

The Ethical Consideration of Food Service at IMS

The Teachings of the Buddha

At IMS we take our basic directives in most activities from the teachings of the Buddha as they have come down to us in the Pali Canon, a collection of texts dating back 2,500 years. The Buddha taught on all aspects of life necessary to living with integrity and regard for sentient beings. As lay people we are guided in ethical conduct by the five lay precepts, which are to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and the use of intoxicants leading to heedlessness.

IMS serves a vegetarian menu that includes some eggs and dairy in order to provide varied, healthy and substantial meals that support the meditation retreat environment. We take into consideration the wide range of diets and dietary restrictions of our increasingly diverse retreatant population, and the health of our retreatants, staff and teachers. We also consider the impact our food choices have on the environment, including climate change, and the ethical concerns of consuming animal products – as well as vegetables and fruits – from large commercial farms. We make these choices while fulfilling our intention to hold costs at a level that allows us to keep our retreat fees affordable.

At times, individuals who come to IMS express concern about our decision to offer a vegetarian menu over a vegan one. In all the Buddha's teachings on ethical conduct, he never proscribed eating meat or animal products such as eggs and milk. He was sensitive to the suffering that animals endured: the precept on non-killing includes animals as well as humans. However, when he was once asked by a prominent monk to order his monastic community to eat only vegetarian food, he declined to do it. The Buddha explicitly allowed his monks and nuns to eat meat, provided they did not know, hear or suspect that the animal had been killed expressly for them. So too in the modern age, in many Buddhist monasteries in Thailand and Burma, meat is served on a daily basis to the monks, nuns and lay people.

Our Community of Practitioners

The retreatants, teachers and staff who come to practice and work at IMS are by and large ordinary, mainstream people from around the world. Most of them are not vegetarian, let alone vegan. Many cannot eat common plant-based proteins such as beans, nuts, gluten and soy. For IMS to serve a wholly vegan diet would prove a difficult adjustment for them. To supply adequate protein from a vegan diet would mean that IMS would serve many dishes with beans, which are not easily digestible for many people, especially older members of our community. We feel that by offering a protein-rich vegetarian diet with some eggs and dairy, we are already asking most of our community members to make a significant adjustment from the food they are used to eating. As a meditation retreat is already challenging in many ways, we want to make people as comfortable as we can with the food we serve. We always offer a vegan alternative for those who are committed to that diet.

Ultimately, there is no diet that completely avoids causing harm. The use of pest control and soil cultivation in vegetable and fruit farming kills millions of mammals, birds and insects, and destroys their habitats. In addition, industrial farms that are the source of so much of our nation's produce make their profit by exploiting our society's most vulnerable human populations.

To mitigate such harm we do our best to use sources that are sustainable and cause the least harm possible. Most of our food is organic. For our vegetables in season, we use local organic farms that are

pioneers in true organic farming and do everything possible to produce nutrient-dense food, while minimizing their carbon footprint. Our milk and eggs are produced within a few miles by small family farms whose animals are part of the family. The milk and eggs are delivered personally by the farmers. None of our animal products are factory farmed – and all of our cheese, some of which we make ourselves, is rennet-, hormone- and antibiotic-free. All of our corn and soy products are organic, including locally sourced tempeh and tofu. Nearly all of our flours, grains, legumes and canned goods are also organic.

IMS is committed to remaining ethically consistent with the teachings of the Buddha and to serving our community members as effectively as we can. As such, we continue to look for ways to reduce the environmental, social and karmic costs of our food sources.
