

# Symbols, Art, and Aesthetics

Buddhist symbolism is intended to represent, through art, certain key elements of the *dharma*, or Buddhist beliefs. Many of the symbols are also common to Hinduism, but their meaning may be different.

## Early Symbols

Some of the earliest and most common symbols include the

- *Stupa* and the relics which could be found inside them
- *Dharmachakra* or *Dharma Wheel*
- Bodhi Tree
- Lotus Flower
- Swastika

## Diversity of Buddhist Symbolism

While some Buddhist symbols are found or used in each of the three major Buddhist schools, others are unique to each and reflect the differences between schools. As well, there are variations in the interpretation of the meaning and significance of the symbols.

## Theravada Symbolism

In the Theravada schools, Buddhist art and symbolism focuses solely on representational art and historical meaning. Reminders or memorials of The Buddha, called *cetiya*, fall into one of three categories relic, spatial, and representational.

While The Buddha was not represented in human form until about the first century, his physical characteristics are described in one of the main texts of the traditional Pali Canon, the *Dīgha Nikāya*, in the discourse titled “Sutra of the Marks.”

Buddha’s primary physical characteristics are described by 32 signs, “The 32 signs of a Great Man,” and another eighty secondary characteristics.

## Mahayana Symbolism

In the Mahayana schools, Buddhist figures and sacred objects tend towards esoteric (secret and mystical, not shared with everyone) and symbolic meanings. *Mudras*—symbolic hand gestures—describe the actions of the characters represented in Buddhist art. Many images also function as *mandalas* (literally “circle”—a spiritual and ritual symbol representing the universe).

Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist art frequently makes use of a specific set of eight auspicious symbols (*Astamangala*) in domestic and public art. These symbols have spread with Buddhism and have been incorporated into the art of many cultures, including Indian, Tibetan, Nepalese, and Chinese art.

The eight auspicious symbols are

- Lotus Flower
- Endless Knot
- Golden Fish
- Victory Banner
- Wheel of the Dharma
- Treasure Vase
- Parasol (Umbrella)
- Conch Shell

In East Asian Buddhism, the swastika is a widely used symbol of eternity. It is used to mark Buddhist temples on maps and in the beginning of Buddhist texts. It is known in classical Tibetan as *zungdrung*. In ancient Tibet, it was a graphical representation of eternity.

In Zen, a widely used symbol is the *enso*, a hand-drawn circle.

## Vajrayana Symbolism

A central Vajrayana symbol is the *vajra*, a sacred indestructible weapon of the god Indra, associated with lightning and the hardness of diamonds. It symbolizes emptiness (*sunyata*) and, therefore, the indestructible nature of reality.

Other Vajrayana symbols include the *ghanta* (ritual bell), the *bhavacakra*, the *mandalas*, the number 108, and The Buddha eyes commonly seen on Nepalese stupas such as at Boudhanath. There are various mythical creatures used in Vajrayana as well: Snow Lion, Wind Horse, dragon, *garuda*, and tiger.

The popular mantra “*Om mani padme hum*” is widely used to symbolize compassion and is commonly seen inscribed on rocks, prayer wheels, *stupas*, and art.

Tibetan Buddhist architecture is centred on the *stupa*, called in Tibetan *chorten*. The *chorten* consists of five parts that represent the *Mahabhuta* (five elements). The base is square which represents the earth element, above that sits a dome representing water, on that is a cone representing fire, on the tip of the cone is a crescent representing air, inside the crescent is a flame representing ether. The tapering of the flame to a point can also be said to represent consciousness as a sixth element. The *chorten* presents these elements of the body in the order of the process of dissolution at death.

