

Chapter Three



At the Monastery

T

he monastic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism is the most prominent such tradition in the world today, even in the absence of a homeland to base it in. Many of the major monasteries, such as Sera and Drepung, can be found in India and Nepal. The views of the monks and nuns, Geshes and Rinpoches, are often quite different than that of the lay people, especially regarding Buddhist philosophy. Within the monasteries, there is a spectrum of views regarding meat consumption, making for dynamic research. This was a topic of controversy for most, embarrassment for some. It was the most difficult part of my research, but also, perhaps, the most rewarding.

The very first research I did at a monastery was during the Hindu festival of Dusai, with monks at the Thupten Choling monastery in Solu Khumbu, northeastern Nepal. Between *pujas* the monks and nuns performed for the animals being sacrificed by Hindus for Dusai (to facilitate their rebirth in higher realms), I interviewed monks and nuns about eating habits at the monastery. I even had a fierce debate in Tibetan about meat eating with a monk, giving me my first taste of this classic Tibetan Buddhist learning style.

They use an actual sheep head on their altar during Losar at this monastery, and use actual sheep intestines in making offerings to wrathful deities. Losar is one of the only times of year where meat is served, and the monks and nuns said they looked forward to it partially for this reason. They seemed to view the mutton and yak meat that was brought in from Tibet for this occasion as an important link to their homeland. One

monk told me that aside from Losar, meat was generally not allowed or encouraged at the monastery, so as to not violate Buddhist tenets.

When I asked the monks how meat eating and Buddhist Dharma corresponded to each other, I got a range of interesting answers. One monk admitted that it is not compassionate to eat animal flesh. A Sherpa lama told me that eating meat is forbidden in the texts, yet most Tibetan and Sherpa Buddhists try to get around that by buying meat instead of killing the animals themselves. Since everyone seems to accept that buying meat in such a manner is acceptable for Buddhists to do, the negative karma incurred from killing the animal is mentally minimized.

Then came the great debate. My opponent was a monk in his twenties named Sonam, clad in a fancy Nike windbreaker covering his monk's robes and a cocky demeanor. He said (in Tibetan) that, "Tibetans have the great expansive mind (Mahayana consciousness) so we can eat animals, as we and the Buddha cover them with our understanding of the Dharma." He continued, "I understand compassion, but animals will suffer regardless of whether or not I eat them, so why not eat them?" He said that Buddhists can't be picky about what they eat and attributed my vegetarianism to my being a "picky American."

During the debate, one nun pointed to Sonam's younger brother and asked me, "Do you think it would be O.K. to eat him?" She raised her voice. "DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE O.K. TO EAT HIM?" I responded that I didn't think that would be O.K. Then she said that in her opinion it would be the same to eat him, a monk or an animal. Sonam then responded that he thinks if he ate me, that it would be O.K.—tasty in fact—if that was all he had available to him.

I then asked monks and nuns at Thupten Choling if their eating habits have changed since they came from Tibet. Most everyone said that Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India are eating much less meat than they used to in Tibet. Sonam made it sound like meat consumption was such an integral part of Tibetan culture that giving it up altogether would be a weakening of the cultural integrity in exile and would almost be disgracing the tradition. This was strong evidence for me that meat eating is an aspect of Tibetan culture, just as Buddhism is an aspect of Tibetan culture. The fact that these two conflict with each other is more of a situational irony than a distortion of Buddha's teachings. Of course, efforts are made to justify the tradition of meat eating under the tradition of Buddhism, but most of these, in my opinion, are built on shaky ground.

Sonam thought that the pleasure he gets out of eating meat might outweigh the suffering of the animal that gets killed for his food. Others thought that since the animals would be suffering in *samsara* if they were not killed to be eaten, the suffering created by being killed was not significantly greater, and thus vegetarianism was not worth pursuing. I should mention, however, that all of the monks and nuns I was able to talk to were in their twenties, and certainly lacked the wisdom of some of the senior monks. Freeing animals from the slaughter is a common merit-building activity for senior monks in Tibet, but may not yet be appreciated or understood by most of the younger monks and nuns.

