



# Buddhism and Vegetarianism

Buddhism in Every Step (C12)  
(英文版)

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# Buddhism and Vegetarianism

## I. Buddhist Vegetarianism

Many people see vegetarianism as the hallmark of Buddhism, but when Buddhism was first transmitted from India to China, there was no requirement whatsoever that monastics not eat meat. In *The Great Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha said, “Meat eaters destroy their seed of compassion.” Thus, later generations advocated vegetarianism to practice the spirit of compassion. In China, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty wrote the “Essays on Giving Up Wine and Meat” out of compassion and recommended the entire monastic order take up vegetarianism. He encouraged the laity to become vegetarians as well. It was only from this moment that Buddhism and vegetarianism became so closely intertwined.

During the Buddha's time, the monastics survived on alms offered by the laity. There were no distinctions made about who they received alms from, and they were taught to rely on what they received from the generosity of others. In countries of the Southern Buddhist tradition, like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma along the South Asian and Indochina peninsula, this system of daily alms, in which the monastics eat whatever the faithful offer, is still observed. How could they choose between vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings?

Tibetan Buddhists are also not obligated to be vegetarian, for Tibet is a region of severe cold to the degree where it is almost impossible to grow vegetables. Tibetan lamas usually make beef and lamb the main part of their meals. It would be quite challenging for them to adopt vegetarianism because doing so would make it very difficult to live. How would they cultivate their religious practice in such dire circumstances? Similarly, though Buddhism is commonplace in modern Japan, the temples and monasteries do not uphold vegetarianism.

The reason vegetarianism was able to spread in China was due to the influence of Confucianism. Confucianists advocated benevolent kindness and filial piety. The great Confucian thinker Mencius said, "Having seen an animal alive, one cannot bear to see it dead; having heard its cry, one cannot bear

to eat its flesh. This is why the gentleman stays away from the kitchen.”

Moreover, in Confucian philosophy, children are to wear sackcloth, keep a vegetable diet, and abstain from wine and meat during the mourning period after the death of their parents. Even during major sacrificial rites, people are also supposed to keep a vegetarian diet and ritually bathe themselves to show their respect for the spirits. After Buddhism’s transmission to China, the practices of not killing and freeing animals from captivity combined with the Confucian emphasis on benevolent kindness to spread vegetarianism even further.

The goal of learning Buddhism is not to become a vegetarian, for eating is not the important issue; it is the purity of the mind that is important. If one’s words are filled with compassion and loving-kindness but the mind is filled with greed, hatred, and wrong views, one can eat vegetarian food all day long but still go against one’s conscience!

Thirty years ago, vegetarianism in Taiwan was nowhere near as widespread, and taking the ten-hour trip from the north to the south region made dining quite a problem. This is why I established Fushan Temple in Changhua, central Taiwan, so that devotees traveling back and forth could have vegetarian meals. Since then, vegetarianism has become a growing trend, not just in Taiwan among Chinese

Buddhists, but all around the world. In recent years, there are more and more vegetarians in Western societies. This phenomena is not necessarily related to religious belief, since most choose vegetarianism for health reasons.

All the cafeterias in India's train stations now offer vegetarian food. Traditionally meat-based foods in the USA such as pizza and hamburgers now also come in vegetarian versions, while one can find a vegetarian restaurant anywhere in Taiwan. Fo Guang Shan has Water Drop Teahouses that offer vegetarian food at branch temples around the world as a way of giving something back for the accomplishments of all sentient beings. Operating in combination with art galleries and bookstores, these teahouses not only offer vegetarian snacks but also enrich the spiritual life of the devotees and have garnered broad support. All of these developments show what an influence vegetarianism has had on humanity.

Whether someone eats meat or vegetarian food, what we consume is a reflection of our daily habits. Some people are mainly meat eaters, while some are mainly vegetarians, but others have no particular preference. Buddhism encourages people not to take life and that means putting into practice the Buddha's spirit of compassion. The Ming dynasty poet Tao Zhouwang wrote:

*A finger burned in boiling water delivers a  
shocking pain to the whole body;  
A needle prick into one's skin feels as if knives  
are cutting all over one's skin.  
When fish die, they sadly look for pity;  
And when chickens die, they weep before the  
blade.  
Such sad weeping is clear in every case;  
It's just those that hear it recognize it not.*

Life is precious. To enjoy the delicacies of the land and sea requires the sacrifice of so many living creatures; wouldn't it be good to let them go on living? Why must we make animals suffer to satisfy the desires of our appetites? Besides, eating certainly does not require gourmet foods. It is said:

*A cup of plain tea far surpasses drinking  
ambrosia;  
And the fragrance of simple fare surpasses  
dining on meat and wine.*

## **II. Different Types of Vegetarians**

It is important for all life to survive, and to survive, we must eat. Most people make no distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian when it comes to eating; they simply eat whatever they can. However, some people will become vegetarians and

not eat meat because of their faith, for environmental protection, to preserve life, or for health reasons.