Tibetan temples are often three-storied. The three can represent many aspects such as the *trikaya* (three aspects) of a Buddha. The ground story may have a statue of the historical Buddha Gautama and depictions of Earth and so represent the *nirmanakaya*. The first story may have Buddha and elaborate

ornamentation representing rising above the human condition and the *sambhogakaya*. The second story may have a primordial Adi-Buddha in Yab-Yum (sexual union with his female counterpart) and be otherwise unadorned representing a return to the absolute reality and the *dharmakaya* (truth body).

## Common Buddhist Symbols

The chart on the following pages provides a summary of the most common symbols associated with Buddhism and their meaning or significance.



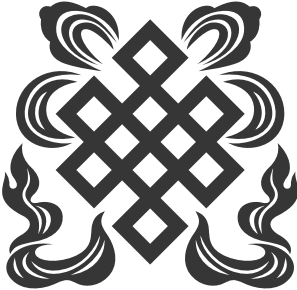



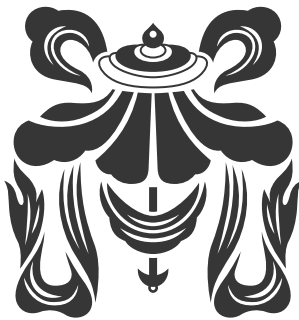
Image	Name and Meaning
	<p>The <b>Eight Auspicious Symbols (<i>Astamangala</i>)</b> derive from Mahayana traditions. The exact origins of the eight symbols are not known, but it is generally believed that they are based on Indian traditions that predate The Buddha's life. Some Buddhist scholars believe the eight auspicious symbols reflect the eight items the Indian <i>Brahmin</i> offered The Buddha following his death. There are various teachings and interpretations with respect to each, but there are also some general beliefs about the eight symbols.</p> <p>The wheel to the left depicts the eight auspicious symbols. Starting from the top and moving clockwise, the eight symbols are the parasol or umbrella, the infinity knot, the treasure vase or <i>pumpa</i>, the lotus flower, the conch shell, the two golden fish, the victory banner, and the <i>Dharma wheel</i> (<i>Dharmachakra</i>).</p>
	<p>The <b>parasol or umbrella</b> is traditionally a symbol of royalty and protection from the elements. In Buddhism, the Parasol symbolizes the protection the <i>Dharma</i> gives one from the distress and confusion caused by our <i>samsaric</i> lives and the burning heat of our emotions. Even though we may not be fully awakened, when we seek refuge in The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we begin to find ease beneath the shelter of the parasol. It is usually depicted with a dome, representing wisdom, and a 'skirt' around the dome, representing compassion. Sometimes the dome is octagonal, representing the Eightfold Path. In other uses, it is square, representing the four directional quarters.</p>

Image	Name and Meaning
	<p>The <b>infinity knot</b> (aka <b>endless knot</b> or <b>eternal knot</b>) is a symbol of The Buddha's mind. It represents The Buddha's endless wisdom and compassion and can also represent the continuity of the 12 Links of Dependent Origination. The intertwining lines symbolize how everything is connected.</p>
	<p>The <b>treasure vase</b> or <b>purna</b> traditionally is a symbol of wealth, abundance, affluence, and prosperity. In Buddhism, each person is a sacred receptacle, a vessel that can be filled with riches of wisdom and compassion. It may also symbolize the treasures of health, wealth, prosperity, and all the good things that come with enlightenment. It is also a reminder of the potential of following The Buddha's teachings. From mindfulness and concentration to compassion and loving-kindness, these are some of the many gifts and treasures that come from practicing the <i>dharma</i>.</p>
	<p>The <b>lotus flower</b> is an important symbol in Buddhism as well as Hinduism. It symbolizes purity and encourages us to enjoy the purity of our mind and actions. In Buddhism, the lotus has been used in many teachings to impart the true nature of all mankind. While the roots of the lotus flower are found deep in the mud, below the murky water of a pond or lake, it still grows above the water and blossoms into a beautiful, sweet-smelling flower. The lotus is representative of how one may rise from suffering to reach enlightenment, beauty, and clarity. The lotus can appear in several colours, each with its own meaning: white symbolizes spiritual and mental purity, pink symbolizes the traditional Buddha, purple is for mysticism, red symbolizes love and compassion, while blue symbolizes wisdom.</p>
	<p>The <b>conch shell</b> (the right-turning white conch shell) represents the deep, melodious, and sonorous sound of The Buddha's teachings, the <i>Dharma</i>, reaching far and wide, awakening beings from ignorance.</p>

