
An Effective Method of Vegetarian Dietary Practice in Vietnam Based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and Food Science

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Abstract

This study aimed to propose an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam by integrating Mahāyāna Buddhist principles with contemporary food science. It had three objectives: (1) to examine the issues associated with vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam; (2) to investigate methods of vegetarian practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism and their foundations in food science; and (3) to propose an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and food science. The study employed a qualitative methodology comprising documentary research and fieldwork. Documentary data were drawn from primary and secondary sources concerning Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, vegetarian dietary practices, and food science. Fieldwork data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 key informants, including Buddhist monastics and scholars, nutrition experts, medical professionals, and long-term vegetarian practitioners in Vietnam. The data were analyzed using descriptive, thematic, analytical, and interpretive approaches.

The findings revealed that vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam are strongly influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, particularly compassion (karuṇā) and non-violence (ahiṃsā), but are also affected by nutritional, economic, sociocultural, and knowledge-related challenges. Four principal methods of practice were identified: periodic vegetarianism, full-time vegetarianism, gradual and flexible vegetarianism, and mindful and compassion-based eating. Buddhist teachings provide the ethical and behavioral foundations for these practices, while food science supports nutritional adequacy through dietary balance, diversity, nutrient bioavailability, and the prevention of potential deficiencies, particularly in vitamin B12, iron, and protein. Based on these findings, the study proposes an integrated vegetarian dietary method emphasizing gradual transition, nutritional balance, mindful eating, cultural adaptability, and practical sustainability. This approach offers a framework for promoting healthy, sustainable, and ethically grounded vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam.

Keywords: Vegetarian dietary practice; Mahāyāna Buddhism; Food science; Buddhist ethics; Nutritional balance; Mindful eating; Sustainable food systems

Introduction

Vegetarian diets have attracted increasing global attention because of their potential contributions to human health, environmental sustainability, and ethical food consumption. A growing body of evidence indicates that well-planned vegetarian and plant-based diets are associated with lower risks of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and certain cancers, while also producing lower environmental impacts than meat-based diets (Craig, 2009; Key et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2023; Baroni et al., 2024). Nevertheless, poorly planned vegetarian diets may result in deficiencies of vitamin B12, iron, calcium, zinc, omega-3 fatty acids, and high-quality protein, thereby increasing the risk of nutritional imbalance (Melina et al., 2016; Niklewicz et al., 2024).

In Vietnam, vegetarian dietary practices have developed under the long-standing influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and traditional culture. Since Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam approximately two millennia ago, vegetarianism has become closely associated with the Buddhist values of compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), especially among monastic communities and lay Buddhists during religious observances (Thur, 2008; Hiep & Mahatthanadull, 2019; Yen & Ha, 2023). In recent years, vegetarianism has also become increasingly popular among non-Buddhists because of growing awareness of health, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare (Nho, 2024; Thanh et al., 2025).

Despite its growing popularity, vegetarian practice in Vietnam continues to face several challenges. Previous studies have reported limited dietary diversity, inadequate nutritional knowledge, misconceptions regarding vegetarian diets, and socioeconomic barriers that hinder long-term adherence (Van et al., 2016; Thuy et al., 2023; Hang et al., 2024). Traditional Vietnamese vegetarian meals are often centered on rice, vegetables, tofu, and soy products, which may not adequately supply essential nutrients if meal planning is insufficient. Consequently, deficiencies in vitamin B12, iron, calcium, and protein remain concerns among long-term vegetarians (Craig, 2009; Melina et al., 2016; Niklewicz et al., 2024).

From a Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective, vegetarianism extends beyond dietary restriction to encompass ethical cultivation and spiritual practice.

