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Buddhist Approaches to Environmentalism and Food Insecurity

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Buddhist Approaches to Food Insecurity and Environmentalism

Abstract

Buddhism is a religion deep-rooted in history, most prevalent in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.³ These countries are “developing countries” and may not have the necessary infrastructure to succeed economically and have increased health risks, one of which is food insecurity.⁴ With climate change an increased threat, these areas of the world are more susceptible to environmental problems. The Buddhism religion strongly values sustainability, in both the environment and food insecurity. It values helping others, both humans and nature. Despite the adversity they face, Buddhists have dealt better than communities in similar situations of poverty and climate change with food insecurity, but there is still more improvement needed.^{10,11,13} Intervention programs are needed to improve the food insecurity and environmental issues many Buddhists face. However, the Buddhist approach to life would likely benefit those who adopt it, and their health and well-being would likely improve.¹⁹

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is one of society’s most ancient religions, deep-rooted in many cultures for 2,500 years.¹ In the United States, 1.2% of the total population identified as Buddhist in 2010, making it the fourth largest religion in the country.² It is fairly widespread, originating in the mid 19th century when the first Buddhist temple was built in San Francisco.² Although Buddhism is a major religion practiced worldwide, it is most prevalent in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.³ These countries are considered “developing countries” and may lack the necessary infrastructure to succeed economically and have increased health risks.⁴ Food insecurity is one of these risks.

Like many other major religions, Buddhism is based on several key principles, called the Four Noble Truths (Table 1).

Table 1. The Four Noble Truths⁵

One	Suffering is inherent in life
Two	Suffering is caused by craving
Three	Craving and suffering can be ceased
Four	The Noble Eightfold path leads to the cessation of suffering

The other key principles of Buddhism are compassion to all living beings, mindfulness, reciprocity, and interconnections with all beings, including those derived from nature.⁵ Many external environmental factors, such as climate change and food insecurity, negatively impact areas of the world where Buddhism is most prevalent. Buddhists are better equipped to manage these challenges through their religious and social practices and behaviors.

Another popular aspect of Buddhism is its association with vegetarianism. The religion abstains from any destruction of life and acts of violence to help create a conflict-free society. When he was alive and relaying his teachings, the Buddha only restricted meat consumption, he did not ban it completely, so it is up to an individual's beliefs and interpretation that decides their personal dietary choices.⁶ The general recommendation is to focus on practices that do the least

harm and avoid unnecessary killing and harm. ⁷ So it is up to the individual to make the right decision for themselves.

Instructions exist for the “Five Contemplations While Eating”, which encourages mindful and thoughtful eating. The “Five Moral Precepts” also exist as one of the religion’s most important aspects: no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, or partaking of intoxicants. This means that alcoholic beverages are prohibited, since alcohol may increase the likelihood to commit one of the other four precepts. Another aspect of the Buddhist diet restricts the “Five Pungent Spices” (onion, garlic, scallion, chives, leek), as they raise sexual desire when eaten cooked, or enhance anger when eaten raw.

Like all religions, there are spectrums, so not every Buddhist follows these rules. Individuals have the autonomy to practice the religion their own way, which is seen worldwide. For examples, Buddhist monks in Nepal and other Himalayan countries accept any food given to them. The Buddhist texts and rules are open to interpretation, and ultimately it is up to each individual to decide what is right for themselves, preserving autonomy. ⁸

Food Insecurity in Buddhist Populations

As defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” ⁹ Food insecurity is a multi-faceted issue. There is not just one cause, and there is not just one solution. On the opposing end of the spectrum, food security occurs when all people have social, economic, and physical access to enough safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs. ¹⁰

Many Buddhists that live in developing countries in rural, agricultural communities have limited road access, water sources, education, and health facilities, which may inhibit their access to quality food. Low income is also a factor of food insecurity. Sanephong, Thailand is a poor isolated, indigenous Buddhist community marginalized by mainstream culture. Recently, they have lacked culturally appropriate and diverse foods that are necessary for their health and well-being. In 2017, the average household income was \$958 a year. In that year, the highest income was achieved by a government employee and was \$4,285. The lowest income was \$35 a year and was a daily laborer's. To manage food insecurity, this Buddhist village used a variety of techniques. The community expanded the number and production of home gardens to increase the children’s consumption of fresh foods. Even though most leaders of Sanephong are men, women are still recognized and valued as promoters of the village’s well-being. Through balancing culturally appropriate, Matriarchal, and Buddhist values, food security is encouraged, as is pride and sustainable community investment. ¹¹

Because the countries with the highest prevalence of Buddhism are developing countries, they are at greater risk of food insecurity and food scarcity. Communities often rely on external aid, such as wheat imports, to feed themselves. This dependence creates several problems, such as environmental concerns, pollution, and social and economic concerns. ¹² Buddhists' positive views on life and cognitive restructuring (for example religious practice) can ease the stressful burden of food insecurity. ¹³ One practice encouraged in Buddhism is called *dhana* in which the wealthy give the poor food with no expectations that they will be repaid. ¹¹