## Image



## Name and Meaning




**Two golden fish** historically symbolized the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers. Overtime they have become symbolic of good fortune or luck. They are also a symbol of how one with courage and fearlessness may face the ocean of suffering and may choose their rebirth just as fish swim freely through water.

The **victory banner** was originally a military standard of ancient India. The Victory Banner represents The Buddha's victory over Mara, the Lord of Illusion, preceding his Enlightenment. In Tibetan Buddhism, victory banners symbolize enlightenment. They symbolize the victory of humans when they defeat the enemy of elusion.

The **Dharma wheel (*Dharmachakra*)** is a symbol common to several religions with origins in India including Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Historically, the *Dharmachakra* was often used to adorn Buddhist temples, statues, and inscriptions, from the earliest period of Indian Buddhism to today.

In Buddhism, the *Dharmachakra* represents The Buddha's Dharma (His teachings and beliefs), Gautama Buddha himself, and the path taken to enlightenment. It is also a symbol related to the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, with each spoke representing one of the eight paths. It is a reminder for Buddhists to help others by 'turning the Wheel of *Dharma*'; that is, by giving *Dharma* teachings.



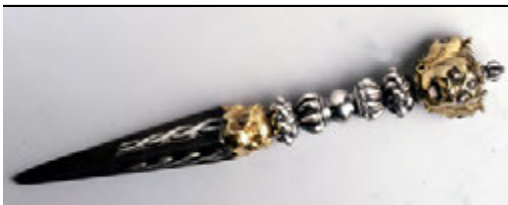
Image	Name and Meaning
	<p>The <b>vajra (thunderbolt)</b> and <b>tribu/drilbu (bell)</b> are ceremonial or ritual objects, used in many rites by Tibetan Buddhist lamas or any Vajrayana practitioner of <i>sadhana</i> (spiritual exercises).</p> <p>The <b>vajra</b> (aka <i>dorje</i>) symbolizes great spiritual power, and the properties of a diamond (indestructible) and a thunderbolt (irresistible force). It is shaped like a small wand resembling a scepter, with a ball or round finial on both ends. It is usually made of copper or silver. It is always held in the right hand of the person. It is used in cleansing or purification rituals intended to bring forth enlightenment. It is also used in a ritual known as <i>Dorje</i>, with the <i>tribu</i> (bell), by <i>lamas</i> and other practitioners in various rituals.</p> <p>The <b>tribu</b> symbolizes compassion and wisdom. Traditionally, the Tribu has a handle corresponding in shape to the <i>dorje's</i> finial, as in the image to the left. It is made from the same metal as the <i>vajra</i>. It is believed that the sound of the <i>tribu</i> purifies one's spirit, draws good energy, and banishes evil.</p>
	<p>The <b>swastika</b> symbolizes the feet or footprints of The Buddha and is often used to mark the beginning of texts. In contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, it often used to decorate clothing and other objects. With the spread of Buddhism, it has become part of the iconography of China and Japan. There, it symbolizes plurality, abundance, prosperity, and long life.</p> <p>In the image on the left, the swastika is prominently displayed on the chest of the statue of Buddha in Kek Lok Si temple in Malaysia.</p>
	<p>The <b>kapala</b> or <b>skull cup</b> is a ritual object (a bowl or cup) made from the top half of a human skull. The <i>kapala</i> is used by both Hindu and Buddhist (Vajrayana) <i>tantra</i> rituals. In Tibet, they are commonly carved or elaborately mounted and adorned with precious metals and jewels. The <i>kapala</i> is most often used to make offerings to Buddhist deities.</p>

## Image

## Name and Meaning



**Prayer wheels** are used to take the place of physically chanting *mantras*. By spinning a wheel on which prayers and *mantras* have been inscribed, the sacred words are sent out into the universe. The prayer wheels are constructed by rolling the inscribed paper and then placing the roll inside a copper or wood container. The container is then attached to a spindle, which is spun around as shown in the image on the left.



