

## **Health, Ethics and GNH – A qualitative study of vegetarian motivations**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the motivations of vegetarians by means of a survey questionnaire. Responses to questions were gathered from 25 participants and a follow up in-depth interview was conducted with 11 of those participants. Respondents were predominantly from Thimphu, Paro and Phuentsholing. Sixty percent were females and ages ranged from 18 to 55, with a median of 31 years. Data was analyzed using a thematic approach. While this research found that religious belief and ethical issues concerning animal welfare were the main motivators for the participants' vegetarianism, a significant number of them also reported health benefits from being vegetarians, which provides enough reasons for continuing to follow vegetarian diet.

### **Introduction**

Abstinence from the consumption of meat and animal products is an element of some religious practices including Buddhism and Seventh Day Adventism (Fraser, 2003). Others choose a secular vegetarianism, grounded in non-religious motivations (Whorton, 1994). The Vegetarian Society coined the term 'vegetarian' in the mid-nineteenth century, and this is used to cover a range of dietary choices that avoid some or all foods with animal origins. Thus the term 'vegetarian' is used to describe any diet that emphasizes the consumption of plant foods and discourages the consumption of animal foods. In its most restrictive form, a vegetarian diet excludes all animal foods, including meat, dairy products and eggs. Vegan, macrobiotic, and fruitarian diets fall into this category. Less restrictive form includes the lacto-ovo vegetarian diet, which includes dairy products and eggs; and the lacto-vegetarian diet, which includes dairy products (Willets, 1999). In this paper the term 'vegetarian' is used to describe any diet that includes plant products, dairy products and eggs while it excludes the consumption of any animal flesh and bones. Thus the type of vegetarian diet described in this particular paper is the lacto-ovo vegetarian diet.

Although vegetarianism was once viewed as odd and cranky, the avoidance of animal products has gained increasing popularity in the general population of the world in the recent years. In Britain, for instance, the number of self-identified vegetarians increased from 2.1% of the population in 1984 to 5.4% in 1997 (Gallup, 1997). Similar finding has been reported in Australia with the proportion of vegetarians being higher among teenagers (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). Further, many studies on vegetarianism have reported that vegetarianism and meat avoidance are prevalent among young people, especially women (Social surveys, 1995; Griffin, 1992; Erlichman, 1991; Drapper and Wheeler, 1990).

Studies of vegetarians have identified a variety of secular motivations for adopting a meat-free diet (Beardsworth and Keil, 1992). Personal health and animal cruelty were reported to be the main motivators for adopting vegetarian diet. On the other hand, many reports have been made

on the factors underlying vegetarian motivation, which include aversion or dislike towards eating flesh, environmental concerns and peer or family member influences are also noted (Lea and Worsley, 2001). Health vegetarians choose not to eat meat in order to derive certain health benefits out of it. Today a large body of scientific literature suggests that vegetarians are relatively healthier than their non-vegetarian counterparts. Research evidences have shown that vegetarians enjoy relatively lower blood cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, less obesity and consequently lower risk of mortality from ischaemic heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer and lower rates of all-cause mortality. (American Dietetic Association, 1997; Key et al., 1999). Health is not the only reason that triggers the consumers for reducing or avoiding meat consumption. Animal welfare and environmental issues are also important, with other reasons being less prevalent in the Western societies (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991; Richardson 1994).

The first evidence of humans choosing to follow a vegetarian diet date from around 3000 years Before the Common Era (BCE). Some sources state that the origins of practice were in Egypt (Vegetarian Society, 2008); while others state that they were in India (Stuart, 2007). In the beginning Vegetarian was related to religious belief (Walters and Portmess, 1991, p.11). Pythagoras (circa 569-475 BCE), one of the first philosophers of ancient Greece was believed to be the first one to follow a vegetarian diet based on ethical reasons (Walters and Portmess, 199 p.12). He believed in reincarnation, due to which he avoided eating meat. Aristotle (circa 384-322 BCE) also understood the close similarities between man and animal and he famously described man as political animal. In his opinion, animals could not think but they had the sensation and hunger to guide their actions (Spencer, 1995, p.91).

