



Chatral Rinpoche's Steadfast Commitment to Ethics

By Zach Larson

Chatral Rinpoche is renowned in the Tibetan community for his peerless spiritual discipline, especially when it comes to refraining from eating meat. Meat eating is an entrenched aspect of Tibetan culture and there are very few who can do without it for long. His Holiness the Dalai Lama became vegetarian in 1966, but when he got Hepatitis B the Tibetan doctors who support him insisted he start to eat meat again, which he continues to do today in moderate quantities. A few contemporary masters – such as Kangyur Rinpoche – were also known for being strict vegetarians, but they are the exception.

When I was on the University of Wisconsin-Madison College Year in Nepal Program in 2000, I was studying how Tibetans view the cultural convergence of Buddhism and meat eating and Chatral Rinpoche was one of the main people I interviewed. Here are some excerpts from that interview:

Question: Why did you decide to stop eating meat? How old were you when you made this decision?

Answer: It is written in many Theravadayana and Mahayana texts that one should not eat meat. There is also a Vajrayana text that says the same thing, that one should not enjoy meat or alcohol. Because of this I am following the instructions of Shakyamuni Buddha. Being a religious person, I don't take meat or alcohol and at the same time I try to tell other people not to consume these things. This is my reason – I'm just trying to motivate other people. I was 47 years old when I went to Bodhgaya and made a vow to all of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to give up meat and alcohol.

Question: Why do you think vegetarianism is an important aspect of practicing the Dharma?

Answer: 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. So I gave it up.

Question: Some claim that one can help the animals one eats by praying for them, and thus eating meat is compassionate. Other than for the most accomplished yogis and lamas, what do you make of this claim?

Answer: With supernatural powers gained through certain meditations, it is true that there are some realized beings who can revive animals from the dead and help them reach a higher rebirth or enlightenment by consuming small amounts of their flesh. But this is not done for sustenance, only for the purpose of helping that animal. I personally do not have that power and because of that I never eat meat. Eating meat in one's diet is much different than eating flesh to liberate a being through supernatural powers. I am just an ordinary practitioner who really doesn't have these qualities. So, if I ate meat it would be the same if you or any other lay person ate meat. I would be committing sin and I would be getting negative karma. I don't pretend as if I have special powers and eat meat, I just avoid it altogether.

Question: Do you know other lamas who are vegetarian?

Answer: I know many of them from Tibet. There are Nyingma, Sakya and Gelukpa vegetarians in Tibet. Compared to the many meat-eating lamas, vegetarian lamas are very few though. I'm 88 [in 2000] and during my experience I have come across many lamas in Kham, Amdo—all parts of Tibet—who don't eat meat. There are lamas who eat meat and those who don't. At my monastery in Tibet there are also lamas who take meat and those who don't.

Question: Many Buddhist practitioners in the United States eat meat because their Tibetan lamas eat meat. What do you make of this?

Answer: Many great siddhas in India drank enormous amounts of alcohol and developed magical powers. One of these mahasiddhas (Virupa) kept drinking alcohol all day and suspended the sun in the sky and kept it from setting.^[i] Naropa, Tilopa—these were great masters. If you can acquire supernatural powers, you don't need to follow the same standards of normal people and you can drink alcohol and eat meat. Those who have supernatural powers can still give great teachings and benefit all sentient beings. So, if the teachers in America are of that level, ask all your friends to join them in drinking alcohol and eating meat. ^{*} It all depends on the level of realization one has achieved. A lama who enjoys meat and alcohol can still bring people on the right path, so long as they have developed supernatural powers.

Question: Do you see Tibetan Buddhists in exile making a sincere effort to reduce their meat consumption and become vegetarian, or has meat eating become an entrenched aspect of Tibetan culture?

Answer: In Tibet, there's only meat and *tsampa*^{**}—there is no other staple food. Tibet is at a high altitude and the climate is tundra-like. There are not many fruits and vegetables. After coming to South Asia, you really don't have to follow the Tibetan custom of meat and *tsampa*. There are many types of fruits and vegetables, nutritional supplements—all kinds of good foods. Everything is available. So there is really no need to talk about the customs of Tibet as an excuse for eating meat. From my experience, not eating meat has many benefits. I'm 88 and ever since I stopped eating meat, I haven't had any major sickness. When I sleep, I sleep well. When I get up, I can walk right away. When I read religious texts, I can see them properly. I have very good hearing and can listen attentively. These are the qualities I have experienced from not eating meat. I didn't get sick or die when I stopped eating meat; no negative consequences came to me. I can travel by vehicle, airplane or train without getting nauseous or dizzy and I never get headaches. I am a human being formed with flesh and blood like anyone else and am proof that giving up meat does not make one ill like many Tibetans seem to think. I'm telling you from my own experience; only good things have happened to me from giving up meat.

Question: Many Tibetans quote a sutra passage that says if one does not hear, see, or suspect that meat has been obtained especially for you, then it is acceptable to eat. How do you respond to this?

Answer: If the animal being killed is unseen, then it is something like stealing something without being caught. That would also be deemed acceptable if you used this rationale. You could say something dirty without being heard—as if you need evidence to judge whether it is a sin or not. What they say is not right. Killing, stealing and other negative actions can never be gotten away with. Even if other people don't see you do them, the deities, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas see you doing these things. There is a Tibetan saying that even if one does not get caught committing a sin, that the gods catch you every time. It is impossible to do anything without being seen—you're always being watched by the deities. They see and understand what you did—they know that you helped to kill an animal by buying meat.