Buddhist scriptures and contemporary scholarship emphasize that abstaining from meat expresses compassion toward sentient beings, reduces suffering, and supports the bodhisattva ideal (Keown, 2005; Hiep & Mahatthanadull, 2019; Mahatthanadull & Thanaboripat, 2021). Food science, meanwhile, demonstrates that the health benefits of vegetarian diets depend not only on food selection but also on balanced nutrient intake, dietary diversity, nutrient bioavailability, and appropriate supplementation where necessary (Appleby & Key, 2016; Nolden & Forde, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). These perspectives suggest that ethical values and nutritional science should be treated as complementary rather than separate approaches to vegetarian practice.

However, existing studies have generally examined Buddhist vegetarianism from religious or cultural perspectives or investigated vegetarian diets primarily from nutritional and medical viewpoints. Few studies have integrated Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical principles with modern food science to develop a comprehensive and practical framework for vegetarian dietary practice in the Vietnamese context. This gap limits the applicability of existing knowledge for promoting nutritionally balanced, culturally appropriate, and sustainable vegetarian lifestyles in Vietnam.

Accordingly, this study addresses the research gap by integrating Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings with contemporary food science to develop an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam. Through its interdisciplinary and practical focus, the study seeks to contribute to scholarship on Buddhist vegetarianism and food science and to support healthier, more sustainable dietary practices.

Research Objectives

1. To study the issues associated with vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam.
2. To examine the methods of vegetarian practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism and their basis in food science.
3. To propose an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and food science.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship demonstrates that vegetarian dietary practice involves both substantial health potential and identifiable nutritional risks. Craig (2009), Key et al. (2016), and Melina et al. (2016) found that appropriately

planned vegetarian diets may support healthy body weight and reduce cardiometabolic risk, but inadequate planning can compromise vitamin B12, iron, calcium, zinc, vitamin D, omega-3 fatty acids, and protein intake. More recent evidence reinforces the need to distinguish between simply avoiding animal products and following a nutritionally adequate plant-based pattern. Dawczynski et al. (2022) reported that vegetarians and vegans often consume more fiber, folate, and antioxidant nutrients but may have lower status of vitamin B12, iodine, calcium, iron, and zinc, while Peruvemba et al. (2024) showed that diet quality is strongly related to nutrition literacy and dietary motivation. In Vietnam, Chinh (2023), Van et al. (2016), and Hang et al. (2024) identified food insecurity, inadequate dietary diversity, limited understanding of portion sizes, and intermittent practice as barriers to nutritional adequacy. These findings indicate that the central problem is not vegetarianism itself, but the knowledge, food access, and meal-planning conditions under which it is practiced.

Research on Mahāyāna Buddhist vegetarianism emphasizes its ethical and cultural foundations. Yen and Ha (2023) and Hiep and Mahatthanadull (2019) explain that compassion, non-harming, mindfulness, and the bodhisattva ideal shape Vietnamese vegetarian practice, particularly periodic observance among lay Buddhists and more sustained practice among monastics. Food-science research complements this ethical framework. Appleby and Key (2016) associate well-planned vegetarian diets with favorable long-term health outcomes, while Raj et al. (2025) affirm that vegetarian and vegan dietary patterns can be nutritionally adequate when supported by evidence-based planning and professional guidance. Recent studies also clarify that adequate protein can be obtained from varied combinations of legumes, soy foods, nuts, seeds, and grains, although vitamin B12 and other nutrients may require fortified foods or supplementation. Taken together, these studies suggest that Buddhist motivation can sustain ethical commitment, but food science is necessary to translate that commitment into safe and nutritionally balanced practice.

Behavioral research further shows that sustainable dietary change depends on more than knowledge alone. McEachan et al. (2011) demonstrate that intention, social norms, and perceived behavioral control influence health behavior, while Yang et al. (2025) identify education, affordability, recipes, accessibility, and family support as facilitators of plant-based eating. In Vietnam, Nho (2024), Thao and Thanh (2023), and Markoni et al. (2023) show that environmental concern, food quality, availability, consumer identity, and social context influence vegetarian choices. Newer evidence also links mindful eating

with healthier plant-based dietary patterns (Paolassini-Guesnier et al., 2025), while Rickerby and Green (2024) identify convenience, taste, cost, knowledge, and social expectations as persistent barriers. The literature therefore supports an integrated model combining Mahāyāna ethics, nutrition literacy, gradual behavioral change, mindful eating, and culturally accessible food systems; however, few studies have tested such a model empirically in Vietnam.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework links the issues associated with vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam, Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, food-science foundations, and fieldwork evidence to the development of an integrated and practical vegetarian dietary method.

