

Recollecting Buddhas, Being Vegetarian, Reciting Sūtras

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Source text: 《福慧隨身書》No.7《念佛、吃素、誦經》

Translated by Yinshun Cultural & Educational Foundation Translation Team

Contents

RECOLLECTING BUDDHAS, BEING VEGETARIAN, RECITING SŪTRAS	2
Recollecting Buddhas	2
Being Vegetarian	4
Reciting the Sūtras	4
Problems with the Way These Practices are Undertaken	5
ELABORATION ON VEGETARIANISM	6
Vegetarianism is a Unique and Great Quality of Chinese Buddhism	6
Avoiding the Five Pungent Vegetables and the Meaning of Vegetarianism	6
The Essential Principle of Buddhist “Vegetarianism” is to Realize the Spirit of Protecting and Benefiting Sentient Beings	7
Seemingly Reasonable Yet False Arguments From Non-vegetarians	8
Discussing the True Meaning of No Killing from the Relationships Between Sentiment and Rationality, and Between the Killer and Victim	9
The Mentality of the Killer and What They Killed Affect the Degree of Fault from Killing	9
The Wrong View that Uses the Guise of Science to Justify Taking Life	10
Clarification of Situations Arising from Different Time and Place	11
The Issue Concerning the Three-fold Acceptable Meats in the Buddha’s Time and in Theravada Buddhism	11
The Teaching That Encourages Vegetarianism in the Mahāyāna Aligns with the Buddha’s Spirit of Great Compassion	12
The Reason Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists Eat Meat	13
Bizarre Arguments From Those Who Eat Meat	15
The Issue of Consuming Meat in Japanese Buddhism	15
Elaboration On Practicing the Spirit of Protecting Lives from the Aspects of Environment and Spiritual Capacity	16
The Ridiculous Argument that Eating Meat is Necessary	17

Recollecting Buddhas, Being Vegetarian, Reciting Sūtras

Faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom—these are the essentials of the bodhisattva practice. The cultivation of numerous different dharma practices is merely the further practice and development of the three essentials. These different dharma practices have many degrees and stages, making them very deep and vast. For now, let us look at some expedient practices for beginners. The main practices of Chinese Buddhists are recollecting buddhas,¹ vegetarianism, and recitation of the *sūtras*. These practices belong to the initial expedients on the bodhisattva path.

Recollecting Buddhas

Although the meaning and function of the practice of recollecting buddhas is not limited to one facet, its main objective is to stimulate the initiation of faith and aspiration. The initiation of faith and aspiration of a bodhisattva refers to the initiation of the bodhi mind—that is, the directing of all intentions toward the wisdom of buddhas. It is not easy to initiate faith and aspiration for unsurpassed bodhi (a buddha’s wisdom). Unsurpassed bodhi is what buddhas have perfectly attained; buddhas are those who possess unsurpassed bodhi—the wisdom of buddhas. Buddhas possess countless hallmarks and features of great beings and have powers and strength that are far-reaching and without limit. They have omniscience and incomparable loving kindness and compassion. Even when still practicing the bodhisattva path, they had already acquired indescribable virtues from carrying out many acts of benefit to themselves and others. Therefore, buddhas are ideal role models. We should respect and admire buddhas for their virtues and be grateful for their loving kindness and compassion. In other words, every thought should have buddhas as the place of refuge and object of respect. By revering buddhas in this way, the initiation of faith and aspiration to learn buddhas’ teachings is most potent. Having buddhas as our role models effectively encompasses the triple gem because buddhas teach the dharma, and on account of the dharma, there is the *saṃgha*.

It is with this aim of initiating faith and aspiration to learn the teachings of buddhas that the *Mahāyāna sūtras* extensively teach the practice of recollecting buddhas and praise the excellence of initiating the bodhi mind. In terms of recollecting buddhas, the point is to recollect the virtues of a buddha (virtue of perfect wisdom, virtue of purity, virtue of benevolence²), recollect a buddha’s manifest hallmarks,³ contemplate on the truth (the true meaning of buddha), and/or recollect the pureland of a buddha. [This practice of recollection]

¹ In this practice any buddha can be adopted as the main focus it is not limited to the Buddha of our world, Śākyamuni Buddha.

² The translations of the Chinese terms for the second and third virtues are based on the quality that each reflects, as displayed by the buddhas. The virtue of purity refers to a buddha’s perfection with respect to ending all defilements and leaving no trace at all. In the Chinese, the literal word “cut off” (*duàn* 斷) is used, meaning to cut off all defilements. The virtue of benevolence translates literally from the Chinese as “gratitude” (*ēn* 恩). Here, the Chinese word “gratitude” is not referring to the buddhas’ gratitude but instead to the immense gratitude that sentient beings have for the buddhas’ benevolence in helping them attain liberation.