While I was conducting this research, I began to read The Words of My Perfect Teacher by Patrul Rinpoche. Patrul Rinpoche was a 19th century Nyingma practitioner who rejected high monastic office to become a wondering yogi, living his life as a beggar or in caves. He was strongly against meat consumption, and very critical of the propensity of the monastic order for eating meat. He wrote,

“Look at the lamas of today! Each time a patron kills a nice fat sheep and cooks up the gullet, kidneys and other organs along with the meat and blood, serving it piled up with the still quivering ribs of a yak, our lamas pull the shawl of their robes over their heads and suck away at the entrails like babies at their mother's breast. Then they cut themselves slices of the outer meat with their knives and munch them in a leisurely fashion. Once they have finished, their heads emerge again, hot and steaming. Their mouths gleam with grease and their whiskers have acquired a reddish tinge. But they will have a big problem in their next life, in one of the ephemeral hells, when they have to pay back with their own lives all that they have eaten so many times in this life.”²⁰

Patrul Rinpoche's strong animal rights stance combined with his criticism of the monastic order accentuated my experiential conclusions about the lack of sympathy by monks for the animals being killed for food. Chatal Rinpoche and other Nyingma yogis on the other hand, were very intimately concerned with the suffering of animals and were strict vegetarians as a result. My strong admiration for these yogis coupled with a slight disgust with the monastic order's apathy towards suffering animals caused me to generalize and romanticize these two categories.

Patrul Rinpoche's bold proclamation fueled these beliefs.

“Lamas and monks are the people who are supposed to have the most compassion. But they have none at all. They are worse than householders when it comes to making beings suffer. This is a sign that the era of the Buddha's teachings is really approaching its end. We have reached a time when flesh-eating demons and ogres are given all the honors.”²¹

Initially, I thought that Patrul Rinpoche was talking about people like the Dalai Lama, who eats meat and obviously is “given all the honors.” After having read the Dalai Lama's autobiographies and talking with a number of his advisors and members of his cabinet, however, I have put him in a category all his own. I don't really understand why he hasn't questioned his doctors' advice to eat meat, but appreciate his role as the primary agent for reducing Tibetan's reliance on meat in their diet, through his many messages to his people on the subject.

The Dalai Lama is considered, to some extent, the leader of all monastic traditions in Tibet. He is honored by all Tibetan Buddhists, not just the members of his particular school, the Gelukpa. No other country in the world gives their leader the support and loyalty that Tibetans give the Dalai Lama. He is considered the human manifestation of the God of Compassion, Avalokateshvara. He is humble and has a sense of humor, yet can be very stern and direct when addressing his people, as I witnessed during the Opera Festival (*Shoton*) speech he gave and during his March 10th speech, both in Dharamsala. His observations are very astute, and I will dedicate the next few pages to them.

In his initial autobiography, written as a young man, he writes,

"There are different opinions among Buddhists about eating meat but it was a necessity in Tibet. The climate was rigorous and although food was plentiful, it was limited in variety so it was impossible to stay healthy without eating meat... Tibetans would think it is a sin to kill any animal, for any reason, but they would not think it sinful to go to the market and buy the meat of an animal which was already dead. The butchers who slaughtered the animals were regarded as the sinners and outcasts."²²

In his second autobiography, written recently, he recalls his childhood.

"I particularly enjoyed going over (to my parents' house) at mealtimes. This was because, as a young boy destined to be a monk, certain foods such as eggs and pork were forbidden to me, so it was only at my parents' house that I ever had the chance to taste them. Once, I remember being caught in the act of eating eggs by one of my senior officials. He was very shocked, and so was I. 'Go away,' I shouted at the top of my voice!

"On another occasion, I remember sitting next to my father and watching him like a little dog as he ate some pork crackling, hoping that he would give me some—which he did. It was delicious."²³

He Continues,

"I also well remember one occasion when, as a small boy, (my brother Tenzin) told me that Mother had recently ordered pork from the slaughterman. This was forbidden, for whilst it was acceptable to buy meat, it was not acceptable to order it since that might lead to an animal being killed specially to fulfill your requirement.

“Tibetans have a rather curious attitude towards eating non-vegetarian food. Buddhism does not necessarily prohibit the eating of meat, but it does say that animals should not be killed for food. In Tibetan society it was permissible to eat meat—indeed it was essential, apart from *tsampa*, there was often not much else—but not to be involved in butchery in any way. This was left to others. Some of it was undertaken by Muslims, of whom there was a thriving community, with its own mosque, settled in Lhasa. Throughout Tibet, there must have been several thousand Muslims. About half came originally from Kashmir, the remainder from China.”²⁴

