

Advanced Class - Review 2008/2009

Theory and Practice of Meditation

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Essence of the Doctrine:

Q. . What are the Four Noble Truths?

A. The existence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the freedom (cessation of) from suffering and the path leading to the freedom from suffering.

Q. Explain what is meant by the existence of suffering - Dukka

A. The Pali word the Buddha used, Dukka, ranges from stress to intense suffering, mental anguish and grief. In English we generally use the word suffering. The literal translation is 'that which is difficult to endure'. The Buddha did not say you suffer or I suffer he explained that suffering exists in the world and then gave examples.

Q. What are the examples he gave?

A. Birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, old age is suffering , death is suffering, separation from the loved is suffering, associating the unloved is suffering, not getting what you want is suffering - In short the five aggregates (nama, the 4 components parts of the mind, and rupa - form) affected by attachment is suffering.

Q. Buddhism is known as a pessimistic religion because the Buddha focused on suffering, do you agree? Explain.

A. No, Buddhism is not a pessimistic religion. It is a realistic religion. If the Buddha had just talked only about the existence of suffering, then it could be said that Buddhism is pessimistic. The Buddha expounded the truth of suffering, found the cause for suffering, realized the state of eradication of suffering and taught the path to eradicate suffering. The path is now available for all persons to achieve freedom from suffering. As such it is a proven path of hope and liberation for all persons.

Q. What is the cause of suffering? Explain.

A. The cause is craving or strong grasping. The intense craving to cling to and hold tight to pleasurable sensations, the intense craving to reject and avert unpleasant sensations and the craving to change neutral sensations to pleasant sensations. The Buddha called this craving or strong grasping tanha.

Q. Usually when we suffer we tend to blame someone else for our suffering. I am suffering because of my mother, my father, my spouse, my children, my friend, my teacher, etc. Are these people the true cause of our suffering or is it something that arises from within? Is it the event that causes the suffering or is it our volitional response to the event that causes suffering?

A. The Buddha realized that the cause for the suffering and mental anguish one felt was not out side the body but within. He realized that it was the strong grasping or holding tight - the wanting and attachment - that caused suffering

Q. Give an example.

A. A class of twenty children just found out from their teacher that they were going to have a surprise test. It was a beautiful day and the class had just asked their teacher if they could play outside and have a longer recess. Many of the children were upset. Not only was the teacher not letting them go out, she was giving them a test! Some of the students ignored the teacher and walked out of the class. They were sent to the principal's office. Some of the students protested, were rude and disruptive. They were given detention. Some were angry but controlled their anger, deciding to complain about it among themselves at recess later. The rest accepted the fact that, nice day or not, this was school time. They worked on their test. Twenty different students reacted in twenty different ways and as a result suffered in different ways. Most of the students if questioned would have said, "I am miserable and it is all my teacher's fault." Suffering exists. But is the cause the teacher? If it were, then would not each and every one of the children have suffered to the same degree?

Let us examine the feelings of these children. Due to past conditioning, they knew that recess outside on a beautiful, sunny day was a pleasant sensation. Some of the children then built craving or a desire to experience this happy sensation again. Due to past conditioning they knew that tests were not fun. Some of the children then built a craving not to write the test or to set aside this unpleasant occurrence. This strong craving led some of the children to experience ill-will and possibly hatred towards the teacher, who in their mind was thwarting their happiness. Some of them then acted on this ill-will and created unskillful kamma. The stronger the craving the greater was their suffering. And yet there were some children who, with a balanced mind and equanimity, accepted the inevitable. They did not allow their former conditioning to result in craving and grasping. As a result they did not suffer.

Q. Give another example.

A. A few years ago Sri Lanka was devastated by a tsunami. The effects were tragic with over 100,000 deaths and missing persons and many more homeless. This resulted in an out pouring of love and compassion in persons all around the world. People were touched by the suffering of so many innocent persons. This tragedy revealed the best of human nature. But it also resulted in tremendous grief and mental anguish for many persons. Why did it affect people in such varied manner? Why is it that some were paralyzed with grief and anguish while some were motivated to extreme measures of compassion and some others

were totally unaffected? It is because the cause of suffering and mental anguish lies within us. It is the strong bonds of attachment that we have to our loved ones together with not experiencing and understanding the truth of impermanence that led to the mental anguish and grief.