³ In the *sūtras*, it is said that each buddha possesses thirty-two great hallmarks and eighty secondary characteristics, which are a reflection of the virtues a buddha has achieved.

can be extended to include prostrating, praising, or making offerings to buddhas; repenting in front of buddhas, rejoicing in and aspiring to the buddhas' virtues; requesting buddhas of the ten directions to give teachings and remain in the world, and so on.⁴ All of these fall into the extended definition of practices for recollecting buddhas. In the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*⁵, it is said that there are bodhisattvas that enter the Buddha-dharma relying on faith (and aspiration) with diligence, and they delight in accumulating the virtues of a buddha. These are the faith-inclined bodhisattvas in the *Mahāyāna*. The aforementioned practices relating to recollection of buddhas, which belong to the easy path,⁶ are especially revealed for them. In fact, the easy path is merely a stepping-stone to the difficult path (practice centered on wisdom and compassion). Therefore, the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā* says that beginners practice recollection of buddhas, repentance, requesting, and so forth, and through these practices, their minds become pure and their faith deepens. After this, they are able to cultivate the advanced practices centered on wisdom, compassion, etcetera. Similarly, *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* says, “initially when sentient beings begin learning the *Mahāyāna*, they should develop right faith. However, some are weak.” Therefore, they are taught to “focus solely on recollecting a buddha” as this can “protect their faith” so that their bodhi mind does not waver or dwindle. The first and foremost purpose of recollecting buddhas is to care for and encourage the development of faith and aspiration—that is, to cause faith that has not yet arisen to arise, and to nurture faith that has arisen to become stronger and stable. Recollection of buddhas is a mental activity that focuses on recollecting the virtues of buddhas wholeheartedly and never forgetting them. This in fact, is an especially effective and expedient way to encourage faith and aspiration to arise. As for the verbal recitation of a buddha's name,⁷ this is a preliminary measure for those who cannot undertake even the easy path well.

⁴ These practices correspond to the first seven practices of a Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's ten great vows; the remaining three practices are to always follow the teachings of the buddhas, to always accord with the wishes of sentient beings, and to dedicate one's merits universally to all beings.

⁵ This is a famous exegesis by Nāgārjuna, which explains the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (specifically the version with the length of 22,000 *ślokas*). The extant record of this exegesis is in Chinese titled 大智度論 (*dàzhìdù lùn*).

⁶ The distinction between an easy and difficult path to Buddhahood is closely connected to the Pureland School. Generally, the easy path refers to the practices of the Pureland School, in particular the practices aimed at accumulating the virtues of a buddha, such as repentance in front of the buddhas, rejoicing in the buddhas' virtues and requesting the buddhas to give teachings and remain in this world. These practices were taught to those who aspired to the *Mahāyāna* but were too weak in capacity to walk the usual path of the six *pāramitās* and helping sentient beings to Buddhahood, which takes countless great eons and requires phenomenal endurance. The easy path helps these practitioners to build their faith, merits, and virtues, so that they are able to practice the six *pāramitās*—the difficult path. The difficult path is likened to walking along the road, while the easy path is likened to travelling in a boat.

⁷ The practice of verbal recitation of a buddha's name generally refers to the recitation of the Amitābha Buddha's name, which is the most common practice among Chinese Buddhists.

Being Vegetarian

Vegetarianism, or more accurately “not eating meat,” is a virtue in the tradition of Chinese Buddhism. For a Buddhist, it is not required that one becomes a vegetarian. Some Buddhists do consume meat, such as Buddhists from Sri Lanka and so on who follow the Theravada tradition, and some Tibetan and Japanese Buddhists. Among the Chinese Buddhists, some think vegetarianism belong to the Theravada tradition and that in the *Mahāyāna*, vegetarianism is not necessary. This understanding is wrong. Vegetarianism is a practice that is specifically promoted in *Mahāyāna* texts: *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, *Mahāyāna Parinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Aṅgulimālyā Sūtra*, etcetera. Though there are many reasons and purposes for not eating meat, the main purpose is to nurture loving kindness and compassion. It is said in the *Mahāyāna Parinirvāṇa Sūtra*, “consuming meat kills the seed of great compassion.” Bodhisattvas are supposed to benefit and help all beings and provide relief to beings in suffering. How then can they bear to harm, kill, and eat them? Where is the loving kindness and compassion in that? The bodhisattva practice is built upon loving kindness and compassion; therefore, in the practice of the *Mahāyāna*, there is no doubt that meat must not to be consumed. In fact, there are two kinds of practice to develop compassion. One is passively to not eat meat and the other is actively to release lives—that is, to save lives of sentient beings. These are doable and effective ways of nurturing compassion.

Reciting the Sūtras

Regarding the recitation and memorization of the *sūtras*, this is also an expedient means of practice, although, at the beginning, it is usually performed by merely reciting the texts continually, without seeking understanding [of the teachings]. This method has a number of functions and purposes, but the primary one is preliminary practice for developing wisdom. The practices to develop wisdom (the ultimate wisdom is the realization of true *prajñā*) include the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and insight with tranquility. This is further elaborated upon in the ten righteous dharma practices: copying the *sūtras*, making offerings to the *sūtras*,⁸ introducing the *sūtras* to others, listening and learning, chanting, briefly teaching the *sūtras* to others, familiarizing oneself with and memorizing the *sūtras*, extensively elaborating on the *sūtras* to others, contemplating and discerning, and practicing insight with tranquility.⁹ The first eight are practices that fall under the wisdom of learning and its preliminary practices. To sum up, the practice of reciting *sūtras* without understanding can also be an effective measure for developing further understanding of the doctrines, the knowledge of learning. This is similar to the approaches that were used in private schools in ancient China. First, students repeatedly read and memorized a text in order to be familiar with it. After [committing it to memory], they received lectures on the text so that they could understand the text clearly.

⁸ Making offerings to the *sūtras* may sound odd, but this practice aims to develop respect for the teachings. In the way that a buddha’s image is placed on an altar so too the *sūtras*, and offerings are made to the text.