A **phurpa** (aka *kila*, *purbha*) is a three-sided dagger, similar to a tent stake. Commonly called a magic dagger, the *phurpa's* blade is not sharp and not intended to be used as an actual weapon. The *phurpa* is used to intimidate evil spirits and overcome challenges. During Buddhist rituals, the adherents chant *mantras* while they meditate on frightening away evil forces with the *phurpa*.



A **mandala**, which literally means a circle, is a spiritual and ritual symbol common to several Indian religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. A *mandala* is essentially a symbolic geometric object that represents the universe.

Most *mandalas* include a square with four gates containing a circle with a centre point. Each gate is in the general shape of a T, as may be seen in the image of the Tibetan *mandala* on the left.

In the spiritual traditions where *mandalas* are used, they may have several purposes, including

- to help focus the attention of practitioners
- to be a tool for spiritual guidance
- to establish a sacred space
- to be an aid to meditation

In Buddhism, the *mandala* functions as a sacred space open to Buddhist deities and spiritual forces, and is also used as a focal point during meditation.

## Image



## Name and Meaning

The **lion** is a symbol of royalty that refers to Buddha's life and position in society before seeking and attaining enlightenment. It is also symbolic of the power of his teachings and will often be compared to the roar of a lion. The lion is one of Buddhism's most important symbols and may often be found at the entrance to and within Buddhist temples and monasteries.



An **empty throne** in early Buddhist art represented The Buddha. In the earliest phase of Buddhist art, which lasted until the first century CE, The Buddha was only represented through symbols such as an empty throne, the Bodhi tree, a riderless horse with a parasol floating above an empty space, Buddha's footprints, and the dharma wheel. The throne also symbolized the royal heritage of Siddhartha Gautama.



The **Four Guardian Kings** are four heavenly kings or guardian gods, each of whom watches over one of the four directions of the world.



## Image



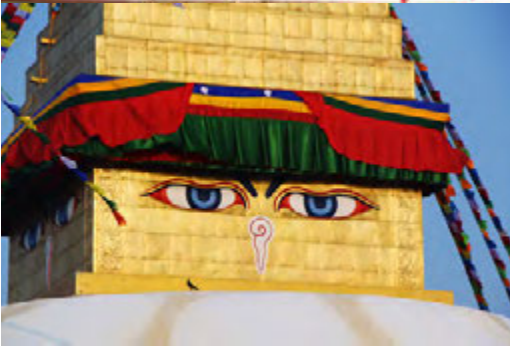
## Name and Meaning

The **footprint** of The Buddha is an imprint of Gautama Buddha's one or both feet. There are two forms: natural, as found in stone or rock, and those made artificially. Many of the "natural" ones, of course, are acknowledged not to be actual footprints of The Buddha, but replicas or representations of them, which can be considered Cetiya (Buddhist relics) and also an early aniconic and symbolic representation of the Buddha. The footprints of The Buddha abound throughout Asia, dating from various periods. They often bear distinguishing marks, such as a *Dharmachakra* at the centre of the sole, or the 32, 108, or 132 auspicious signs of the Buddha, engraved or painted.



