



## An Analysis of the Concepts of Vegetarianism and Non-killing as Found in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*

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### Article Info

Research Article

Received: 28/01/2026

Revised: 23/06/2026

Accepted: 25/06/2025

Published online: 25/06/2026

### Abstract

This article examines the concepts of vegetarianism and non-killing as articulated in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, with the aim of clarifying their ethical and soteriological significance within *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. The study pursues three objectives: 1) to study the foundational Buddhist principles of vegetarianism and non-killing. 2) to explore the historical background, main content, and significance of the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. 3) to analyze the concepts of vegetarianism and Non-killing as found in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. Employing textual and doctrinal analysis, this documentary study demonstrates that non-killing, grounded in the first precept, constitutes the ethical foundation of Buddhist moral discipline, while vegetarianism functions as its practical extension, embodying compassion and karmic responsibility.

**Its results revealed that** 1) On the foundational Buddhist principles of vegetarianism and non-killing, it was found that Buddhist ethics takes non-killing as its fundamental principle, aiming to respect life, purify body and mind, and weaken the afflictions that sustain *Samṣāra*. Within this ethical framework, vegetarianism functions as the concrete daily practice of non-killing, and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, grounded in

**Keywords:** Buddhist Ethics, Non-killing, Vegetarianism, The *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*.

universal compassion, establishes it as an active ethical responsibility rather than a merely optional moral choice. The doctrines of karma and rebirth further confer soteriological significance upon dietary conduct, as meat consumption perpetuates karmic continuity and **samsāra**, whereas vegetarianism helps interrupt cycles of harm. 2) Through close textual analysis, it was found that Buddhist ethical cultivation is inseparable from meditative and liberative aims. Ethical purity is not treated as an external moral requirement, but as a necessary condition for the purification of consciousness and the realization of authentic meditation, thereby integrating dietary ethics into the broader path of liberation. 3) On the concepts of vegetarianism and non-killing as found in the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**, it was found that the text explicitly affirms vegetarianism as an indispensable condition for genuine **samādhi**, wisdom, and liberation. As a seminal scripture integrating moral discipline (**śīla**), meditative concentration (**samādhi**), and wisdom (**prajñā**), the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** clearly states that those who fail to eradicate the mind of killing and continue to consume meat cannot attain authentic meditation or liberation, thereby establishing vegetarianism as a necessary prerequisite for release from **samsāra**.

## Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Significance

The **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** occupies a central position in East Asian **Mahāyāna** Buddhism and has long been regarded as a normative text for doctrinal orthodoxy and authentic practice (Welch 1968). Since the Tang dynasty, it has exerted sustained influence particularly within the Chan and Tiantai traditions through its rigorous integration of karmic causality, moral discipline (**śīla**), meditative concentration (**samādhi**), and wisdom (**prajñā**), grounding liberation firmly in ethical purification (Buddhist Text Translation Society 1977–2009; 2009). Within this framework, the sutra’s uncompromising stance on non-killing and vegetarianism constitutes one of its most distinctive ethical positions, explicitly identifying abstention from killing and meat consumption as prerequisites for **samādhi** and liberation, most clearly articulated in the *Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity* (Kapleau 1981; Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 264–267). Dietary conduct is thus treated not as a morally neutral choice but as a decisive factor in karmic production, mental transformation, and liberation (Phelps 2004).

Against both **Theravāda** allowances for “pure meat” (Walshe 1995) and modern ethical pluralism, this study employs textual and doctrinal analysis to demonstrate that the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** unequivocally rejects the possibility of authentic meditative realization while consuming meat, identifying killing-related karmic tendencies as a fundamental obstruction to liberation (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 234–235). In dialogue with contemporary discussions of animal ethics,

ecological responsibility, and systemic harm, the sutra's integration of ethics and soteriology reveals its enduring relevance to modern debates on non-violence and moral accountability (Schmithausen 1991; Waldau 2001). This article argues that the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra articulates** one of the most stringent ethical models in **Mahāyāna** Buddhism, in which vegetarianism and non-killing are not contingent moral ideals but structurally necessary conditions for authentic **samādhi** and liberation.

## Objectives of research

- 1 to study the foundational Buddhist principles of non-killing and vegetarianism.
- 2 to explore the historical background and doctrinal significance of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**.
- 3 to analyze the concepts of vegetarianism and Non-killing as found in the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a document-based qualitative research approach to systematically examine the doctrinal construction of vegetarianism and non-killing in the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**. Through close analysis of the original Chinese text and authoritative English translations, with particular attention to key passages such as the Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity, it explores the intrinsic relationship between dietary ethics, karmic causality, and liberative practice. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in Buddhist ethics, the study further situates these teachings within a broader theoretical framework and evaluates their relevance to modern ethical discourse.