Madjdian ¹⁰ examined gender roles, social change, and intra-household allocation of food in 2 communities in Humla, Nepal, one that is primarily Hindu, and one that is primarily Buddhist. The researchers found that Buddhist women had more autonomy in food decisions than Hindu women. Other evidence from interviews supported this. Most of the Buddhist women did not experience food scarcity, whereas many of the Hindu families did. Buddhist families

served meals based on appetite and upon request if more servings were desired, and everyone received the same quality of food. On the contrary, Hindu families served meals based on hierarchy, in which the eldest male was fed first. This would sometimes leave other family members, such as the women, hungrier. In this study, questions were also asked about autonomy and access to good nutrition during pregnancy. The Buddhist women did not have to change their diet during pregnancy as an example of their increased autonomy in their food decisions.¹⁰

Another study conducted in Sanephong, Thailand, examined a matriarchal Buddhist community in relation to food insecurity.¹¹ There was concern in the community that the decrease in local food availability was due to low incomes and evolving environmental conditions. Sanephong has no gender stereotypes in terms of labor division, and family property is passed down through the daughters. This further confirms the autonomy and empowerment of women in Buddhism that contributes to their health and food security. Additionally, Buddhist monks are given food through charitable donations, so families in Sanephong may send their children to live in urban Buddhist temples for free room and board while attending school. Through this method, parents can ensure their children are receiving proper nutrition and education, bettering their prospects. The village of Sanephong, Thailand has a high sense of well-being despite being a poor agricultural community. This is largely attributed to the interconnected values of Buddhism and matriarchy. This is seen in their self-reliant nature, matriarchal gift economy (i.e. property passed through the women), *dhana*, and equal access to resources.¹¹

How Buddhists Practice Environmentalism

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, environmentalism is a political and ethical movement that works to better and protect the environment. Like food insecurity, environmentalism requires complex solutions and relies on many factors.¹⁴ Environmental nutrition ties the food system with environmentalism to create a systematic movement that focuses on producing and consuming foods that are sustainable to humans and the planet.¹⁵ While climate change affects everyone on Earth, it affects poor regions more because these areas often lack the infrastructure necessary to combat it. In Manang, Nepal, a Buddhist population has worked hard to combat future climate change and food insecurity problems such as: reclaiming abandoned land, depending more on barley, reducing the conscious exhibition of horses, and relocating farming from the slopes to the valley bottom.¹⁶

Buddhism has an environmental ethics component to it as well. Buddhists are required to be mindful of their impact on the planet and live in such a way that reduces the suffering of all beings.

One practice unique to Buddhism is called tree ordination, during which trees are ordained and wrapped in saffron robes to indicate they have the same status as monks. This practice is one of the ways ecology monks engage the community and work with others to create sustainable living programs that benefit both the environment and locals. Ecology monks are monks who engage in environmental conservation activities and actively respond to issues of environmental degradation. Ordaining trees shows that trees are valuable and should not be destroyed for industrial purposes, because when this happens, suffering arises in the community. The idea behind tree ordination is that people would not hurt a tree (cut it down) if it was wrapped in robes and seen as a religious figure. This is just one example of Buddhists being proactive in addressing environmental problems. They are encouraged to view nature as a source for their teachings, meaning they value it highly.¹⁷

Buddhism's four noble truths and its theme of interconnection and interdependence to nature pertain to environmentalism. A Buddhist text says there is a connection between human morals and the impact on the environment. Buddhists believe that all human-created materials, energy, and waste negatively affect all aspects of society.¹⁸ They believe suffering is behind all Western consumer economical views of well-being. Climate change is caused by this external pursuit of desire, because of humans' innate want for material things and experiences to satisfy them. Buddhism focuses on cycles and flows rather than single change inputs and outputs. This philosophy would be beneficial in assisting with climate change.¹⁹

Conclusion

The religion of Buddhism values sustainability, both in terms of the environment and food insecurity. Buddhist values align with helping others, whether it be other humans or nature. Because of this connection, Buddhist communities have developed well-being that other communities in similar situations of poverty and climate change have not.^{10,11,13} While Buddhism is a religion that has dealt well with issues of food insecurity, there is still much room for improvement. There is a need for intervention programs that focus on providing healthy and affordable foods.¹³ Buddhists also support ecological efforts.²⁰ In the past few decades, Buddhists have helped protect and replant forests, rebuild an ecologically significant lack, resisted a major gas pipeline's construction, protested the destruction of the California Red Woods, and helped develop the Earth Charter.⁷ These are just some of the many examples of efforts that the Buddhist community has done to protect the planet. It is for their approach toward food insecurity and environmentalism that those who adopt a more Buddhist approach to life would benefit, and their well-being would likely improve.¹⁹

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