

## OBSERVING THE FIRST PRECEPT

**I think I was asked to take part in this discussion<sup>1</sup> because I am a vegetarian and a Buddhist as well. If that is so, the impression probably was that I am a vegetarian because I am Buddhist and that in my opinion I have to be vegetarian in order to observe the first precept. Well, I must say that this is not why I am vegetarian.**

So I must provide you with a little bit of autobiographical material. I never *became* vegetarian. My mother's brother was a vegetarian - that was more than 70 years ago. My mother loved him deeply and would do anything to please him. So when he suggested to her that it would be a good thing if she brought up her children to be vegetarian, she wholeheartedly agreed.

I was born severely underweight and my mother used to say that visitors who came to see the new infant nearly always wondered how he could survive: he was so tiny. And it seems I habitually refused take my mother's milk. I vividly remember that as a child I was awfully thin. In those days when there were no antibiotics and standards of hygiene were poor, young ones were often susceptible to all kinds of infection. I was no exception. In my childhood I suffered from measles, chicken pox, typhoid and malaria. Nevertheless my parents at no time tried to make me eat fish or meat: the family stuck to the decision through thick and thin.

Years later, when I left my village and came to Kotte to stay with my vegetarian uncle, he put me to school at Ananda Sastralaya, which was then under the Principalship of Dr Adikaram. As you all know Dr Adikaram was a staunch vegetarian and there prevailed at the school a positively pro-vegetarian atmosphere. I was quite at home in this atmosphere and never bothered to think about the question why I was a vegetarian. I only knew that my uncle had given up eating fish and meat because of Venerable Narada, who at that time was preaching the virtues of vegetarianism in the country.

It was only after I entered the university that I had often to answer questions about my diet and also suffer some taunts - but really not many. Most of my friends respected my way of life which by now I had consciously chosen not to alter. I never thought that in order to conform to the first precept I must be vegetarian. I must say that through all those years, I hardly ever tried to convert anyone else to my own way of living. When I married, my wife was not vegetarian and I didn't bother about it. The important thing is that she didn't mind my being vegetarian either. In a very largely non-vegetarian world, I co-existed with others happily. I even co-existed happily with a non-vegetarian partner<sup>2</sup>. But we had a definite agreement that no meat would ever be brought to our home.

In 1982, after I had been 56 years a vegetarian, Dr Adikaram formed the Sri Lanka Vegetarian Society and asked me to be one of its Patrons, the other being himself. Till then I had been a

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly enlarged version of an article that appeared in the Daily News (Sri Lanka) of January 02, 1999 and in the Animal Rights Online Newsletter of March 24, 1999. The enlarged version was prepared for a Buddhist symposium at the YMBA, Borella and has since been published in the website Buddhism Today.

<sup>2</sup> My wife, the late Kalyani Sanghamitta Palihawadana (Kusuma to her friends), also became a vegetarian, some years after our marriage. She remained a dedicated vegetarian till her death in November 2009 aged 82.

vegetarian first due to sheer upbringing and later due to a gut feeling that I had: that it was not right, it was not fair, to participate in the process of killing animals to feed ourselves. By my own life experience I knew it was also not necessary, - though at that time we did not have the scientific support to vegetarianism that exists today. In fact I stuck to vegetarianism in spite of the information that we were given at that time - namely that there were serious health hazards in the vegetarian diet. I used to try to obviate those so-called hazards by taking Marmite, yeast tablets and considerable amounts of milk.

During all those years, I studied several languages one of which was Pali. As Pali was the language of Theravada Buddhism, that led me to an indirect study of Buddhist religious texts. Many of the canonical texts of Buddhism resonated with my conscience and they were also intellectually satisfying; and so gradually I began to give deep attention to what I read in those texts. I learned Pali first under Dr Adikaram whose unorthodox handling of Buddhist texts and subjects appealed to me greatly.

One of the things that struck me profoundly was that what the Buddha offered was not a religion of routine and habit, but one which, in spite of its extraordinary mix of simplicity and complexity, could also to a very great extent be tested on the anvil of reason. The other thing that struck me with equal force was the indubitably ethical nature of the way of life that the Buddha commended. The universal attraction of a text like the Dhammapada - which is really a good mirror of the simplicity and the complexity of Buddhism- lies largely in the fact that it teaches a way of life that appeals to the deepest ethical sentiments of the human species. And I would say that the ethics that one comes across in such texts as the Dhammapada rests infinitely more on human compassion and a feeling for justice and fairness than on any precepts.

