



Compassionate Action by Chatral Rinpoche
Edited, Introduced, and Annotated by Zach Larson.

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Review by Norm Phelps, Author of *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*:

For centuries a stronghold of meat eating in the Buddhist world, the Vajrayana, is opening up to vegetarianism at a pace no one could have predicted. In 1994, composer and Tibetan Buddhist practitioner Philip Glass could tell *Tricycle* magazine that he had never met a vegetarian lama, “from the lowest rank to the highest.” Today, a growing number of the generation of young lamas who grew up in India and Nepal are promoting vegetarianism as an essential expression of Buddhist compassion. The organizations they are forming, such as the Universal Compassion Movement and Tibetan Volunteers for Animals, are saving the lives of animals daily and having a profound effect on Tibetan Buddhism. And on April 6, 2005 the highest lama of them all – the Dalai Lama – announced to a wildlife conference in New Delhi that “Lately I have also turned to a vegetarian diet.” Where just a short time ago there were no books on vegetarianism from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective available in English, there are now at least three: *Food of Bodhisattvas* by Shabkar, *Ahimsa* by Bodo Balsys, and *Compassionate Action* by Chatral Rinpoche.

The newest of these, *Compassionate Action*, is a jewel. Unified by theme rather than structure, *Compassionate Action* is a collection of writings and teachings by Chatral Rinpoche with an introduction and commentary by Zach Larson. A Tibetan-speaking Nyingma practitioner who has studied with Chatral Rinpoche, Larson provides an intelligent and intelligible guide to the life and teachings of one of the most revered figures in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Rinpoche’s teachings are clear, compassionate and uncompromising.

The heart of *Compassionate Action* is Chatral Rinpoche’s essay “On Meat Eating” and an interview Larson conducted with him in 2000. When asked why he doesn’t eat meat, Rinpoche pulled no punches. “If you take meat, it goes against the vows one takes in seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Because when you take meat, you have to take a being’s life.” That says it all. That, in a nutshell, is the Buddhist argument against meat eating.

Perhaps the most valuable part of *Compassionate Action* for Western practitioners is Chatral Rinpoche’s withering dismissal of claims that the Vajrayana allows meat eating. Eating meat is fine, he says, if your level of realization is so high that you have acquired supernatural powers, including the power to transfer the consciousness of the animal to “a higher rebirth or enlightenment . . . But this is not done for sustenance, only for the purpose of helping that animal. But I do not have that power and because of that I never eat meat.” And he gives us the distinct impression that he would not be at all surprised to learn that meat eating teachers in America don’t have it either. Farther on, Rinpoche says, “One who has taken the Bodhisattva vow will incur great sin in eating the flesh of sentient

beings who were one's parents in past lives. Even in the vajrayana, meat is forbidden until one attains the ultimate view of pure perception." That certainly lets me out, and I suspect it also lets out the vast majority of meat eating Buddhists.

Chatral Rinpoche makes it clear that although vegetarian lamas are a minority, they are by no means the rarity that Philip Glass – in common with most Western Buddhists – believed. "I know many of them from Tibet," he tells us. And the good news is that their numbers appear to be growing.

Zach Larson has performed a great service by bringing us the remarkable life story and compassionate teachings of one of our greatest living lamas. *Compassionate Action* is essential reading for Tibetan Buddhists, and indeed for Buddhists of all schools who are wrestling with the question of meat eating. Not to mention those who are not wrestling with it and should be. I have heard that Larson is currently working on his own book about Tibetan Buddhism and meat eating. I hope that this is so. I can't wait to read it.

Endorsement by Sogyal Rinpoche, Author of *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

"Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche studied under some of the greatest masters of the previous century, and ranks today as the senior-most teacher of the Dzogchen lineage. He is renowned throughout the Tibetan community as a steadfast guardian of the Buddhist tradition and a highly accomplished, legendary adept, who—like the great sages and hermits of the past—has spent much of his life in retreat, practicing meditation and granting teachings only sparingly to a few committed disciples.

"It is truly wonderful therefore that we now have this precious collection of his teachings and advice capably translated into English, enabling many more people to benefit from his boundless wisdom and compassion. Here, in these poetic writings and recorded interviews, Rinpoche imparts his instructions in a forthright and elegant style and reveals his deep commitment to Buddhist ethics, his dedication to non-violence and preserving life, and above all, his total dedication to the authentic teachings of Lord Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava."

Review from BuddhaDharma Magazine (Spring 2007):

"Fame and renunciation rarely go hand in hand. However, in the Tibetan Buddhist world, occasionally there are hermits who become revered and renowned precisely for the integrity of their renunciation. Chatral Rinpoche, a ninety-three-year-old Nyingma master, has exemplified this tradition throughout his life. Referred to by Thomas Merton as "the greatest man I ever met" and frequently described as the greatest living Dzogchen master, Chatral Rinpoche's fame has spread despite the lack of any publications devoted to him. Now, his inspiring life and teachings are available in *Compassionate Action* (Snow Lion Publications, 2007), a collection of his translated teachings and compositions edited by Zach Larson. The book opens with a brief biography and continues with chapters exploring different aspects of the bodhisattva practices for which Chatral Rinpoche has become well-known, such as vegetarianism, his annual practice of freeing thousands of captured fish into the Bay of Bengal, his construction and veneration of stupas, and his training and guidance of the next generation of Nyingma lamas."