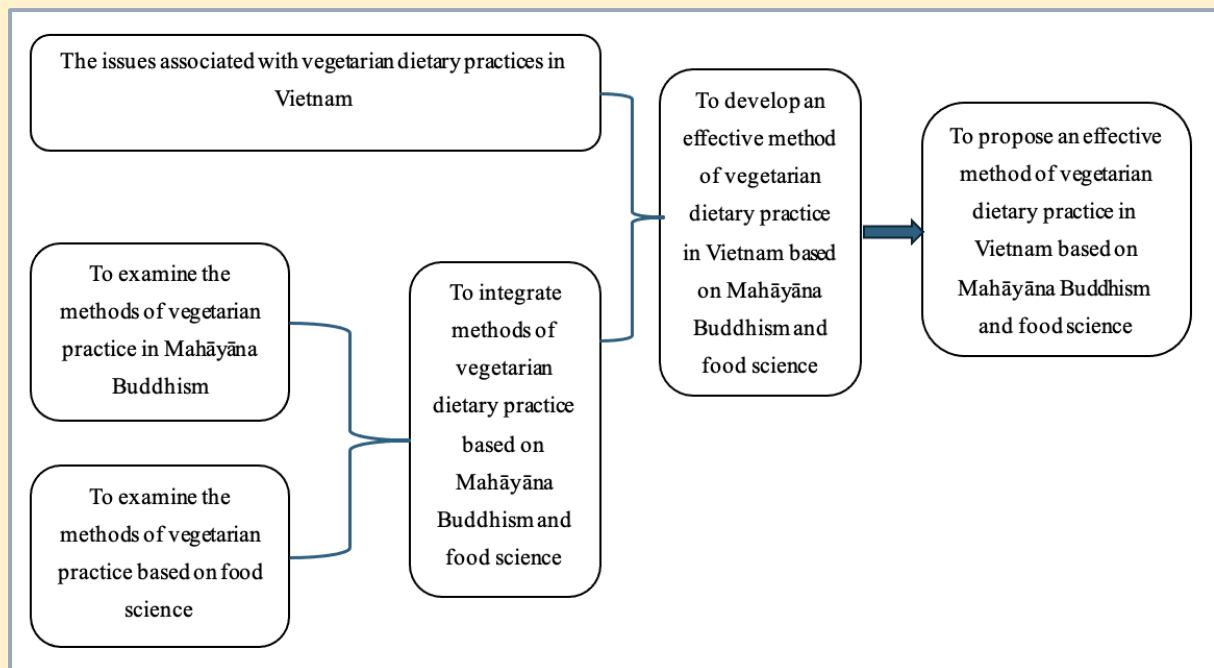


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology comprising documentary research and fieldwork. The research process consisted of three main stages: (1) collecting documentary and fieldwork data, (2) conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with selected key informants, and (3) analyzing and synthesizing the collected data to produce a descriptive and interpretive account.

1. Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary research and fieldwork. Documentary research involved the systematic collection and review of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included relevant Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, Vinaya texts, and commentaries concerning vegetarian dietary practices, together with academic publications in food science, nutrition, and public health. Secondary sources included books, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, master's theses, conference proceedings, government publications, and relevant institutional materials concerning Buddhism, vegetarianism, nutrition, and dietary practices in Vietnam.

