month, the four Kings will come down in person. The same thing happens in the second half of the month. Therefore, during these six days, we should "do no evil and perform all good." We should be diligent and unceasing in performing worldly good and spiritual cultivation. Then our merits and lifespan will surely increase.

Some may feel this seems to encourage us to only do good deeds when the Four Heavenly Kings come to inspect us. Actually, these six fasting days are just expedient means. When our good habits have fully developed, every day will naturally be a day of "fasting." Good habits are difficult to cultivate but bad habits are quickly learned. Yet the bad habits that we acquire and become addicted to are very difficult to break. Smoking, alcohol, and craving the nightlife are easy examples. Therefore, Buddhism teaches that we should first gradually get rid of our bad habits. After we develop good habits and good thoughts, our mind will be filled with brightness.

Right intention is the foundation

Vegetarianism has many benefits. But to truly achieve the aim and benefits of vegetarianism, we must generate a mind of compassion and equality. No matter what we do, we should have the right intention. If our intention is right, whether we recite the Buddhas' names, recite the sutras, or are vegetarians, we will gain infinite merits and blessings. However, in similar situations, if we do not have right intention, there may not be blessings or merits. If we do not have a mind of compassion and equality, and only practice vegetarianism for the sake of our body, even though we may obtain good health, that is "ego-attachment (attachment to the false ego);" the mind's ignorance and foolishness may increase, and there will be no merits. Animals that eat grass are like this. They do not do it from any resolve for compassion or equality; it is just the result of their past karma. People who say that cows and sheep are vegetarians but cannot attain liberation only see the surface; they are ignorant of the true reason that cows do not attain liberation.

In our cultivation, whether as laity or monastics, we must have right understanding and right view, and should study Buddhism from good and knowledgeable teachers who have genuine

realizations. Making a resolve to be a vegetarian is very important to cultivators, but there is now an unhealthy trend in Buddhism: many people, originally vegetarians who have taken the five precepts, and cultivate very diligently, later hear that the esoteric sect allows people to eat meat and drink wine, so they start to follow those ways, feeling that the esoteric school is very good since they can enjoy the five worldly desires and still attain liberation and buddhahood. This is an erroneous viewpoint! They don't realize the reason that the esoteric practitioners do not practice vegetarianism is because they once led the life of animal herders in Tibet and there were no vegetables there; therefore, they had to eat meat. Now that they have come to Taiwan, because the environment is different, many of them have become vegetarians. Therefore, we should know that in practicing Buddhism, we should be vegetarians based on a mind of compassion and equality. Those who want to cut corners and use the esoteric school to give themselves an excuse, give rein to the five desires and take the wrong road. This will only result in bad karma.

The mind gives rise to discriminations and attachments

Many people feel that vegetarian food is lacking in nutrients, or that it doesn't taste good. Actually, this is a problem of the mind, not a question of whether vegetarian food is nutritious. Whether food tastes good or bad is relative; it is the result of a discriminating mind.

For example, some people like to eat lightly seasoned foods. Cantonese people like foods that are sweet, sour, and salty. People from Hunan, Sichuan, and Hubei like foods that are spicy and salty. Zhejiang people like foods with strong odors, the stronger the better, just as some people like to eat fermented tofu, yet its smell gives others a headache. People from southern China like to eat rice; Northerners like to eat noodles, and if they have a garlic clove in spicy sauce to accompany plain wheat buns, that's better than a New Year's banquet. Once, a gentleman liked bitter melons so much that if someone invited him to dinner and didn't serve any bitter melons, he would immediately leave. Brazilian people would not enjoy a meal without some sour dishes. Therefore, sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy – which food tastes best? When we see these different preferences, we realize that what tastes good and what tastes bad are illusive and unreal. It is all due to our own discriminations and attachments.

Buddhism teaches that “all dharmas arise from conditions; all conditional arisings are empty in nature.” All phenomena arise from the coming together of causes and conditions; they are all illusory and empty in nature. Taste for food is the same. It is due to past habits and individual preference from discrimination and attachment.

