
Should Vipassana meditators eat lab-grown meat?

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February 17, 2022

Abstract Vipassana meditation of Sayagyi U Ba Khin as taught by S.N. Goenka is a quickly growing meditation tradition, philosophy, and global community with over 200 meditation centers worldwide. Vipassana meditation is considered a type of Theravada Buddhism, and accordingly, one of the tenets is that meat should not be eaten in most contexts. Meanwhile, new technologies which allow for meat to be grown and eaten without having to kill an animal are emerging and challenging traditional ethical perspectives on meat. So far there has been no literature on what moral stance the Vipassana community will take on this “lab-grown” meat. This paper looks at whether lab-grown meat should be ethically permissible by adherents to the Vipassana meditation tradition of S.N. Goenka. I conclude that Vipassana meditators should be allowed to eat lab-grown meat on their own accord but meditation centers should not serve it. Furthermore, I suggest that Vipassana teachers rethink the tradition’s stance on dairy foods given the ethical concerns associated with modern industrial dairy farming.

Keywords Vipassana meditation · meditation centers · S.N. Goenka · Sayagyi U Ba Khin · lab-grown meat · cultivated meat · ethics

1 Introduction

Vipassana meditation in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin and as taught by S.N. Goenka has risen as a noteworthy movement in the last few decades. It is a growing movement which has spread far from its original roots with over 200 centers around the world and with a reddit following of over 10,000 people

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[17]. Centers offer 10-day long silent meditation courses which give “householders” the opportunity to live as monks for some time and prepare them to maintain an independent meditation practice afterwards. While there are numerous variants of Vipassana meditation, from here on out, this paper uses the term Vipassana to reference the tradition originally taught by a Burmese layperson Sayagyi U Ba Khin and spread by S.N. Goenka.

Meat consumption has traditionally not been allowed in Vipassana, but this might change with the advent of lab-grown meat. The rationale for this ban has been two-fold—first, animals should not be killed or harmed, and second, consuming animal products can hurt one’s meditation. However, new methods make it possible to eat meat without killing an animal. It begs the question: What are the Vipassana ethics of eating lab-grown meat? This paper is the first to formally address this question.

In this paper, I will look at the ethics of eating meat based on the principles of Vipassana meditation. I will not address issues like the environmental impact, the nutritional quality, or the “naturalness” of lab-grown meat, but rather focus on how animals are treated in its production. For evidence on Vipassana meditation, I will reference the seminal teachings publicized by the Vipassana Research Institute as well as a personal interview with a Vipassana assistant teacher. For evidence on lab-grown meat, I will reference findings from pioneering companies in the industry as well as scientific research papers. I will start by providing a background on Vipassana meditation and lab-grown meat and then dive into an ethical analysis to answer the question: should Vipassana meditators eat lab-grown meat?

2 Background

2.1 An Introduction to Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana meditation is a type of Buddhist meditation with its roots in Burma. The technique is said to have first spread beyond the country roughly 70 years ago after being passed down through generations among recluse monks. U Ba Khin taught this method to S.N. Goenka who then left the country and spread the technique beyond Burma’s borders. S.N. Goenka is regarded as the primary teacher of the technique—his extensive writings and recorded lectures are today referenced as the core resources of the meditation technique and way of living.

The meditation is a more serious type—first-time students must embark on a 10-day long silent meditation course consisting of over 10 hours of daily meditation. The technique can be described as disciplined, non-reactive self-observation. By sitting down for long stretches and focusing on oneself internally, observing fetters of the mind and sensations of the body without reaction, one slowly “purifies the mind” by building up patience, self-control, and equanimity [8, p. 4].

2.2 Vipassana Attitudes Towards Meat

Similar to most forms of Buddhism, Vipassana meditation does not permit its adherents to eat meat. Even the earliest Vipassana texts on record are filled with stories of how masters like Lediya Sayadaw “urged people not to kill cows for food and promoted a vegetarian diet in general” [19, p. 83]. This tradition has continued up through today, where the code of conduct instructs Vipassana meditation centers to offer “simple, wholesome vegetarian meals” [16, p. 4] during 10-day courses. The reason for not eating meat can be broken down into two primary factors: first, the killing and harming of the animal, and second, the negative effects on one’s meditation.