Plutarch (Plutarch, 2004) was the first to defend animal rights on the basis of feelings of animals. He stated,

*“I’m astonished to think what appetite first induced man to taste of a dead carcass or what motive could suggest the notion of nourishing himself with the flesh of animals, which he saw, just before, bleating, bellowing, walking, and looking about them.”*

Plutarch clearly saw animals as feeling creatures that have rights. He argued that if humans treat animals as inferior creatures and in cruel ways, this can lead to the cruel treatment of fellow humans (Plutarch, 2004). The Australian born philosopher Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975) brought to wide attention the importance of animals, particularly emphasizing the need for equal consideration of the interest of different animals. According to him, the key reason why human give moral considerations to humans is that they can suffer (Singer, 2002, p.7). However, because animals can also suffer it is illogical to treat them different than humans treat the member of their own species. From the utilitarian point of view, Singer (2002) argues that the suffering that an animal experiences in food production cannot be justified by human beings’ preference for meat because the suffering caused to animals is too large when it is compared to the pleasure that humans feel when they are eating flesh (Singer, 2002 P171). What Singer concludes based on the utilitarian view is that humans should turn to vegetarianism, as animals suffer in food production so much that the pleasures gained by humans when eating them does not compensate it.

On the issue of environment, one can rightly argue that meat consumption is environmentally unfriendly compared to that of vegetarianism. This is due to the inefficiency of animals to convert plant protein into animal protein, which is estimated at about six kilos of plant protein needed to yield one kilo of animal protein (Pimentel and Pimentel, 2003, Baroni et al. 2007). The large environmental impact related to animal farming include the large land areas required for pasture for herding animals or the area needed to grow animal feed (Schlesinger, 1997; Tilman et al, 2001). Grain-fed beef is estimated to need 35 calories of fossil fuels for every calorie of beef (Horrigan et al, 2002). It has been stated that livestock and its byproduct would account for more than 51% of all man originated greenhouse emissions (Goodland and Anhang, 2009, 11). It has also been widely debated that humankind would actually save more animals by giving up animal farming, because there would actually be more space for the wild animals (Matheny and Chan 2005).

Health, Wellbeing and Conservation of Environment are among the important domains of GNH, the developmental Philosophy of Bhutan. These important domains are further defined by GNH values and principles such as compassion, truthfulness, empathy, interdependence, eco-consciousness, sustainability, non-utilitarian, fitness, prevention, precaution, non-malignance, altruism fairness, etc. For a country to be peaceful, happy and self reliant, it is inevitable that all those values and principles get infused in the minds of all the citizens of the country. As a result, the government of Bhutan is trying its best to impart GNH Education to its people, particularly through the introduction of GNH fully and properly into the educational system.

Following the initiatives of the Government, Schools have been responding positively towards inculcating GNH values in their students with the motto “Green School for Green Bhutan”. The word green carries a multidimensional connotation such as clean environment, love for plants, child friendly atmosphere, etc. However, the word “Green” could also mean green vegetables instead of red meat. Interestingly, some schools and colleges observes “meat free day” as one of the activities related to GNH. This can indeed be viewed as one of the most significant GNH oriented activities because it is inculcating in children the sense of nonviolence, truthfulness, morality, sacrifice and harmony. As suggested by various research findings, if eating meat is an act of animal brutality (Spencer, 1995; Singer (2002); Plutarch, 2004), if raising animals for meat is environmentally unfriendly (Pimentel and Pimentel, 2003; Matheny and Chan 2005; Baroni et al. 2007) , and if a meaty diet is bad for health (American Dietetic Association, 1997; Appleby et al., 1999; Key et al., 1999a, b), one can clearly conclude that meat consumption is anti-GNH. If deeply analyzed, the act of eating meat is nothing different from the act of killing because the cause of killing animals is simply due to the market demand for meat. Hence eating meat is an act of cruelty to animals and unfortunately it is clear from Plutarch’s (2004) argument that being cruel and brutal to animals can lead to the cruelty and brutality of fellow human beings. In the light of these statements, if the majority of our population continues to remain meat eaters, realizing the goal of GNH remains a distant dream.

This is because for GNH to survive and flourish as a guiding development philosophy in generations to come, it is absolutely essential that we lead our youth by example. Since the future of our country lies in the hands of our younger generation (His Majesty the fourth King of Bhutan) it is very important that our youth grow up to care deeply about nature and about others, to think and see reality clearly and rationally, and to act wisely so that they can be a beacon and model of wellbeing, sanity, and balanced development in a troubled world facing extraordinary environmental and social challenges.

Hence, this study aimed to explore the underlying factors that influence the participants' motivation for vegetarianism. It also sought to find out whether how a meat free diet impacts health. Most importantly this paper attempted to explain the correlation between Vegetarianism and GNH.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects and Procedure**

Subjects were recruited from Thimphu, Paro and Phuentsholing, all urban dwellers. Vegetarian subjects were defined as those who reported excluding meat in their diet. The sample was a convenient sample of educated group, who had been identified as potential subjects and was invited by the researcher to participate in the study. The sample was non random, because only those subjects who were approached by the researcher could participate. Therefore, the sampling method employed here is non-representative and could carry some possible bias.