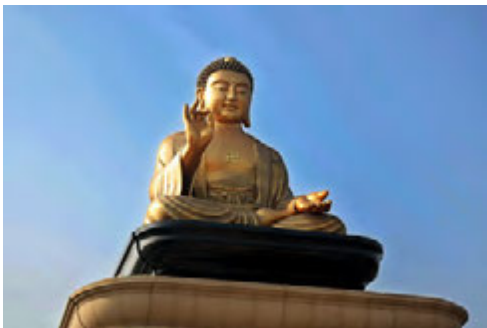
The **Bodhi tree** Refers to a large and very old sacred fig tree that was located in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India, under which Siddhartha Gautama (Gautama Buddha) the spiritual teacher and founder of Buddhism achieved enlightenment or Bodhi. In Buddhist religious art, the Bodhi tree is recognizable by its heart-shaped leaves, which are often prominent in the painting or sculpture.

The Sacred Fig growing at the Mahabodhi Temple is believed to be a direct descendant of the original Bodhi Tree. This temple and the tree is a popular destination for pilgrims, and it is considered to be the most important of the four main Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Other Bodhi trees which have special significance in the history of Buddhism are the Anandabodhi tree in Sravasti and the Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Both of these are believed to be descended from the original Bodhi tree The nun Sanghamitta, daughter of Asoka, was said to have brought a branch of the original Bodhi tree, where it was planted at Anuradhapura.



The **Buddha eyes** or **wisdom eyes** can commonly be found on all four sides of Buddhist stupas or shrines. It symbolizes the all-seeing and omniscient eyes of Buddha and is representative of Buddha's presence all around. The curly line below the eyes in the middle (where the nose is on a face) is the Sanskrit numeral one that symbolizes the unity of everything and also signifies that the only way to attain enlightenment is through Buddha's teachings. The dot between the eyes is indicative of the third eye, which represents spiritual awakening.

## Image



## Name and Meaning

The **statues** and **representations of Buddha**, in Buddhism as in Hinduism, have a number of stylized, ritualistic hand gestures known as *mudras*. Each *mudra* has a specific meaning and significance. Often, statues or paintings of The Buddha depict a specific *mudra*. Therefore, if you know what to look for, you can 'read' the meaning of a Buddha statue or other depiction by looking at the pose, posture, and the hand gestures displayed. Each traditional pose is specifically related to an important event in the life or past lives of the Historical Buddha.

Such representations of The Buddha may also be known as an Attitude and there are over 100 poses illustrating the life of the Buddha.

The first image on the left is of a statue of Buddha in the *abhaya* or "no fear" *mudra* pose. The second image is of a statue depicting the *dhyana* or *samadhi* pose symbolic of meditation and deep contemplation. The third image depicts The Buddha in the *vitarka mudra* pose, symbolic of transmission, learning, and intellectual discussion.

For more information on Buddhist *mudras*, see

- <https://tricycle.org/magazine/mudra/>
- [www.buddhas-online.com/mudras.html](http://www.buddhas-online.com/mudras.html)
- [www.buddhanet.net/mudras.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/mudras.htm)

Frequently, The Buddha is depicted with curly, short hair, apparently symbolic of Siddhartha after he had cut off his topknot to renounce his privileged past. However, more often, his hair is neither shown as being shaved nor long. In such cases the hair is believed to be symbolic of moderation, somewhere between the extremes of indulgence and mortification.

Other distinguishing features and their significance include

- Half-closed or veiled eyes symbolize a state of meditation or looking outward and inward.
- Elongated earlobes to hear what is needed in the world.
- A dot on the forehead symbolizes wisdom and a third eye to see unity.
- A full mouth refers to eloquence in speech.
- Long arms signify generosity.
- Slender fingers symbolize mindfulness, precision, and purity in every act.
- Round heels represent an even temperament.
- Fine webs between toes and fingers signal interconnectedness.

## Image



## Name and Meaning

A **butter lamp** consists of a base and a basin on top for burning vegetable oil (*ghee*) or the traditional yak butter. Frequently, butter lamps are decorated with Buddhist designs and symbols. The lamps vary in size and shape: they may be small basins made from simple materials or large basins that may be gilded and well decorated with Buddhist symbols, such as the lotus.