First, the acts of killing and harming are said to be wrong. Among the ten precepts which students must take upon becoming serious Vipassana students, the second one is translated as “to abstain from killing any being” [11]. And even if one does not directly kill an animal for the meat, S.N. Goenka clarifies that “by eating meat you indirectly encourage someone else to break the precepts by killing” [20, p. 62]. Whether directly killing an animal for meat or indirectly killing one by contributing to the demand for its killing, eating meat is generally considered breaking the second precept. And while not necessarily outlined in a precept, harming other beings is also said to be wrong. S.N. Goenka speaks in a discourse that “any action that harms others, that disturbs their peace and harmony, is a sinful action, an unwholesome action” [20, p. 54]. Killing an animal clearly falls within the domain of causing harm; this could be contribute to why eating meat is not permitted.

Second, the consumption of meat itself is said to be bad for one’s progress in meditation. According to the Vipassana worldview, “kalāpas” are the subatomic building blocks of material and mental reality. The food we eat plays an important role in how these kalāpas are formed in our own bodies: among the “four possible causes for the arising of kalāpas, the first is the food we eat” [20, p. 103]. Consuming unwholesome food is then said to be unhealthy for the body. Under this line of reasoning, animals should not be eaten because of their impurity. S.N. Goenka writes that “at a subtler level you harm yourself by eating meat. Every moment an animal generates craving and aversion. . . its body becomes permeated with craving and aversion. This is the input you receive when eating non-vegetarian food. A meditator is trying to eradicate craving and aversion, and therefore would find it helpful to avoid such food” [20, p. 62]. Meat is not only avoided because it harms other beings, but also because it holds meditators back in their progress towards a purer and more wholesome state of mind.

To be sure, there do exist special circumstances where the eating of meat is permitted. One permissible scenario is if meat is deemed medically necessary by a doctor. On the issue of dietary exceptions, S. N. Goenka writes that “in cases where for strictly medical reasons special food may be a necessity, they should be cleared through the Teacher or assistant teacher before the course” [16, p. 10]. Another scenario is if the meat is not requested for by the individual but just is simply given to them. Once again, S. N. Goenka testifies that “if

meat happens to be provided for you and you enjoy its taste as you would that of any other food, you have not broken any precept” [20, p. 62]. These situations are the exception, not the rule, though. This paper deals with the far more common case today where there is agency over the choice of eating or not eating meat.

2.3 An Introduction to Lab Grown Meat

Lab-grown meat is a new meat alternative which does not require an animal to be killed. Also known as cultivated meat, cultured meat, or in vitro meat, it is created by taking a small stem cell extraction from animals and then inducing its growth into a meat patty within a biochemically controlled environment. This contrasts with standard methods of meat production which require raising, feeding, transporting, and killing an animal. This new process promises to reduce the negative environmental impacts of meat consumption by up to 99 percent [12]. As a result, the lab-grown meat industry has received hundreds of millions dollars of investment recently and is expected to reach dinner tables around 2030 [3].

More specifically, the process starts with extracting stem cells from an animal and then “placing them in a warm cultivator which mimics the animal’s body” [1]. Stem cells are undifferentiated, early-stage cells which have the ability to break into various types of other cells [4], including the types of cells that constitute a piece of bacon or beef. These cells are then “immersed in a ‘growth medium,’ nutrients similar to what an animal would feed itself— amino acids, fats and vitamins” [10] until the meat cells grow enough in volume, when finally, “3-D printing is used to build cultivated meat cells into more familiar meat shapes” [10]. However artificial or natural this process seems to be, the end product is a piece of meat nearly identical to that which we eat today [10].

2.4 Lab-Grown Meat and Animal Well-Being

What’s revolutionary about this lab-grown meat process is that meat can now be consumed without killing any animals. The super efficiency of the cultivation process means “the cells from a single chicken allow us to cultivate the same amount of poultry that ordinarily would come from hundreds of thousands of traditionally farmed birds” [14]. With lab-grown meat still being a decade out from a serious market presence, we are sure to see even more improvements in the effectiveness—soon a single chicken’s cell sample could soon substitute millions of traditionally farmed birds. No longer are massive industrial farms centered around the raising and killing of animals necessary to eat their meat—instead, a single cell sample from a single chicken can substitute the entire process. Not only does lab-grown meat not require killing animals, but it also promises not to harm them. The company Mosa Meat says that they take a “0.5 gram cell sample under anaesthesia” with a “standardized

veterinary procedure” and as a result, “no animal is harmed” in the process [9]. Some methods of meat extraction don’t even involve a veterinary procedure. The company JUST Egg now has the technology to take cells from the feather which has fallen from a chicken and convert them back into stem cells ready to be cultivated into poultry [21]. Just as we might take our dog to the vet or pick up a feather off the ground, so too can we eat lab-grown meat without a guilty conscience for animals.

