

Want Fries With That?

By LISA JONES

Staff Writer

Buddhists are often assumed to be vegetarians. In America today, however, many Buddhists aren't. While some abstain from meat-eating out of compassion for all living beings, others feel that eating meat is part of ordinary life and, therefore, part of practicing Buddhism amid the realities of society. So what exactly is the Buddhist view of vegetarianism?

The Theravada and Mahayana precepts, or rules of discipline, include the directive not to kill, which presumably prohibits the killing of animals as well as humans. The precepts also say, however, not to sell liquor and not to sleep on an elevated or broad bed. So how realistic is it to adhere to these precepts today?

Nichiren Daishonin believed that to observe precepts in modern times would be of no benefit. He therefore defined the sole precept (known as the diamond precept) for the Latter Day of the Law as embracing the Gohonzon. Buddhism teaches that by embracing the Gohonzon one receives all the benefit of observing all other precepts.

But that's not to say that killing is OK.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda explains this in his dialogue with Josef Derbolav, published as *Search for a New Humanity*:

Considering himself generally superior because of the particular mental superiority he undeniably has, Western man has tended to look down on other living creatures, whom he believes exist for him to exploit. He, therefore, has felt justified in killing them as he wishes....

The Buddhist view is entirely different. Buddhism puts great value in life itself, no matter what its manifestation. Each creature wishes to preserve its own life, and Buddhist thought regards it as wrong to take that life. The sin of killing is intensified when the victim is aware of the dignity of life and wishes to use its own life in a valuable and creative way.

President Ikeda further says:

Although sin is committed when human beings take the lives of other creatures for food, efforts to preserve one's own life are considered good. And the good is all the greater if the life preserved is used for the sake of the happiness of other people. Such taking of life must, however, always be for the sake of maintaining or improving the quality of life. Killing for pleasure is unjustifiable. Furthermore, killing for self-sustenance, too, is sinful if one's own life is not put to use in a valuable way.

As President Ikeda explains, Buddhism takes a balanced view: Killing animals for food is neither strictly wrong nor invariably right. As Mr. Ikeda says, "Taking of life must...always be for the sake of maintaining or improving the quality of life." So the crucial question is: Does meat-eating maintain or improve the quality of life?

With regard to nutrition, meat is healthful and harmful to eat — depending on whom you ask. Meat-eaters and vegetarians alike can quote government reports and scientific studies that support their conflicting views. Is meat-eating good or bad for the environment? That question, too, is hotly debated. (Please see box this page.)

Considering the Buddhist belief that each human being has a unique mission to fulfill in

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life, it's conceivable that we each have unique dietary needs. Maybe there are some people who require a strictly vegetarian diet for optimum health, and maybe there are some who require meat. It's likely, too, that our dietary needs will change throughout our lives. Individual choice, then, is an important component of healthy eating.

In Buddhism, individual choice and personal responsibility go hand in hand. Yet many of us don't give much thought to where our food comes from or how our food choices may impact our ecosystem. Our sense of responsibility to ourselves and our interconnectedness with other living beings prompt us to examine our eating habits and expectations.

Why, for example, is it OK to eat a chicken, but not a house cat? Is it because a cat seems more familiar to us and more human-like than a chicken? Or, if it's natural for animals to kill and eat one another, is it natural for human beings — as “sophisticated animals” — to kill and eat one another?

Consider this passage from the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, which describes conditions in Japan in 1278: “The country of Japan has been visited by continuous famine for the last several years, and supplies of food and clothing are exhausted. The domestic animals have all been consumed, and persons who eat human flesh are appearing. They tear flesh from the bodies of the dead, children and the sick, mix it with fish or deer meat, and sell it. People purchase this mixture and eat it. Thus, this country has unwittingly become an abode of wicked demons” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 139).

In this age of mass-produced and processed food, when we buy meat products, can we be absolutely certain what they contain and where they've been?

Regardless of whether you've suddenly decided to swear off sushi or you just got a craving for venison, the “meat question” warrants examination and dialogue.

And by the way, Buddhism posits that plants can attain enlightenment. Something to consider when making a salad.

Lisa Jones is a vegetarian — usually — because she thinks that meat is icky. She tries to let her intuition guide her dietary choices. She has a vague hope that one day her life-condition will be so high that she'll subsist solely on café latte and lemon rind. You can e-mail her at ljones@sgi-usa.org.

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