



# **The Concept and Practices of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarianism in Vietnamese Society**

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## **Abstract**

The objectives of this paper are 1) to study the concept of vegetarianism in Mahayana Buddhist canon; 2) to study the concept and practice of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarianism in Vietnamese society and 3) to analyze the roles of Mahayana Buddhist vegetarian in Vietnamese society. This qualitative study rotate issue on the concept and practice of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarianism in Vietnam society.

The study is also found that it is not necessary for one to be a vegetarian in order to become a Buddhist. Buddhist motivations for abstaining from meat-eating draw from a wide range of traditions. Theravada tradition emphasizes non-harming, Right Livelihood, and detachment; Mahayana tradition highlights interdependence, Buddha-nature, and compassion.

**Keywords:** Mahayana Buddhism, vegetarianism, Vietnamese society.

## 1. Introduction

It must be said that, in all Mahayana sutras, there is no sutra allowed to eat meat. Not only that, the Buddha also explicitly stated that human should be preventing from meat eating. From Mahayana scriptures, the Buddha clearly states that all sentient beings are equal because they all have Buddha-nature and will be enlightened in the future: “I am the Buddha, and sentient beings will be the Buddha.”

*“Sabbe tasanti dandassa sabbe bhayanti maccuno attanam upamam katva na haneyya na ghataye”.*

*(All are afraid of the stick, all fear death. Putting oneself in another’s place, one should not beat or kill others). (Dh.p. 129)*

Thus, it means people should not kill others’ life to nourish our lives. The Buddha taught lesson of compassion mind to his followers by eating vegetarian food, instead eating of animal flesh. In the LankavataraSutra (Kinh Lang Gia) the Buddha said that: *“after I have passed away, there may be some of my followers who do not have deep understand on my teachings. They may be mistakenly concluding that I allow them to eat meat and I, myself, also eat meat. That is a mistake, because how those who are in a compassionate mind, practicing asceticism and following the Mahayana path can tell others to eat meat? Indeed, I have given the rules of eating, but not about meat eating. Therein, there has ten things to avoid and three things are acceptable. But in this sutra as well as in the Hastikashiya, Nirvana and Angulimalika sutra, eating meat is strictly forbidden. Not only in the past, but in the future and present, all followers have to abstain from the meat of animals even though they make in any way.”* (Ven. Duy Lực, 1994: 239-41).

Further, a human life is nothing more important than health, people will not survive without healthy, but how can we have long-life without disease. Today, we live in developed society with the humanize progressing on science, technology, industrial science, biological sciences. There are many inventions to help people gain strength, healthy and long-life. That is so, but the most important is how can humankind apply science and technology to their life in a simple way? So, Albert Einstein, the physicist said that: *“Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”*

It is true. In previous time, vegetarianism was practiced by religious practitioners of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. But each religion has different vegetarian ways. People who follow the vegetarianism, they want to have a

healthy life without disease. Moreover, they practice vegetarianism for healing, environmental protection, protection animals. (Julia Mathew, 2017: 35)

Today, vegetarianism is not strange to people anymore. People think that the vegetarian food as a way of health treatment. But not much people understand why the Mahayana Buddhism must have vegetarian food. The ordinary people think that regulation of Mahayana Buddhism is “Buddhist monk/nun must eat vegetarian food”. It is true, but in fact that reason is not really persuaded. Therefore, this study will expose the meaningful of why Mahayana Buddhism tend to eat vegetarian food and how could they persuade people in Vietnam society. This paper will express the ideal of the concept of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarian, the way how they practice vegetarian food in their Buddhist life. Moreover, the research also studies on the concept and practice of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarian in Vietnam society.

## 2. The concept of vegetarianism in Mahayana Buddhist Canon

There are many subdivisions within Buddhism but most can be classified into three major branches: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The Theravada and the Vajrayana schools in South East Asia, Sri Lanka and Tibet tend to allow meat-eating while Mahayana practitioners in China, Korea, and Vietnam advocate vegetarianism. (Stephanie Kaza, 2005: 392)

Theravada Buddhist disciples must go alm round and having one meal per day. Avoiding the carving and attachment on food. So, food are prohibited after lunch. But the Theravada Buddhist disciples allowed to have meat in dairy meal. However, they do have the rule of acceting as *“three occasions in which meat may be eaten: when it is not seen, not heard, and not suspected, that the living being has been killed for sake of the Bhikkhu”*. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995: 474)

While Theravada schools emphasize restraint and personal discipline including eating discipline to achieve liberation from craving, Mahayana schools emphasize the virtue of helping others attain freedom from suffering. The Mahayana model of the enlightened being is the bodhisattva who returns lifetime after lifetime to help all who are suffering. The Bodhisattva vow to “save all sentient beings” calls for cultivation of compassion for the endless suffering of existence.