There are different types of vegetarians. Some eat no animal products at all, some still consume eggs and milk, while others are less strict and may eat vegetables that have been cooked alongside meat during social settings. However, vegetarianism is really about the purity of the mind, and there are many who look to adopting a vegetarian diet as a way to strengthen their compassion. Although it may not be possible to become completely vegetarian all at once, one can do so in stages. Compassion has its degrees as well: you may start by being compassionate first to the people you know, and then slowly branch out to develop unconditional loving-kindness and compassion for all. With a vegetarian diet, you begin by reducing the intake of meat dishes, so you gradually become more compassionate. By doing this, one will naturally improve their karma as well.

People may also observe vegetarianism only at certain times. For example, some people have the habit of eating vegetarian porridge in the mornings. Even though such people are only eating vegetarian food for breakfast, it is still a certain expression of compassion. Others choose to observe a “vegetarian fast” for six days a month, on the eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, twenty-third, and the last two days of each lunar month. Being able to observe a vegetarian diet

over these few days can help enhance one's morality. Even if one is not able to be a total vegetarian, observing these six "fasting days" is a very good practice.

According to what scientific research has discovered, people's emotions are more easily stimulated when the moon is full, while such emotions are at a lower level than normal on the first day of the lunar month. Thus, by eating vegetarian food, people can adjust their minds and bodies.

When Buddhists sit down to eat, they can remember or recite the five contemplations:

1. Assess the amount of work involved; weigh up the origins of the food.
2. Reflect on one's own moral conduct; perfect or not, take this offering.
3. Safeguard the mind against all error; do not give rise to hatred or greed.
4. Regard this food as good medicine, so as to treat the weakened body.
5. In order to accomplish the Way, one deserves to accept this food.

Whether one is a vegetarian or not, having something to eat each day can only happen because of many causes and conditions: the farmer planting the crops, the worker processing the food, and the merchant selling the products, as well as factors like

sunlight, air, and water. Therefore, what is most important when eating the food one has been offered is doing so with a sense of gratitude.

If the conditions of your life make it impossible to become a vegetarian, Buddhism encourages one to at least eat meat that fulfills the “three pure conditions.” *The Five-Part Vinaya* states:

There are three kinds of meat that one cannot eat: that which is seen, that which is heard, and that which has suspicions about it. Being seen means seeing for oneself that the animal was killed on one’s behalf;<sup>1</sup> being heard means hearing from reliable sources that the animal was killed on one’s behalf; and having suspicions means one suspects that the animal was killed on one’s behalf. If it is not seen, if it is not heard, and if there are no suspicions about it, then it is considered pure meat.

Even if one is unable to be a vegetarian, eating meat that fulfills these three pure conditions can put one more at ease during the meal.

There are also those vegetarians who follow the example of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, and “eat the vegetables next to the meat.” When Huineng lived in hiding among a group of

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1 For example, eating fresh lobster. *Ed.*

hunters and it came time to eat, he would boil some vegetables in the same pot with the hunters' meat. When asked about this, he would say, "I only want the vegetables next to the meat." Although it is sometimes inconvenient to maintain a vegetarian diet, just thinking about it creates a state of mind that is extraordinarily precious!

I became a vegetarian at the age of four, but during my eighty plus years of being a vegetarian, I still could not avoid eating some things that contained non-vegetarian ingredients. For example, the principal of Yilan High School in Taiwan once invited me to stay at his home as a house guest. The principal had cooked a big plate of boiled dumplings for us, but upon taking my first bite, I discovered that the filling for the dumplings was made of leeks and eggs. Although I knew this, I said nothing so as to avoid any sense of discourtesy, and in the end, I even ate the entire plate of dumplings. On another occasion, a group representing the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China went on a tour to Japan. The Japanese Buddhist Association treated everyone to a meal, and when the servers presented the noodles, there was a fishy smell. It was then that we realized the Japanese often make their broth using fish and shrimp. In order to avoid humiliating our hosts, all we could do was swallow the entire bowl of noodles.

During the past civil war period, there was a particularly tyrannical soldier who came to the temple and threatened the abbot, saying, “You are all very compassionate vegetarians. I have here a bowl of meat. If you eat this entire bowl, I will not harm you. But if you don’t, I will kill you all.”