- Q.** It is impossible to be detached from one's family and loved ones. How can one ever overcome this bond?
- A.** It is difficult but not impossible. When a person becomes a nun or monk s/he renounces her/his family and worldly things. This is the beginning. Through the practice the yogi's attachment to his or her family changes to deep compassion and selfless love and the wisdom of insight. It is however, extremely difficult for lay persons. One should not have unrealistic expectations or be judgmental. This is the current reality. Just accept it and continue with the practice.
- Q.** What is cessation of or freedom from suffering? Explain
- A.** The cessation from suffering is the Buddhist goal of Nibbana-Enlightenment or awakening. It is a supramundane state of mind that is free from defilements and is achieved through Insight meditation where one examines reality with equanimity with no evaluation and no grasping or aversion to pleasant unpleasant or neutral sensations. It is the experience of the four Noble Truths and the Buddhist reality of suffering, impermanence and not self. It is the experience of the arising and passing away of phenomena without grasping or aversion. It is just the equanimous observation and the experience of impermanence. It is also the experience of boundless compassion to all beings as one has experienced absolute reality.
- Q.** Give a description of Nibbana
- A.** The Buddha said, "Nibbana is the highest bliss." "It is bliss supreme because it is not a kind of happiness experienced by the senses."
- Q.** Give a broader description.
- A.** "As the lotus is unstained by water, so also Nibbana unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also Nibbana is cool and allays the fever of all passions. As water quenches the thirst of men and beast who are exhausted, parched and overcome by heat, so also Nibbana quenches the craving for sensuous enjoyments, further being, and cessation of being. As medicine protects from the torments of poison, so also Nibbana from the torments of poisonous passions. As medicine puts an end to sickness, and nourishes like nectar Nibbana ends all suffering and nourishes by giving peace..." Ven. Nagasena.

- Q.** I am still having difficulty relating to this description give another description
- A.** Imagine how one would feel if you had to carry a 50 lb sack of potatoes on your back and you could never put it down. Freedom from suffering is when you have put down this sack. It is the relief, the peace, the lifting of the burden, the lightening of the load. But Nibbana is the relief and peace for the mind not the body. Now imagine if you had a 50 lb load of defilements, fabrications and corruptions resulting from past conditioning in your mind Nibbana is the relinquishing of this load.
- Q.** What is the Path one has to practice to attain freedom from Suffering?
- A.** The Noble Eightfold Path as taught by the Gotama Buddha.
- Q.** Explain the Noble Eightfold Path briefly.
- A.** "Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood which is summarized as Sila or Virtue, Right effort and Right Concentration which is summarized as Samadhi or concentration (One pointedness), and Right Understanding and Right View which is categorized as Panna or wisdom. "
- Q.** Can the Noble Eightfold Path be summarized as the practice of Right Virtue, Right Concentration and Right Wisdom?
- A.** Yes. One has to understand and practice virtue, concentration and wisdom and let the Truth arise within you. The practice of the path is not just having the academic knowledge of virtue, concentration and wisdom.
- Q.** Why is generosity (dana) included in the practice and yet left out of the Noble Eightfold Path?
- A.** The Buddha dispensed the Noble Eightfold Path to the five monks: Kondanna, Bhadda, Vappa, Mahanama and Assaji who had already renounced all worldly pleasures and taken the ascetic life. The graduated method the Buddha taught to Tapassu and Balluka his first lay disciples is known as Anupubbi Katha and starts with generosity and its benefits and ends with renunciation. As lay people who are not renunciates we should include Dana in our practice. However, Dana at its highest form is included in the Noble Eightfold Path in the form of letting go. Letting go of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations and emotions that arise in the body and mind with equanimity and understanding of impermanence (Anicca) and not self (Anatta). This highest form of Dana (letting go) is included in panna or wisdom.

Q. Why do you say that a strong foundation of Dana and Sila are required for meditation? Can you show the relationship between the practice of generosity, virtue and meditation to the cessation of suffering?