3 Ethical Analysis

My ethical analysis will be comprised of two sub-analyses. First, an individual analysis: should individual meditators be ethically permitted to eat lab-grown meat? Second, a center analysis: should Vipassana meditation centers be ethically permitted to offer lab-grown meat to students?

3.1 Individual analysis: Should Vipassana meditators be permitted to eat meat on their own accord?

Animal Well-Being

Because lab-grown meat does not require the killing of an animal, it is clear that its consumption would not violate the second precept of Vipassana to “abstain from killing living beings.”

Would lab-grown meat still cause harm to animals in the process of raising them? It is likely that a number of animals would still need to be deliberately raised for the production of lab-grown meat—the company New Age Meats, for example, aims to create a “world where we can raise just a handful of animals to harmlessly harvest simple DNA samples from over the course of their lives” [7]. This animal raising process introduces a potential point for animal harm at two levels: first, the cell extraction, and second, the conditions for raising those animals for cell extraction.

The first concern is not legitimate for two reasons. First, as stated above, lab-grown meat uses standard veterinary procedures like we might use on our own pets. Given that Vipassana meditators are permitted to ask vets to inflict slight discomfort to animals enjoyed as companions, they should also be permitted to ask scientists to inflict that same discomfort to animals enjoyed for nutrition. Additionally, new methods like feather cell extraction are even less intrusive than the procedures we use on our pets where truly no animal is harmed in the process.

The second concern of the animals’ living conditions is still up in the air. Modern industrial animal cultivation creates significant stress and harm for animals in the process [6]. There might still be a need for farms with similar living conditions dedicated to raising animals for their cell extraction. Ultimately, it is too early to tell since lab-grown meat has not spread throughout the market yet. Another analysis on this issue considering the living conditions of animals

raised for cell extraction should be conducted when lab-grown meat methods have grown to industrial production levels. In the meantime, this point will be viewed as a non-issue because of the promise that lab-grown meat offers of far fewer animals needed to support the same consumption levels.

There actually already exists a food which Vipassana meditators are permitted to eat which has the same animal cruelty concerns: dairy. Vipassana meditation calls for its adherents to eat a vegetarian diet, and this means that the consumption of dairy foods like milk, yogurt and cheese is permitted. However, industrial cultivation of cows for dairy products is a harmful process. Most of the animal products we eat today, including milk, cheese and yogurt, are sourced from an industrial-farming process [15]. Many of these industrial dairy farms create seriously unpleasant circumstances for cows: mother cows are removed from their children immediately after giving birth and then spend each day producing milk incessantly in stressful, tight coops [13], often standing in their own feces and building up untreated bodily injuries [5]. In the author's personal experience of serving at Vipassana meditation centers, centers prioritize the most affordable food options from large department stores. Unfortunately, this prioritization results in foods more likely to be unethically sourced for mass production. Already permitted in Vipassana, the mass dairy industry has more serious concerns over animal cruelty than lab-grown meat currently does; if dairy is not deemed unethical because of these concerns, then neither should lab-grown meat.

Influences on Meditation

The second reason for not eating meat is the way that meat will affect the meditator's meditation. As explained above, animals are full of craving and aversion, so eating them damages progress towards an equanimous mind.

However, there are examples in Vipassana which contradict this logic. First, tradition says that Burmese people actually "take pride in the fact that... the first food that the Buddha took after enlightenment was Burmese rice and honey" [18]. The Buddha, a being whose mind is free from craving and aversion, ate food solely produced by animals. If the Buddha is to eat food derived from animals, it should not be bad for other meditators to do the same.

Secondly, Vipassana meditation centers offer milk, cheese and yogurt to their students, but these foods are no less animal products than meat is. Extracting milk from cows and then processing it into a block of cheese is not much different than extracting cells from cows and then processing it into a patty of meat. Both of these products are just as much filled with the "craving and aversion" that stems from "every fibre of [the animal's] body" [20, p. 62].