Both lay people and monastics may have had the following experiences: before becoming vegetarians, they eat a lot of fish and meat; they were not accustomed to coarse food and simple

meals. But after becoming a vegetarian or monastic for a long time, for 10, 20, 30, or even 40 years, they feel that vegetables are sweet, fragrant, and delicious; instead, the stench smell from meat and fish make them nauseous. This is also due to the mind's discriminations.

Some people regularly rush to the bank before closing time to maintain their cash flow and are very distressed if they don't get there on time. If their friend tells them, "I can't help you with your banking situation, but I can invite you to dinner" – even though the food is plentiful and delicious, they cannot enjoy it because of their financial problem; their mind is filled with afflictions so food is tasteless. In our society today, there are many laborers who eat plain and simple food, yet they are very healthy. On the other hand, the rich eat sumptuous meals each day, and even take supplements, yet they have many health problems. That is because their minds are filled with afflictions; they are not able to digest or absorb their food, which is soon excreted. All these prove that the preference for vegetarian food or meat, what tastes good and what does not, is entirely due to the mind.

Vegetables have the most natural nutrients

Many people believe that a vegetarian diet is not nutritious enough. This does not make sense. More and more people today who have no religious beliefs have become vegetarians for health reasons. For decades, we as vegetarians have never eaten meat, yet we are quite healthy. This proves that vegetables are very nutritious. Vitamins and proteins are mostly extracted from plants and seldom extracted from animals. So how can people say that vegetables have no nutrients? Furthermore, don't strong animals such as elephants, cows, and horses eat grass? This proves that plants are very nutritious. Therefore, the nutritious value of vegetables is not the real issue; it is our mind.

The lifespan of a human being is now relatively short. Many ancient civilizations have records of people who lived very long lives of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand years. Think about this, now with the advances in medicine and science, we should be much healthier, but why is our lifespan shorter than that of people in the past? The reasons are easily seen. First, in the past, people ate natural foods including vegetables and fruits and used leaves for their clothing. Today, people eat and dress luxuriously yet their food contains many artificial ingredients and chemicals. Second, in the past, wood was used to build houses; Sui Ren Shi discovered fire by rubbing pieces of wood together; Yiu Cao Shi taught people how to build tree houses. For their health, people now also like to eat natural, organic food and live in houses built from wood. They are reverting back to these ancient practices. This shows that a vegetarian diet is surely healthy and nutritious.

“If the starting point is not true, the path to the goal will be convoluted”

In Buddhism, the reason for being a vegetarian is not so that people can live a long time but because of their mind of compassion and equality. First, sentient beings are future buddhas and bodhisattvas; therefore, we should not eat the flesh of sentient beings. Second, everyone has Buddha nature. Besides protecting our own life, we also must respect the lives of all sentient beings. Third, vegetarianism is based on the principle of causality that spans the past, present, and future. Therefore, we clearly understand the reason for vegetarianism is the bodhisattva cause, the right cause. With our actions based on these principles, the rewards will be limitless. If we do not have a correct “causal mind” (intention) in practicing vegetarianism, even though good actions lead to good retributions, the benefits will be greatly reduced.

This mind is very subtle. If our causal mind is right, all our actions will have immeasurable merits—they will be bright and virtuous deeds. If our intentions are not right, we may work very hard without getting good retributions; we may even create bad karma instead. Both Buddhist practice and worldly endeavors are like this. Therefore, whatever career we pursue, we must constantly examine this causal mind and ask ourselves why we wish to become a physician, an architect, a politician, a businessman, or even pursue knowledge. For example, with what mind do politicians campaign for office? If it is with a mind of compassion for the country and society so that all people will have peace, a mind to protect the jobs and families, and all their actions based on the love and care for people and things – then the higher their political office the better; they are already bodhisattvas! Because of their high positions in society, they can serve more people and do more important work. Isn't that the bodhisattva way? However, if they only inflate themselves, are tempted by fame, profit, or desire when campaigning for office, it will be disastrous; they will not only suffer defeat and infamy, but will also descend into the suffering realms in the future.