Let me illustrate this by an example. We have all read the famous stanza which says that we should understand others by our own reactions: we would then not kill nor cause others to kill (*attānam upamam katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye*). There is no precept here. Rather, the Buddha here points out the result of empathy: what happens when one has sensitivity. The statement is a distillation of humane experience. It may be due to civilisation, or it may be the result of a distinctive trait of human psychology; whatever it is, the fact is that unless you are hardened by a villainous environment, you shrink from inflicting on others what you yourself do not wish to suffer. And, after all, is this not the basis of all justice? Is this not why we insist on fair play?

The Buddha continues to appeal to this aspect of human nature when, for example he says that all beings are frightened by weapons that inflict pain, that everyone tries to escape from death. (*sabbe tasanti dandassa, sabbe bhāyanti maccuno*). Why does he say *every one*? Does he not appeal to the conscience of his audience when he says this? Don't think that you are the only one who wishes to avoid pain and death. Everyone does. And as we learn from what he says about compassion, everyone does not mean human beings only. The universal kindness that the Buddha commends is quite clearly based on his own deep realisation of the fact that all beings are capable of suffering and any sensitive person is prone by such realisation to do what he or she can to eliminate or minimise such suffering. The point then is not whether we are mechanically going to obey a rule, but whether we can be sensitive, whether we can have that osmotic quality of the heart through which the pains and sufferings of others can seep into our own hearts. Sensitivity means that their pains and sufferings are also our own. If we can be

sensitive in that way, it is not important whether we recite a precept or not. We will instinctively and of necessity desist from what the precept tries to teach us to avoid.

Why then did the Buddha teach a code of conduct which we recognise as the five precepts? In his own words the world is full of all kinds of persons. Some have more 'dust' on their eyes than others do. It would be fair to say that he tried to rub out some of that dust, though he knew that the full elimination of it can only be by the persons concerned. Evidently, he did this with great passion and infinite hard work. The precepts perhaps should be seen as his anguished appeal to the conscience of human beings to lead an ethical life. In their utter simplicity, they represent almost all that is needed for a society to groom itself to a life of compassion and orderliness.

And now let us consider what the implications of the first of these precepts are. Actually the Buddha has not left any grey area where we have to grope in the dark as to what these implications are - what he had in mind when he called on us to take upon ourselves the discipline (*sikkhà*) of refraining from killing. In the Dhammika Sutta in particular- but everywhere in spirit - he says that not to kill means three things: You do not do it yourself; you do not get others to do it; and you do not encourage, condone or applaud, you do not aid and abet, when others do it. (*pànam na hane na ca ghàtayeyya/ na cànujañña hanatam paresam*). What more does one need to prove that one cannot observe this precept as long as one buys the flesh of animals slain for our consumption? What encouragement does the meat industry need from us? Except that we buy what they kill - and allow them to reap the profits they get from our purchases?

There are people who say that the first precept is negatively formulated; and that this is intentionally done - to allow us room to eat animals that are killed by others. Such people conveniently forget the positive corollary of the negatively worded precept. Buddhism does not stop at teaching us not to kill. It also insists that we protect and cherish all life. This is the teaching of loving kindness. *Sabbe sattà bhavantu sukhittà*: May all beings be happy. Everybody says - at least all Buddhists do- that Buddhism is a practical religion. If this practicality means that we can eat animals, then we have to admit that in insisting on happiness for all beings, it is at the same time being severely unpractical.

Actually Buddhism is practical. But the practicality lies elsewhere. It does not ask us to attempt the impossible. Like tying a cloth over your nose lest you breathe in any invisible creatures. Like refusing to walk lest you trample on tiny creatures that abound everywhere. We do what we can. We do the utmost that we can. That is all.