Upon hearing this, the abbot picked up the bowl without any hesitation and ate the meat. He did so in order to save others, not because he was craving it. So, did he abandon vegetarianism? To me, this looks like an expression of his compassion and shows his greatness. *The Verse of the Seven Ancient Buddhas* says:

*Do nothing that is unwholesome,  
Do all that is wholesome,  
Purify the mind.  
This is the teaching of all Buddhas.*

The Dharma is based upon compassion and is realized through skillful means. In receiving and practicing the Buddhist precepts, one should do so in a complete and thorough manner, yet one cannot become shackled by its tenets and lose the spirit of the Dharma.

### **III. The Benefits of Vegetarianism**

Some people believe that vegetarian food does not provide enough nutrition and that vegetarians become weak and unhealthy, but look at me! I have

been a vegetarian since childhood, and I have grown up tall and strong. Furthermore, consider the generations of great monks who have been vegetarians for decades, well into their seventies and eighties, and still maintain a youthful, ruddy complexion as well as strong, healthy bodies.

The benefits of being a vegetarian are numerous. Generally speaking, those who eat meat appear a little heavier, while the features of vegetarians are a bit more delicate and refined. Buddhism teaches that one's appearance is dependent on the mind, and according to some evidence, people who eat a lot of animal protein tend to have more aggressive and violent tendencies, while vegetarians are more gentle and tolerant. Moreover, the outbreaks of infectious diseases like mad-cow disease, SARS, and bird flu have spawned global panics, causing people to worry about whether or not they will end up eating some diseased meat. Being a vegetarian enables one to avoid eating livestock that may be carrying such diseases.

The world's animals can be divided into two categories. Animals like elephants, camels, horses, and cattle are herbivores who eat grass and have great endurance: a horse can travel hundreds of miles in a day, an ox can pull a cart and till the fields, and a pigeon can fly hundreds of miles. Carnivores like jackals, wolves, tigers, leopards, and lions may be

ferocious and savage, yet they lack staying power. There is an old Chinese saying: “After three strikes, a tiger lacks energy.”

Buddhism does not require its adherents to become vegetarian, but there are many benefits that come from a vegetarian diet, including increased endurance, moderate emotions, and easier cultivation. For example, Fo Guang Shan has many young novice monks who often participate in friendly basketball matches with students from nearby secular universities. On the court, you can watch the players on the other team become winded and sweaty, asking to be substituted out after playing for a short period of time, while the novices are still running up and down the court. When asked if they want to be substituted, they often reply, “Why? I still have energy!”

Moreover, the more than one thousand monastics at Fo Guang Shan work unceasingly from morning to night to spread the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings. Besides six hours of sleep, most of their time each day is spent working. They neither complain about hardship nor grumble about fatigue. How can this possibly be? Originally, I could make no sense of these questions, but later on, I realized that vegetarianism had a lot to do with it. A vegetarian diet increases one’s stamina.

A vegetarian diet can improve your sitting meditation and nurture your compassion. Vegetarians

have pure minds with few desires, they are softer and more peaceful in their temperaments, and they tend to live longer. Experts have shown that vegetarianism can even protect the environment and reduce world conflict. Why are there so many wars in the world? In Buddhism, there is a verse that goes:

*Wishing to understand whence come eons of  
warfare,  
Just listen to the sounds from the butcher's  
door at night!*

Vegetarianism also has its shortcomings. For one, hunger comes easily. However, experiencing hunger easily indicates that one can more easily digest things, so vegetarianism is conducive to better physical health. Vegetarianism is slowly becoming a popular lifestyle. Despite the different motivations of each vegetarian, as long as they have the correct concept and they cook their food well, vegetarianism will have a positive effect upon the mind and body.

#### **IV. Questions on Vegetarianism**

For the most part, Buddhists become vegetarians to be more compassionate. However, according to the biological definition of life, anything that undergoes

birth, growth, reproduction, and death is alive. Under that definition, plants are also alive, so is it then wrong to eat them? Inquiries about vegetarianism can bring up many confusing questions such as these.

There are some who say that the reason people can eat vegetables is because they do not shed blood, while animals do. One may then ask: shrimp, fish, and crabs do not shed blood, so can they be eaten?

It is important to note that the growth, reproduction, and death of plants are physical phenomena, not psychological phenomena. Buddhists do not define “life” in terms of these physical differences between plants and animals but look at life’s ability to consciously respond to stimuli. For example, when you are about to kill a chicken or a duck, it will consciously respond with fear. Eating some green vegetables or radishes will not elicit a conscious response from the plants. Additionally, the level of sympathy that people have for plants and animals is not the same: one feels quite different after picking a leaf off a plant as opposed to killing an animal.