Animals, like humans, are seen as living beings caught in the afflictions of birth, sickness, old age, and death, cherishing their own existence or self with all its desires. Caring for animals by not killing them as food is a way to develop compassion for others.

The chapter eight in Lankavatara Sutra eliminates the suffering of fear in animals, which arises from experiencing the human intention to kill.

*“For fear of causing terror to living beings, Mahamati, let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion, refrain from eating flesh”.*

Besides, the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra is also clearly mentioned on vegetarianism. The chapter seven of this sutra is on Four Aspects as rightness in one's own self; correcting others; complying well (with the teachings) and discussing; and understanding well causal relations. This chapter was the dialogues between the Lord Buddha and Bodhisattva Kasyapa, meat-eating mentioned in the third aspect of this dialogue.

*The Bodhisattva Kasyapa said to the Buddha: “O World-Honoured One! To one who eats flesh, we should not give flesh. Why not? I see a great virtue arising out of abstention from eating flesh.” The Buddha praised Kasyapa and said: “Well said, well said! You now come to know my mind well. A Bodhisattva who protects Dharma should be thus. O good man! From now on, I do not permit my sravaka disciples to eat meat. When receiving from a danapati a pristine dana (gift) of faith, think that one is eating the flesh of one's own son.” (Yamamoto Kosho, 1999: 43)*

Therefore, if one takes the Bodhisattva vow, then one would be committed to liberating animals as well as humans from suffering, and thus would take up a practice of vegetarianism. Mahayana Buddhist vegetarian ethic was first formulated around the idea that all beings have Buddha-nature, the central concept in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. Buddha-Nature is understood to be an embryo of the Tathagata or the fully enlightened being.

### 3. The Concept of Vegetarianism in Vietnamese Society

Buddhism spread into Vietnam earlier and brought the Buddhist tradition to impact on the Vietnamese culture and society. Buddhism early appeared in Vietnam by the Indian monks following the businessmen who going to selling good and they brought the Buddhist tradition to their trade trip. Vietnamese tradition worships ancestor and local cultures, by the influence of Buddhism, their lives and cultures were adapted. The Vietnamese temple was not only a place for preaching Dhamma and worshiping the Buddha but also their home of studying and doing activities. They believed and worshiped Bodhisattvas because the characters of Bodhisattva who sacrificed themselves to do the benefit of others. Buddhism

deeply affected their lifestyle of thinking and doing of good deeds and the tradition of eating vegetarian also appeared and deeply developed in Vietnamese temple and society.

**Style of vegetarianism:** there are different degrees of vegetarianism, however in Vietnam the three most common types of vegetarianism practice:

**(a) Vegan and Lacto-vegetarian:** Vegan is one kind of vegetarianism in the Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist using. It typically does not use animal products and eggs in daily meal. According to the Surangama Sutra, the five forbidden pungent roots because of: “Buddhism advises practitioners to avoid them, as their consumption tends to disturb the peacefulness of the mind: Garlic, allium chinense, asafetida, shallot, and allium victorialis (victory onion or mountain leek).” (Thien Phuc, 2011)

The five eating forbiddance require to practice in the Vietnamese Mahayana daily meal, however, they can be used as the medicine of treatment. Furthermore, Lacto-vegetarians do not eat red or white meat, fish, fowl or eggs but do consume dairy products such as cheese, milk, and yogurt but not eggs.

**(b) Lacto-ovo-vegetarian:** eating both dairy products and eggs is the most common type of vegetarian diet.

*The Vietnamese gastronomic habit tends towards vegetarianism; rice and vegetables are the main courses of the meal that may be diversified by aqua products. Boiling is a special way of cooking of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese people like a synthetic food processing style that involves many materials and ingredients. ( Vietnam Culture Overview, 2019)*

This is the most common type of vegetarian uses by Vietnamese people. They take eating vegetarian a few days in a month and also use eggs and dairy products.

**(c) Brown rice-vegetarian:** using brown rice is one of the vegetarian types in Vietnamese recently because of the health benefits of it.

*Brown rice is one of the most easily digested starches because of its high mineral content, supplies important nutrients for the hair, teeth, nails, muscles, and bones. This means that the release of sugar into the bloodstream is slower after eating brown rice compared to white rice (Phuong Vu, 2018).*

They can eat brown rice in a daily meal or two or more servings of brown rice a week have an eleven percent reduced risk of getting the disease. Vietnamese people know the benefit of eating brown rice that makes the increasing practice number recently.