Fieldwork data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 key informants selected through purposive sampling. The interviews elicited empirical information concerning the issues associated with vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam, methods of vegetarian practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism and their foundations in food science, and the development of an effective vegetarian dietary method suited to the Vietnamese context.

2. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews and Key Informants

The fieldwork involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 key informants selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, professional expertise, and long-term experience. The participants comprised nine members of the monastic community, three health and nutrition experts, and five lay practitioners. Their details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Key Informants

Group	Number	Relevant Background
Buddhist monastics and scholars	9	Knowledge of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Buddhist ethics, and vegetarian practice
Health and nutrition professionals	3	Expertise in nutrition, medicine, dietary planning, and public health
Long-term vegetarian practitioners	5	Practical experience of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnamese daily life
Total	17	

The fieldwork involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 key informants selected through purposive sampling. The participants comprised nine Buddhist monastics and scholars, three health and nutrition professionals, and five long-term vegetarian practitioners. They were selected on the basis of their

knowledge, professional expertise, and practical experience relevant to vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam.

3. Data Analysis and Synthesis

Documentary and fieldwork data were systematically organized, analyzed, and synthesized in accordance with the three research objectives. Documentary data from Buddhist scriptures, academic publications, and food-science literature were examined through document and content analysis to identify relevant concepts, principles, and theoretical foundations. Empirical data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically and supported by descriptive, analytical, and interpretive approaches. The interview data were coded and organized into major themes corresponding to the research objectives. Documentary evidence and empirical findings were then integrated and triangulated to produce a descriptive and interpretive account and to formulate an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and food science.

