**Be A Bodhisattva For The World**

One of the strongest concepts of Buddhism is the Bodhisattva Ideal. Traditional Buddhism describes a bodhisattva as a highly developed meditator who forgoes complete enlightenment, dedicating their attainments and further practice to the benefit of all sentient beings. It is a foundational aspiration for Tibetan Buddhism but is implicit in the earliest teachings. This practice orients the intention for liberation beyond personal aspirations and focuses on the power of relationship to transform the world through compassion and generosity.

This is a grand gesture and has great merit but can seem overwhelming or at least grandiose for our householder culture. One of the significant concerns for me is comparing the larger issues of the planet with my direct experience as a contemporary American consumer. What can I do within my limited scope of resource and influence about the increasing pollution of the biosphere?

This has been a concern of mine since the early 1970’s and after the cultural upheaval of my college years in the late 1960’s. At the time I was living in New Jersey and had little or no money. I fell in with a married couple my age who were yogis associated with the early career of the Hatha Yogi Amrit Desai, who had an Ashram in Pennsylvania. For some reason I was also reading a book called “Diet For A Small Planet” by Frances Moore Lappe. The focus of the book, and her work in general, is the disparity between what potential the planet has for producing sufficient food for humanity and the rampant starvation.

What impressed me was the data that showed the excessive amount of land and water it takes to feed one cow, compared to the food that could be grown and watered, then distributed to the population. Grains and legumes are more easily harvested, stored and shipped than meat. Of course, there is the problem of the spreading of highly nitrated fertilizer into the water system, but that is more manageable than meat production.

Out of economic necessity, I went with this couple to the Ashram and lived there for a few months in the Autumn of 1970. This was a strictly vegetarian establishment and my life as a “steak and potatoes” person ended. I noticed I felt better day by day and, in addition, I had my first exposure to meditation practice, including the book “Be Here Now” by Baba Ram Dass.

The reason I mention these incidents in my life is to clarify my intention regarding avoiding red meat. I do eat fish occasionally and eggs on a regular basis, and that represents a compromise in my commitment to the welfare of the planet. I was a vegan throughout the 1970’s based on a commitment to lessen the ecological damage to the planet, derived from the information in Lappe’s book.

Most people believe that the Buddha was vegan, and this is a misperception. In the Vinaya, the code that guides the lifestyle choices of Buddhist Monks and nuns. The teaching states "Monks, I allow you fish and meat that are quite pure in three respects: if they are not seen, heard or suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk. But, you should not knowingly make use of meat killed on purpose for you." (Book of the Discipline, Vol. 4, p. 325). During those times, which predate the strict vegetarianism of the later Hindu rules involving ahimsa, non-violence, the Buddhist renunciates relied on the generosity of local villages, whose poverty required that they find protein wherever they could, including meat.

We live in a different environment, where food production and distribution is radically different than then. We know more about nutrition as well as how to grow food. Food consumption in our culture during my lifetime has been more organized around industrial efficiency and profitability than actual nutritive value. Here are some examples of how this affects our health and the environment:

SUGAR: Glucose is an essential fuel for the body and we all have a natural craving for something sweet. Up until the 16th century, it was considered to be a delicacy, even as medicine! When the Europeans began to exploit slave labor, the ability to cheaply grow and harvest sugar cane transformed and, to a large extent began, the despoiling of the environment. South Florida is the most relevant example; industrial sugar farms dominate Florida political dynamics, and the result has been the upsurge of nitrate pollution in the Everglades and feeds the red tide algae blooms that are significantly impacting tourism in the southern part of the state. Those workers who cultivate and harvest the cane are significantly underpaid and suffer greatly from the workplace conditions.

BEEF: The consumption of meat is considered a luxury for a large segment of humanity. The high levels of protein seem ideal for good nutrition. The downside is the industrialization of meat production, processing and distribution. As I mentioned above, raising cattle is quite inefficient ecologically. The corn and soybeans grown for animal feed can also be consumed by humans, and those crops can be grown where cattle would be grazing. Methane created by cow farts contributes in measurable ways to global warming. The nitrates from cow dung is a rich fertilizer, but much of it isn’t directed to that function. One of the side effects of this year’s hurricane Frances was the overflowing of dams containing pig manure, sending nitrates into the rivers of the Carolinas and out into the Atlantic. Meat must be refrigerated to avoid spoilage, and that uses energy that would otherwise be available for less ecologically damaging processes. Additionally, industrial farming includes routine application of antibiotics to healthy cattle, pigs and poultry to foster quicker growth to harvest. This contributes to the emergence of antibiotic resistant disease organisms.

