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Academic Article

# A Study on Non-Meat Eating and Compassion based on Buddhist Cognition

Jingting Zhang<sup>1</sup> and Minxin Li<sup>2\*</sup>

## ARTICLE INFO

### Name of Author:

#### 1. Dr. Jingting Zhang

School of Humanities, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China.

Email: [tissarazjt@outlook.com](mailto:tissarazjt@outlook.com)

### Corresponding Author\*

#### 2. Minxin Li

International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Email: [iceman-66@163.com](mailto:iceman-66@163.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Both of Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism allow meat eating, only Mahayana Buddhism follow the precept of non-meat eating, how does it connect with compassion that emphasized in Mahayana Buddhist practice, and has any conflicts with Theravada Buddhism? The Findings show that Theravada Buddhism does not follow the precept of non-meat eating, because it created no obstacles in attaining the goal of Nibbāna if the non-killing precept is not broken. On the other hand, monks cannot be choosy about food when they are going for alms. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes non-meat eating because of the practice of Bodhisattva aiming to cultivate compassionate heart. Whether or not to eat meat does not conflict with different goals of Theravada and Mahayana: Nibbāna and Buddhahood.



## Introduction

Non-killing is one of the basic precepts of Buddhism, but “*the three kinds of ‘clean’ flesh*” is allowed to be ate. Both of Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism are not against meat-eating, only Mahayana Buddhism follow the precept of non-meat eating, how does it connect with compassion that emphasized in Mahayana Buddhist practice, and has any conflicts with Theravada Buddhism?

According to the definition of Collins English Dictionary, Non-meat eating can also be called vegetarianism, the principle or practice of excluding all meat and fish, and sometimes, in the case of vegans, all animal products, such as eggs, cheese, etc. from one’s diet. From this definition, it shows that there are different kinds of vegetarians depending on different limitation of one’s diet. Mahayana Buddhism follows a vegan diet, excluding animal products, like milk, eggs, cheese, and so on.

In Buddhism, compassion can be explained as follows;

(1) Loving Kindness (metta) and compassion (karuṇā) (Oldenberg, 1997), in Theravada Buddhism, and they could be the way to mental emancipation through practicing “*Sublime Attitudes*” (*cattāro-brahmavihārā*) which also included Loving Kindness (metta) and Compassion (karuṇā) in Visuddhimagga (Tin Maung, 2011).

(2) Loving Kindness means “*giving joy*” to someone and compassion means “*saving someone from suffering*” (“*Avatamsaka-Sutra大方廣佛華嚴經*,” n.d. In T10 (No. 293), 775) in Mahayana Buddhism.

It is not difficult to find that both have similar definitions in the concept of compassion. But there still has some subtle differences, Mahayana Buddhism is mainly emphasizing on saving someone from suffering, Theravada Buddhism emphasizes compassion as a method of practice.

## The three kinds of ‘clean’ flesh” of Theravada Buddhism

There is no “non-meat eating” precept of Theravada Buddhism, but it does not mean there is no limitation on meat eating in Theravada Buddhist practice, it should be contented following conditions when monks eating.

The meats which contented three conditions are allowed to be eaten without breaking non-killing precept, when killing of the animal that supplies the meat:

- (1) It is not seen.
- (2) It is not heard.
- (3) It is not suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk (Horner, 2000).

When the meats contented these three conditions, it’s named “the three kinds of ‘clean’ flesh”. To be specific, for monks, they didn’t see the scene of the animal’s death, didn’t

hear the scream of the animal's death, and the animal is not killed because of monks themselves.

It needs more clarifications on the third condition, according to traditional Buddhist convention monks should practice mendicancy, and they cannot choose or refuse offering from providers. On the other hand, to accept all food is to cultivate equality mind. Therefore, Theravada monks have not enough condition to choose non-meat eating. But there are still have ten kinds of meats are not allowed to be eaten according to Theravada Buddhist doctrines. Monks should observe offering food carefully before they eat the food, Buddha ever said that there are ten kinds of meats are not allowed to be eaten: *human flesh, elephant flesh, horse flesh, dog flesh, snake flesh, lion flesh, tiger flesh, leopard flesh bear flesh, hyena flesh* (Oldenberg, 1997). Once whoever should make use of it, there is a grave offence, if the offering food included those ten kinds of meats, monks couldn't take use of them.

