

*QUESTION: Why is the cruel treatment of animals almost never discussed or questioned within Buddhist circles or Buddhist magazines? So many Buddhists continue eating meat and wearing leather and fur. I don't understand this. What is your view, and how can we who live by the dharma bring about a change?*

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: My view is that vegetarian is surely best. It is common knowledge that animals raised for consumption are mistreated, and that they experience pain when they are killed. If we resonate with the pain that animals clearly feel, it seems to me it's very difficult to justify using animals to satisfy our own desires. As far as I know, most Theravada meditation centers in the West are vegetarian for this reason. Eliminating or at least minimizing one's consumption of meat is an expression of compassion. It's also very positive from the point of view of global warming. According to a recent United Nations' report, the meat industry is responsible for twenty percent of the world's carbon emissions.

Yet the answer to your question is not simple. Some people need to eat meat for their health. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is one of these people. He has written that his strong preference is to refrain from eating meat but that his doctors have advised against it. It is clear that this pains him. As well, there are certain parts of the world where meat must be eaten simply to survive..

Theravada monks are in a different position than laypeople because monks have little choice about what they eat. Monks are dependent on lay people for their food and are expected to accept whatever is offered. As I understand it, the higher precept that monks are expected to keep is the precept of accepting whatever is offered to them. They also need to avoid being directly responsible for an animal being killed expressly for them.

I do think if we choose to refrain from eating meat that it is wise not to be dogmatic or self-righteous about it. As we know, history is full of people who were remarkably cruel to other people and yet were kind to animals. Ultimately you must do what is right for you. If you choose not to eat meat or wear fur or leather, your example may inspire others. There is so much suffering in this world and there are so many ways that we can try to alleviate it. Anything we do to alleviate the suffering of others, including animals, is beneficial.