Buddhist monks and nuns will tend to the butter lamps that are theirs and those which are brought by local community and pilgrims as offerings

Buddhists believe that they do more than provide light, the lamps also enlighten and purify the mind. They are central to Tibetan Buddhist religious practices and ceremonies, such as the Monlam Prayer Festival. Butter lamps may be used for meditation to help focus the mind.

The butter lamp's flame and glow represents the pursuit of enlightenment. The flickering of the lamp may also be symbolic of the impermanence of things and life. The darkness that comes with the extinguishing of the flame may be symbolic of the challenges which all living things may face and with which all may struggle.



The **begging bowl** or **alms bowl** (in Pali, *patta*; in Sanskrit *patra*) is one of the most important objects in the daily lives of Buddhist monks and nuns. As a practical vessel, it is used to collect alms or offerings of food or money from lay supporters and pilgrims. On a symbolic level, the begging bowl is associated with the historical Buddha.

Therefore, the begging bowl is the primary symbol of the life that Buddhist monks and nuns have chosen and of The Buddha's teachings on non attachment.

According to the *Vinaya*, monks may use bowls made of either iron or clay, and of various sizes.



## Buddhist Dress

Buddhist monks generally shave their heads and wear a robe whose colour and components vary dependent on the specific school, nation, or region; however, all trace their origins to the Buddhist robes that Buddha and his disciples wore. Originally the robes of Buddhist monks were constructed of discarded fabric. The pieces of fabric were then stitched together to form three rectangular pieces of cloth. These three pieces of rectangular cloth were then fitted over the monk's body in a specific way. The three main pieces of cloth that constituted the traditional Buddhist robe were called the *antarvasa*, the *uttarasanga*, and the *samghati*. Together they form the "triple robe," or *ticivara*. The *ticivara* is described in some detail in the *Theravada Vinaya*. (The Learn Religions website offers an article with colourful images and descriptions of Buddhist monks' robes in various countries and schools, see [www.learnreligions.com/the-buddhas-robe-p2-4123187](http://www.learnreligions.com/the-buddhas-robe-p2-4123187).)

The name for the robes vary by school and by region, reflecting the languages spoken by Buddhists in Asia. In the beginning, they were known as *kasaya* in Sanskrit and *kasva* in Pali; however, with the spread of Buddhism to other countries they became known by many other names, such as *jiasha* (Chinese), *kesa* (Japan), *gasa* (Korean), *ca-sa* (Vietnamese), and *chogo* (Tibetan). *Kasaya* is a general term that refers to all robes, including those depicted on Buddhist statues and those worn by monks or nuns.

As stated earlier, the *kasaya* is traditionally made by the aspiring novice, nun, or monk by stitching together fabric and discarded clothing offered by lay people. In India, where the climate is warm and temperatures are generally high, monks needed only one outer garment. However, in countries such as Japan and China, where the climates are harsher and temperatures can be much colder, other garments were needed and worn underneath the *kesa*. Therefore, in Japan and China, *kesa* usually refers to the outermost robe, which became a symbol of faith, an ornament, and not really to serve as protection against the elements. Today, Buddhist robes may be brown/tan, orange, red, maroon, grey, or black and comprised of more than three pieces of clothing.

Buddhist nuns also shave their heads and wear a robe which is usually brown, maroon, white, grey, or pink.

Most lay Buddhists dress according to the customs and traditions of the nations they live in and are indistinguishable from the majority. Nonetheless, within some countries and traditions, lay people will dress in white as was the custom in Buddha's time. Visitors to Buddhist temples or monasteries should dress and behave modestly, as is customary in any religious place or building.