The spiritual path is also like this. We must be clear on why we recite the sutras and meditate. For example, there are now so called “chanting groups” who are invited to go and recite the sutras at funerals. After the chanting, they ask for money; they are in the business of selling Buddhist blessings. In Buddhism this is called “to sell the Tathagata.” This not only has no merits but creates sin. Reciting the sutras is a good thing; it is a Buddhist practice; how could it become sinful? This is due to an erroneous mind. Also, the practice of meditation originally is to help enlighten the mind and see our true nature, and to cultivate samadhi and wisdom. But some people do not care about this and instead wish to achieve spiritual powers through meditation, or they wish that the bodhisattvas will come to tell them about the future or even give them the right lottery numbers in their meditation.... Meditating with such ulterior motives is not only devoid of merits, but will easily lead to afflictions and even cause mental problems. Furthermore, monastics should also harbor a proper view in cultivation, and constantly reflect that their reasons for embracing the monastic life are because they wish to renounce the world, renounce the home in the three realms, the home of ignorance, and to benefit oneself and others. If our viewpoint is wrong, even if we

embrace the monastic life, there will be no merits. Why? If we do so because of certain stresses in life, or to escape from debtors: “if the starting point is not true, the path to the goal will be convoluted;” when our viewpoint is not correct, we will not obtain the great benefits of embracing the monastic life.

The way of the mind is extremely subtle; to miss by a hair’s breadth, the result can differ by a thousand miles. Buddhism says, “All of the triple realms are only this mind; all the ten thousand dharmas are merely consciousness.” Spiritual cultivation is nothing but how we regulate our mind, and how we use this mind. We must achieve a mind of samadhi, purity, and clarity, be able to discriminate what is bright and what is dark, what should be done and what should not be done. The mind must be perfectly clear.

Buddhism teaches us what is correct and true. If this mind is like a mirror or a pool of still water, without the least bit of defilement, without giving rise to a single delusive thought, constantly abiding in samadhi and wisdom, this mind is then the Buddha Dharma. When we truly attain this level, the mind will penetrate all the dharma realms and attain “spiritual resonance (感應),” so that we can achieve what people call “all our wishes will come true” and “when the mind is spiritual, blessings come naturally.” Then both our studies and careers will surely be successful. If the mind is always scattered, drowsy, and confused, we will even have bad dreams at night, be lethargic in the daytime, unable to make clear decisions in anything; then how can we expect any spiritual resonance?

Nurturing blessings and wisdom

Vegetarianism is both intimately related to Buddhism and closely related to our merits, virtues, wisdom, and samadhi. Both the Mahayana and Theravada sutras extol the importance of no killing and compassion to all sentient beings. Therefore, we sincerely hope that every practitioner of Buddhism will take the right road. In cultivation, we must first cultivate merits by upholding the precepts and have a compassionate mind. Yet, to develop compassion, we firstly must not kill; secondly, we should save and protect lives; and thirdly, we should practice vegetarianism. If we can incorporate these principles into our daily lives, discipline and train ourselves, we will eventually realize true compassion and impartiality; the mind will then become pure and we will attain liberation. Buddhism is the truest of truths. If we put in one measure of efforts, we will get one measure of benefit; if we put in ten measures of efforts, we will obtain ten measures.

Vegetarianism is also good for our health. From a medical viewpoint, vegetables can lower blood pressure and decrease the chances of cancer and many other diseases. But in Buddhism, we advocate an entirely compassion-based motivation for taking on vegetarianism. Therefore, whether

people hope for good health, for spiritual progress, or increase wisdom, blessings, merits, or compassion, they all should practice Buddhism and vegetarianism. The first step is to gradually get used to eating the “three pure meats;” after that, eat the “five pure meats.” From never killing lives, saving lives, and protecting lives, we go even further to vegetarianism.

The foundation in practicing Buddhism is to establish right understanding and right view. I hope that everyone will have this understanding, and I believe that the wise surely know how to reflect and take care of themselves. We should work diligently from the right cause, instead of blindly wishing for the right result. Whatever we sow, we will surely reap. We must be steadfast in this right direction if we wish to make progress in our Buddhist cultivation.