⁹ Here, tranquility must be attained and form the foundation to the practice and attainment of insight.

Problems with the Way These Practices are Undertaken

The practices mentioned above—recollecting buddhas, being vegetarian (releasing lives), and reciting the *sūtras*—are common to Chinese Buddhists. For beginners, they indeed serve as proper entry methods to the bodhisattva path. These are entry-level expedient methods undertaken to nurture the *Mahāyāna* faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

Unfortunately, some practitioners recite and memorize the *sūtras* for the sake of merit, and they slight the investigation of the doctrines, which negates the function of this expedient method for the study of wisdom. Similarly, there are those who practice vegetarianism and the releasing of lives. Although they release lives and do not eat meat, only a few cultivate enough loving kindness and compassion to actively provide relief to human beings who are suffering in the world. In other words, these practitioners focus on caring for animals but neglect to care for human beings. This is to put the cart before the horse. This situation occurs because they do not know the purpose [of being vegetarian]. Accordingly, their practice does not nurture loving kindness and compassion.

Comparatively speaking, those who practice recollecting buddhas are somewhat more successful in nurturing faith; although, generally they fall into superstitious beliefs, and a few eagerly seek self-liberation. For these practitioners, if they can truly aspire to the bodhisattva vow of seeking the Buddha path and delivering sentient beings [from suffering]—that is, arouse the mind of benefiting themselves and others and initiate the vow of great diligence for the sake of the dharma and humans—this is rare and wonderful!

The practices of recollecting buddhas, vegetarianism, and reciting the *sūtras* are special expedient methods of bodhisattva practice. However, because practitioners disregard the practice of wisdom, neglect the development of loving kindness and compassion, and easily fall into superstitious beliefs, these skillful means have never performed their function well in Chinese Buddhism. Practicing in this way does not constitute part of the bodhisattva practice (nor would it even suffice as a preliminary practice toward entry into the *Mahāyāna*). This is indeed the root cause of Chinese Buddhism's deterioration. It is sad that Chinese Buddhism has fallen into such a situation! This type of practice cannot lead to the realization of the Buddha-dharma's great benefit. [Practicing in such a way] is insufficient to save oneself, let alone save the world. When learning the Buddha's teachings and studying the bodhisattva path, it is imperative to clearly understand the true goals of these special expedient methods. We should not recollect buddhas merely for the sake of undertaking the practice of recollection. Neither should we be vegetarians merely for the sake of practicing vegetarianism, nor recite the *sūtras* merely for the sake of practicing recitation. Rather, the purpose of practicing the recollection of buddhas is to establish proper faith and aspiration. Likewise, the aim of practicing vegetarianism is to nurture loving kindness and compassion. As for reciting and memorizing the *sūtras*, the goal is to develop wisdom. These are expedient methods, and their purpose is to further our cultivation of faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

Therefore, through the practice of recollecting buddhas, genuine practitioners of the Buddha-dharma and the bodhisattva path should be inspired to be diligent and to make the great vow to attain the Buddha's wisdom and deliver sentient beings from suffering. From our practices of vegetarianism and of releasing lives, we should nurture loving kindness and compassion and follow through with many undertakings that provide social benefit to human beings. Through reciting the *sūtras*, we study the doctrines in order to develop wisdom. Only in this way are the functions of these three entry-level expedients fully utilized and the foundations for the study of the bodhisattva path firmly established. As shown in the Chinese proverb, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," these are but the initial steps. From here, there remain countless expansive and profound practices [along the path], and we should progress toward these and move forward directly!

Elaboration On Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is a Unique and Great Quality of Chinese Buddhism

Vegetarianism, the practice of not consuming meat, is a traditional virtue of Chinese Buddhism that has lasted more than ten centuries. Vegetarianism aligns well with the profound and lofty spirit of Buddhism. Only the followers of Chinese Buddhism who possessed a solid cultural foundation were able to thoroughly develop this virtue to the point at which it not only became a personal practice and a common mindset among Chinese Buddhists, but also a policy that forbade people from killing animals during certain times each year. The meaning of vegetarianism may not be fully understood by the average vegetarian Buddhist; however, vegetarianism is undoubtedly a unique and great quality of Chinese Buddhism.

Sadly, in the past thirty years vegetarianism has deteriorated due to several complicated factors. Consequently, many incorrect and false arguments have arisen and gained popularity among Buddhists. This can only be regarded as the pitiful decline of the Buddhist spirit in Chinese Buddhism. It is no wonder that Buddhists who sincerely protect the Dharma, such as Venerable Yinguāng, felt aggrieved and compelled to speak out [to improve the situation].

Why should Buddhists be vegetarian? Is it necessary to be vegetarian? Is it possible to practice vegetarianism thoroughly? Why should eating meat be discouraged? These types of questions are commonly asked, and common people's thoughts on these issues are often mixed with their misunderstandings. [Nevertheless], most beginners practicing Buddhism should understand the essential meaning of vegetarianism, and those who aim to protect Chinese Buddhism must not neglect this point.

Avoiding the Five Pungent Vegetables and the Meaning of Vegetarianism

First, we must understand that in Buddhism there are five pungent vegetables, and Buddhists are discouraged from consuming them. The pungent vegetables are garlic, onions, shallots,

leeks, and other related vegetables that have a strong, pungent smell. If everyone ate these vegetables, then it would be a non-issue between each other. But if one or only a few ate these vegetables while the majority did not, then that stinky odor would bring forth a nauseating feeling when smelled by others. Therefore, Buddhists should avoid the five pungent vegetables.

