

Buddhism

The common mistake made about Buddhism and food is that the Buddha forbade the eating of meat, but he did nothing of the sort. He did forbid the taking of any life in the First of the 5 Precepts:

Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami - I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.

All that is clear from the suttas is that a Buddhist can ‘with a clear conscience, receive, cook, and eat meat that either was freely offered by someone else, or that came from an animal who died of natural causes’.ⁱ Pali texts show that the Buddha and his followers did eat meat as long as they had no reasons to suspect that the meat was specifically killed for them. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Buddha’s death appears to be the result of eating adulterated pork, but there is argument about the meaning of the word translated as pork.

A Buddhist cannot under any circumstances, however, take part in the killing of anything for food. Bullitt puts it nicely: a Buddhist can’t go into a Chinese restaurant, point to a live lobster in a tank and ask for it to be cooked for them. So, a Buddhist can’t be a butcher and indeed Buddha identified ‘the business of

The majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists are Theravada, one of the two great tendencies in Buddhism, the other being Mahayana. ‘From the Theravada perspective, the choice of whether or not to eat meat is purely a matter of personal preference. Many Buddhists (and, of course, non-Buddhists) do eventually lose their appetite for meat out of compassion for the welfare of other living creatures.’ⁱⁱ Sri Lankan daily food practice reflects this. Cookbooks written by Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers and Muslims have recipes for all kinds of meat (fowl, pig, beef, lamb) and fish, and hotels, restaurants, and kades (small cafes) serve meat dishes. Knox wrote of the Veddah hunter gatherers selling meet to people from the ‘Countray’ and exchanging it for arrowheads from ‘Smiths’ in both of which cases this was likely to include Buddhists happy to live in the grey area of eating meat which they very well know has been killed for food, if not for them at their request. My father recalls going to the Central Market in Colombo to buy meat from butchers all of whom were Muslim – though never pork, of course.

ⁱ Bullitt 2010

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