The data reported here were drawn through the administration of questionnaires to 25 people; 15 females and 10 males, which were posted to them through email. Questionnaires were prepared in English and the questions allowed the subjects to write down their thoughts freely. The questions were also generally designed to provoke answers describing their attitude towards meat and meat avoidance.

Any research involving human participants requires researchers to observe some essential ethical guidelines to safeguard the interest and security of the subjects under study. For this study informed consent was sought from the participants after they had been provided with clear insight into the research design and their role in the study. The study was anonymous, voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any time.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using the phenomenographic techniques described by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991). This process consists of:

1. Familiarization with the data by reading through the transcripts carefully;
2. Condensation through the selection of the most representative and significant statements;
3. Comparison to check for sources of variation or agreement;
4. Grouping of similar statements into categories;
5. Labeling, which describes the range of conceptions; and, finally,
6. Contrasting across the categories in relation to similarities and differences.

These categories or themes were the ones that appeared as some of the important findings of the study and was stated under separate heading in the findings section. They were expected to display multiple perspectives from participants, which was supported by diverse quotations and specific evidences.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Animal welfare and the vegetarian diet**

The desire to avoid killing animals for human consumption was the main reason offered for becoming vegetarian. At the heart of this lies a view that animals also have feelings as we humans do and thus they do not deserve to be tortured for human pleasure. Avoiding the consumption of meat was thus a sacrifice to be made by individuals as part of an ethical commitment.

*“Whenever I see or think of meat I really feel sad because every sentient being trembles before death and undergoes immense pain and suffering when they are being killed”.* (R11)

Often a specific incident had been a trigger.

*“I became vegetarian when I was in class nine in the Middle secondary School. I saw people killing animals and felt so sad that the reason the animals are born are to suffer from being*

*killed by humans. Thereafter I avoided eating meat because I think too much about where meat comes from". (R 3)*

For many respondents their ethical choices were directly associated with their religion. Buddhism believes that there is not a single animal who at one time or the other had not been your parents. The principle of "cause and effect" is deeply embedded in the hearts of many Bhutanese people. As a result, most people recognize "taking away lives" of any sentient beings as an aspect of negative action, which would ultimately bring about misfortune not only in one's present life but also in the future lives. The following statements support their feelings towards animals.

*"Being a Buddhist, I must be kind to all sentient beings. If I don't take meat I can save some lives. Moreover, I'll not be guilty of harming animals directly or indirectly". (R01)*

*"The sight of meat makes me think that they are the flesh and bones of our own parents, siblings or beloved ones of past lives. I pray for their soul to rest in peace whenever I see meat". (R25)*

*"After receiving the Buddhist teachings in 2007, I realized the pain of bearing sword against our own body. Similarly, for my survival the other is being killed, which is unfair. There are many who don't eat meat but are still healthy and alive. From that moment I decided not to eat meat any more". (R22)*

### **Health and the vegetarian diet**

A few respondents in this study associated positive health and wellbeing with dietary choice. Diet is considered as central to good health and longevity, with poor diet associated with lower levels of health and specific illnesses. Food science argues that 'nothing affects your mind and quality of life as much as nutrition' while dieticians suggest that 'you can't expect your body to treat you right if you fill it full of crap all the time'. Respondents offered evidence for this links.

*“By eating a vegetarian diet I feel so clean, so pure and healthy. Moreover, science has proven that the life span of vegetarian is 10 years longer than non-vegetarian. I’m very happy to be a vegetarian. I feel so much healthier”.* (R 15)

*“By not eating meat I feel so good mentally and physically”.* (R14)

*“I feel fresh and healthy. I think avoiding meat has positive impact on my health”* (R19)

*“I think I’m lucky being a vegetarian because so far there is no negative impact on my health”.* (R16)

Although the respondents expressed that following a vegetarian diet has positive impact on their health, the general notion among Bhutanese is that a diet devoid of meat is poor and unhealthy. This is perhaps one reason that makes Bhutanese to contradict their Buddhist philosophy. They often dedicate their prayers by saying, ‘May all sentient beings be free of sufferings’, and yet they keep on eating meat. Respondents offered a range of issues concerning non-vegetarian’s perspectives on vegetarianism.