Furthermore, killing an animal destroys its life, while plants can continue to live as long as their seeds are sown again. In fact, the majority of vegetables and fruits will not grow well if they are not harvested by having their stalks or branches trimmed on a regular basis. Therefore, Buddhism believes that

the eating of plants does not pose a dilemma for the compassionate, while the eating of animals does.

When vegetarians only eat vegetables there is no problem, but is it okay to eat things like chicken eggs? Some feel that it is not okay to eat eggs since the egg could have become a life. Because of this, monastics will usually avoid eating eggs so as not to bring an end to that potential life. Those who enjoy eggs will say that the eggs we buy in the grocery store are unfertilized, and thus it is okay to eat them.

Among the Buddhist monastic rules, there is a category of rules put in place to prevent behavior that would promote criticism and bring a bad name to Buddhism. Thus, when someone says something like, “Vegetables are expensive nowadays: eggs are much cheaper, so you should eat those,” nothing is wrong with that statement. But, if a monastic were to eat an egg while on an airplane or train, he or she would have to explain themselves to others: “Oh, this egg is unfertilized and is not alive.” Isn’t this a lot of trouble? One can clearly see the controversy actions like this may provoke. Therefore, practitioners should have their own principles in order to avoid being criticized by the world.

It is also customary for Buddhist vegetarians to abstain from eating onions, garlic, and leeks. Many people ask, “You eat other kinds of vegetables, why not these?” *The Suramgama Sutra* says:

All the various sentient beings who seek samadhi<sup>2</sup> must stop eating the world's five kinds of pungent roots. These five kinds of pungent roots cause licentiousness when eaten cooked and increase anger when eaten raw.

Traditional Chinese medicine also holds that one must regulate these pungent plants to properly cultivate the body and that failure to do so will harm the body. Buddhism pays particular attention to purifying the mind and reducing desire, and although onions, garlic, and leeks are also plants, eating them stimulates moral turbidity and emotional excitement, which are obstacles to our cultivation. Moreover, temples and monasteries are places of purity dedicated to the Dharma, and everyone gathers there to practice together. Once onions, leeks, and garlic are fried in the wok, their pungent smell pervades everywhere and makes people feel distracted. To prevent these foods from bothering people and to avoid possible criticism, Buddhist monastics will abstain from eggs, garlic, onions, and leeks.

Another dietary question: is it acceptable to partake of cow's milk and yogurt? Yogurt and milk neither contain the flavors of onions, garlic, and leeks nor does their production involve the taking of life. Since there is no killing involved, the consumption of milk and yogurt is permitted.

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<sup>2</sup> A deep meditative state.

Today, there are plenty of vegetarian “meat” products made from tofu that not only look like their meat counterparts but taste very similar as well. For most vegetarians, there is no worry about confusing these substitutes with the real thing; they know that they are eating vegetarian food and don’t bother with other distinctions. However, there are some who think that people who are committed vegetarians should not partake of these imitation dishes. What is the point of making vegetarian food look like meat? Are vegetarians still harboring thoughts of eating meat, making them enjoy these substitutes as a way of satisfying such cravings?

In Buddhism there is an expression, “If you wish to lead others to the Buddha’s wisdom, first give them what they desire.” I think people who create such dishes do not do so for the sake of vegetarians. Instead, they do so to encourage everyone to eat vegetarian food and to coax them to learn more about vegetarianism. This is particularly true in Chinese culture which stresses that lavish meat offerings be made for certain ceremonial rites. Not only does substituting these offerings with vegetarian mock-meat dishes eliminate the bad karma that comes from killing, but it satisfies people’s expectations for how such offerings should be made.

Buddhism teaches that when the mind is pure, the land is pure as well. When you hold on to this

kind of purity and just go about your day as conditions present themselves, where in the world is not the Pure Land? It is important that vegetarians foster this kind of attitude when they relate to others. Many vegetarians say that eating out is inconvenient, but in my travels around the world all these many years, I have found that keeping a vegetarian diet has not been a trouble for others and has actually often brought them happiness.

## **V. Taking Life**

Buddhists are vegetarians to avoid taking life. Buddhism advocates not killing, but to live a life completely without killing is no easy task. For example, when you go to see a doctor and he gives you an injection to wipe out the bacteria causing your illness, is this not taking life? The sutras say, “When the Buddha gazes upon a glass of water, he sees eighty-four thousand beings.” There are many living organisms in a glass of water, and if you drink it, are you not killing them? When the deceased are cremated, their bodies still contain many living microorganisms, so when the body is burned, aren’t they being killed? We regularly burn wood to make fires, but the wood itself contains many parasites; isn’t this taking life as well?