FOOD PRESERVATIVES: One of the great advances in human culture is the ability to store food with minimal spoilage. Currently, however, the number and variety of industrial chemicals added to food to manage appearance as well as reduce spoilage has as yet unknown consequences, particularly for children, whose bodies are vulnerable to chemically induced developmental problems.

There are any number of other examples of how contemporary agricultural practices cause harm for individuals and the environment. This harm isn’t contained just to farm animals; the environmental degradation and disruption caused my contemporary human culture is systematically destroying the areas where the biosphere was previously dynamically in balance due to millennia of evolution. Of course we cannot as individuals correct these wrongs, and the industrial and corporate systems that dominate contemporary culture exert to a large extent control decisions that adversely affect local and worldwide environmental well-being.

An important refrain that is repeated in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse, suggests the Bodhisattva Vow. The reference is found in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, Dhammanupassana. The following quote is from *Satipatthana-The Direct Path To Realization* by Analayo, on page 13:

"Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in

terms of the four noble truths. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide

contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the four noble truths?

"Here he knows as it really is, 'this is *dukkha';* he knows as it really is, 'this

is the arising of *dukkha';* he knows as it really is, 'this is the cessation of

*dukkha';* he knows as it really is, 'this is the way leading to the cessation of

*dukkha,'*

[REFRAIN]

"In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally

... externally, internally and externally. He abides contemplating

the nature of arising of passing away ... of both arising and passing away

in *dhammas.* Mindfulness that 'there are *dhammas'* is established in him to

the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And

he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

"That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in

terms of the four noble truths.

The parts of the quote in red font that refer to externally, internally and externally, establish the interbeing element of our existence—we are all travelers on this planet, and the choices humanity makes have great impact for life on earth. Our individual choices are deeply conditioned by contemporary consumer culture, and the lack of insight that each of us brings to these choices is a form of dukkha.

A core consideration in the ethics of Buddhism and other environmentally sensitive movements is to do the right thing because it is the right thing, not because of an expectation of immediate and total reward for the efforts. The principles and practices of the Four Noble Truths offers some suggestions.

**WHAT DOES THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS OFFER IN REGARD TO THESE ISSUES?**

**DUKKHA:** The direct awareness of dukkha in these circumstances moves towards the perspective of the Bodhisattva Vow, to cultivate a commitment to alleviating suffering for all sentient beings. Contemplate the distress and confusion suggested in the above listed categories. Imagine the experience of cattle as they are forced into circumstances that are frightful and reek of death. Educate yourself regarding the “dead areas” at the mouth of the Mississippi river and into the Gulf of Mexico; we tend to avoid directly confronting ourselves with the consequences of our choices at a fast food restaurant or other areas where eating meat and poultry products is quick and convenient. How often do you contemplate the amount and effect of the large amounts of sugar (and salt) included in contemporary foods?

**THE CAUSE OF DUKKHA:** The direct cause of dukkha is craving and clinging. Contemplate directly the craving you might experience around food—the taste, the convenience, the sedation that overeating produces. Contemplate the unquestioned identification with what you eat and how easy it is to maintain ignorance about the destruction of natural habitat that comes about as farming is increasingly industrialized. What are you willing to let go of regarding your eating habits out of consideration for how your choices impact the environment? As strongly and persistently conditioned consumers, it is actually difficult to even contemplate what is happening at the source of your nutritional choices; remember, greed, hatred and ignorance regarding cause and effect are at the core of dukkha’s origination and continuation.

**LIBERATION FROM DUKKHA:** Contemplating liberation from dukkha for a farmworker in South Florida, a motel owner in Naples or the eradication of the Amazonian rain forest to promote growing soybeans to feed cattle, which increases the impact of CO2 on the atmosphere are quite abstract from our daily life, but the consequences are becoming more vividly evident in terms of global warming. *Liberation from dukkha involves doing the right thing within the limits of your circle of influence*. Of course, we can make choices regarding home gardening, thoughtful food consumption and contacting responsible agencies and corporations to advocate for more benevolent policies.

**THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH:** This issue goes directly to the Virtue aggregate of the Path, particularly Right Action and Right Livelihood. Cultivating mindful awareness, combined with educating yourself regarding what goes into producing and distributing the food you eat and making more environmentally ethical choices, will move towards realizing the potential of the Bodhisattva Vow.

***MAY THE MERITS OF YOUR PRACTICE BENEFIT EVERYONE YOU MEET (AS WELL AS THE LARGER SCOPE OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS).***