## Results

### 1. Vegetarianism and Non-Killing in Buddhist Ethical Thought

#### 1.1 The Buddhist Ethics of Non-Killing

Buddhist ethics conceives morality not as a rule-based system but as a causal process that shapes consciousness and future experience. Acts of killing generate karmic imprints that reinforce afflictive mental states and sustain **saṃsāra**, whereas non-killing functions as a fundamental practice for weakening the defilements that obstruct liberation (Phelps, 2004).

Within the structure of Buddhist moral discipline, this principle is codified as the first of the Five Precepts (**pāṇātipātā veramaṇī**), forming the ethical foundation for lay practice alongside the prohibitions against stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. Together, these precepts aim at the purification of body, speech, and mind (Walshe 1995).

Accordingly, non-killing occupies a central position in Buddhist ethical thought and spiritual cultivation. By emphasizing respect for life and the avoidance of harm, it prevents the cultivation of hatred and domination that accompany violent action, which explains why classical

Buddhist sources consistently regard killing as among the gravest unwholesome deeds (Walshe, 1995).

### 1.2 Vegetarianism as the Extension of Non-Killing

Vegetarianism extends the principle of non-killing into daily consumption. Although early canonical sources permit “pure meat” under limited conditions, such allowances aim to minimize involvement in killing and preserve purity of intention (*cetanā*) (Walshe 1995). With the rise of **Mahāyāna** Buddhism and the bodhisattva ideal, non-killing was reframed as an active ethical commitment grounded in universal compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), rendering vegetarianism a practical expression of sentient equality and the alleviation of suffering (Watson 1993; Kapleau 1981).

### 1.3 Karma, Rebirth, and Moral Responsibility

The doctrines of karma and rebirth constitute the fundamental causal framework of Buddhist ethics, according to which all actions generate enduring moral consequences. In this view, wholesome actions give rise to wholesome results, while unwholesome actions produce unwholesome effects. Behaviors connected with killing, violence, or indifference to the suffering of sentient beings accumulate negative karma and thereby sustain and intensify **saṃsāric** existence.

From this perspective, dietary practice is not morally neutral. Participation in meat consumption implicates one in the causal continuum of killing, reinforcing afflictive tendencies and karmic continuity. By contrast, vegetarianism, grounded in non-harming and compassion, reduces the accumulation of unwholesome karma, cultivates wholesome karma, and contributes to the purification of consciousness. It thus functions not as a symbolic or merely ritual observance, but as a concrete ethical practice aimed at interrupting karmic entanglement and weakening the conditions of rebirth (Phelps 2004).

## 2 The Historical background and doctrinal significance of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**

### 2.1 History of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**

The transmission history of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** is distinctive within the **Mahāyāna** canon and reflects the complex processes of Buddhist textual transmission across cultural and linguistic boundaries. According to traditional Buddhist accounts, the sutra was preserved in the Dragon Palace and later retrieved by **Nāgārjuna** after the Buddha’s **parinirvāṇa**, though it did not initially circulate widely in the human realm (Buddhist Text Translation Society 1977–2009). In the Chinese context, its eventual arrival was later associated with devotional narratives—most notably the prolonged supplication of the Tiantai master Zhizhe—which symbolically framed the karmic conditions for its transmission (Welch 1968).

Historically, the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** was translated into Chinese in 705 CE during the Tang

dynasty in Guangzhou, under the direction of the Indian monk **Prajñā**, with Fang Yong serving as the principal literary editor (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009). From the Tang period onward, the sutra exerted sustained influence on East Asian Buddhist traditions, particularly Chan, Tiantai, and Pure Land. Although modern scholarship has raised questions regarding its authenticity and possible Chinese composition, comparative analysis of early transmission records, together with the text's doctrinal coherence and long-standing authoritative reception, indicates that it cannot be conclusively classified as an apocryphal work (Welch 1968; Buddhist Text Translation Society 1977–2009). Regardless of debates concerning its provenance, the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** has functioned historically as an authoritative **Mahāyāna** scripture, shaping Buddhist ethical thought and meditative practice in East Asia.

## 2.2 Doctrinal Content of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**

Doctrinally, the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** presents an integrated framework uniting moral discipline (**śīla**), meditative concentration (**samādhi**), and wisdom (**prajñā**). Rather than functioning as a speculative or purely philosophical treatise, the sutra consistently frames itself as a guide for concrete spiritual cultivation. Central themes include the eradication of delusion, the realization of one's true nature, and the stabilization of authentic **samādhi**.