Research Process

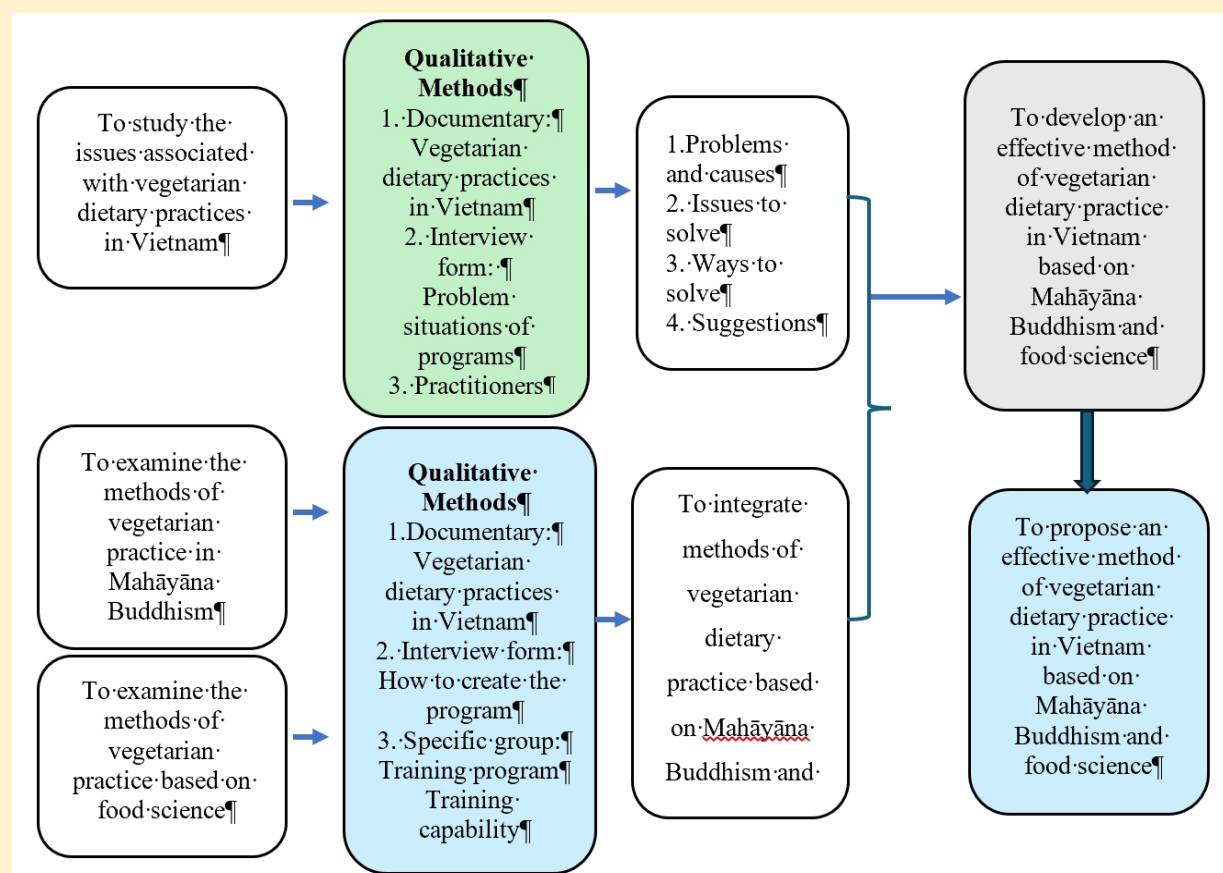


Figure 2. Research Process

Research Results

Objective 1: The Issues Associated with Vegetarian Dietary Practices in Vietnam

The findings from documentary analysis and in-depth interviews revealed that the issues associated with vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam are multidimensional and interconnected. Four major issues were identified: (1) nutritional and health issues, (2) economic and access issues, (3) cultural and social barriers, and (4) lack of nutritional knowledge and information. Although participants generally recognized the religious, ethical, and health-related values of vegetarianism, the interview findings showed that maintaining a nutritionally balanced and sustainable vegetarian diet can be difficult when practitioners have limited dietary knowledge, insufficient food diversity, restricted access to suitable foods, or difficulties adapting the practice to everyday social life.

Table 2. Summary of Findings for Research Objective 1

Main Issue	Key Finding	Interview Evidence
Nutritional and health issues	Poorly planned diets may result in nutritional imbalance and insufficient dietary diversity.	Health professionals emphasized dietary balance, potential nutrient deficiencies, and scientific understanding.
Economic and access issues	Food availability and individual living conditions affect the ability to maintain a diverse vegetarian diet.	Lay practitioners reported adapting food choices to local availability and daily circumstances.
Cultural and social barriers	Family, work, and social environments influence the consistency of vegetarian practice.	Lay practitioners described balancing vegetarian practice with family responsibilities, work, and social situations.
Lack of knowledge and information	Religious motivation may not be accompanied by sufficient knowledge of balanced vegetarian nutrition.	Health professionals stressed the need for nutritional knowledge and appropriate dietary planning.

Objective 2: Methods of Vegetarian Practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Their Foundations in Food Science. The findings identified four principal methods of vegetarian practice in the Vietnamese Mahāyāna context: (1) periodic vegetarianism, (2) full-time vegetarianism, (3) gradual and flexible vegetarianism, and (4) mindful and compassion-based eating. Documentary and interview findings showed that these methods represent different levels of commitment and adaptation rather than a single rigid form of practice. From a

Buddhist perspective, they are grounded in compassion, non-harming, mindfulness, and ethical cultivation; from a food-science perspective, their effectiveness depends on nutritional adequacy, dietary diversity, appropriate food selection, and sustainable eating habits.