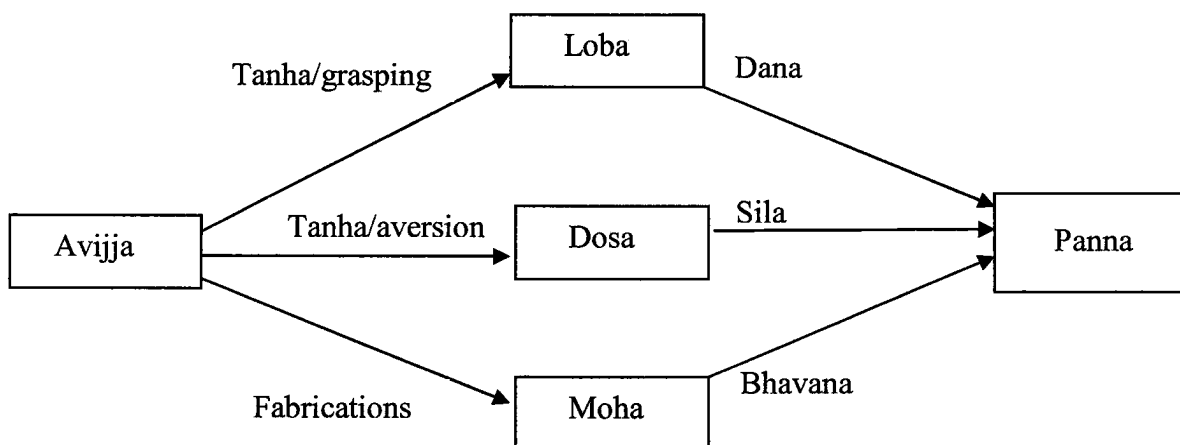
A. The Buddha said that Nibbana-freedom from suffering was the absence of greed (loba), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha). The cause of suffering is craving or tanha. A pleasant or unpleasant sensation arises one evaluates it and grasps at it if it is pleasant and averts it if it is unpleasant. Unchecked this grasping grows and leads to strong desire, greed and lust. Similarly the unchecked aversion leads to ill-will, anger and hatred. It is this strong attachment to grasping to pleasant sensations and strong aversion to unpleasant sensations that is known as tanha (the cause of suffering).

The Buddha advocated the practice of Dana - generosity or "letting go" - to reduce and eliminate Loba (greed) and Sila - virtue - to reduce and eliminate Dosa (hatred). Through the practice of Dana and Sila one reduces greed and hatred.

Q. Where does meditation fit in this picture?

A. The Buddha advocated meditation to reduce and eliminate delusion (moha) and not knowing (avijja). We know that strong grasping and strong aversion leads to craving (Tanha) which leads to suffering. Yet we continuously allow pleasant and unpleasant sensations to grow to Tanha. This is because of delusion/not knowing - not seeing things as they really are. Insight (Vipassana) meditation is used to see things as they are. Also, one learns to observe sensations of the body and emotions of the mind with equanimity and does not let them grow to strong grasping and strong aversion. One sees the arising and passing away of phenomena and realizes that this too is impermanent. One just observes without evaluation and judgment.

Avijja leads to loba, dosa and moha. The practice of dana, sila and bhavana leads to elimination of loba, dosa and moha. It also leads to the elimination of avijja and the emergence of panna or wisdom. The diagram below may help.



Q. How does one connect the doctrine of dependent origination to freedom from suffering (Nibbana) and the practice?

A. This is just a summary of what I have taught in class to trigger your memory. The doctrine concentrates on rebecoming and tanha that result in rebecoming by taking you through three births. One needs to break the cycle of rebecoming by eliminating avijja. If one goes step by step over the links of the doctrine to find the weakest link one will see that the weakest link is vedana - feeling results in tanha - craving. It is at this point that we need to focus and strike the blow. This step is in the present so it can be done. We have to do it before craving results in grasping (Upadana). By this time it is too strong to break.

The break, however, needs to occur at the first step. Avijja - not knowing results in sankara-fabricated or conditioned activities. By using Vedanaanupassana and Cittaanupassana we observe sensations and emotions in the body and the mind until the mind is sensitive to the most subtle sensations and emotions. We observe the reality of anicca-impermanence without reacting. Now when pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations or emotions occur we just observe their arising and passing away. No evaluation, no judgment just equanimity and wisdom. We do not let our past conditioning result in sankara - fabricated reactions or activities.

Q. How does one start the practice of Anapana Sati - Breathing Awareness Meditation?

A. Find a quiet place and sit comfortably on the floor or cushion in the meditation posture or on a low stool with feet firmly on the floor. Place your hands on your lap the right hand over the left, close your eyes and relax your whole body while keeping your back straight. Then focus on your breath. Start with a few deep long breaths to find the point of focus. Find the place where the breath enters or leaves the body and then watch the breath.

