



# Mid America Dharma

Offering Insight Meditation to the Heartland

November 5, 2016

Dear Friends,

At our October, 2016 meeting the Mid America Dharma board of directors voted to allow meat to be served and consumed at our retreats. We want you to be aware of this change and we also wanted to offer you an explanation for our decision.

This decision was not taken lightly. It is a change from our nearly 25 year practice of offering "simple vegetarian" meals. We realize it differs from the practice at major Insight Meditation centers in the USA. We also realize that many people hold strong views about vegetarianism and believe that eating meat involves a violation of the first precept, to abstain from taking the life of any living being.

As you know, we rent facilities for our residential retreats and meals are prepared by facility staff. The kitchen staff generally often have little experience cooking vegetarian meals. Over the years we have repeatedly tried working with the staff at various facilities on creating more balanced meals for our retreatants. While there has been some improvement, the changes have generally not resulted in balanced, healthy vegetarian meals. One result is that people often feel a need to overtly or covertly bring supplemental foods.

Many, if not most, of these facilities are also preparing meals for other facility guests and residents. Those meals usually include meat. If it is served on the same food line that we use, as often happens, many of our retreatants choose to take meat. We have repeatedly tried explaining that the meat is not for us, but it is sitting there and people take it. Sometimes they need to eat meat for medical reasons. Sometimes they take it because it is familiar. Sometimes they choose it because it is more appealing than the protein sources of the vegetarian meals. There are, no doubt, other reasons as well.

It seems that a large number of our retreatants prefer to consume meat. Over the years I've also observed a number of our teachers making arrangements to have meat while teaching, probably for a variety of reasons like the retreatants.

So these are the realities that we have continually struggled with over these 25 years.

Looking to the Theravada Buddhist tradition for guidance, we find the story of Devadatta. He tried to get the Buddha to set a rule for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis that would have required no eating of "fish or flesh" under any circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The Buddha rejected this as a requirement. He had previously defined the circumstances when bhikkhus and bhikkhunis could consume meat: "I say that there are three instances in which meat may be eaten: when it is not seen, not heard, and not suspected [that the living being has been slaughtered for the bhikkhu.]"<sup>iii</sup> If these conditions were met, the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis could eat meat. Apparently the Buddha never established a guideline for householders like most of us, though we could follow the same guidelines if we chose to.

So our board has decided to stop struggling with reality. When we can make arrangements with facilities we will offer three basic options:

- simple vegetarian meals;
- meals with meat or fish as the protein source; and
- the option of supplementing either of these with one's personal foods brought from home.

We will try to inform you at the time you register what the meal options will be.

We don't know how this will work, but we're going to give it a try. We look forward to your feedback.

For the Board,

Phil Jones, President

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- i. Vinaya 3.171, Horner, I.B. *The Book of Discipline*, Sutta Central, 2014, BD 1.297, <https://suttacentral.net/downloads>
  - ii. MN55.5, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 474. Also at Vinaya 3.172 (BD 1.298).