If each of these instances of killing resulted in bad karma, then the collective bad karma of

humanity would be huge. According to my understanding, drinking water, giving injections, and burning wood cannot be considered taking life. Why? Since there was no intention to kill, there cannot be the thought of killing. All phenomena are created by the mind, and when it comes to taking life, the karmic results of our actions depend largely upon whether or not there was an intention to kill.

I once visited the Penghu islands off the coast of Taiwan. When the local people saw a group of Buddhist monastics, they said, “We are all fisherman here, and we make our living from taking life. How, then, can you monastics be of any help to us?”

I thought to myself at the time, “Buddhism does not reject a single sentient being. Though the people here make a living by catching fish, if we are unable to give them some help, then wouldn’t that mean Buddhism is rejecting them?”

Even though maintaining one’s livelihood through fishing does entail the act of taking life, if there is no hatred behind the killing, this has a positive effect on the individual. Humanistic Buddhism is a Buddhism based upon human beings, and humans beings must always find a way to survive. Therefore, insisting that the human world be like heaven or the pure land is perhaps too stringent. What we must do is reduce the amount of killing and be as kind and compassionate as possible.

Of course, Buddhism does not condone taking life, but the conditions under which such killing takes place do vary. Some people spare no one in their ruthlessness and kill out of hatred, while other people kill out of a sense of compassion in order to save other people's lives. For example, during the course of his many previous lifetimes of pious conduct, the Buddha was a merchant, and on one occasion he embarked on an ocean voyage to conduct his business. It was on the ship that the merchant encountered a villain who was planning to murder the other passengers for their money. All the merchant could do was kill this evil individual in order to save the lives of the five hundred merchants on board. Although the story says he still took negative karma for this act, it was not very much compared to other acts of killing because of the compassion he had in his intent.

It is a very complex question when it comes to who or what may be killed. Under normal circumstances, every life is precious, and no harm should be done to any life, but from a human perspective, sometimes taking life depends on time and place. Taking life out of anger or hatred is definitely wrong, but sometimes sacrificing another life out of a sense of compassion and justice is also permitted.

When considering killing, there are a lot of things in this world that seem contradictory. For example,

there are some people who will only eat fish, but not chicken. Does this mean that fish have been preordained to be killed by human beings? If we look from the perspective of trying to benefit others, there is nothing in Buddhism that is absolutely permitted or forbidden.

Some people ask, “Is using small animals for medical testing permissible?” When I was invited to Singapore in 2001 and held an informal discussion with some newly licensed doctors graduating from Medical School, I found that they were very concerned about this question. At the time, I told them that using animals to conduct medical experiments has as its goal the saving of all people in the world. After all, a death could be an event of great importance or a matter of little consequence, as the value placed on each death is not the same. Since they are engaged in medical research, the doctors hold lofty and far-reaching goals. Because of this, they do not need to overly concern themselves with the details.

Sometimes, it is said that we should sacrifice the few in order to save the many, but this cannot result in indiscriminate killing nor involve any antipathy in the mind, much less any sense of taking delight in killing. Although both positive and negative aspects still exist, these laboratory experiments are being done for the sake of saving all of humanity. However, when such experiments unavoidably call

for the taking of life, if one can do so with a sense of solemnity and gratitude for those that are killed and further dedicate the merit accrued from the experiments to those sacrificed, then one has done a more perfect job.

Some may also ask about farmers and their use of insecticides. Now, I cannot violate the Dharma and say misleadingly that such actions are not wrong at all. However, when the Dharma speaks of “not killing,” it clearly sees the killing of human beings as more grave and serious and the killing of insects as less so. The best approach, of course, is to take precautions in advance to drive the insects away rather than killing them, but if that is not possible, it is not as serious of a wrongful deed to take the life of insects to insure one’s survival as it is to kill a human being.

Both intentionally and unintentionally, we harm many small life forms. Even though such unintentional destruction of life is still wrong, it is minor compared to the killing of a human being. Buddhism takes the deliberate taking of life that is done with motive and intention as an expression of anger seriously, for such actions create heavy bad karma. However, scrutinizing the question of taking life too finely can easily lead to the pointless splitting of hairs. Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism need not be too insistent when it comes to the multitude of minute details.