The beginner should just be aware of the breath passing in and out through the nostrils. Do not follow the breath into the lungs. Just watch it at the nostrils as a gate keeper watches people enter and leave the gate. Examine the quality of the breath. Is it a long breath or a short breath. Is it warm or cold. Where does the breath touch? Is it at the nostrils or is it on the upper lip? Just be with the breath. Do not regulate the breath. Just observe it.

Then slowly narrow in on the area at the tip of the nose, nostrils and upper lip. Focus on the awareness or sensation of breath. The sensation of breath will come gradually with persistent practice. Focus on the feeling of the breath and the sensation it causes. Let the breath come naturally. Do not regulate it. Just watch and feel the breath.

Q. I am having difficulty keeping my focus on the sensation of breath. Sometimes I do not feel it at all. Can you help?

A. It is the nature of the mind to wander. You can not expect to harness the mind that has run free for many years. Do not be agitated. Be patient. What you are experiencing is common to all persons even those in meditation for a few years. Just concentrate on bringing the mind back to the breath as soon as you become aware that it has wandered. Make it a habit that you harness the mind as soon as you are aware that it has left the breath. Do not let the mind start to chatter and tell stories. Be in the present moment.

- Q.** What do you mean by be in the present moment?
- A.** Your mind will wander into the past or the future. Harness the mind back to the present moment. Sensation of breath represents the present moment. Also be in the present moment throughout the day. Whether you are studying, eating, driving or playing don't let your mind wander to other things. Make sure that you give your full concentration to what ever you are doing. The mind tends to move to "Desire" or "Distress". Keep it in the Dhamma. When ever you are in the present moment you are in the Dhamma. I call this the 3 'D"s - Desire, Distress and Dhamma. When you keep it in the present moment you are in the Dhamma.
- Q.** I have heard that counting and repeating a word (mantra yoga) helps concentration. Do you recommend this?
- A.** It is true that counting and repeating a word such as Buddho helps concentration, but you have to give it up when you move to Vipassana. At times it is very difficult to drop the counting or the word. As such I recommend sensation of breath with patience and a lot of love and compassion to your self. Do not set unrealistic goals and expect concentration in a few days or months. Practice daily consistently with effort. Then let go and let Dhamma unfold. This is your current reality. Every sit will not be the same. Just accept your current reality and practice, practice, practice!
Counting, repeating a word, looking at an object (Kasina), conceptualizing are all external to the mind and body. They will eventually lead to Jhana but no further. One needs to find an object that is internal to the body. This is the beginning of the practice of Vipassana. Awareness of the sensation of breath is the beginning of Vipassana.
- Q.** I am still having difficulty with concentration.
- A.** Are you practicing daily for at least one hour in a quiet place? One can not learn to play the piano just by taking weekly lessons. One has to practice daily. The progress will depend on good instruction and daily practice. Even a professional pianist who performs has to practice many hours daily to keep up his practice. Harnessing the mind that has run wild for many years is challenging. Have confidence in the Dhamma and in your self. Others have succeeded. What others have done you too can do. Let the Dhamma unfold. Accept current reality. Do not be harsh on yourself. Just watch your mind.

If your mind is wondering to ill-will or anger switch to thoughts of loving kindness. Start with your self then spread to others. If your mind is distracted by desire and lust move to impurities of the body. If there is doubt reflect on the virtues of the Buddha or take a break from meditation and read an inspiring discourse or biography of a great monk or nun. When sloth and torpor appear in the mind reflect on impermanence and death. Next day go back to breathing awareness.