At a very young age, the Dalai Lama is quoted in the film Seven Years in Tibet as saying, “Tibetans believe that all living creatures were their mothers in a past life. So we must show them respect and repay their kindness—and never, never harm anything that lives.” He notes in his second autobiography, “Tibetans have a great respect for all forms of life. This inherent feeling is enhanced by our Buddhist faith which prohibits the harming of all sentient beings, whether human or animal.”^{24a} In the same book, he describes a lesson he learned about kindness,

“One of the parrots (at my summer palace) was very friendly with my Master of the Robes. He used to feed it nuts. As it nibbled from his fingers, he used to stroke its head, at which the bird appeared to enter a state of ecstasy. I very much wanted this kind of friendliness and several times tried to get a similar response, but to no avail. So I took a stick to punish it. Of course, thereafter it fled at the sight of me. This was a very good lesson in how to make friends; not by force but by compassion.”²⁵

The Dalai Lama enjoyed going to his parents’ house “in late autumn when there would always be fresh supplies of delicious dried meat, which we dipped in chili sauce. I liked this so much that on one occasion I ate far too much and soon afterwards I was violently sick.”²⁶ Later on in his childhood, autumn took on a different meaning for him.

“There was a particular time of year, autumn, when nomads brought yaks to be sold to the slaughtermen. This was a very sad time for me. I could not bear to think of all those poor creatures going to their deaths. If ever I saw animals being taken behind the Norbulingka (summer palace) on their way to market, I always tried to buy them by sending someone out to act on my behalf. That way I was able to save their lives. Over the years I should imagine I must have rescued at

least ten thousand animals, and probably many more. When I consider this, I realize that this extremely naughty child did do some good after all.”²⁷

In the 1950’s, the Dalai Lama describes a Chinese Communist technique of humiliating and torturing Tibetans,

“Monks and nuns were subject to sever harassment and publicly humiliated. For example, they were forced to join in extermination programs of insects, rats, birds and all types of vermin, even though the Chinese authorities knew that taking any form of life is contrary to Buddhist teaching. If they refused, they were beaten.”²⁸

Years later, in setting up refugee camps for Tibetans in southern India, he says,

“On that first visit to Bylacopy, I well remember the settlers being very concerned that the burning they were having to carry out to clear the land was causing the death of innumerable small creatures and insects. For Buddhists, this was a terrible thing to be doing, since we believe that all life, not just human life, is sacred. Several of the refugees even came up to me and suggested that the work should be stopped.

“All attempts to found poultry farms and piggeries have been unsuccessful. Even in their reduced circumstances, Tibetans have shown themselves unwilling to become involved in animal production for food. This has given rise to a certain amount of sarcasm on the part of some foreigners, who point out the anomaly between Tibetans willingness to eat meat and their declination to provide it for themselves.”²⁹

The Dalai Lama relates the time he became vegetarian,

“It so happened that my room in the Governor’s residence looked directly on to the kitchen’s opposite. One day I chanced to see the slaughter of a chicken, which was subsequently served up for lunch. As it was having its neck wrung, I thought of how much suffering the poor creature was enduring. The realization filled me with remorse and I decided it was time to become a vegetarian. As I have already mentioned, Tibetans are not, as a rule, vegetarians, because in Tibet vegetables are often scarce and meat forms a large part of the staple diet. Nevertheless, according to some Mahayana texts, monks and nuns should really be vegetarians.

“From that moment on, I adhered minutely to the vegetarian rule and in addition to abstaining from meat, ate neither fish nor eggs. This new regime suited me well and I was very contented; I felt a sense of fulfillment from a strict interpretation of the rule. Back in 1954 in Peking, I had discussed the subject of vegetarianism with another politician at a banquet. This other man claimed to be vegetarian, yet he was eating eggs. I questioned this and argued that because chickens come from eggs, eggs could not be considered to be vegetarian food.

We disagreed quite strongly—at least until (the Chinese politician) brought the discussion to a diplomatic close.”³⁰

He Continues,

“On returning to Dharamsala in early 1966, I had taken enthusiastically to my new vegetarian diet. Unfortunately, there are few dishes in Tibetan cuisine that do not use meat and it was some time before the cooks learned to make them taste good without it. But eventually they succeeded and began to produce delicious meals. I felt really well on them. Meanwhile, several Indian friends told me of the importance of supplementing my diet with plenty of milk and different kinds of nuts. I followed this advice faithfully—with the result that after 20 months I contracted a severe case of jaundice.