## VI. Common Misconceptions

Some people say that animals exist to be eaten by human beings. This is an extraordinarily misleading idea. In this world, there is no one so great that they can absolutely rule over the many and no one so strong that they can completely dominate the weak. Even though the lion is the king of the jungle, he can still die of starvation because of a mere thorn stuck in his paw. In Chinese, there is a saying: “Swimmers can still drown; boxers can still be beaten to death.” There is always someone stronger, and you should never think of yourself as almighty. Even if you could not possibly avoid taking life, you should still at least feel a sense of regret.

Buddhism makes a distinction between breaking a moral precept and holding a wrong view. Taking life is wrong, but the karmic effect can be lessened if one knows how to repent. However, there are some people who feel that taking life is right and proper. This is a wrong view, and no form of repentance can deal with that. It is just like an illness which has spread to the vital organs and is almost impossible to cure. Therefore, eat meat as one may, but no one should be so sure of himself and self-righteous as to believe that chickens, ducks, cattle, and sheep are meant to be eaten. It is as if a tiger or lion ate one of us and thought that “humans

are meant to be eaten by tigers.” What would humanity think about that?

Likewise, here is a story about a cat that was preparing to eat a mouse: The mouse said, “It is only because you’re big and I’m small that you can kill me so ruthlessly. That’s so unfair!”

The cat said, “You want to be fair? Okay then, I’ll let you eat me. How about that?”

Taken aback, the mouse said, “You’re a cat. How could I possibly eat you?”

“Well, if you’re not going to eat me, then I’ll eat you. How’s that for fair?”

There is another mistaken view some people hold, believing that if they eat pork, horse meat, beef, or lamb, then because of their karma, they will be reborn as a pig, horse, cow, or sheep in the next life. This reasoning is not correct. If someone kills a mouse, will they become a mouse in the future? What about someone who kills a mosquito? By that same token, shouldn’t killing a human being result in a human rebirth? If we eat our fill of rice, is what we excrete later still rice? This deviant view is not a correct understanding of cause and effect and is actually quite terrible.

Once, a grandfather gave his misbehaving grandson a slap on the face to discipline him. The grandfather’s son, the boy’s father, then proceeded to slap himself. The grandfather asked his son, “Why did you hit yourself?”

The son replied, “You struck my son, so I struck your son!”

While such a statement superficially makes sense, it’s actually foolish. In the same way, it is not possible that one can become whatever one eats. This has to do with cause and effects. Depending on one’s intentions and actions, results of an action will be quite different. For example, if someone has a personal debt but cannot pay it back, one might substitute the money with labor instead. If you hit someone but now wish to make amends, it is not necessary to allow the other party to strike you back; a simple apology will solve the problem.

In Asia, there are also some people who hold the mistaken view that eating liver helps to rejuvenate one’s liver, eating brains helps rejuvenate the brain, and so on. But can eating liver really help to heal you? I do not think such things are very likely. Most people say the pig is a stupid animal, so will you become stupid after eating pig’s liver? The idea that you can heal part of your body by eating that organ in other animals is distorted. A whole acre of cropland can be planted at the same time, but the seedlings that come up still all be of different heights. When trying to understand the cause and effect relationships that make up our world, the importance of conditions and how they alter the effects cannot be overlooked.

All sentient beings are reborn throughout the six realms of existence for millions of kalpas,<sup>3</sup> so that no detailed account of all these comings and goings can be given. Chan Master Yuanyun's "Poem on Not Taking Life" states:

*All the bowls of meat stew over thousands of  
years,  
Amount to a deep ocean of hatred not easily  
calmed.  
Wishing to understand whence come eons of  
warfare,  
Just listen to the sounds from the butcher's  
door at night!*

.....

*Human life is true suffering:  
The grandson marries his grandmother  
reborn;  
Former cattle and sheep sit at the table,  
While one's relatives are cooking in the pot.*

What, then, can be done? Some might think that they are weighed down by all of their karma from eating meat in the past; how could it ever be fully extinguished? This is just like someone asking if the Buddha still has to feel the results of his past karma.

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<sup>3</sup> Kalpa is a Sanskrit word meaning a really long period of time equivalent to the lifespan of the universe.

The effects of karma must always be experienced. However, the Buddha also said that negative karma is created by the illusory mind. If you do not give rise to the illusory mind, at that moment, there is no negative karma.

*The Lotus Sutra* introduces the idea that our Buddha nature is a mixture of both positive karma and negative karma. Even so, as long as we are able to plant more positive karma, the minor offenses will not have all that big of an impact. For example, there may be both weeds and grain seedlings growing together in a field. As long as one perseveres and slowly removes the weeds, by the time the grain has grown tall and can cover the weeds beneath them, the weeds will no longer affect the harvest.

