



Life as a Vegetarian Tibetan Buddhist Practitioner

A Personal View

By Eileen Weintraub

Compassion is at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana, the “great vehicle,” is the prevalent form of Buddhism practised in China, Japan and Tibet. The central theme of this vehicle is the aspiration to attain enlightenment not for oneself alone but the sake of all sentient beings. Protecting beings is second nature to many Buddhists. All would hesitate to kill anything and many would go out of their way to save even an insect’s life.

Why then do many Buddhists eat the flesh of other beings? In Tibet, killing and hunting were traditionally discouraged by the clergy, but climatic conditions made successful year-round agriculture impossible. The solution was to rely upon a class of individuals to slaughter animals. The interpretation of Buddha’s teaching was that it was OK to buy and eat meat if the being wasn’t killed directly for you. *Tsampa* (ground barley), meat, yoghurt and tea were the basic diet for those living on the “Roof of the World.” Tibetans generally ate sheep and yak – which were cultivated by the nomad culture and kept individually by families. One yak was enough to feed a family for perhaps a whole season. In the U.S., it is ironic that some people think that by consuming chicken and fish they are further on the path towards vegetarianism than by eating “red” meat. Consuming meat from a larger animal means that fewer animals are killed for food.

After fleeing Tibet, many lamas went into exile in India. There they did not change their diet from the one they had eaten in Tibet – in spite of the predominantly vegetarian Indian culture that served as their new home.

Sticking to Meat

It was not until the mid-1970s that mainstream Tibetan lamas started visiting America. Often their first contacts were with people from other Eastern spiritual traditions. American disciples were attracted to Tibetan Buddhism and migrated over from the mostly vegetarian Hindu traditions, including yoga and Transcendental Meditation practitioners. Did the Tibetans try to change their own meat-based diets? Did they try to embrace a new healthy, ethically conscious diet that was now available to them? More commonly the reverse happened – many Westerners graciously embraced the Tibetan diet. Students who were used to eating salads, brown rice and tofu learned to cook and eat lamb, beef and other Tibetan-style dishes to please their teachers.

Except for some purification days, meat was served at many Tibetan Buddhist centers at most meals (however, recently this has changed and retreat centers now offer vegetarian options.) Disciples became adept at fielding questions from surprised newcomers as to why Tibetan lamas, who would never kill an animal, ate meat. Why did meat have to be offered at the *tsok pujas* (group prayers with food offerings on special lunar days)? For some outsiders this was seen as nothing less than hypocritical. Those of us who were offended eventually stopped

making it an issue. As the incongruities of this diet were pointed out we shrugged and parroted the party line. After all, the important part was that we prayed for the liberation of all beings.

In certain Tibetan Buddhist circles that developed in this country, meat-eating – and some other more controversial habits – were promoted as part of the Tantric lifestyle. “Tantric” in this case meant not getting hung up on conventional morals or concepts of purity. In other words, to embrace life fully was to consume it literally. Other lamas acknowledged that it was meritorious to stop eating meat, if one could manage it. Yet there was more important work to be done, like taming the mind and praying for the benefit of all sentient beings. Besides, once you became enlightened you had set up a link with all those beings you had eaten (or perhaps a heavy karmic trail). If one was enlightened like the 10th century Tibetan saint *Tilopa*, one could send the consciousness of the being to the pure land before eating the flesh.

Both lay and ordained Tibetans are known for their extraordinary compassion for animals. One Tibetan lama performs *powa* (liberation after death) for street dogs in Nepal that are poisoned by the government. He whispers mantras in the dying dogs’ ears. *Powa* is commonly done for animals whenever possible. The Abbott of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Woodstock, NY confessed in his life story that the most painful part of his escape from Tibet was when his party was forced to shoot a wild boar to keep from starvation. In Heinrich Herrer’s account of his time spent in Lhasa, *Seven Years in Tibet*, he told how building projects would halt to protect even the lives of insects. When possible, killing is avoided at all costs.