It is not difficult to understand that Theravada does not emphasize on non-meat eating, and "*the three kinds of 'clean' flesh*" is allowed to be eaten. The reasons could be summarized as follows:

- (1) For practicing without the slightest discrimination to things outside the heart, do not attach anything which including the offering food supplied by lay people.
- (2) Following the traditional Buddhist conventions, monks should practice mendicancy everyday, and they should not choose or refuse the food that offered from lay people.
- (3) Theravada monks only eat "*the three kinds of 'clean' flesh*" and be free from ten kinds of flesh.

If the non-killing precept is not broken, it no obstacle for Nibbāna. Although monks could eat meats, but they should obey non-killing precept strictly, taking use of food and meat is for practice but not for satisfying their own greed of palate. Theravada Buddhists does not follow non-meat eating, eating meat or not did not prevent them from reaching Nibbāna.

Theravada Buddhism's emphasis on practicing without discrimination, following traditional conventions of mendicancy, and avoiding attachment to food supplied by laypeople contributes to the acceptance of "clean" meat. The consumption of such meat, when the non-killing precept is upheld, is considered compatible with the path to Nibbāna. The focus is on using food for practice rather than indulging personal desires, and whether monks eat meat or not does not pose an obstacle to reaching Nibbāna within the Theravada Buddhist framework.

### **Theravada Buddhist View of Compassion**

There are two meanings of compassion in Theravada Buddhism, Loving Kindness (metta) and Compassion (karuṇā) (Oldenberg, 1997), and they could be the way to mental emancipation through practicing "Sublime Attitudes" (cattāro-brahmavihāra) which also included Loving Kindness (metta) and Compassion (karuṇā) in Visuddhimagga (Tin Maung, 2011). For Nibbāna purpose, Theravada concentrates on Loving Kindness which can be applied in meditation practicing, e.g.: Mettā Bhāvanā/Jhāna. The aim of this Loving Kindless Meditation

(Mettā Bhāvanā/Jhāna) “must be made to become, to put away ill will (paṭigha/dosa)” (Hare, 2001).

According to Buddha’s teaching in Anguttara nikāya, the benefits of practicing Loving Kindness: “Monks, by the release of the heart through amity, practiced, made become, made much of, made a vehicle and a basis, exercised, augmented and get going, eight advantages are to be expected. What eight? Happy one sleeps; happy one awakes; one sees no bad dreams; one is dear to humans; one is dear to non-humans; devas guard one; neither fire, nor poison, nor sword affects one; and though one penetrate not the beyond, one reaches the Brahmā-world” (Hare, 2001). It was shown that practicing compassion can be a way to help monks to reach both of supramundane (Nibbāna) and mundane benefits. Theravada emphasized “compassion”, and helping others through practicing “Compassion Paramita”, and also practicing “Loving Kindness Meditation”. On the other hand, “the three kinds of ‘clean’ flesh” is allowed to be eaten, but it does not mean whoever eats meats has no compassion, because there are many practice ways about compassion in Theravada Buddhism. For example, Loving Kindless Meditation (Mettā Bhāvanā), it could help monks to put away ill will (paṭigha/dosa) (Hare, 2001). Since the non-killing precept is not broken, “the three kinds of ‘clean’ flesh” created no obstacle in attaining Nibbāna, that’s why meat-eating does not means whoever eats meats has no compassion in Theravada Buddhism.

Furthermore, there are ten kinds of flesh are forbidden to be ate for Theravada Buddhists, if ate them, it could bring troubles for practicing, because “whoever should make use of it, there is an offence of wrongdoing” (Oldenberg, 1997). It seems that the precept on “Ten kinds of flesh are forbidden to eat” is not referred to compassion, and there is no inevitable connection between them.