The world has progressed from the period of the divine right of kings into the age of democratic rights, but this is not the end. The next great change is for the right to live to be promoted for all sentient beings. As this era approaches, all abusive behavior toward animals, such as overburdening horses and oxen with heavy loads and the hanging of live ducks and chickens upside down in the market will be punished. The light of this society can only manifest through the advocacy of compassion and kindness. Come what may, Buddhism stands for the equality of all sentient beings, for it is only by treating animals in accordance with this sense

of equality that the ultimate expression of human civilization can be achieved.

## **VII. Cooking Vegetarian Food**

If we are to say that vegetarian food is better than non-vegetarian food, we have to make sure that we can cook tasty food before we can expect others to enjoy it. This is why I encourage all Fo Guang Shan branch temples to cook good vegetarian food, so those who come to pay homage to the Buddha can enjoy eating it. Throughout my life, I have tried to remain humble and not say too much about my own qualities, but I *do* feel like I can cook some good vegetarian food. However, things don't always turn out the way we plan, and I very seldom have the opportunity to cook for others. Even so, I can still pass on a few tips.

I've tried to teach what I know to quite a few people at Fo Guang Shan, but most of them have not been able to receive my teachings because it is hard to change people's ideas. You might tell someone your method, but he or she might say, "Well, in the past, I did it this way," or "I've always done it like this." When the mind has its preconceived notions, even the best methods cannot be accepted. It is like pouring tea into a cup that has some soy sauce in it; the tea will lose all its flavor. The cup must be empty for the flavor of the tea to come through. Therefore,

if one wishes to make good vegetarian food, one should empty the mind of any preconceived ideas, so everything can be taken in.

Whatever one undertakes, it is important to pay attention. Cooking is no different and is an art form all on its own. It is important not to neglect anything about the food's appearance, fragrance, or taste. The ingredients for vegetarian food generally include green vegetables, radishes, cauliflower, and various kinds of melons. Vegetarian food is usually more subtle, unlike meat dishes that have their own strong flavor, so skillful cooking is required to bring out the flavor of the food.

When stir-frying vegetables, how they are cooked depends on whether the vegetables should be soft or crispy. What should be crispy must be crispy, and what should be soft must be soft. Chinese people in particular are quite careful when it comes to controlling the temperature for cooking. Vegetables that should be crispy should be quickly stir-fried at high temperatures. Vegetables that should be soft must be cooked slowly over low temperatures. For these kinds of vegetables, one should not add salt to the wok first, or they cannot be stir-fried to a soft consistency.

Food that needs to be boiled to a soft consistency may take more time, but here is a clever method to save time: vegetables like radishes, cucumbers, and cauliflower are usually boiled until they are soft, but

one can fry them first to break down the fibers in the vegetables. If you do not like the oily taste, lightly rinse them with water after scooping the vegetables out of the wok. After boiling, put the vegetables back in the wok and add seasonings like soy sauce and salt. Let that simmer for a little while and the vegetables will become tasty.

Things like peanuts and soy beans are hard to cook thoroughly, so soak them in water a half day beforehand. Once they become soft, boil them in the wok, and they will quickly be done. One can even slowly braise them on a low fire the night before, and after they have been thoroughly cooked and softened the next day, fry them with oil and salt, and then, they will be ready to serve.

If you are busy and don't have time to cook, noodles can be a convenient solution that can be put on the table in less than five minutes. The secret to making noodles is to make sure the water is boiling hot so as to prevent the noodles from expanding and sticking to the bottom of the wok; they also could become too soft if they cook too long. Moreover, it is best to leave some broth after scooping out the noodles. There is also no need for vegetables when eating noodles. If someone eating noodles also wants vegetables, then they know nothing about noodles. If the cook puts a lot of vegetables into the noodles, then they do not know anything about noodles, either. At

most, only one other thing should be added to the noodles. Here are some examples:

### **Tomato Noodles**

To cook tomato noodles, first heat the tomatoes and peel off the skin. You can even remove the seeds if you like. Chop the peeled tomatoes finely and boil them in oil until they are soft and have the consistency of ketchup. Add a little soy sauce and enough water to cook the noodles; then, boil the noodles until they are done. The most important thing to remember about tomato noodles is to not boil them too much, or they will become sticky.

### **Soy Milk Noodles**

If there are no tomatoes, then soy milk can be just as handy. Pour some unsweetened soy milk into the wok, and add a little water. After this comes to a boil put in the noodles. Finally, add a little salt, and it is ready to eat.