In the case in which pungent vegetables are eaten for medicinal reasons, the person must not participate in group activities, so as to avoid causing others discomfort. Thus, in Buddhism, when we talk about avoiding the five pungent vegetables, the meaning is as such. This is different from the common idea of “vegetarianism” (not eating meat).

The concept of vegetarianism as held by common people is similar to the idea of eating only vegetables and avoiding meat. However, in Buddhism “vegetarianism” does not mean that all vegetables may be eaten, or that all animal products are to be avoided, according to the Buddha’s teachings. This is because vegetables such as garlic and shallots, which are called pungent vegetables, are not eaten by Buddhists, and some items like dairy products, were permitted by the Buddha. Therefore, “vegetarianism” in Buddhism does not require a vegan diet, as some may assume. The meaning of “vegetarianism” in Buddhism is to realize the practice of no killing.

The Essential Principle of Buddhist “Vegetarianism” is to Realize the Spirit of Protecting and Benefiting Sentient Beings

The practice of not killing is the core principle underlying Buddhism’s approach to assimilating with the world and benefiting sentient beings. The practice of upholding precepts; that is, ethical behavior, relies on this principle as its basis. For example, when taking refuge in the Triple Gem, which is the initial entry practice based on faith, one recites the vow: “From this day forward until my death, I vow to protect life.”

In order to realize this vow of protecting life, one must not forgo the initiation of the resolution to uphold the precepts. The first item in the five and ten precepts is “no killing” [and this is what the oath, “I vow to protect life” refers to].

The meanings of these wholesome precepts, in summary, are as follows:

- (1) “No killing” means not to harm other people’s internal lives [referring to their bodies].
- (2) “No stealing” means not to encroach on other people’s external lives [referring to their possessions]. By respecting other people’s physical existence and their property, one is able to protect the lives of others.
- (3) “No sexual misconduct” means not to destroy the harmony of other people’s families, and thereby, one is able to protect the existence of each family unit.
- (4) “No false speech” means to bring about mutual understanding, trust among humans, realizing no deceit, and no conflicts between them. In this way, one is able to protect the existence of society and humankind.

If someone diverges from the spirit of protecting lives, then all their behaviors toward people and the environment will become negative and eventually turn into unwholesome, evil practices. Therefore, protecting lives is at the core of Buddhism. This is the innate essence of Buddhism and also is what the *Mahāyāna* promotes, extensively and perfectly. “No killing” and “no consumption of meat”, which are based on compassion, both stem from this innate essence.

Seemingly Reasonable Yet False Arguments From Non-vegetarians

Some people advocate that there is no harm in eating meat, and some go as far as to say that we cannot live without eating meat. These arguments that non-vegetarians put forth are varied and complex. But the most misleading of them is the attachment of plausible, scientific reasons, such as that it is impossible for us to not kill, and that it is necessary to kill. [From their perspective], not eating meat for the sake of no killing is absolutely meaningless. Some argue that plants also have life and so being vegetarian still cannot avoid killing. Some also argue that there is no pure vegetarian [because] even when drinking water many microorganisms in the water are killed. Further, they argue that by just breathing, many microorganisms in the air are killed too. So they [contend] that if one wants to truly avoid killing and eating meat, then one cannot drink or breathe, and as a result the only choice is death.

In addition, some non-vegetarians criticize vegetarians with the argument that vegetarians base their practice of vegetarianism on the grounds of benevolence, and that this is just a kind of self-deception [and cannot achieve the goal of no killing], which is similar to what Confucians say, “a virtuous man keeps away from the kitchen.”¹⁰ If such an opinion is held by ordinary people in society, it is understandable. However, if a Buddhist practitioner concurs and supports such a viewpoint, it is a big joke. I heard that Buddhism in Japan also holds such a similar [erroneous] view. It is hard for me to believe this. From my understanding, Buddhist studies in Japan are quite well developed, and so how is it possible for them to maintain such a superficial view? Perhaps occasionally there are a few disreputable scholars who want to appease their appetite and hence concur with such a worldly, erroneous view.

¹⁰ Here, Venerable Yinshun is highlighting how some non-vegetarians distort and criticize the Buddhist argument for being vegetarian, which is based on compassion and hence no killing. This quote comes from a dialogue between a king and Mencius. During that discussion, the king observes a cow being led away and enquires about the cow. Upon finding out the cow will be slaughtered for a ceremony, the king takes pity on the cow and asks that the cow be released and a goat (which he has not personally seen) be used instead. The quote that “a virtuous man keeps away from the kitchen” implies that vegetarians, although they do not eat meat, cannot stop the acts of killing that occurs in the kitchen. Hence, the aim of no killing is not thorough because vegetarians cannot stop others from killing and eating meat. In other words, vegetarians do not eat meat because they cannot bear animals being killed. However, non-vegetarians eat meat, and animals are still killed due to their consumption. The non-vegetarian’s distorted question is: Why can vegetarians not bear animals being killed if the meat was for their own consumption, but are not active in stopping others from killing and eating meat, which shows that vegetarians do not really mind if animals are killed?