Practicing Ahimsa

Trying to follow *ahimsa* (non-violent) principles, I have been a vegetarian for 25 years. But it has been a challenge to be both a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and a vegetarian. My own teacher had a good laugh when I insisted on staying vegetarian during visits to him in Tibet. And in Tibet my meat-eating travel mates joined me once at a vegetarian noodle stand – only when it became apparent that the *tukpa* (soup) they were going to have was going to be prepared from the chickens that were still running around outside the restaurant!

There are Tibetan injunctions, however, to refrain from eating meat. For example, an 18th century Tibetan saint named Shabkar was a spokesperson for the virtues of not eating meat. In *The Life of Shabkar, the Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi*, he wrote: “Eating meat, at the cost of great suffering for animals, is unacceptable. If, bereft of compassion and wisdom, you eat meat, you have turned your back on liberation. The Buddha said, ‘the eating of meat annihilates the seed of compassion.’” Shabkar articulates the most sweeping indictments against meat-eating found in Tibetan literature. This was particularly relevant at a time when the prediction the Buddha made in the *Lankavatara Sutra* had already become a reality: “In the future, meat-eaters, speaking out of ignorance, will say that the Buddha permitted the eating of meat, and that he taught there was no sin in doing so.” And also from this *Sutra*: “Those who practice loving-kindness should consider all sentient beings as their own children; therefore, they must give up eating meat.”

Another 18th century Tibetan saint was lama Jigme Lingpa. A commentary on his autobiography (*Apparitions of the Self, the Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* by Janet Gyatso) recounts: “Of all his merit-making, Jigme Lingpa was most proud of his feelings of

compassion for animals; he says that this is the best part of his entire life story. He writes of his sorrow when he witnessed the butchering of animals by humans. He often bought and set free animals about to be slaughtered (a common Buddhist act). He 'changed the perception' of others, when he once caused his followers to save a female yak from being butchered, and he continually urged his disciples to forswear the killing of animals."

Respecting Buddha Nature

According to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, humans and animals are the only visible realms of the six classes of beings. Plants are non-sentient and do not inherently contain Buddha nature (the seed of enlightenment within all sentient beings). Although it has been said there may be nature spirits, which protect the plants, their lives are not taken when we harvest vegetables. Buddhists are admonished constantly to work to save all sentient beings yet little thought may be given to sitting down to consume even a whole being for lunch!

The harvesting of beings for their flesh could be seen as the supreme form of exploitation. I see vegetarianism and veganism as a boycott of all that abuse. Even making a partial effort is commendable. If not eaten solely as a necessity to sustain life, I believe that flesh eating as a culinary preference will be considered barbaric in the future. If concerns arise regarding the karmic consequences of eating flesh, to whom should we give the benefit of the doubt? The living beings who were raised in obscene conditions and who died in terror in slaughterhouses, or our own habitual patterns and taste addictions? Even if health benefits are thought to be obtained by eating meat, this should be considered very carefully. With our abundant food markets in the U.S., satisfying alternatives can always be found.

In his 1995 Seattle public talk, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, said he tried being a vegetarian all the time but found it too difficult. At the time of the talk he said he eats meat every other day. This makes him a vegetarian six months of the year. By making an example of cutting his meat consumption in half, he is trying to gently influence his followers. It should be noted that this recommendation received little applause from the audience.

While many of the great Tibetan teachers did and do eat animals, the Dalai Lama has broken new ground by publicly stating his case for vegetarianism. If we seriously consider the compassion inherent in His Holiness' advice and actions, Buddhist meat-eaters could similarly try to eat vegetarian at least every other day to start out with. Since Buddhists have taken vows not to kill, they should not support a livelihood that makes others kill. Even if one does not have great compassion for animals this would meritoriously save humans from performing heinous deeds. The power of each human being becoming vegetarian releases the most intense suffering of the animal realm – the agony of factory-farmed animals. This profound action can help slow the grinding wheels of *samsara*, bringing to a halt the cycles of suffering of the entire animal realm and influencing their eventual liberation. When animals are not just looked upon as creatures to fill our stomachs, they can be seen as they really are – beings who have the same Buddha nature as we all do.

Eileen Weintraub has been practicing Tibetan Buddhism since 1976. She made three extended trips to China and Tibet to visit her Buddhist teacher who returned to re-establish his monastery in Tibet after exile in India and America. She lives in Seattle, with her husband and rescued companion animals.