Table 3. Summary of Findings for Research Objective 2

Vegetarian Method	Mahāyāna Buddhist Basis	Food Science Basis	Interview Evidence
Periodic Vegetarian Method	Buddhist observance, compassion, and non-harming	Provides a practical starting point for increasing plant-based meals	Participants regarded periodic practice as familiar and adaptable to Vietnamese religious and daily life
Full-time Vegetarian Method	Stronger ethical commitment, compassion, and consistent non-harming	Requires dietary diversity and careful nutritional planning for long-term practice	Participants reported greater stability after adaptation, but also initial difficulties in social situations and meal preparation
Gradual and Flexible Vegetarian Method	Allows practitioners to progress according to personal conditions and readiness	Supports progressive dietary adjustment and sustainable behavioral change	Many participants described their transition to vegetarianism as gradual rather than immediate
Mindful and Compassion-based Eating Method	Mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and awareness of non-harming	Encourages conscious food selection, moderation, and healthier eating behavior	Monastic participants emphasized awareness of food, its value, and the consequences of dietary choices

Objective 3: An Effective Method of Vegetarian Dietary Practice in Vietnam Based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and Food Science. By integrating documentary evidence and interview findings, the study proposes an effective vegetarian dietary method that combines Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical principles, nutritional adequacy, gradual behavioral change, and practical adaptation to the Vietnamese context. Rather than requiring an immediate or rigid transition, the method emphasizes gradual progression from periodic practice toward more consistent dietary habits, supported by balanced nutrition and mindful eating. It was developed to address the nutritional, practical, social, and knowledge-related issues identified under Objective 1 while incorporating the Buddhist and food-science foundations identified under Objective 2.

Table 4. Summary of Findings for Research Objective 3

Component	Main Findings	Interview Contribution
Structure	Integrates periodic vegetarian practice into daily eating habits while ensuring nutritional balance and dietary diversity	Participants supported gradual, flexible practice and emphasized balanced food choices
Core Mechanisms	Behavioral change and habit formation are reinforced by nutritional knowledge, awareness, and mindful eating	Key informants emphasized knowledge, motivation, mindfulness, and consistency
Practical Application	Accessibility, affordability, community participation, and cultural familiarity support long-term practice	Practitioners highlighted food availability and daily-life conditions; monastics and lay participants emphasized community support
Health and Scientific Validation	A well-planned, diverse vegetarian diet can support nutritional adequacy and long-term health	Health professionals emphasized proper planning and dietary diversity; practitioners reported perceived health benefits

Discussion

This study examined an effective method of vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and food science. The findings are discussed according to the three research objectives in order to compare them with previous studies and clarify the contribution of the research.

Regarding the first objective, the study found that vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam involve multiple challenges, including nutritional imbalance, limited dietary diversity, economic constraints, insufficient knowledge, and inconsistency in practice. These findings are consistent with Craig (2009), Key et al. (2006), and Melina et al. (2016), who emphasized that vegetarian diets may lead to nutritional deficiencies when they are not properly planned. In the Vietnamese context, the findings are also supported by Chinh (2023), Van et al. (2016), and Hang et al. (2024), who identified food insecurity, limited dietary understanding, and unstable vegetarian practice. Whereas previous studies focused primarily on isolated nutritional or behavioral factors, the present study provides a more integrated analysis encompassing nutritional, economic, social, cultural, and religious dimensions. This broader approach helps explain the principal barriers to sustainable vegetarian practice in Vietnam.

Regarding the second objective, the study found that vegetarian practice in Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism can be understood as a flexible and structured system comprising periodic vegetarianism, full-time vegetarianism, gradual

transition, and mindful eating. These findings are consistent with Hiep and Mahatthanadull (2019), who interpreted vegetarianism as both a moral and spiritual practice, and with Yen and Ha (2023), who emphasized the influence of Buddhism on Vietnamese culture and daily life. From a food-science perspective, the findings also align with Appleby and Key (2016), who showed that well-planned vegetarian diets may provide long-term health benefits. Previous studies often separated religious and scientific dimensions; this research integrates Buddhist ethics with food-science knowledge to develop a clearer and more practical system suited to contemporary Vietnamese life.