Discussing the True Meaning of No Killing from the Relationships Between Sentiment and Rationality, and Between the Killer and Victim

When talking about killing and no killing in Buddhism, it involves the aspects of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. In other words, this issue in the Buddhist context involves morality and immorality. The qualities of morality and immorality do not belong to the scientific fields of physics or chemistry, nor is it related to something [that can be viewed] through a microscope or telescope. In physics, what is wholesome or unwholesome cannot be distinguished. Rather, this belongs to the field of morality, which involves the complexity of rationality and sentiment. That is to say, what is wholesome or unwholesome is something related to mentality and object, as well as self and others in the realm of sentient beings. Therefore, this issue should be explained from the aspects of rationality and sentiment, and from the aspect of the mentality of the killer and victim.

First, let us look at the aspect of what is killed. Killing means to harm and to take the lives of beings that possess feelings and consciousness (similar to what is called an animal). Beings that have feelings and consciousness all yearn for life, and fear death. If they meet with harm or face death, fear and suffering arises in them. This then brings about behaviors stemming from anger, resentment, and animosity. For example, when there is killing among people, the situation of animosity, hostility, and vengeance develops between each other.

Plants are beings that do not possess feelings and consciousness. Although plants exhibit the characteristics of reproduction and require nutrients to sustain their lives, they only react physically when they are harmed. They do not have any psychological reaction. For example, when the grass is mowed and trees are cut, they do not feel upset, nor do they develop hostility and animosity [toward those who mowed the grass or cut the trees]. Moreover, these acts, such as cutting trees, do not cause the doers to bear the karmic force of killing. Therefore, when talking about no killing in Buddhism, the key points are whether the object that is killed will experience a psychological reaction, and whether [the act of killing] will give rise to effects in which there is a relationship of mutual animosity and hostility. The proponents of “eating vegetables is also killing” obviously have not been clear about this particular point in Buddhism and have not properly understood the true reason for prohibiting killing.

The Mentality of the Killer and What They Killed Affect the Degree of Fault from Killing

In Buddhism, killing specifically relates to the killing of beings that experience feelings and consciousness. Even though sentient beings all have feelings and consciousness, on account of the differences in relationships between the victim and the killer, the degree of fault from killing will vary. For instance, killing a person is regarded as a grave fault, and in this case, if the victim is a person to whom the killer or society owes much gratitude, such as parents, teachers, or sages, then the fault is the evilest of evil. If the victim is a cow, sheep, bird, fish, or insect, although there is fault, the severity is much less.

Apart from the factor of the victim, whether the act constitutes killing needs to also take into account the mentality of the perpetrator when they kill sentient beings. This can be summarized into three categories:

1. If the perpetrator kills a sentient being under the condition that they clearly know that the victim is a person and, due to greed, hatred, and/or deviant views they make the decision to kill after thinking about the act, then the act constitutes the grave fault of killing. Under such conditions, even if the victim is an animal, the fault is not light either.
2. Regarding sentient beings like cows, sheep, insects, and other animals, we should avoid killing and harming them, and [in fact,] it is possible to avoid killing and harming them. If we are unable to be mindful and due to carelessness we harm them, then we still bear the fault of killing. But this fault belongs to *duskṛta*¹¹ offense, which is relatively light.
3. At the time of killing or harming, if one does not have the intention to kill and is not aware that sentient beings are to be killed, such as through drinking water or breathing, then this does not constitute the fault of killing, even though sentient beings may be harmed and killed.

In Buddhism, the notion of taking life refers to actions of killing that constitute an immoral fault. This is similar to the laws [relating to murder] in our society, but even more thorough. For example, in the legal system there is a difference in the degree of the crime, such as whether there is intention to kill a person, or if the killing was accidental. In addition, if a person who is mentally disordered or disabled accidentally harms someone, they are not considered as having committed the crime of murder.

The Wrong View that Uses the Guise of Science to Justify Taking Life

The Buddhist teachings on what is killing and what is not killing are reasonable, ethical, and not difficult to understand. Yet, those who use the guise of science to justify the taking of life have actually muddied this matter; they argue that taking life is a fact that is unrelated to sentiment and rationality, or to the killer and victim. In other words, they argue that this matter is unrelated to humans. From their view, they turn their argument from inability to avoid killing into the view that it is acceptable to kill, and even to conclude that killing is necessary. If we follow their argument, then one would postulate that war is unavoidable in this world and, accordingly, that it is acceptable to engage in conflict and war with cruelty, or even that war is necessary. This would mean that the promotion of peace, which is anti-war and anti-invasion, should also then be opposed. These proponents of killing are no other than those who erode the fabric of truth and morality. If Buddhist practitioners agree with these views, then undoubtedly they are foolish people who have deviant views.

¹¹ *Duskṛta* is a Sanskrit word that literally means “bad action.” In the Buddhist monastic Vinaya, a *duskṛta* offence is a minor offence.

Clarification of Situations Arising from Different Time and Place

Some people think that it is acceptable for Buddhists, even monks and nuns, to eat meat. Their reasoning is based on records in the *sūtras* and *vinayas* where the Buddha and his disciples did not abstain from eating meat. Even today, the monastics in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand continue to live a lifestyle that is very similar to the monastic lifestyle of Ancient Indian Buddhism where all monastics did not avoid eating meat. The lamas in Mongolia and Tibet, as well as the Buddhist clergy in Japan, also eat meat. Based on these facts, [these people argue that] abstaining from eating meat is a unique quality and practice of Chinese Buddhism, and that vegetarianism is not a strict rule that all Buddhist practitioners must follow.

