

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'.

What 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. Current thinking is that what is meant was a mushroom in a dish described as *shukaramaddava*, possibly a mushroom grown in an area frequented, and so softened, by boars. The result was apparently dysentery that led to death.ⁱⁱ

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.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Mahavamsa records Buddhism as being introduced through the conversion of the Sri Lankan king Devanampiya Tissa by Mahinda, the emissary of the Indian king Asoka, somewhere between 250-200BCE. 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.'^{iv} 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 'Country' 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.

Sinhalese Buddhists have eaten meat for centuries. Excavations at Anuradhapura indicates that 'the expansion of the city and increasingly social complexity require a food supply which certainly appears to have involved the extensive exploitation of four main animal types (i.e. Bos, Axis, Sus, Parreysia) plus a range of other animals'.^v The Inscription on a pillar at Mādirigirya dating from the 10th century CE says that dead goats and fowls should be given to the hospital attached to the monastery. The Chūlvamsa, the chronicle following the Mahavamsa, describes a great feast for the bhikku (monk) community during the reign of Vijayabāhu in the 13th century CE at which meat was one of the items.^{vi}

Knox also describes dealings between the Wanniya-laeto and local villages that suggest Sinhalese Buddhists ate meat.

'They kill Deer and fry the Flesh over the fire, and the people of the Country come and buy it of them... It hath been reported to me by many people, that the wilder sort of them, when they want Arrows, will

carry their load of Flesh in the night, and hang it up in a Smith's Shop, also a Leaf cut in the form they will have their Arrows made, and hang by it. Which if the Smith do make according to their Pattern they will require, and bring him more Flesh: but if he make them not, they will do him a mischief one time or another by shooting him in the night. If the Smith make the Arrows, he leaves them in the same place where the Veddahs hung the Flesh^{vii}...

When I first read this, I wondered why 'the people of the Country' would buy meat from the Veddahs, and why a smithy would barter for meat. Surely they could have gone and hunted for themselves? I think the answer for the Sinhalese communities with which the Veddah's interacted is, Buddhism. The foundation event for Buddhism in Sri Lanka, as the Mahāvamsa records it, arises when the Sinhala king Devānaṃpiyatissa is out hunting. He sees a stag that he startles into running and gives chase. Little does the king know that the stag is a deva of the mountain who has taken this form to draw the king to where the *thera* (elder priest) Mahinda is living, having come to Lanka on the orders of the dying Buddha to preach and convert. The king hears the teachings and is converted as is his court and many others. The Chronicle doesn't specify it, but presumably somewhere in the teachings Mahinda outlined the precepts of Buddhism, the first of which prohibits intentional killing of any creature. While there is a common belief that Buddhists are prohibited from eating any meat, this is not what Theravada Buddhism teaches that the Buddha allowed his monks to eat meat (with some exceptions) as long as the animal was not killed for the purpose of being food, particularly where it is the food that is put into their begging bowl as they should avoid giving offence to the donor.^{viii} So what I think Knox is documenting here is an accommodation meat fancying Sri Lankan Buddhists living near the Wanniya-laeto made at the time with their religion, though admittedly it would take some fancy hair splitting since they would have to know the deer was killed for food.

ⁱ Bullitt 2009

ⁱⁱ Achaya 1994

ⁱⁱⁱ Bullitt 2009

^{iv} Bullitt 2009

^v Young and Coningham cited in Hussein 2012

^{vi} Hussein 2012

^{vii} Knox *ibid.*

^{viii} Bullitt 2007