3.2 Individual Analysis: Deliberation and Suggestions

Because lab-grown meat does necessitate the killing of animals, the first precept is not violated with its consumption. Existing evidence from pioneering lab-grown meat companies suggests that the animal cultivation and cell

extraction process will not be painful to animals. Although the treatment of animals raised for cell extraction is still a concern, because Vipassana meditators are permitted to eat dairy products surrounded by the same concerns, Vipassana meditators should also be allowed to eat lab-grown meat.

3.3 Center Analysis: Should Vipassana meditation centers offer meat?

Center Purity

Meditation centers are the physical hubs for Vipassana meditation where meditators congregate, serve the community, and most importantly, meditate. In order to support student meditation, centers are thoughtfully designed as quiet, wholesome, and pure environments. Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka explains that the atmosphere of a Vipassana center should “always remain charged with pure Dhamma vibrations for today and future generations” [16, p. 14].

The purity of these centers depends partly on the food they provide. Speaking once more on the purity of centers, this time directed towards the students, S.N. Goenka writes: “since you have come here to get rid of your defilements of craving, we should help you by providing the best environment so that they don’t increase, shouldn’t we? You are trying to annihilate them. We don’t want to eradicate craving on the one hand, and increase it by food on the other” [19, p. 70]. Vipassana centers should offer food in a way that supports student meditation.

Food Purity

Under the above reasoning, some Vipassana centers have actually decided to stop offering plant-based meats. One senior Vipassana teacher in the Northeast US, Barry Lapping, asked centers to stop using plant-based meats because they could evoke thoughts and feelings of real meat in meditators, hurting their meditation in the process [2]. Even though a typical Impossible Burger patty is made entirely of plants and no animal is harmed or killed in the process, because these meats intentionally try to emulate the appearance, sensation, and flavors of real meat they are not deemed fit for consumption. Lab-grown meat does merely not try to emulate meat—it is meat, with the blood, flavor, and texture all the same, just grown in a different way. So long as plant-based burgers are deemed unideal to student meditation because of the thoughts and feelings they might evoke in serious meditators, lab-grown meat should also not be provided at meditation centers.

However, Vipassana inconsistently applies this concern over how meditators’ perceived disgust of food affects their meditation. As explained earlier, if most of our dairy is sourced from industrial farms which cause harm to cows, wouldn’t seeing dairy products also hinder the meditation of students who are aware of those harms? Why should we only care about people’s perception of the downsides of meat but not of milk, cheese, and yogurt?

Here, there seem to be two elements of Vipassana which are contradictory: the principle of a vegetarian diet and the tenet of not harming other beings. Because tenet of no harm is more explicitly identified as a wrongdoing whereas the vegetarian diet stems from the tenet, the suggestion of a vegetarian diet should be reconsidered. Since dairy-filled vegetarian diets now involve the harming of animals, in order to be consistent with the tenet of not harming other beings, Vipassana meditation should either urge its adherents to shift towards a vegan diet or urge the ethical sourcing of dairy.

3.4 Center Analysis: Deliberation and Suggestions

In order to ensure the best conditions for meditation, it is understandable that Vipassana centers should not offer lab-grown meat substitutes in the near future. Substantial time should be given for society to acclimate to lab-grown meat and see it as an ethically benign food option before it is brought into a center with high standards for moral purity. However, to stay consistent with this decision, Vipassana meditation centers should also seriously reconsider their offering of dairy products. Either they should ensure that all dairy products are sourced ethically or they should discourage the consumption of dairy altogether.

4 Conclusion

In this moral analysis of lab-grown meat from the Vipassana perspective in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin as taught by S.N. Goenka, I find that Vipassana students should be allowed to eat lab-grown meat on their own accord because of the absence of killing or harming in the meat cultivation process. Additionally, meditation centers should not provide lab-grown meat in order to provide the most wholesome environment for a student's meditation. Tangentially, I find inconsistencies in Vipassana meditation centers' stance on animal well-being and diet. Either centers should update their diet policy to ensure that dairy products are sourced ethically or they should discourage its consumption entirely. Importantly, if Vipassana teachers were indeed to update the tradition's stance towards dairy, then the ethics of lab-grown meat should also be reconsidered.

The paper contributes to the growing body of ethical analysis of Buddhism and lab-grown meat. More research should be done on the perspectives on lab-grown meat of other sects of Buddhism and traditions of Vipassana, and more research will be necessary as lab-grown meat technologies advance and expand into the market. As both Vipassana meditation and lab-grown meat continue to grow in popularity, this paper will serve as a useful starting point in determining whether Vipassana students should be allowed to eat lab-grown meat.

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