#### 4. The Practice of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarianism in Vietnamese Society

The influence of Mahayana Buddhism on Vietnamese culture and tradition, the practice of vegetarianism impact deeply into Vietnamese society by the practice of Vietnamese Buddhist disciples and lay people.

For the Buddhist monks and nuns, the Northern Vehicle of Buddhism following the Path of Bodhisattva, it is called the *Bodhisattvayana*. These Mahayanists observe the Bodhisattva Precepts, one of which is the prohibition against partaking of food that is prepared using the flesh of an animal. The Vinaya contains guidelines for proper conduct on the part of monks and nuns. “The Vinaya states that monks are not to work for a living, and the eating of food not made by others was a *pacittiya*, an offense requiring confession” (Wijayaratna, Mohan, 1990: 58).

The practice of vegetarian had written down in the Mahayana Vinaya. The requirement of vegetarian dietary by monks and nuns is the enshrined in the supplementary monastic code of the Vietnamese Buddhist. Mahayana Buddhism confirmed that if one pursues the Bodhisattva Path to attaining Enlightenment, one should avoid meat eating to cultivate compassion for all living beings. “All the roots of goodness of all... bodhisattvas and all *Tathagatas* have as their foundation loving kindness... if any person asks about the root of any aspect of good; say that it is loving kindness” (Y. K. Tony, Yamamoto Kosho, 2000: 16-8).

The Buddha-nature has insight each sentient being for becoming of Buddha: “a complete and practical manual for a spiritual practice that will eventually lead to enlightenment. It gives instruction in the correct understanding of the Buddha-nature, which is the potential within all beings for becoming a Buddha” (Ven. Master Hsuan Hua, 2009: p.xiv). Because of the relationship between compassion and the Bodhisattva Precepts, we would never think of killing anyway.

Additionally, the Vietnamese Buddhist Monks/Nuns mindfully practice the “Five Contemplations” while eating. There is the five periods: “think about where the food came from and the amount of work necessary to grow the food, transport it, prepare and cook it and bring it to the table” (Dr. Ron, 2003). The five observations force to stop and think about the food they are eating.

Vegetarianism in Vietnam is certainly not only limited to the monastic community but also practices by the Vietnamese Lay Buddhist. They usually practice vegetarian in the temple and their home, in brief:

**The Observance of Eight Precepts and One Day of Vegetarian in the Vietnamese Mahayana Temple:** a set of eight Precept to be observed by the Lay Buddhist on two days or four days of the lunar month at the temple. Laypeople will come to the temple early in the morning and spend twenty-four hours in the temple to observe the precept.

By the observance of Eight Precept, they cut themselves off from their life which is bombarded with material and sensual demands. “Observance of precept (both the Five and Eight Precepts) when performed with an earnest mind in certainly a meritorious act.” (S. K. Dhammananda, 1998: 165). They take a chance to develop relaxation and tranquility, to train their spirit.

**The Vegetarian Diet at Home:** The Vietnamese people practice vegetarianism at home following their condition and tradition. The lay Buddhist always take their vows to practice six days monthly. They are the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, and the last two days of the lunar month.

The Vietnamese people take the six days of vegetarianism because the following the Buddhist precept, however, they eat a vegetarian diet because of: “causing healthy problems. Normally, someone is reaching to elderly age fat level of the body tend to increase and with the fat level these blood pressure and cholesterol also tend to the increase” (Most. Ven. Thich Nhat Tu and Thich Duc Thien, 2014:63).

So, many Vietnamese Buddhist follow the monastic style vegetarianism or at their home by taking the six days in monthly, on the occasion of Lunar New Year’s Eve, ancestral feast days as well as the 1st and 15th day of the lunar calendar. Other Buddhist lay-followers also follow the vegetarianism dietary.

## 5. An Analytical the Roles of Mahayana Buddhist Vegetarian in Vietnamese Society

People become vegetarians for many reasons, including traditional culture, way of life, metta-karuna, karma, health, religious convictions, concerns about animal welfare or a desire to eat in a way that avoids excessive use of environmental resources.

### a. Role of Vegetarianism towards Traditional Culture and Ways of Life

The vegetarian food first became popular during the reign of the Ly Dynasty in 11th century. However, it reached its zenith as an important part of royal cuisine during the long rule of the Nguyen Dynasty since early 19th century, when Hue emerged as a Buddhist Centre (V. Ngoc Anh, 2017). Vu Ngoc Anh says more that “the team of chefs serving

royalty had to offer the King the finest food as part of a royal ritual, a prayer for peace and prosperity in the kingdom. During this special ritual, the King kept himself clean and his mind tranquil. The cooks also had to be clean and extremely selective of the food they chose to make the offerings. Above all, the vegetarian feast had to be presented beautifully, with ornate decorations.” Therefore, vegetarian food has become a tradition in Hue and more strongly spread to the whole Vietnam nation. Moreover, most people turn vegetarian during the first and full moon days of the month and on other festive days. The first day of the New Lunar Year, for instance, is a day of vegetarian meals for many families in the city.