Using these observations of different types of Buddhism as proof [that eating meat is acceptable] seems to be very reasonable. However, there is a precondition that we must first clarify. Protection of life is the guideline that Buddhists follow for living in this world and benefiting sentient beings. Buddhists regard this guideline as the loftiest goal, and they aim to bring humans and themselves toward this goal in life. This loftiest goal and aim can only be achieved by taking into account the conditions of time and place. Thus, the starting point must be something doable, [for the people] and then slowly they can progress to greater and higher practices. It is futile to apply the same [high] standards to all situations. If one claims that everyone should apply the same [high] standards to all situations, then this statement will become nothing more than all talk and no action [because it is not doable].

That is why in Buddhism there are the different levels of practices for the sake of better human lives, heavenly lives, and the state of transcending the world, and so on. We need to understand the skilful practices that gradually help someone to progress, and then guide them to complete the ultimate and perfect practices. We should not remain fixated on the practices that are provisional [and not ultimate].

The Issue Concerning the Three-fold Acceptable Meats in the Buddha's Time and in Theravada Buddhism

It is true that in Ancient Indian Buddhism—during the Buddha's time and subsequently—the disciples and the Buddha himself did eat meat, yet they abstained from killing. Within the precepts, not only is the killing of humans strictly prohibited, but intentionally harming an animal's life is also prohibited. So much so that [monastics are] required to always have a water filter with them to avoid harming the planktons in drinking water carelessly. It is without question that the practice of no killing is stringently applied in Buddhism. Nevertheless, because the Buddha and his disciples relied on alms for their livelihood, they had to accept whatever the donors provided and had to eat whatever they were given.

The Buddha and his disciples never approved of personally taking the life [of an animal] for the sake of indulging in what was delicious, nor did they stress that they had to have meat [for the same purpose]. Because Buddhist monastics have to accommodate the practice of traveling around to seek alms and to spread the Dharma, they could not strictly forbid the consumption

of meat. In other words, their consumption of food and drinks had to conform to the prevalent conditions. Although Buddhist monastics were allowed to eat meat in some situations, this did not constitute breaking the precept of no killing, since they had no intention to kill, and the animal was not slaughtered purposely for the monastics. As such, there were some restrictions relating to the consumption of meat at that time. In the situations in which the [monastics] personally saw that the animal was killed [in order to make the offering to them], or they were informed or suspected that [the meat dish] was especially made for them, they had to politely decline the offering. This is because animals were killed especially for their sake in those conditions. Therefore, if they did not know to decline the meats offered by donors, when they should have, in these situations they were regarded as breaking the precept of no killing.

In Buddhism the prohibition against eating meat is not because of the meat itself; rather, it is because [eating meat may stimulate the development] of killing. In general, people do not know the true meaning behind [the precept of] no killing. They do not understand that the reason Buddhists do not eat meat is to avoid taking life, not because of the meat itself. Due to not knowing the true meaning of abstaining from eating meat in Buddhism, various incorrect arguments occur in society.

In summary, on the one hand, if Buddhist monastics who live a life based on alms consume meat [that is offered to them] under the conditions [of the three-fold acceptable meat] in which they do not see, learn of, or suspect [the meat dish is especially for them], they do not break the precept of no killing. On the other hand, if monastics are receiving continuing support from a certain devotee, then they should educate that devotee to avoid especially making a meat dish in order to offer it to them. Otherwise they violate the rule of no killing if they continue to consume meat. How can it be reasonable that the monastics should know the devotee is taking the life of an animal especially for them but still choose to eat the meat, using the reason that the Buddha allows them to eat meat?

If someone gets used to eating meat and feels they cannot live without eating meat, this is a situation of being trapped by the craving of taste. In such a case, even if they are monastics from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and so on, they are still essentially contravening the Buddha's core teaching on compassion, and they have lost the true spirit of Buddhism.

The Teaching That Encourages Vegetarianism in the Mahāyāna Aligns with the Buddha's Spirit of Great Compassion

The rules for renunciants in Buddhism originally [was set up to] adapt to the mendicant lifestyle of India at that time. Under the circumstances of a mendicant's lifestyle, they ate whatever was offered for meals and rarely had the opportunity to choose the type of food they consumed. [Therefore] eating meat was a provisional way to cater to that time and place. But within the great compassion of the Buddha, he never considered that the three-fold acceptable meat was something that all Buddhists must eat. Thus, the Buddha's true spirit is fully explained in the *sūtras* such as *Hastikakṣya Sūtra*, *Aṅgulimālyā Sūtra*, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, and *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. In these *Mahāyāna sūtras*, vegetarianism is clearly instructed.

It is said that Buddhist practitioners should not eat meat and that the three-fold acceptable meats is a provisional permission [for the sake of catering to prevailing conditions]. Eating meat destroys the seed of great compassion and (intentionally killing in order) to eat meat makes one a member of Mara's clan. The teaching of not eating meat in the *Mahāyāna* aligns perfectly with the Buddha's spirit [of great compassion]. This is not just an idealistic teaching; it can be adapted to the prevailing situation and be implemented.

Initially, the monastics lived a mendicant lifestyle, relying on alms, but as Buddhism began to flourish the monastics gained offerings of large parcels of land from kings and individuals. Although the land was farmed by lay devotees and the harvests were offered by them to the monastics, in essence the produce was under the management of the monastics. In addition, some [monastics] gained long-term support from certain devotees and simply maintained the formality of seeking alms each day. So, the original alms round, [where they went] from one house to the next; that is, randomly showing up at homes seeking alms in which sometimes they received food and sometimes received nothing, began to change. Under such new circumstances [where monastics can choose their food], if monastics continued to consume meat, then it was obvious that their consumption of meat came from their desire to eat meat. So how can one say that they have not broken the precept [of no killing]? Hence, when the *Mahāyāna* became widespread, a resolute position to oppose eating meat was advocated.