“Eventually the illness, which turned out to be Hepatitis B, cleared up, but not before I had consumed large quantities of Tibetan medicine. As soon as I began once more to take an interest in eating, I was instructed by my doctors that not only must I take less greasy food, cut out nuts and reduce my consumption of milk, but also I must start eating meat again. They were very much afraid that the illness had caused permanent damage to my liver and were of the opinion that, as a result, my life has probably been shortened. A number of Indian doctors I consulted were of the same opinion, so reluctantly I returned to being non-vegetarian. Today, I eat meat except on special occasions required of my spiritual practice. The same is true for a number of Tibetans who followed my example and suffered a similar fate.”³¹

My mother, a nutritionist, believes that the Dalai Lama’s diet was

imbalanced—far too much milk and apparently too much greasy food—and that the cause of his getting hepatitis was a weakened immune system indicative of an imbalanced diet, not of a vegetarian diet. The Tibetan doctor in Bylacopy comes up with a similar analysis. However, not being familiar with how to eat a balanced, vegetarian diet, his doctors made a decision within the limits of their specialized knowledge of foods available in Tibet, namely meat. Even though he continues to eat meat, the Dalai Lama encourages the Tibetan monastic community to get active in helping to reduce suffering among sentient beings, and to try to break the meat eating tradition, as much as possible. He relates, “I feel that Buddhist monks and nuns tend to talk a great deal about compassion without doing much about it.”^{31a}

One monk who is doing a lot about it is Geshe Thupten Phelgye from Sera Je Monastic University. With his Universal Compassion Movement I mentioned in the previous chapter, he works hard to educate and to bring the monastic community out of apathy and into compassionate action. He is a member of the Gelukpa International Executive Committee, and submitted the following proposal on March 24th, 1999 to the Committee's annual conference in New Delhi, India.

“To discuss ways to bring about changes into the most (contradictive of) the fundamental practice of compassion in Buddhism, ‘enjoying the flesh of Mother Sentient Beings’ particularly (among) the ordained people, individuals and monasteries, (I encourage them) to adopt veganism or at least vegetarianism.

“It’s (a) pity, that the human race in this world (has) used and tortured animals (in) unimaginable ways without caring (about) their suffering and right to live, because they are unable to speak for themselves. Unfortunately, the Buddhist, who aims (to attain) Buddhahood for the well-being of mother sentient beings are addicted to the taste of the flesh of these mother sentient beings. If we try to think about it in the deepest (part of our) heart, it is a contradiction to our commitment.

“Moreover, the ordained people are the symbol of peace and compassion, the preserver of Buddhism, the teachings of the most compassionate teacher to mankind. Therefore, it is unfortunate to see the monks and nuns at the butchers (buying) meat and (using) meat in the monasteries and (as) individuals. (In addition), using animal products like leather shoes and skin wearing are unfair for the monks and nuns. Therefore, I (appeal) with my folding hands to the councils of this seminar to discuss on the above mentioned subject to bring about changes in our diet: to adopt veganism or at the least vegetarianism for ordained people and pass a resolution.”

The proposal passed and is now being implemented at Gelukpa monasteries worldwide. It was the first time I had ever seen the word “veganism” written by a Tibetan. This diet, which excludes all animal products, was extremely foreign to the Tibetans I met, and they often had a hard time understanding why I followed it and what it entailed. UW language teacher Tsetan would often ask me if things like bread, potatoes and tofu were “O.K. for me to eat.” My Tibetan family in Bylacopy was at first baffled by my diet, but later became very skilled at cooking tasty vegan meals.

The term “Bodhisattva” was mentioned quite a bit in the interviews of the previous chapter, but I did not take time to explain it. It is a term for a kind of semi-enlightened Buddhist social worker who vows to return to Earth incarnation after incarnation for as long as it takes to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. It is an important part of the Mahayana Buddhists’ identity, and most serious monks take the “Bodhisattva Vow,” in which one promises to dedicate this and all future lives to helping sentient beings alleviate suffering in their lives. I have taken the vow myself, with the Dalai Lama presiding. Yet as the Dalai Lama notes, compassionate action is not the highest priority for the majority of monks and nuns.

Patrul Rinpoche says, “To be given the Bodhisattva vows is more valuable than being given command of a province. Look how those with no compassion hurl their vows away!”³² A good example is a commercial that is shown on television stations in Europe and Asia. It shows an old, wise Tibetan Buddhist lama levitating in the sky. Young monks watch admiringly below. A swarm of mosquitoes fly up to where the lama is levitating, and so he levitates closer to the ground. The young monks hand him some bug spray. He sprays the insecticide and levitates upward again while all the mosquitoes drop dead to the ground. He levitates high in the air, smiling widely. Tibetan Buddhist monks have also given Chevrolet trucks rights to their chant recordings. These trucks kill thousands of insects and mammals every year and are harmful to the environment. Certainly these are not the activities of Bodhisattvas?!