This is my answer.

Question: Some monks have told me that since insects are killed in the production of rice and other vegetables, then there is really no difference in eating those things and eating meat. What do you think about this?

Answer: This would mean that you wouldn't eat anything and would starve to death. If you say you were going to go for a month without killing insects through the food you eat, then you would die. If you die, this precious human life is wasted. So if you just let your body be destroyed, that means you are taking your own life, which is killing in itself. You can always take the insect from the rice when you see it and let it free outside. You don't necessarily have to kill beings to eat. Although, when we walk we crush many insects under our feet. We may not see them or observe we must be killing them. Not being aware doesn't mean that we haven't created any sin, because after all, cause and effect are always there.[\[ii\]](#)

After the interview, Rinpoche said to me,

Today you came to ask me these things and I answered them. It is very good. I am very happy. You have recorded my conversation, so you should relate it to the people. We are here at the place of Guru Rinpoche's cave. At this place, we are exchanging questions and answers. It will be nice for other people to hear this. When you make your book, put my interview at the beginning. Thank you.

Rinpoche's monastery at Yangleshöd has two signs posted on it related to meat eating. The first is in Tibetan, Nepali and English and is one of the first things you see when you approach the monastery.

The sign, a full four square meters in size, reads:

IN THIS BUDDHIST MONASTERY THE CONSUMPTION OF MEAT, ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE & TOBACCO AS WELL AS PLAYING CARDS OR GAMBLING IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.

One of the principal vows in Buddhism is to refrain from consuming intoxicants, along with refraining from killing, stealing, lying and sexual misconduct. Not many Tibetan Buddhists outside of the monastic tradition take this vow seriously and Nyingma practitioners are known to drink alcohol. Rinpoche does not tolerate this at all among his disciples. There was an incident a few years ago where a photo of a late lama was placed in Rinpoche's room by the disciples of this lama, who were asking Rinpoche for blessings. When Rinpoche saw the photo, he said, "This person was an alcoholic and had broken his precepts, don't leave this photo in my room; take it away!" When the attendant removed the photo from the wooden frame, there was another photo beneath. Rinpoche asked who was in the picture and was told it was the son of the late lama, who was also a heavy drinker. Rinpoche proclaimed, "Like father, like son. Take away both of their photos!"[\[iii\]](#)

In regards to smoking, Rinpoche said,

The major defect of smoking is that it will close the Brahma's door at the top of one's head. So at the moment of death, it will be extremely difficult for one's practice of *phowa*,[\[iv\]](#) in trying to let one's consciousness out from there, either to liberate oneself from cyclic existence or to go to the three upper realms. It is most advisable for all Dharma practitioners – for the sake of both themselves and others – not to smoke at all![\[v\]](#)

The second sign is posted outside of the main worship area and reads in Tibetan and English, *How can we practice true compassion while we consume the flesh of an animal to fatten our own flesh? Stop this filthy habit for your health, for the environment and for the animals.* This large poster placed in a protective frame was made by an animal rights group at Dzogchen

Monastery in South India and shows how highly Rinpoche values this ethic.

The daughter of the great Nyingma figure Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche named Pema is a close friend of Chatral Rinpoche's family. She gave me some insights on the importance of vegetarianism in Rinpoche's practice of compassion in my interview with her in 2000. She said,

Meat eating is high on Chatral Rinpoche's spiritual radar. Rinpoche is so connected with animals. He loves animals. He loves watching wildlife videos on TV. His great compassion caused him to stop eating meat. He gives all his money to save 70 truckloads of fish in Calcutta. It is his most important yearly activity. He prays for every bucket-full he dumps into the ocean, trying to bring them to a higher rebirth. In the Dharma, it is not just a matter of not doing something—eating meat for instance—but actively protecting life. Rinpoche lives this. He is so connected on a vast level to sentient beings and their suffering. Rinpoche is drawn to dark, sinful, murderous places—to Hindu animal sacrifice areas. He took his daughter Saraswati and myself to one once. It was beautiful on the outside, with flowers and carvings. He bought some birds in a cage and released them at the top of the roof. Then we came to the goat sacrifice place. At first I had my eyes closed, but then I saw it—innocent goats being murdered and blood everywhere. I was horrified. Rinpoche calmly walked over the goat blood as if he was doing walking meditation. He wasn't a bit fazed by it. I think he was trying to teach us the lesson of being fearless and patient in the face of suffering.

* Rinpoche was being sarcastic with this response.

** Roasted barley flour.

[i] The great master Virupa was drinking one evening at a tavern and the bartender told him that he could drink as much as he wanted for free until sundown. As he didn't have any money on him, he stuck his *purba* (ritual dagger) in the ground at the confluence of the shadow and the sunlight, causing both to stay where they were and preventing the sun from setting.

[ii] Tsetan Chonjore assisted in the translation of this interview, which was recorded.

[iii] *Light of Lotus Volume 3*. p. 34

[iv] *Phowa* is the practice of ejecting one's consciousness through the central channel of the body out through the top of the head, known as the "Brahma's door." The consciousness is then envisioned as entering the heart of Amitabha Buddha. In this way, one can better control the nature of one's next incarnation at the moment of death.

[v] *Light of the Lotus Volume 3*. p. 34