Vegetarian food, mostly vegan, has become increasingly popular in Vietnam over the last few years. All major cities, including the capital, have many restaurants that serve vegan food, and their number is increasing. Vegans can find in Vietnam a variety of vegetarian dishes. However, the most common vegan dishes are made of soybeans. Apart from tofu, steamed and fried, soybeans lend themselves to soya paste, fermented tofu, veggie Vietnamese ham and a wide variety of other dips and dishes.

### **b. Role of Vegetarianism towards Metta-karuna Practice and Good Karma**

It is not necessary for one to be a vegetarian in order to become a Buddhist. Becoming a vegetarian in order to strengthen our loving kindness and compassion. The Lankavatara, Nirvana and Angulimala Sutras had various reasons for not eating meat, but the main reason is to cultivate one’s loving kindness and compassion. As the sutras say: “Eating meat nips compassion in the bud”. Therefore, being a vegetarian does not lead to liberation, but to cultivate the compassion and loving-kindness.

What one does, no matter how insignificant it may seem, affects everyone else, including oneself. Our present reality depends on how one has treated others in our past. That is good news because it means one can change one’s bad karma by changing our actions.

With a vegetarian diet, one begins by reducing the intake of meat dishes so one gradually becomes more compassionate. By doing this, one will naturally improve their karma as well.

### **c. Role of Vegetarianism towards Environment and the Strengthen Human’s Physical and Mind**

#### ***Environment***

The damaging effects of meat production is one of environmental issues. Reducing the consumption of meat and encouraging vegetarianism are measures for protecting the environment that would not only make economic sense, but would also receive the support

of most of the world religions.

According to a recent report by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, 18% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions come from livestock production, namely from the urine and excrement of animals raised for food. The greenhouse gas emissions from this animal waste is 40% more than the emissions that come from all the motor vehicles, including airplanes and ships, of the entire world. Further, almost two-thirds of the ammonia emissions responsible for acid rain come from animal wastes (Alexander Berzin, 2019).

### ***The Strengthen Human's Physical and Mind***

According to what scientific research has discovered, people's emotions are more easily stimulated when the moon is full while such emotions are at a lower level than normal on the first day of the lunar month. Thus, by eating vegetarian food, people can adjust their minds and bodies (Ven. Mater Hsing Yun, 2015: 7).

Moreover, vegans can find in Vietnam a variety of vegetarian dishes. However, the most common vegan dishes are made of soybeans. Apart from tofu, steamed and fried, soybeans lend themselves to soya paste, fermented tofu, veggie Vietnamese ham and a wide variety of other dips and dishes. Since soybeans are nutritious, rich in protein and calcium, and non-fattening, they are a good replacement for animal meat. They are also said to be useful in treating several illnesses, including heart disease and cancer (Bach Lien, 2016). Despite the different motivations of each vegetarian, as long as they have the correct concept and they cook their food well, vegetarianism will have a positive effect upon the mind and body.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study found that there is not only Mahayana Buddhism mentioned on the vegetarianism but also Theravada Buddhism had too. Even both schools have some ideas are not really same. Theravada Buddhist disciples allowed meat in dairy meal. But they do have the rule of accepting as "*three occasions in which meat may be eaten: when it is not seen, not heard, and not suspected, that the living being has been killed for sake of the Bhikkhu*". However Mahayana Buddhist disciples are not allowed to have meat in their dairy. In actual fact, vegetarianism is a practice specially advocated in the Mahayana teachings. The Lankavatara Sutra eliminates the suffering of fear in animals, which arises from experiencing the human intention to kill. "*For fear of causing terror to living beings, Mahamati, let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion, refrain*

*from eating flesh".* Moreover, the sutra says that savage animals also have Buddha-nature. Both humans and animals desire to live and fear death, that is in their awareness. Therefore, being a vegetarian is entirely based on the mind of compassion and that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature.

Theravada schools emphasize restraint and personal discipline including eating discipline to achieve liberation from craving, Mahayana schools emphasize the virtue of helping others attain freedom from suffering. But the Buddhism, specially Mahayana Buddhism, have strongly enhanced on the theory of non-harming (*ahimsa*). The goal of learning Buddhism is not to become a vegetarian, for eating is not the important issue; it is the purity of the mind that is important. If one's words are filled with compassion and loving-kindness but the mind is filled with greed, hatred, and wrong views, one can eat vegetarian food all day long but still go against one's conscience.

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