- Q.** I see a lot of anger and ill will. What should I do?
- A.** Your practice must begin with thoughts of loving kindness (Metta Chinta). Metta Chinta for your self for past hurts and metta to others for having hurt you. Just practice metta. This may be required for a month or even a year. Do not start with breathing awareness if persistent anger and hatred remain in the mind. As you grow calm with thoughts of loving kindness use one or two words such as "be happy" or "sukiho" and use this for concentration.
- Q.** I have good concentration when I study or listen to a talk. However, my mind runs when I focus on breath.
- A.** You have concentration in your daily life. This is good. We must now focus on right concentration. Samma Samadhi. Be patient and consistent. Practice diligently. You will succeed in time.
- Q.** In which discourse did the Buddha teach Vipassana?
- A.** In the Satipathana Sutta -Four Foundations of Mindfulness
- Q.** What are the Four Foundations of Mindfulness?
- A.** 1. Kaya-anupassana or mindfulness of the Body, 2. Vedana-anupassana or mindfulness of sensations or feelings, 3. Chitta-anupassana or mindfulness of the mind and its thoughts or emotions, and 4. Dhamma-anupassana or mindfulness of truth or Dhamma including the Five Hindrances, Five aggregates, Six internal and external sense bases, Seven factors of enlightenment, Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path,
- Q.** What do you mean by mindfulness?
- A.** Observing with a concentrated mind while in deep meditation the reality within, without aversion or grasping just observing with equanimity. Seeing for your self with your mind as opposed to knowledge from a book or a tape. Seeing for your self and experiencing impermanence. Experiencing the arising and passing away of all things with equanimity. It is an awareness of the current reality.
- Q.** Give an example.
- A.** When an event is happening one can get involved and become a part of the event or one can step aside and observe the event as a bystander. As emotions such as anger, passion enter the mind watch but do not get involved. Do not let your mind run with the event and proliferate and multiply. Just watch without aversion or attachment realizing this too is impermanent. In the same way when sensation arises pleasant, neutral or unpleasant just observe do not attach or avert just observe realizing that this too is impermanent. Watch the arising and passing away of phenomena.

- Q.** Give another example.
- A.** When you are watching a play at the theater you observe the actors perform. You ascertain the message they are trying to convey by observing their expressions, words and actions. You do not join the performance. In the same way just observe the actors in your mind. Anger has arisen. Do not join the actors and take ownership of the anger. Just observe it arise and pass away without judgment.
- Q.** How does one begin the practice of Vipassana?
- A.** One begins the practice of Vipassana when one starts to observe the sensation of breath on the nostrils and/or upper lip with equanimity. When one has practiced sensation of breath and obtained a fair measure of concentration one moves to observing sensation on the body (Vedana-anupassana). One does this systematically from head to foot. One observes pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations without labeling them or reacting to them with aversion or desire. One just observes the arising and passing away of sensations.
- Q.** What do you mean by some measure of concentration?
- A.** When one's mind remains with the sensation of breath without distraction for some time. When the breath becomes so subtle that one feels that one is not breathing but one can still remain with the breath without fear or distraction. When one can scan the body one time without the mind wondering outside the body.
- Q.** When should one begin the practice of mindfulness of the mind (Citta-anupassana)?
- A.** One continues with the practice of sensation on the body for a year or two until one's mind is in tune with sensations that arise in the body and can observe the arising and passing away of sensations naturally. The body and the mind are tightly integrated. Just as one feels pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations one feels similar sensations in the mind. We just name them differently. When watching the mind you may say I am sad or angry or joyful. When watching the body you may say I am in pain or this feels good.
- Q.** Why do you not start Vipassana with mindfulness of the Body (Kaya-anupassana)?
- A.** Mindfulness of the body, where the impurities of the body and constituent parts are observed is ideal for persons who have strong desire and passions. It is also a good way to start for those moving from the married life to the celibate or ascetic life. As most of my students are married persons leading a normal householders life I prefer to start with vedana-anupassana unless a student informs me that he is having hindrances resulting from desire.

Q. How often and how long should one meditate?

A. One should meditate twice a day, preferably at the same time. One hour at each sitting is good. Start with 15 minutes of breathing awareness then move to 40 minutes of Vipassana and end with 5 -10 minutes of metta. If you have the time for longer periods of meditation this is better. If you can have a day retreat every month with a ten day retreat every year it will be even better.

Q. Many teachers recommend breathing awareness (or the preferred Samadhi meditation) until one reaches the Mental ecstasies (Jhana). You encourage Insight meditation when Access Samadhi (Upachara Samadhi) is reached. Is it not better to attain Jhana and then move to Vipassana?

A. The Buddha attained the Jhana. The advantage of attaining Jhana is that one temporarily subdues the hindrances. This makes it possible to practice for long hours of meditation without the disruption resulting from the hindrances. However, one needs long hours of meditation at a stretch to attain Jhana. Most lay persons find it difficult to devote the required time to the practice. As such one may not reach Jhana in this life-time and then one has foregone the benefits of Vipassana. This is good in the monastic environment or if the yogi has the time for long hours of uninterrupted meditation..

