

Prison Vegetarian Project

Vegetarian Ethics – When You Cannot be a Vegetarian in Prison

One of the most common letters we get goes something like this: ***I would love to be a vegetarian but the food choices they give us in the facility are not enough to keep me filled and feeling strong.***

We are often asked, along with this, whether there is something we can do to advocate for better, more nutritious, and filling meals for vegetarians in prisons across the country.

Unfortunately, there is not much that we can do. We've been in contact with inmates who have brought suits against prison authorities because of the poor or insufficient vegetarian diet options. Though some inmates have won their cases, the real challenge seems to be getting prison food service staff to develop and maintain high quality vegetarian diets. We have to remember: prisons across the country are facing budget problems and vegetarian diets are not on the top of their lists of items that need improvement.

We developed this pamphlet to answer this common question: ***What do I do if I want to be a vegetarian but cannot, because the prison vegetarian food options are inadequate?***

Here are a few suggestions:

- First of all, we have recommended that people in prison who have this problem consider following the regular diet, but joining with us in observing **Freedom Tuesdays**. Here's what our chaplain wrote in one of our recent Newsletters:

I'd like to introduce you to something that my Indian-Hindu friends have taught me. Many observe one (or more) days per week of vegetarian diet. The most popular day in Hindu tradition to observe vegetarianism – I am told – is Tuesday. I have some friends who also observe Thursdays and Fridays.

*The days chosen are related to my friends' teachers and their family traditions. The important point, they tell me, is that you **choose the day(s) you will observe and keep to that practice.** Do not wait to wake up in the morning and "feel" vegetarian. **Choose your day – or days – and let those be dedicated to vegetarian practice.***

- **We also would like to tell you a story – a true story, in fact:**

A few years ago, a few of us who have volunteered at Prison Vegetarian Project had a visitor staying with us – a Buddhist Monk from Bangladesh. We went out with him to a restaurant for dinner – Buddhist Monks from his tradition will not ask for food, but will take whatever is put on their plate.

One of us ordered food and, when it arrived, took his plate and put food on it – both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. Our friend the Monk started to eat and one of the other people with us said to him "I'm sorry, sir, to ask you this, but I thought Buddhist Monks were vegetarians and I see you are eating meat. Am I wrong – are Monks not required to be vegetarians? Our friend the Monk answered this: ***"Our main practice is to not be attached to our practice. I do not have any rules – I just try to be compassionate and mindful at all times. My sister-friend put meat on my plate and I am thankful for that. That is my practice."***

- Why are we telling you this story? Because we all fall into the trap of putting our religious rules above the most important practices – those of thankfulness and compassion. Many of us cannot be vegetarians at all times – I'm the volunteer coordinator of Prison Vegetarian Project and sometimes I also eat fish when it has been prepared for me. At those times, I believe it is most important that I be thankful and compassionate – rather than clinging to my rules and preferences.
- You don't have to take our word for it. Here is a teaching from some of our friends who practice in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka and Burma (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bullitt/bfaq.html>):

We are all guilty of complicity, in one way or another and to varying degrees, in the harming and death of other creatures. Whether we are carnivore, vegan, or something in between, no matter how carefully we choose our food, somewhere back along the long chain of food production and preparation, killing took place. No matter how carefully we tread, with every step countless insects, mites, and other creatures inadvertently perish under our feet. This is just the nature of our world...In stark contrast to the world's other major religions... Buddhism invokes no divinity, no supreme Creator or supreme Self, no Holy Spirit or omniscient loving God to whom we might appeal for salvation. Instead, Buddhism calls for us to hoist ourselves up by our own bootstraps: to develop the discernment we need to distinguish between those qualities within us that are unwholesome and those that are truly noble and good, and to learn how to nourish the good ones and expunge the bad. Being a vegetarian is good, but it's not everything.

- And here's something from our Christian Vegetarian friends (<http://www.all-creatures.org/cva/honoring.htm>):

To the degree that you move toward a plant-based diet, you significantly help humans, animals, and the environment. As Christians, we are called to be faithful, which includes living in accord with our core values as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Being faithful also includes (living with) fellow Christians, in loving and compassionate ways...

- And here's a teaching from some of our Zen Buddhist friends (<http://zen.thetao.info/do/vegetarian.htm>):

You should follow whatever precepts you can. Don't worry if you can't follow all of them all of the time. As the Buddha said, refusing to take any vow because you can't take all of them is like a thirsty person that finds a river, but will not drink because they can't drink all the water.

Let's help each other to stay focused on the most important practices – being thankful for whatever food we get, minimizing the pain and suffering caused to other living beings – whether through being a vegetarian every day, or one day a week, or even through eating a little less meat – and always hoping we can live more peacefully in the future.

Let us know what you think – we love to hear from you.

P.V.P.

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