*For fear of causing terror to living beings…Let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining him or herself to attain Compassion, refrain from eating flesh
~ Buddha*

*Going vegetarian may be the most effective way to fight global warming. Buddhist practitioners have practiced vegetarianism over the last 2000 years. We are vegetarian with the intention to nourish our compassion towards the animals. Now we also know that we eat vegetarian in order to protect the earth.
~ Thich Nhat Hanh*

*I do not see any reason why animals should be slaughtered to serve as human diet when there are so many substitutes. After all, man can live without meat… In order to satisfy one human stomach, so many lives are taken away. We must promote vegetarianism. It is extremely important ~ H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama*

Dear friends,

It was almost 50 years ago that I stopped eating meat. At the time, I had friends who were vegetarians for purely health concerns and their ideas about a non-meat diet interested me. Following a bout of amoebic dysentery (I was travelling at the time) and not eating solid food for several weeks, I experimented with not eating meat when I resumed eating solid foods. Many people find the transition to non-meat eating difficult, but for me it was never problematic. Once I made the decision, I never turned back and never missed it. I was happy with my choice, physically and ethically. (Disclosure: My father’s business was wholesale meats, as was my grandfathers, great-grandfathers all the way back to butchers in Germany. I grew up eating choice cuts of meat daily and would spend school holidays among a men’s culture of butchers, sharpened knives, cow carcasses hanging from iron hooks in refrigerated rooms, sawdust on one’s shoes and animal fat and blood on one’s white apron. All this was normal to me.)

When I entered the Buddhist path several years later, I was already a practicing vegetarian. My first Zen teacher, Phillip Kapleau, was a committed and passionate vegetarian for both health and ethical reasons. While not an article of faith for our Rochester Zen community, many members, perhaps most, followed a vegetarian diet. Meat, fish, poultry and alcohol were never served at the Rochester Zen Center or any social gatherings of the community.

Ahimsa or doing no harm to living beings was the foundation for ethical behavior taught by the Buddha during his lifetime and remains so to this day. Obviously, taking the life of someone is the most violent or harmful act one can do to another sentient being. Since each of us wish not to suffer in this life and to live unmolested by the harmful actions of others, how can we not understand that this same wish or instinct to preserve one’s life is common to all forms of life?

We know that animals fear death. They run from being herded towards the slaughterer, flee from hunters and struggle to escape from the hook or net. They do anything they can to preserve their life when it is threatened. Animals care for their offspring. Cows (red meat) and pigs (white meat) carry their young in utero, produce milk and suckle their children like human mothers, and engage in many caring and protective behaviors towards their young. Poultry and birds spend much time caring and protecting their eggs and engage in many feeding and caretaking behaviors towards their young until they are able to feed themselves.

The practice of compassion (karuna) implies both an empathic or sympathetic relationship towards the suffering of another, as well as an active intention to alleviate that perceived or felt suffering. Compassion can also be actively proactive in the sense that it desires to prevent suffering from arising and protecting beings from experiencing suffering. In our personal lives most of us try not to intentionally cause suffering to another being. As the first mindfulness training says, I vow not to kill but to protect all life.

To survive, human beings must eat. So the question arises, since we live in conditions where we have choices about what we eat, how do we make choices that are congruent with our ethical/moral stance not to kill, do the least harm, and protect life? How do I ensure that my need to survive and nurture my body causes as little harm to other beings as possible and practical? One might wonder if eating the flesh or organs of other living beings is necessary to one’s physical well-being. One might also ask: is it just to demand that other forms of life give up their lives for my survival, especially when there are healthy and easily accessible alternatives?

The traditional ethical approach to not eating meat arose in relationship to the harm it causes mammals, birds and fish. These days, there are also many other extremely cogent arguments for a vegetarian or vegan diet. One reason is the pollution of the natural environment that often occurs as a byproduct of the ways animals are currently raised for slaughter, while another is the significant contribution the methane gases produced by cattle make to global warming and climate change. Globally, a very substantial amount of available farmland is devoted to growing crops to support the feeding of livestock, which removes much agricultural productivity needed to feed our hungry planet. Finally, there is much research that supports the health benefits of a vegetarian or vegan diet, or conversely that demonstrates the negative effects of meat eating. As followers of a path of understanding and compassion, it is important that we look deeply into our actions of body, speech and mind to both assess our motivation and intention and to see the effects of our actions. Often the short, medium and long term effects of our actions are not readily apparent to us without this type of reflection and introspection. This also implies a willingness to educate ourselves to begin to see cause and effect operating within a greater inter-connected and inter-penetrating web of life, rather than a linear model of existence.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training says, “Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming... I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and wellbeing in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the Earth.” I invite you to reflect deeply on the points raised in this email and come to your own conclusions. (Please see below for additional reference material).

*In the Dharma, Fred*

To aid you in your research, I recommend the following resources, but there are many more available that you could discover on your own.

1. An excellent website on Buddhism and vegetarianism with many diverse resources and links is <http://www.shabkar.org/>.
2. A letter by Thich Nhat Hanh on a vegetarian diet and its relation to many global issues can be found at <http://vancouverbpf.wordpress.com/2007/12/04/letter-from-thich-nhat-hanh/>.
3. An excellent documentary (available on Netflix) to get you thinking is, Forks Over Knives, which approaches vegetarianism primarily from the health perspective.
4. Several books relating to Buddhism and vegetarianism are:
*To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case For Becoming Vegetarian* by [Philip Kapleau](http://www.shabkar.org/teachers/chan/roshi_philip_kapleau.htm)
*Food of Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining from Meat* by [Shabkar](http://www.shabkar.org/about/shabkar/index.htm)
*The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights* by [Norm Phelps](http://www.shabkar.org/download/pdf/Interview_with_Norm_Phelps.pdf)