According to Buddha's teachings in Anguttara Nikāya, the benefits of practicing Loving Kindness include positive effects on sleep, dreams, relationships with humans and non-humans, protection by devas, and a sense of invulnerability to fire, poison, and weapons. This practice is seen as a means to attain both supramundane (Nibbāna) and mundane benefits. Theravada allows the consumption of "the three kinds of 'clean' flesh" under specific conditions, but this does not imply a lack of compassion. Compassion is actively encouraged through the practice of "Compassion Paramita" and Loving Kindness Meditation. Meat-eating, within the confines of these conditions, does not hinder the attainment of Nibbāna, as long as the non-killing precept is upheld. Despite the allowance for certain meats, there are ten kinds of flesh forbidden for Theravada Buddhists, and consuming them is considered a wrongdoing that could disrupt the practitioner's path. It's noted that this prohibition on ten kinds of flesh does not seem directly linked to compassion, and there is no inherent connection between this precept and the cultivation of compassion in Theravada Buddhism.

### Non-meat Eating in Mahayana Buddhism

In the sutra of *Mind Meditation in Mahāyāna Jātaka* (*dacheng bensheng xindi guanjing* 大乘本生心地觀經), shown that “Bodhisattva Maitreya the prince of Dharma, Eat no meat from the beginning of his vow of Bodhicitta. Because of this causal factor he was named Mettā -Karuṇā, aimed to fulfill all sentient beings.” (“The Sutra of Mind Meditation in Mahāyāna

Jātaka 大乘本生心地觀經," n.d.). According to *Bodhisattva-bhumi (pusa shanjie jing 菩薩善戒經)*, "Bodhisattva...does not have an intention to hurt other beings, does not eat their flesh..." ("Bodhisattva-Bhumi, 菩☒善戒☒" n.d.), and *The Great Parinirvana Sutra (da boniepan jing 大般涅槃經)*, "The Tathāgata sets up all the precepts with different purposes. Because different purposes, allows taking three kinds of clean flesh. For other purpose, stops ten kinds of meats." ("The Great Parinirvana Sutra 大般涅槃經," n.d.). In the *Lankavatara Sutra (ru lengqie jing 入楞伽經)* "Causes those who eat meat have infinite faults. All Bodhisattvas practicing the great compassion should not eat meat." ("The Lankavatara Sutra 入楞伽經," n.d.).

From above sutras shown, it is easy to find out many views about non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhist sutras. It seems non-meat eating is very necessary, and what are the reasons? The causes of non-meat eating in Mahayana can be divided into two mainly side, doctrinal requires and historical reasons.

Doctrinal requires, non-meat eating was emphasized in different Mahayana sutras, it shown the different doctrinal requires between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. As follows:

"Bodhisattva Maitreya the prince of Dharma, Eat no meat from the beginning of his vow of Bodhicitta. Because of this causal factor he was named *Mett ā -Karū ṅ ā*, aimed to fulfill all sentient beings." ("The Sutra of Mind Meditation in Mahāyāna Jātaka 大乘本生心地觀經," n.d.). Bodhisattva Maitreya was described the prince of Dharma, he eats no meat from the beginning of his vow of Bodhicitta, it can be analyzed that non-meat eating is correlated to the Dharma which means compassion of Tathāgata here because of vow of Bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta was defined as "Bodhisattva initial determination to seek enlightenment, corresponded with the peerless path and vowed: "I will become a Buddha, this is called the 'the Mind of Bodhi'" ("The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom 大智度論," n.d.). According to *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra 大智度論)*, Bodhicitta is the abbreviation of anuttara-samma^sambodhi citta, which means to reach the Buddhahood, and the vowing of Bodhicitta means not only to reach the Buddhahood but also help other beings to get rid of all sufferings. Therefore, it can be analyzed that one of the main reasons about non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhism is because of keeping one's Bodhicitta.