It is true that the Buddha did not lay down a rule for monks to be vegetarian. That was because they at that time depended on alms given by others, many of whom were not the Buddha's followers. And also it was not his style to be a spiritual autocrat. But then, he laid down that right livelihood of lay people excludes the sale of flesh. What does that mean? It means that if a community is totally Buddhist there cannot be any trade in animal products in that community. Is that not sufficient as an argument for Buddhist vegetarianism, if one needs an argument?

There is one other point that I wish to draw your attention to. As I said earlier, we are not just being led by an arid wish to follow a rule, or even by a wish to gather merit for ourselves, when we consciously make the decision not to have anything to do with what killers of animals offer to

us. We make that decision realising what is actually happening in the brutal world in which we are fated to live. In this world there are such things as animal farms. These are a hideous outgrowth of modern industry. They follow all of the horrendous evil that goes with the basic dictum of modern industry - the greatest profit at the least cost. From that flows the most unconscionable features of the modern animal farm: the techniques of "intensive confinement", denial of free movement and all other traces of a natural life to animals so confined - which includes removal of the young from contact with the mother, keeping them in total darkness for long periods of time, filthy and overcrowded living conditions, over-feeding, under-feeding, cutting their beaks and tails, utterly merciless modes of transportation and the final brutal act of the inevitable torturous slaughter. Especially the slaughter of large animals - cattle, pigs, goats, sheep - is not a job quickly done, like snapping on a mosquito. It is an abominable long drawn-out process that offends the moral conscience of all sensitive human beings.

(Please don't take me amiss. I do not mean that we have to snap upon mosquitoes. Or that killing smaller animals is all right. This is just an example to highlight the greater brutality of the slaughter of large animals.)

The modern animal farm is unlike anything that was known in the world in which the Buddha lived. Had he lived in the twentieth century, I can scarcely doubt that he would have made the first precept slightly more explicit and recommended vegetarianism to his followers.

The Buddha, had he lived in the world today would have certainly grasped the tremendous ecological / environmental hazards to which the planet is exposed by the life styles that are now gaining universal currency. In this context we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that meat eating is one of the prime reasons for a great deal of damage to the environment of planet earth. Not many people realise that 33% of the world's total harvest of grain (and 70% of the massive US harvest) goes to feed livestock of the animal farms of the world<sup>3</sup>. (This does not include the free ranging cattle and goats and other animals in the peasant economies of the world). It is said that the entire human population could be adequately fed with just one quarter of the corn, soya etc. that are now being used to feed livestock destined to the slaughter-house. And that means that three quarters of the massive acreage devoted to cultivating this livestock-feed can be diverted to forestry. That alone will reverse much of the environmental degradation that the planet is currently going through, with all that it costs to the quality of life of every species of its living beings. Awareness of this fact is a compelling factor for millions of sensitive people of all faiths to renounce meat eating and take to vegetarianism and veganism.

The modern vegetarian movement, which is vigorous and vitally active in many parts of the world, is firmly anchored in an ethical foundation which takes into account the right of animals to life and freedom - and kindly treatment at our hands- as well as the duty of us all to protect the planet's environment: so that all forms of life will flourish as they did before the onset of the disastrous life styles that are currently fashionable. If the Buddha were alive, he would have certainly been one of the prime advocates of such an ethical way of life.

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<sup>3</sup> These figures are those quoted at the time this presentation was made. The situation today is even worse, with newly industrializing countries like China and India adopting the methods introduced by factory farms of the USA. See APPENDICES 1 and 2 below.

And as I see it, this is what the first precept is all about: an ethical way of life that stands for the welfare and protection of all living beings upon this fragile planet that is our common home.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Shun meat, says UN climate chief

By Richard Black  
Environment correspondent, BBC News website

**People should consider eating less meat as a way of combating global warming, says the UN's top climate scientist.**

Rajendra Pachauri, who chairs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), will make the call at a speech in London on Monday evening.

UN figures suggest that meat production puts more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than transport.

But a spokeswoman for the UK's National Farmers' Union (NFU) said methane emissions from farms were declining.

**" People may not realise that changing what's on their plate could have an even bigger effect "**  
Joyce D'Silva Compassion in World Farming

Dr Pachauri has just been re-appointed for a second six-year term as chairman of the Nobel Prize-winning IPCC, the body that collates and evaluates climate data for the world's governments.

"The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has estimated that direct emissions from meat production account for about 18% of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions," he told BBC News.