Regarding the third objective, the study found that an effective vegetarian dietary method in Vietnam should integrate ethical motivation, nutritional knowledge, and behavioral support. This finding is consistent with Nho (2024), Yang et al. (2025), and McEachan et al. (2011), who emphasized the importance of motivation, social norms, perceived behavioral control, and practical barriers in shaping dietary behavior. It is also supported by research on consumer behavior and access to vegetarian food in Vietnam. Previous studies, however, generally examined psychological, environmental, or consumer factors separately and did not integrate them into a comprehensive dietary method grounded in Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. The present study addresses that gap by proposing a gradual, balanced, and sustainable method that combines Buddhist ethics, food science, and behavioral principles.

New Knowledge from the Research

This study generates new knowledge by integrating Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics, food science, and the lived experiences of vegetarian practitioners in Vietnam. The findings show that effective vegetarian practice should not be understood simply as abstaining from meat. Rather, it is a structured dietary system requiring nutritional balance, dietary diversity, appropriate food selection, and sustained behavioral adaptation.

The study also identifies nutritional knowledge as a decisive factor in successful vegetarian practice. Many health concerns associated with vegetarian diets arise not from vegetarianism itself but from insufficient knowledge of meal planning, nutrient sources, and possible deficiencies. Therefore, nutrition education should be incorporated into Buddhist vegetarian practice, particularly for long-term practitioners.

A further contribution is integrating Mahāyāna Buddhist principles with food science. Compassion, non-harming, mindfulness, and moderation provide ethical motivation and guide food choices, while food science ensures nutritional

adequacy and health protection. These two perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory.

Based on this integration, the study proposes three core elements of an effective vegetarian dietary method: gradual transition, nutritional balance, and mindful eating. Gradual transition improves adaptability, nutritional balance supports physical health, and mindful eating strengthens ethical awareness and self-regulation.

The findings also show that successful implementation depends on practical conditions, including affordability, food accessibility, cultural familiarity, and social support. The proposed method therefore extends beyond individual dietary choice and recognizes the broader social and economic environment. Overall, the study contributes a holistic framework that connects physical health, mental well-being, ethical cultivation, and sustainable dietary practice in the Vietnamese context.