In the *sutra of Bodhisattva-bhumi (pusa shanjie jing 菩☒善戒☒)* "Bodhisattva...does not have an intention to hurt other beings, does not eat their flesh...Then can he fix his own mind as well as others" ("Bodhisattva-Bhumi, 菩☒善戒☒" n.d.). Keeping practicing Bodhisattva-path should insist on non-meat eating which could help Bodhisattva to sow the seeds of good cause in other beings' minds, and then to help other beings to get rid of suffering once the "cause and effect" is coming. According to *The Lankavatara Sutra (ru lengqie*

*jing* 入楞伽經) “Meat eating people have their seed of compassion being cut, how could they still gain such great benefits?” (“The Lankavatara Sutra 入楞伽經,” n.d.). In order to keep one’s compassion, non-meat eating is necessary to practice Bodhisattva-path. It was obvious that there is an intimate connection between non-meat eating and compassion. The reasons of non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhist doctrines could be summarized as follows:

(1) Correlated to the Dharma which represents wisdom and compassion on tathāgata. Wisdom and compassion are characteristics of Dharma, Bodhisattva

Maitreya the prince of Dharma, he was named Mettā-Karuṇā (compassion), Because of this his vow of Bodhicitta aiming to fulfill all sentient beings.

(2) Maintain one’s vow on Bodhicitta. What’s more in important than vowing on Bodhicitta is practicing Bodhicitta, following Bodhisattva-path.

(3) To fulfill and help all sentient beings to get rid of suffering and finally attain Buddhahood. Non-meat eating could help Bodhisattva to sow the seeds of good cause in other beings’ minds, and then to help other beings to get rid of suffering once the “cause and effect” is coming.

Another is historical reason. Mahayana Buddhist doctrines always emphasizes on non-meat eating. In Chinese Liang dynasty, Mahayana was being in prosperity, Theravada was going to disappear, there still exist some monks who keep mendicancy and meat-eating, and under that environment Emperor Wudi Xiaoyan (464-549) issued the document of *Broken Meat-eating and Wine-drinking* (Zhang, 2007) to forbid monks and nuns to eat meat and drink. Emperor Wudi Xiaoyan is a devoted Mahayana Buddhist and abdicated his throne to become a monk for three times. In order to regulate bad atmosphere of Sangha, he regulated “*Broken Meat-eating and Wine-drinking*” to forbid monks and nuns to eat meat and drink. “*Broken Meat-eating and Wine-drinking*” is about the establishment of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist vegetarian tradition and its origin, it was a very important piece of historical literature. Furthermore, the promulgation of the article written by emperor Wudi himself, also he was presided two meetings to discuss and decide it, the total number of attended monks and nuns are 1448 people. It is important to note that emperor Wudi illustrated monks drinking and eating meat is inferior to heretics and laymen and developed various barriers of one’s practice in “*Broken Meat-eating and Wine-drinking*”.

On the other hand, almost all of evidence in “*Broken Meat-eating and Wine-drinking*” are from Mahayana Buddhist sutras, such as *The Lankavatara Sutra* (*ru lengqie jing* 入楞伽經), *The sutra of mind meditation in Mahāyāna Jātaka* (*dacheng bensheng xindi guanjing* 大乘本生心地觀經), *The Great Parinirvana Sutra* (*da boniepan jing* 大般涅槃經). From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhist teachings, it illustrated why monks shouldn’t eat meat, it is another proof of different practices ways between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism.

Summary of reasons for Non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhism see that Non-meat eating is connected to Bodhicitta, representing the compassion of Tathāgata, and is seen as a way to fulfill the vow of Bodhicitta by helping all sentient beings.

The practice helps sow the seeds of good causes in others' minds and aids in alleviating suffering through the understanding of cause and effect. Historical reasons, such as Emperor Wudi Xiaoyan's efforts in the Chinese Liang dynasty, further support the emphasis on non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhism. Non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhism is multifaceted, rooted in doctrinal requirements that emphasize compassion, Bodhicitta, and the understanding of cause and effect, as well as historical developments that solidified these practices within Mahayana traditions.