Also there is the danger that the bliss of Jhana can result in the yogi forming an attachment to the bliss of Jhana and not wanting to emerge from Jhana and move to Vipassana. I have found that moving to Vipassana when some measure of concentration is achieved is more productive and encouraging to the lay persons with busy lives. The results of Vipassana are experienced which encourages the practice further. However, people are varied. I agree that the Jhana route is more suited for some persons

Q. Many times you have spoken about the importance of mindfulness in your daily life. What do you mean by this?

A. What ever you are doing in your daily life, be it seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling or cognizing let there be no distractions. If you are seeing let there be only seeing. If you are hearing let there be only hearing etc. When you are driving, eating, reading or playing try and be focused and do not let your mind be distracted. In the same way be mindful of your sensations and emotions in your daily life. Examine the current reality as an observer without evaluation and reaction.

General:

- Q.** Why is the Buddha referred to as the greatest physician?
- A.** A physician helps the sick by diagnosing the sickness, determining the cause, then eradicating the cause by prescribing the appropriate medication. The Buddha diagnosed a universal sickness common to all living beings - Dukka. He then determined the cause - Craving. The Buddha then went on to eradicate the cause by prescribing the appropriate medication - The Noble Eightfold Path. Just as to cure the sickness one has to take the medication as prescribed by the physician to cure the sickness of suffering one has to practice the Path as taught by the Buddha. Praising the physician, reciting the prescription will not cure the sickness. Similarly praising the Buddha and reciting his discourses will not result in the cessation of suffering.
- Q.** The Buddha is said to have made radical changes in India. What are some of the changes he made?
- A.**
1. The Buddha denounced the degrading caste system where mankind was segregated to persons of high cast and low cast based on birth right. He said that it is by deed that one becomes a noble person and by deed that one becomes a person of low birth. Then he ordained persons of high birth such as royalty and noble men and low birth such as slaves and street sweepers in his holy order and gave them titles based on their abilities and distinctions
 2. The Buddha formed the order of nuns and appointed two female chief disciples to assist with his nuns as he had done with the monks. At the time of the Buddha women were treated as chattels and it was believed that they could not go to heaven without explicit obedience to their husbands. The Buddha encouraged women by saying that women like men could reach the highest spiritual attainments.
 3. The Buddha encouraged question and analysis before acceptance. The Buddha said come and see. Confident in the Truth of his teaching the Buddha encouraged question and debate. There is no blind faith in the Buddha's teaching. Instead he encouraged confidence through study, analysis and direct experience.
- Q.** Did the Buddha recommend vegetarianism for the success of the practice?
- A.** No, the Buddha did not request his Sangha (holy order) to be vegetarian. In fact when one of his renegade disciples, Devadatta, requested that vegetarianism be included as one of the discipline rules for the Sangha the Buddha refused saying this would cause unnecessary hardship to his monks and nuns. The monks have 227 discipline rules (Vinaya) that they need to follow but being a vegetarian is not one of them. The Buddha gave permission for those who wished to be vegetarians to do so. The disgruntled Devadatta caused a chasm in the Sangha by breaking away and forming his own order of disciples.

In the Jivaka Sutta the Buddha has said that his Sangha should not eat meat if they know, see or hear that this animal was killed especially for their consumption. He also requested

that they should avoid certain types of meat such as human flesh, tiger, snake, elephant, etc. as meditating monks living in the jungle would attract wild beast who were attracted to these types of meats. This request was to avoid attacks on meditating monks by wild tigers and other flesh eating animals.

The Buddha was interested in eradication of the defilements. In the Amagandha Sutta the Buddha advised that it is unskillful actions resulting from the defilements that resulted in impurity not the eating of meat. The Buddha focused more on right speech - words that came out of our mouths. We must refrain from telling lies, gossip, slander and harsh words. The only reference to what is consumed is drugs and intoxicants that alter or impair the mind. Both the holy order and his lay disciples are requested to refrain from drugs and intoxicating substances that impair the mind.

If you feel that being a vegetarian assists you in the practice of compassion then this is acceptable. However, if you are not eating meat because of strong aversion or eating meat with strong greed then watch your mind carefully. Our practice is to reduce both strong aversion and strong attachment as it leads to suffering.

Some Mahayana traditions request their Sangha to be vegetarians. It is not clear exactly when this practice was started. The monks under Devadatta were vegetarians. However, the Mahayana tradition came into being sometime after 1st or 2nd century A.D. The Theravada tradition generally encourages eating whatever is served, in moderation with the freedom to chose vegetarianism based on one's own requirements and experiences from the practice. The focus under the Theravada tradition is more on eradication of the defilements resulting from loba, dosa and moha.