Another similar example is the monasteries of Chinese Buddhism, where monastics live a lifestyle of working their own fields, purchasing their own things, and cooking their own food. If they continue to eat meat, then how can they not be in violation of the Buddha's precepts? Putting aside the *Mahāyāna* precepts, even the *Śrāvakayāna* precepts would not permit this. Some monastics, because of their desire to eat meat, use the monastics' consumption of meat in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and so on as their evidence to argue that Chinese monastics can also consume meat. Such ludicrous arguments are not based on the prevailing situation, but simply based on the individual's personal desire.

The Reason Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists Eat Meat

The Buddhist practitioners in Mongolia and Tibet also eat meat. These countries predominately raise animals (inner areas of India and China are largely agriculturally based). Their main food source comes from cows and goats. Under such situations, being vegetarian is not easy at all. Therefore, just like the situation of alms begging, where monastics can have three-fold acceptable meat, Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists' consumption of meat also does not break the precept [of no killing] if they do not kill the animal themselves and do not instruct others to kill animals [for their consumption]. Another reason the Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists eat meat is that the Buddhism in Mongolia and Tibet is dominated by Esoteric Buddhism, which is different to *Śrāvakayāna* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism,¹² [on the one hand] the goal of Buddhahood, which practitioners esteem and aspire to, and the great practices that bodhisattvas develop, are based on great compassion and wisdom, and are manifested through gentleness, tolerance, and compassion. All these qualities especially reflect the virtue of loving kindness and compassion. As these practitioners regard the [buddhas and bodhisattvas] as their role model for practice and have a specific emphasis on loving kindness and compassion, abstaining from eating meat is [naturally] a precept practice for the followers of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

In Esoteric Buddhism, [on the other hand] the objects that practitioners esteem and venerate as protectors are in the form of a wrathful being, lustful *yakṣa*, or *rakṣa* (*vajras*), which are said to be the manifestations of buddhas or bodhisattvas. The Esoteric practitioners regard the *vajras*, who belong to deities of the Thirty-Three Heavens, as their ideal. These Esoteric practitioners develop the visualization that they themselves are the *vajras*, which is called divine-pride (also called Buddha-pride). This is to learn and undertake the practices of the *yakṣa* and *rakṣas*, and to aim to accomplish the *vajra* body of a *yakṣa*. A *yakṣa* and *rakṣa*'s behavior is to feast on flesh and to drink blood (*vajras* are said to cause harm to humans), as well as being highly promiscuous.

In the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Mahāyāna* teachings, these *yakṣas* and *rakṣas* are tamed and educated by Buddha's disciples and, as a result, they give up the habits of consuming flesh and blood, abstain from promiscuity, stop killing other beings, and become guardians and supporters of Buddhism. In contrast, the teachings in Esoteric Buddhism instruct the practitioners to learn from them and take them as exemplars. As a result [these practitioners] learn their ways of consuming meat. Given these *yakṣas* and *rakṣas* are their role models, the practitioners accordingly have to eat meat. It is said that eating meat is very helpful to the practice of sexual union in the Unsurpassable yoga.

From the aspect of environment, Buddhists' consumption of meat in Mongolia and Tibet is an unavoidable situation. From the aspect of faith, it is their freedom of choice that they aspire to learn the *vajra* practice; that is, the *yakṣa* ways of consuming flesh and blood (and to say this is one of the Buddha's and bodhisattva's manifestations). What more can we say? It is definitely improper that we, according to bodhisattva practices of compassion and being gentle, should criticize the practice of regarding a *yakṣa* or *rakṣa* as their revered object. Nevertheless, our humble opinion is that we hope to use the bodhisattva practices to guide and transform *yakṣas*; we do not approve of using the Esoteric practices to behave the same as *yakṣas*. Based on their environment and their beliefs, the consumption of meat by Buddhist practitioners in Mongolia and Tibet should not be criticized, but nor should they be imitated.

However, if Esoteric Buddhism spreads to the farming areas of inner China and the habit of eating meat develops such that practitioners in this region must have meat, then this is problematic. If the Buddhist practitioners of Chinese Buddhism want to learn the *vajra* ways of consuming flesh and blood, looking upon the *yakṣas* and *rakṣas* as their example, then there

¹² Note that the Chinese has 顯教大乘 (*xiǎnjiào dàshèng*), which is referring to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism that does not include Esoteric Buddhism. Some people consider Esoteric Buddhism as part of *Mahāyāna*.

is not much else we can do apart from pity them. We can only hope that this world does not become like that of the *yakṣas* and *rakṣas*.

Bizarre Arguments From Those Who Eat Meat

Meat eaters influenced by Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism have begun putting forth increasingly bizarre arguments. Some argue that practitioners of Esoteric Buddhism must eat meat because this can help overcome attachments [to fixed ideas]. In fact, this world is filled with people who eat meat and who are not willing to become vegetarians. Why do these practitioners not help these people overcome their attachment to meat, but simply entice the few who do practice vegetarianism to eat meat? What kind of logic is this? Does this mean that Esoteric Buddhism is only intended to teach the small numbers of vegetarians [to overcome attachments]?