### Mahayana Buddhist View of Compassion

Loving Kindness means “*giving joy*” to someone and compassion means “*saving someone from suffering*” (“Avatamsaka-Sutra 大方廣佛華嚴經,” n.d.). in Mahayana Buddhism. In *The Eight Great-Beings Enlightenment Sutra (foshuo badarenjue jing 佛說八大人覺經)* said that “*Life and death have endless sufferings, the Buddhasattva vows for the great vehicle to help all others. Devoted great-being himself to bear the pains on behalf of all beings, fulfill them with the perfect happiness.*” (“Eight Great-Beings Enlightenment Sutra 佛說八大人覺經,” n.d.). From these teachings we could understand why Buddhasattva should cultivate compassion. The reasons could be analyzed as follows:

(1) The aim of compassion in Mahayana is to help others to relief from sufferings and attain the perfect happiness. Compassion is also could be a practicing way to liberation, but not just practice it for Buddhasattva themselves, what more important is to help all others to get rid of suffering and reach the liberation.

(2) Practice as required by the Bodhisattva-path, even in a cost for devoting endlessly the Bodhisattva himself. “*Life and Death have endless sufferings*” that means Buddhasattva might devoted himself to practice Buddhasattva path forever, this way is endlessness, they could not choose nirvana even if they reach the liberation, because sentient beings are unaccountable, it needs a cost for devoting endlessly the Bodhisattva himself. Therefore, non-meat eating could be a way for compassion cultivating.

According to *The Bodhisattva-Bhumi (pusa shanjie jing 菩☒善戒☒)*, “*Bodhisattva...does not have an intention to hurt other beings, does not eat their flesh...then can he fix his own mind as well as others’. No matter whom he helped, heaps of merit could be grown...Always shows his compassion whenever somebody living in pain is being seen.*” (“Bodhisattva-Bhumi, 菩☒善戒☒” n.d.). This means non-meat eating is conducive to increasing the compassion and wisdom of Bodhisattvas, as follows:

(1) Cultivate Bodhisattva’s own compassion (metta and karuṇā) and wisdom (paññā) which are the two natures of the Buddha and a way to individual’s liberation. Compassion and wisdom are the symbols of Buddhahood, it needs wisdom to choose. different methods to

help different beings who is ignorance. Through practicing compassion on all living creatures and produce good “*cause and effect*” with them is conducive to help them get rid of suffering. Buddha always knot good fortune with all beings in every life of Buddha, that’s why many people would like to follow Buddha Sakyamuni after he reached enlightenment and became Buddha. On the contrary, if Bodhisattva didn’t sow the good seed to other beings, when the “*cause and effect*” is coming, it would be difficult to practice Bodhisattva-path and help them be free from Samsara.

(2) Help others to gather heaps of merit and relief from suffering through compassion. It could be easier for Bodhisattva to help other beings, if Bodhisattva himself didn’t eat their flesh. On the other hand, non-meat eating could help them to cultivated themselves’ compassion, and then to gather heaps of merit and relief from suffering, thus Bodhisattvas’ teaching would be easier understood by them.

(3) Practice as required by the Bodhisattva-path. If there is no compassion in one’s hearts, they couldn’t make a vow of Bodhicitta, not to mention practicing bodhisattva way. In Mahayana Buddhist Scriptures, non-meat eating is beneficial to cultivate one’s compassion, Bodhisattva-path base fundamentally on the heart of compassion (Bodhicitta), that’s why non-meat eating is so important in Mahayana.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the concepts of Loving Kindness and Compassion are integral to the Bodhisattva path, with a focus on alleviating suffering and helping others attain perfect happiness. The teachings emphasize that compassion means "saving someone from suffering," and Loving Kindness involves "giving joy" to others. In summary, non-meat eating in Mahayana Buddhism is intricately connected to the Bodhisattva's commitment to compassion, wisdom, and the pursuit of liberation for the benefit of all sentient beings.

## Conclusion

Mahayana emphasize on non-meat eating is in order to cultivate compassion to all beings which is the core of Bodhisattva-path and is the nature of the Buddhahood. Non-meat eating is beneficial cultivating one’s compassion and practicing Bodhisattva-path, to fulfill the final goal to help others get rid of suffering and reach the perfect happiness. Theravada Buddhism accepts meat-eating because it is not an obstacle of nirvana since non-killing precept is obeyed. On the other hand, Theravada take *Compassion-Paramita or Loving Kindness Meditation* as a method of practice. The different views on non-meat eating between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism is because of different practice way.

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