*“I think many non-vegetarians want to become vegetarians but they think they might become weak and unhealthy if they avoid eating meat”* (R20)

*“My non-vegetarian friends admire me for giving up meat. However, when I suggest them to become vegetarian, they say they love the taste of meat. Meat is too delicious and nutritious to sacrifice although eating meat is a sin”.* (R18)

### **GNH and the vegetarian diet**

As mentioned earlier, studies in the past had proven that eating meat is an act of animal brutality, raising animals for meat is environmentally unfriendly and a meaty diet is bad for health. Moreover, Plutarch (2004) argues that being cruel and brutal to animals can lead to the cruelty

and brutality of fellow human beings. Going by the above statements, one can say that a meat eating society is a cruel and brutal society, a society who cares less for the environment and above all a meat eating society is a society that consists of sickly and diseased inhabitants. Many respondents have provided link for this evidence.

*“Many a times, I’ve seen that a vegetarian is always kind hearted, soft and compassionate in nature compared to that of a non-vegetarian”.* (R06)

*“I think non-vegetarians are sly and hypocrite in nature because they don’t like to kill but they love to eat meat. They pray for the wellbeing of all sentient beings, yet they keep causing harm to animals. Bhutanese people need to be more practical and realistic”* (R16)

Participants also reported that their non-vegetarian friends and relatives often urge them to eat meat to avoid falling sick. This portrays the selfish and self-centred motive of non-vegetarians. Why should one animal suffer for the uncertain health benefit of the other? An ethical person would as well look for other alternatives rather than depend on the flesh of other fellow animals for wellbeing. In Buddhism it is believed that Buddha nature is inherent in all human beings, yet it has been covered with the dirt of the defilements. Because one doesn't realize one has this precious nature within, defilements build up. But then the Buddha who is like the man with clairvoyance tells us, "You know, there is Buddha-nature within you. All you need to do is uncover and clean it so all the exceptional qualities it has will manifest." People operating primarily by their Buddha nature possess a happiness that is independent of the outside circumstances. Their happiness is firmly rooted in the foundation of knowing that humans are one and inherently divine.

Ahimsa or non-violence is one of the five precepts of Buddhism, which in turn constitute the right action of Buddhist middle path. In Buddhist tradition, the concept of nonviolence has been translated into the practice of virtues such as; non-injury to all living beings, compassion to all living creatures, non-violent reaction to violent thoughts, words and actions, abstaining from meat eating and abstaining from hunting, killing and similar practices in which animals are subjected to cruelty and suffering. Further, the very act of killing someone physically is fraught with terrible consequences for those who indulge in it and even unintentional killing can lead to unhappy consequences and negative karma. If this concept of non-violence is practiced consciously by all Bhutanese population, realizing the goal of GNH will no more remain a distant dream because they are nothing different from the four pillars of GNH.



Fortunately, the findings from this study suggest that the number of vegetarians in our society is increasing gradually. The following excerpts from the participants provide evidence to this link.

*“I think the number of vegetarians is increasing since I meet quite a good number of vegetarians than before” (R01)*

*“I think more and more people are becoming vegetarians because they are becoming more health conscious and religious”*

*“The number of vegetarians seem to be increasing, especially that of females. People are becoming more aware about other food alternatives for meat. Moreover, it is due to religious propagation by lama”.*

The findings also suggest that although many people want to avoid meat, they are faced with certain family obligations and social concerns, which act as barriers to vegetarianism as evidenced by the following link.

*“Some people think that becoming vegetarian will be a problem for them at home when the rest of the family members still eat meat. Moreover, it is a problem during family visits and parties”.* (R09)

*“My mother is very religious and wants to avoid buying meat but she is not able to do so because she thinks it is embarrassing to welcome the guests without meat”.* (R05)

## **Conclusion**

The present study has identified three distinct motivations for vegetarianism: animal welfare, religious belief and personal health. The qualitative data indicated that vegetarian respondents attribute religious beliefs as the first and initial motivator for following a vegetarian diet, which is based on the Buddhist principle of cause and effect. Ethical reasons concerning animal

welfare, based upon Buddhist values and Philosophy was another motivator which encouraged them to avoid eating meat. Meat was a negative symbol for the participants and they abhorred the concept of killing animals directly or indirectly and ingesting flesh of slaughtered animals.

Quite a significant proportion of respondents also stated health as the reason for becoming vegetarians. Although health is not the initial motivator, it provided a good justification for continuing a meat-free diet. Following a vegetarian diet made them feel better, both in terms of reducing symptoms of illness or discomfort physically, as well as feeling clean and pure mentally. In a nutshell, respondents tended to have most positive beliefs and attitudes towards their own vegetarian diet, and most negative attitude towards the diet that includes meat.

### **Limitations and future recommendations**

However, a qualitative study of this sort has some limitations in terms of its representativeness, being a convenient and a fairly small sample. Hence, from the study it could be recommended that future research involving vegetarian motivation should use quantitative method employing larger samples, to try and reduce any possible bias.

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