A defining doctrinal feature of the sutra is its insistence that meditative realization is inseparable from ethical purification. **Samādhi** is not treated as a morally neutral technique, but as a transformed state of consciousness that can arise only when violent intentions, habitual attachments, and defiled mental tendencies have been fundamentally eliminated (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009).

## 2.3 The Significance of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra**

The significance of the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** lies in its rigorous integration of ethics and soteriology. By explicitly linking moral purity to the possibility of genuine meditative attainment, the sutra establishes a strict normative standard for Buddhist practice. Its uncompromising stance on non-killing and vegetarianism is grounded in this ethical–soteriological framework, asserting that liberation and true **samādhi** cannot be achieved without the complete eradication of harmful intentions.

For this reason, the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** has long been valued not only as a doctrinal authority but also as a practical manual for safeguarding the integrity of Buddhist cultivation. Its influence across multiple traditions reflects its enduring role in shaping understandings of ethical discipline, meditative practice, and the path toward liberation within East Asian **Mahāyāna** Buddhism.

### 3 Vegetarianism and Non-Killing in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*

#### 3.1 The Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity

The *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* articulates one of the most explicit and uncompromising positions on vegetarianism within the *Mahāyāna* canon. In the section known as the “Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity,” the Buddha instructs practitioners cultivating *samādhi* to permanently sever all involvement with killing. Meat consumption is identified as incompatible with genuine meditative realization, and apparent states of concentration attained under such conditions are dismissed as illusory or demonic rather than liberative (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 264–267).

The sutra further emphasizes that killing-related practices generate cycles of karmic debt and retribution that bind beings to *samsāra*. Even indirect participation—such as consuming the flesh of animals killed by others—is said to perpetuate these cycles. In this way, the text deliberately collapses the distinction between direct and indirect violence, articulating a holistic conception of ethical responsibility grounded in karmic causality (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 234–235).

#### 3.2 Rejection of Conditional or Selective Vegetarianism

Notably, the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* rejects retrospective justifications for meat-eating based on earlier disciplinary concessions. Although acknowledging that the Buddha once permitted “five kinds of pure meat” under exceptional circumstances, the text insists that such allowances cannot legitimize continued consumption after the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*. Appeals to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) or non-duality are explicitly criticized as doctrinal distortions when employed to excuse ethical compromise and normalize desire or aggression (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 264–267).

Extending this critique, the sutra also prohibits the consumption of the “five pungent plants” (*wu xin*), not for ritualistic reasons but due to their direct impact on mental affliction: when cooked, they stimulate sexual desire; when raw, they intensify anger. Their consumption is further associated with karmic impurity and the erosion of spiritual conditions necessary for genuine *samādhi*, thereby undermining meditative integrity (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 234–235).

Accordingly, true purity is defined not through selective restraint but through a comprehensive transformation of bodily conduct, dietary practice, and intention. Vegetarianism, together with the avoidance of substances that inflame desire and hostility, functions as a criterion for authentic spiritual aspiration, indicating whether afflictive tendencies have been genuinely relinquished or merely displaced into subtler forms (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009).

#### 3.3 Dietary Ethics and the Transformation of Consciousness

Underlying the sutra’s position is what may be understood as an implicit theory of embodied consciousness, according to which dietary practices shape mental dispositions, emotional

patterns, and perceptual habits. Meat-eating is associated with the coarsening of awareness and the persistence of aggressive tendencies, whereas vegetarian discipline supports mental clarity and emotional equanimity. Ethical conduct at the level of consumption thus directly conditions the possibility of **samādhi** and liberative insight (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009).

## Discussion

1. The researcher found that vegetarianism may be understood as a practical extension of the Buddhist principle of non-killing. While early Buddhism permitted the consumption of “pure meat” under certain conditions to avoid direct involvement in killing, **Mahāyāna** Buddhism expanded this ethic through the bodhisattva ideal and universal compassion (**mahākaruṇā**). Consequently, vegetarianism became a concrete expression of compassion, non-harming, and respect for all sentient beings that related to Kapleau work on “To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case for Becoming Vegetarian. From the perspectives of karma, rebirth, and moral responsibility, food choices carry ethical significance because meat consumption may be indirectly linked to the cycle of killing. Vegetarianism, therefore, promotes compassion, generates wholesome karma, purifies consciousness, and supports the practitioner’s progress toward liberation that coincides with idea of Phelps in *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*.