"So I want to highlight the fact that among options for mitigating climate change, changing diets is something one should consider."

#### Climate of persuasion

The FAO figure of 18% includes greenhouse gases released in every part of the meat production cycle - clearing forested land, making and transporting fertiliser, burning fossil fuels in farm vehicles, and the front and rear end emissions of cattle and sheep.

The contributions of the three main greenhouse gases - carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide - are roughly equivalent, the FAO calculates.

Transport, by contrast, accounts for just 13% of humankind's greenhouse gas footprint, according to the IPCC.

Dr Pachauri will be speaking at a meeting organised by Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), whose main reason for suggesting people lower their consumption of meat is to reduce the number of animals in factory farms.

CIWF's ambassador Joyce D'Silva said that thinking about climate change could spur people to change their habits.

"The climate change angle could be quite persuasive," she said.

"Surveys show people are anxious about their personal carbon footprints and cutting back on car journeys and so on; but they may not realise that changing what's on their plate could have an even bigger effect."

### **Side benefits**

There are various possibilities for reducing the greenhouse gas emissions associated with farming animals.

They range from scientific approaches, such as genetically engineering strains of cattle that produce less methane flatus, to reducing the amount of transport involved through eating locally reared animals.

"The NFU is committed to ensuring farming is part of the solution to climate change, rather than being part of the problem," an NFU spokeswoman told BBC News.

"We strongly support research aimed at reducing methane emissions from livestock farming by, for example, changing diets and using anaerobic digestion."

Methane emissions from UK farms have fallen by 13% since 1990.

But the biggest source globally of carbon dioxide from meat production is land clearance, particularly of tropical forest, which is set to continue as long as demand for meat rises.

Ms D'Silva believes that governments negotiating a successor to the Kyoto Protocol ought to take these factors into account.

"I would like governments to set targets for reduction in meat production and consumption," she said.

"That's something that should probably happen at a global level as part of a negotiated climate change treaty, and it would be done fairly, so that people with little meat at the moment such as in sub-Saharan Africa would be able to eat more, and we in the west would eat less."

Dr Pachauri, however, sees it more as an issue of personal choice.

"I'm not in favour of mandating things like this, but if there were a (global) price on carbon perhaps the price of meat would go up and people would eat less," he said.

"But if we're honest, less meat is also good for the health, and would also at the same time reduce emissions of greenhouse gases."

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## Appendix 2

## **Eat less meat to save the planet - UN**



By [Louise Gray](#), Environment Correspondent 02 Jun 2010

### **The world needs to change to a more vegetarian diet to stand a chance of tackling climate change, according to a major new United Nations report.**

The group of international scientists said the greatest cause of greenhouse gas emissions is food production and the use of fossil fuels.

But while the use of coal and oil could be gradually replaced by renewable energy sources like wind and solar, the world will always need to eat.

As the world population increases it is feared that the production of food will become the main cause of climate change and environmental degradation.

The International Panel of Sustainable Resource Management pointed out that agricultural production accounts for 70 per cent of global freshwater production, 38 per cent of land use and 19 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

The report, that will be presented to world governments, said the only way to feed the world while reducing climate change is to switch to more a more vegetarian diet.

"A substantial reduction of impacts would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet change," it read.

Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme, said ordinary consumers can help fight climate change by eating less meat.

"The Panel have reviewed all the available science and conclude that two broad areas are currently having a disproportionately high impact on people and the planet's life support systems—these are energy in the form of fossil fuels and agriculture, especially the raising of livestock for meat and dairy products," he said.

Mr Steiner said governments could encourage people to eat less meat by reforming the system of taxes and subsidies so vegetarian food is cheaper.

"Smart market mechanisms, more intelligent fiscal policies and creative policy-making are among the options for internalising the costs of unsustainable patterns. Some tough choices are signalled in this report, but it may prove even more challenging for everyone if the current paths continue into the coming decades," he added.

Lord Stern of Brentford, the author of the influential Stern Review that first argued for economic measures to fight climate change, also believes the world needs to eat less meat.

He has already warned that the price of meat and other "carbon intensive" goods will need to go up to fight climate change.

Courtesy: The Telegraph (Online), UK.