Another argument is that eating meat is for the sake of liberating the animal. According to their explanation, as long as they give the animal some blessings and say prayers for them [and then eat them], they have helped the animal establish a karmic link of liberation. Based on this logic, do they not wish to liberate their parents and children? If they wish to do so, then why do they not likewise eat their parents and children? Perhaps they may think that there are even better ways to liberate their parents and children. But then why do they not eat centipedes, toads, worms, parasites and so on for the sake of liberating them? These critters are also in need of liberation. All these bizarre arguments from meat eaters are all in vain. Let us be frank: it is because they want to eat meat that they use the excuse of liberating the animal; it is certainly not the case they eat meat for the sake of liberating animals.

Some Buddhists who live in agricultural areas and do not practice Esoteric Buddhism cite the fact of Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists' meat consumption as their defense for consuming meat; this is ridiculous and pitiful.

The Issue of Consuming Meat in Japanese Buddhism

Originally, Japanese Buddhism developed from Chinese Buddhism. Up to this day, with the exception of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pureland) sect, the headquarters of other sects maintain a vegetarian diet. Ever since the Jodo Shinshu sect began to marry and eat meat, the other Japanese Buddhist sects began to follow. This sparked the gradual divergence of Japanese Buddhism from Chinese Buddhism.

Although there are so-called monks in Japanese Buddhism, most of them do not take up the monastic precepts. In essence, it can be regarded as [a type of] Buddhism dominated by lay people. Some say that Japanese Buddhism [is the system that] transcends the monastic form of the *Śrāvakayāna* to become a bodhisattva vehicle whereby the householders are dominant. However, it would be more apt to say that Japanese Buddhism has stepped back from the monastic form of the *Śrāvakayāna* to the ordinary human vehicle. [Therefore], the consumption

of meat by Japanese Buddhists should not be judged according to strict and lofty standards [for monastics].

Elaboration On Practicing the Spirit of Protecting Lives from the Aspects of Environment and Spiritual Capacity

Protecting lives is the fundamental spirit of Buddhism, and it is an all-pervading principle. However, from a practice point of view the issues of whether the approaches suit the conditions of environment and people's spiritual capacity should be considered. With respect to the environment, in some situations eating meat is permitted. In the situation in which alms begging is required and practiced the three-fold acceptable meat is permitted under some conditions. In addition, in the areas in which raising animals is the only and main viable food source, Buddhist monastics are allowed to eat meat under the same conditions. The conditions are that monastics do not personally kill the animal, that they instruct others to do so, or that the animal's death is not directly linked to the self; in this case, eating meat is not considered a breach of the precept of no killing. Nevertheless, in the case where the monastics purchase and cook [their own food], such as the monastics of Chinese Buddhism, the consumption of meat would be regarded as violating the precept of no killing, regardless of what excuse is used. [Therefore,] the environment [one faces] has its idiosyncrasies, and a blanket rule cannot be applied to all situations. In essence, the great compassion of protecting lives in Buddhism should be regarded as the ultimate aim throughout, and one should not hold fast to the provisional approach and use that to object to the ultimate practice.

With respect to people's spiritual capacities, if a person truly has the spiritual capacity of *Mahāyāna* and learns the *Mahāyāna* path, then they should strictly avoid eating meat and nurture their great compassion [through this practice]. For those [whose spiritual capacity] focuses on the *śrāvaka*'s practice to attain self [liberation], the Buddha has set the rule of the three-fold acceptable meat to adapt [to their lifestyle of alms begging]. As for the ordinary Buddhist follower whose spiritual capacity focuses on aspiration to the human and heavenly vehicles in the Buddha-dharma, and have never aspired to leave this world, and also have never initiated the bodhi vow, it is not proper to criticize their consumption of meat or their action of killing living beings, except in the case of killing humans. This is because, although what they do is impure and in error, this has been a common situation during the defiled process of cyclic existence since time without beginning.

For the sake of guiding these followers toward the [practice of] the Buddha-dharma, it is a good idea to encourage them to strictly uphold vegetarianism at certain times, such as on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar months, on the six fasting days of each month, or for short durations. These kinds of practices can be a preparative means to head toward [the advanced practices of] the Buddha-dharma. In other words, for Buddhists who habitually eat meat, instead of strictly forbidding them from eating meat immediately, it would be better to gradually ease them [off meat].

[It turns out that] Chinese lay Buddhists are accustomed to vegetarianism, and have misunderstood that a practitioner of the Buddha-dharma must be vegetarian. [Consequently,] they harbor contempt and disgust toward Buddhists who eat meat. Such views and attitudes can deter meat eaters from learning the Buddha-dharma and can even cause those who promote eating meat to have negative reactions.

The Ridiculous Argument that Eating Meat is Necessary

Regarding meat eaters, [perhaps] because they are used to eating meat or their desire to savor the flavor of meat is too strong, they come up with many theories that eating meat is no big deal, and even that eating meat is necessary. That is, not only do they say that (one can) practice Buddhism and eat meat, but they also go as far as to oppose vegetarianism. All these theories claiming that eating meat is reasonable, is natural, and that vegetarianism is to be rejected, are illogical.

I hope that those who themselves cannot live without eating meat and [also] encourage others to eat meat, stop creating the bad karma of defaming the Dharma. Dear friends, [please take heed, promoting] such ridiculous arguments will destroy yours and others' karmic link to the practice toward Buddhahood.