2. The **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** presents a comprehensive path of Buddhist cultivation that integrates moral discipline (**śīla**), meditative concentration (**samādhi**), and wisdom (**prajñā**). It emphasizes that genuine spiritual realization depends on ethical purification, asserting that moral conduct forms the indispensable foundation for meditation and enlightenment. A distinctive teaching of the sutra is that attachment, violence, and impure intentions obstruct the attainment of authentic **samādhi** and the realization of Buddha-nature. Its enduring significance lies in its integration of ethics and soteriology, particularly through its teachings on non-killing and vegetarianism as essential expressions of compassion and spiritual discipline. Consequently, the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** has served as both a doctrinal authority and a practical guide, profoundly influencing Chan, Tiantai, and Pure Land traditions in shaping East Asian Buddhist understandings of ethical practice, meditation, and liberation. From the above mentioned it coincides with idea of Welch, H. showing in *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*.

3. The **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** strongly advocates vegetarianism as an essential expression of the Buddhist principle of non-killing. In its “Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity,” the sutra teaches that genuine **samādhi** requires the complete abandonment of killing and meat consumption, since participation in the cycle of violence perpetuates karmic bondage and obstructs spiritual realization. The text rejects conditional justifications for eating meat and emphasizes that true wisdom must be grounded

in moral discipline. It also recommends avoiding the “five pungent plants,” which are believed to stimulate desire and anger, thereby hindering meditation. More broadly, the sutra views dietary practices as directly influencing consciousness: meat consumption reinforces attachment and aggression, whereas vegetarianism fosters compassion, mental clarity, and inner tranquility. Consequently, vegetarianism is presented not only as an ethical commitment to non-harming but also as a practical method for cultivating the purity of mind necessary for *samādhi* and liberation. From this it goes hand in hand with the core concept found in the Buddhist Text Translation Society on The *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*.

In addition, Buddhist ethics regards non-killing as a fundamental principle, with vegetarianism serving as its practical expression through compassion, karmic responsibility, and the reduction of suffering. Ethical purity is inseparable from meditation and liberation, as the purification of consciousness depends upon moral discipline and daily conduct. The *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* explicitly affirms vegetarianism as an essential prerequisite for genuine *samādhi*, wisdom, and liberation, maintaining that those who continue to consume meat cannot attain complete freedom from *saṃsāra*.

## Knowledge

This research has yielded several significant new insights into the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*’s teachings on vegetarianism and non-killing, challenging conventional interpretations and deepening our understanding of *Mahāyāna* ethical soteriology.

First, this study shows that the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* redefines vegetarianism and non-killing as structural prerequisites for liberation rather than optional virtues. Rejecting earlier allowances for “pure meat,” the sutra condemns even indirect participation in killing, identifying meat consumption as a continuation of violence that generates karmic debt and obstructs mental purification, thereby linking dietary ethics directly to *samādhi* attainment (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 264–267).

Second, the research clarifies the sutra’s rejection of conditional vegetarianism and doctrinal misuses of emptiness. Appeals to early disciplinary concessions or non-dual philosophy are criticized as ethical distortions that legitimize meat-eating, positioning dietary purity as a normative safeguard in the Dharma-ending age (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2009, 264–267).

Third, comparative analysis highlights the sutra’s distinctive rigor in contrast to *Theravāda* volitional ethics and *Mahāyāna* compassion-based justifications. By uniquely linking vegetarian discipline to meditative authenticity and liberation from *saṃsāra*, the sutra integrates ethics and soteriology in ways directly relevant to contemporary concerns about moral distance, systemic violence, and ecological responsibility (Waldau 2001).

## Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** presents vegetarianism and non-killing not as optional moral ideals or culturally contingent disciplines, but as indispensable conditions for authentic Buddhist practice and liberation from **samsāra**. By integrating dietary ethics with karmic causality, mental cultivation, and wisdom realization, the sutra establishes an inseparable relationship between ethical integrity and spiritual awakening.

From a contemporary standpoint, these teachings acquire renewed urgency amid ecological crisis and increasing moral distance between consumption and harm. The **Śūraṅgama Sūtra** challenges modern assumptions that ethical responsibility can be fragmented or outsourced, insisting instead on a holistic accountability that encompasses intention, action, and systemic participation. In doing so, it offers a classical yet profoundly relevant framework for rethinking non-violence, consumption, and moral responsibility in an interconnected world. Future research may further explore how the **Śūraṅgama Sūtra's** ethical rigor was received, adapted, or contested across different East Asian Buddhist communities and historical contexts.

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