## Hats and Head Coverings

In addition to robes, especially in Tibet, some schools of Buddhism have elaborate ceremonial hats or head coverings that monks, especially senior monks or masters, will wear for special ceremonies and rituals. In Tibet, some



of the sects are known or distinguished by the colour of their hats or head coverings. These include

- Yellow hat: the Gelugpa sect
- Red hat: the Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyupa sects
- Black hat: the Karma Kagyupa sect

In Japan, *gasa*—or traditional hats—were used by Zen monks. These vary in shape and size.

## Food, Drink, and Fasting

Within Buddhism there are differences of opinion on whether vegetarianism is a requirement of Buddhist practice and, as such, practices vary between schools and countries. Traditions vary over whether or not The Buddha prohibited the eating of meat.

It is believed by most Buddhists that vegetarianism was not a part of the early Buddhist tradition and The Buddha himself was not a vegetarian. The food Buddha ate was offered as alms by the community or from being invited to the houses of his followers and admirers. In either case, he ate what he was given. Before his enlightenment he did experiment with various diets including a meatless one; however, it is believed that he eventually abandoned them as he did not find that they contributed to his spiritual development.

Over time, Buddhists began to feel uncomfortable about meat eating. By the beginning of the common era, eating meat had become regally unacceptable, particularly amongst the followers of Mahayana Buddhism, although it remained a point of some controversy.

In contrast, Tantric (Vajrayana) text, dating from the seventh and eighth centuries onward, frequently approved of both drinking alcohol and eating meat and both were considered appropriate to offer to gods.

In contemporary times, many Mahayanists are vegetarian and many Theravadins are not, although the situation is complex. Generally, Theravadins have no dietary restrictions, but frequently monks and lay people in Sri Lanka are strict vegetarians. Others avoid eating meat but will eat fish. Chinese and Vietnamese monks and nuns are strict vegetarians and the lay community is expected to follow their example but many do not. Tibetan and Japanese Buddhists are rarely vegetarians.

Buddhists who insist on vegetarianism do so because the Buddhist code of virtue includes compassion to animals. Thus, eating meat supports an industry that causes cruelty and death to millions of animals. Such Buddhists would argue that a truly compassionate person would wish to reduce all this suffering by refusing to eat meat.

The argument that vegetarianism is not necessary is based on several points as follows:

- If The Buddha had believed that vegetarianism was a requirement of Buddhist practice he would have said so explicitly, but he did not (at least in the *Pali Tipitaka*).
- Unless the individual is directly involved in killing the animal by eating meat, they are not responsible for the animal's death. They may point out that in this sense the non-vegetarian is no different from the vegetarian. A vegetarian is able to eat vegetables or fruit because the farmer has planted and harvested the crops and in so doing may kill many creatures.
- Although vegetarians may not eat meat, they may use numerous other products that lead to or are the result of animals being killed (soap, leather, serum, silk, etc.).
- Cultivating virtuous qualities such as understanding, empathy, patience, generosity, and honesty and bad qualities like ignorance, vanity, pride, hypocrisy, jealousy, and indifference are not dependent on what one eats and therefore diet is not a significant factor in the spiritual development of the person.

Each person has to make up his or her own mind as to their position on vegetarianism.

Monks and nuns in most schools of Buddhism, with the exception of Mahayana Buddhism, will usually eat meat. A large part of this has to do with the Buddha's requirement that the *Sangha*, or monastic community, live off the generosity of the lay people. For a member of the *Sangha* to refuse offerings of meat, would be making it difficult for lay people to support them. With few exceptions, monastics are not likely to refuse certain foods unless there are good reasons for doing so. With respect to meat, they may refuse an offering if they see, hear, or suspect the animal was killed specifically for them or if it is a type of meat The Buddha forbade monks to accept, such as human or tiger meat. As well, it would be considered rude to reject an offering of meat from a faithful but poor family who had used their meagre resources to buy meat to offer to a monk or nun, only to have their offering rejected.

In summary, many Buddhists are vegetarian, however, they generally do not take offence at others eating meat.