### **Pepper Noodles**

It may be that you do not have tomatoes or soy milk, but surely you have some salt and pepper in the house! Boil some water and, after adding the noodles, add a little soy sauce and a little salt and pepper; that is it. The flavor of these noodles will be incomparable.

## **Lima Bean Noodles**

Put some of the lima beans into a blender or food processor, and grind them up. Then put them into a wok, add water, and boil them for a long time until you can no longer see the lima beans. Then add salt and cook the noodles. If you are pressed for time, you can also substitute soft tofu skins: just boil the tofu skins until they soften and the texture becomes soup like. Then add the noodles, it is also quite delicious.

Here are some more simple dishes you can try:

### **Stir-fried Dried Tofu with Celery**

What is most important is to stir-fry the celery so that it is very crispy, while the dried bean curd should be cooked to bring out a very fragrant flavor.

### **Stir-fried String Beans**

String beans are a very common vegetable. To cook them, first break the beans into lengths of about an inch or so, then fry them in oil. Scoop them out of the wok and wash them in water so as to remove any oily taste before stir-frying them in the wok.

### **Stir-fried Bean Sprouts**

After cleaning the bean sprouts, fry them in the wok at a high temperature. They will soon be ready for the table.

## **Pickled Mustard Roots**

Shred the pickled mustard root, then cut slices of dried bean curd or a little shredded mushroom, and then stir-fry them in a wok. There should not be too much dried bean curd or shredded mushroom, for it is improper to let minor players overpower the major role.

Stir-frying vegetables does not require too much time. Even if you want to invest the time in doing it, the time it takes to stir-fry vegetables should not exceed twenty minutes. You can also cook braised vegetable dishes in half an hour. Here are some examples:

## **Mustard Greens**

Mustard greens, called *changnian cai* in Chinese, or “longevity vegetables,” are a part of Sichuan cuisine that are typically served during the Lunar New Year. Some people can cook them into a tasty dish, while others cook them in such a way that no one dare sings their praise. Mustard greens are very bitter, though one way to work around this is to boil the greens in water for a short time and then discard the bitter water. After, chop the greens, and stir-fry them with fresh ginger. Add a bit of soy sauce, but do not add salt. Adding salt will make the dish too salty and unappetizing.

## **Braised Radishes**

Winter radishes are very sweet, very beautiful, and easy to cook into a soft consistency. First, boil the

radishes in water for a short period of time. After taking them out of the wok, cut them into triangles. Then, cook them together with fried tofu. Braise them with soy sauce and spices until they are ready to eat.

### **Braised Tofu**

Tofu can be found anywhere, but soft tofu and firm tofu are not cooked the same way. For braised tofu, first lightly stir-fry the soft tofu in oil for a short period of time, then braise the tofu together with mushrooms, soy sauce, and other ingredients.

### **Fried Gluten Balls**

Fried gluten balls can be cooked by themselves or with the addition of potatoes, mushrooms, soy beans, or peanuts. All such ingredients must be prepared well beforehand because they are not quickly cooked to a soft consistency.

It is important to know how to budget one's life, and cooking requires planning beforehand as well. A novice cook can only handle a single wok and must hurriedly scurry about to complete the meal. A more experienced cook can manage four woks at a time with little additional stress. A superior cook can even handle six woks at a time!

The need to eat is one of life's troubles. Some housewives must begin preparing meals several hours ahead of time in order to serve dinner to a

family of five or six people. They rush about so busily and still cannot finish all their cooking. They may even have to start preparing lunch as soon as they finish breakfast and start preparing dinner as soon as they finish lunch. In the worst case scenario, a cook can't even eat with the guests, even if they repeatedly yell for the cook to join them. A slightly better cook is at least able to make an appearance and request that the guests go ahead and begin to eat. The best cooks are able to have everything finished and ready, so they can eat together with the guests.

A competent cook can prepare a meal of four dishes and one soup and serve it to those sitting around the table. It is best to keep the time to accomplish this between twenty minutes to half an hour. Therefore, planning beforehand is very important. For example, go into the kitchen and boil some water first; next, wash the rice and cook it. When the water boils, use it to cook the vegetables and make the soup. Cooking does not necessarily mean finishing one dish before making the next one; one can cook three or four dishes at the same time.

Cooking vegetarian food must be done simply so as to preserve the original flavor of the food, and one should not spend too much time on it. However, one cannot ignore the needed chopping, the adjusting of the cooking temperature, the other ingredients, and the seasonings. Besides all of these things though, it

is important to maintain the attitude that one is making an offering of the food to those who will eat it, so everyone can enjoy the meal.

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