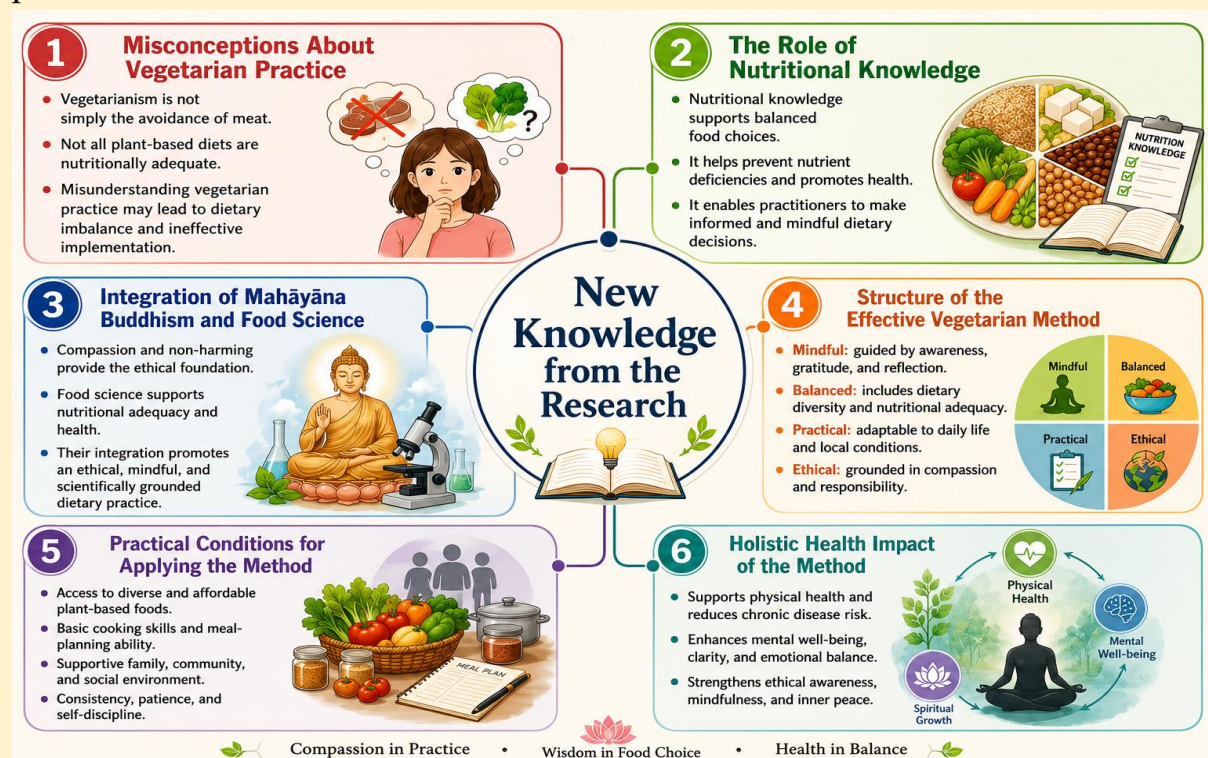


Figure 3. New Knowledge Generated from the Integration of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Food Science

Conclusion

This study examined vegetarian dietary practices in Vietnam by integrating Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, food science, and empirical findings from in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that vegetarian dietary practice is influenced by several interconnected issues, particularly nutritional and health concerns, economic and access limitations, cultural and social barriers, and

insufficient nutritional knowledge and information. These findings indicate that the main concern is not vegetarianism itself but how the diet is understood, planned, and maintained in everyday life. Sustainable practice therefore requires adequate nutritional knowledge, dietary diversity, practical guidance, and adaptation to social and cultural conditions. In response to these issues, the study identified four principal methods of vegetarian practice: Periodic Vegetarian Method, Full-time Vegetarian Method, Gradual and Flexible Vegetarian Method, and Mindful and Compassion-based Eating Method. These methods demonstrate that Mahāyāna Buddhist principles, particularly compassion, non-harming, mindfulness, and ethical cultivation, provide an important spiritual and behavioral foundation, while food science contributes the nutritional basis required for dietary balance, diversity, and appropriate food selection. Integrating these findings led to the development of an effective vegetarian dietary method characterized by gradual transition, nutritional balance, and mindful eating, supported by behavioral change and habit formation, nutritional knowledge and awareness, accessibility and affordability, and community and cultural support. Rather than promoting a rigid or sudden dietary transition, the proposed method provides a flexible approach that can be adapted to individual circumstances and everyday life in Vietnam while maintaining both Buddhist ethical values and nutritional adequacy. Overall, the study demonstrates that effective vegetarian practice requires the integration of ethical motivation, scientific nutritional knowledge, sustainable dietary behavior, and socio-cultural applicability. By bringing these dimensions together within a unified framework, the study contributes a practical and culturally appropriate approach to supporting healthy, sustainable, and long-term vegetarian dietary practice in Vietnam.

Recommendations

The study was organized around three research objectives, and its literature review, scope, methodology, and findings were aligned accordingly. Several directions for future research emerged from the analysis.

1. Develop and empirically evaluate an integrated model of vegetarian dietary practice for sustainable health and well-being in Vietnam based on Mahāyāna Buddhism and food science, with particular attention to the systematic interaction of ethical, nutritional, and behavioral components.

2. Conduct comparative research on vegetarian dietary practices across Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions to identify similarities, differences, and potential applications in contemporary society.

3. Examine the effectiveness of vegetarian dietary practices among different population groups in Vietnam, including monastic communities, lay Buddhists, students, and working adults, with attention to practical challenges, behavioral sustainability, and socioeconomic conditions.

4. Investigate behavioral factors and practical solutions affecting the implementation of vegetarian dietary practices, including the intention-behavior gap, motivation, social influence, education, community support, and digital tools for sustaining long-term dietary change.

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