I was disturbed by a lot of what I saw at Sera Mey Monastery. I went with Dorje, his two brothers and his son to the section of the monastery that represented their hometown. There were quite a few severely obese monks there, and I saw a fair amount of meat in the kitchen. There was a playing card with a nude woman on it in their

courtyard. Near there, at “The Sera Mey Hostel,” there was a large sign with the aforementioned name on it, that had a cartoon of a man eating huge portions of meat and a bowl next to him full of large bones. Regretfully, I didn’t photograph the sign, but it is still firmly implanted in my mind. That same day, there was a monk in his late twenties shooting at some fruit in a tree with his toy gun.

This image of monks with guns would not be my last. In the next few pages, I have documented young monks playing with realistic pistols that shoot plastic pellets. These toys are quite dangerous, used with a violent mentality, and have a lot of social implications. Not only do these young monks continue to harm animals through meat consumption, they are now playing with weapons that have the sole purpose of harming other human beings. I found the popularity of this phenomenon to be both fascinating and disturbing. The strange juxtaposition of nonviolent symbols (monks) carrying symbols of violence (guns) is just another example of hypocrisy in the monastery. Sangye’s nephew told me, “Monks say ‘don’t lie’ then lie. They say ‘don’t desire’ then demand big money from tourists. For all of these monks, hypocrisy is a natural. The monks don’t practice Buddhism in the monastery or in society.”



A young Tibetan Buddhist monk takes aim with a tool of violence in South India.



A monk sucks on his lolly pop, looking for someone to shoot with his pellet gun.



A monk struggles to take a plastic gun from Dorje's son as monks in the next frame casually shoot at each other.



A cool gangster in monk's robes.

Tibetans these days are losing faith in the integrity of their monasteries. Sangye's nephew told me, "Most monks have blind faith and don't know much. A parrot will say '*om mani peme hum*' but doesn't know the meaning. The majority of monks are the same way." His niece was very disgusted at how the abbot of one area monastery had such elegant living quarters. Yet for both of these Tibetan skeptics, the Dalai Lama is the exception. "I think His Holiness is the cleanest one. He says what you already know, but when he says it, the hairs on my arms go up. He teaches very simply and does what he says. So many monks these days gossip and fall asleep during Dharma talks," Sangye's nephew exclaims. His niece told me that the Dalai Lama always lives humbly, while a lot of other high lamas live in luxury and have fancy cars.

The texts and commentaries are certainly there to inspire monks to live virtuously. K. Sri Dhammananda writes,

"Buddhists are encouraged to love all beings and not to restrict their love only to human beings. They should practice loving kindness toward every living being. The Buddha's advice is that it is not right for us to take away the life of any living being since every living being has a right to exist. Animals also have fear and pain as do human beings. It is wrong to take away their lives. We should not misuse our intelligence and strength to destroy animals even though they may sometimes be a nuisance to us. Animals need our sympathy. Destroying them is not the only method to get rid of them. Every living being is contributing something to maintain this world. It is unfair for us to deprive their living rights."³³

Nagarjuna says, "We would run out of earth trying to count our mother with balls of clay the size of juniper berries,"³⁴ to which Patrul Rinpoche comments, "There is not a single form of life that we have not taken throughout beginningless *samsara* until now. Our desires have led us innumerable times to have our heads and limbs cut off."³⁴ So the primary idea—that all living beings deserve the respect of our own mothers—is established. If we kill these mothers of ours, or treat them with cruelty and unkindness, demerit is sure to follow. Patrul Rinpoche writes,

"At the time of the Buddha, there was a village butcher who made a vow never to kill animals at night. He was reborn in an ephemeral hell. At night his pleasure knew no bounds. He lived in a beautiful mansion, with four lovely women plying him with food and drink and other pleasures. During the day, however, the walls of the house would transform into blazing hot metal and the four women into terrifying brown dogs who fed on his body."³⁴

The suffering is bad enough for animals in the realities of their *samsaric* existence, without humans making it worse. Patrul Rinpoche writes,

"Cattle and sheep are exploited until they die. Once they are too old, they are sold off or killed by the owners themselves. Whatever the case, they are destined for the butcher and a natural death is unknown to them. Animals, then, experience inconceivable torments. Whenever you see animals tortured in this way, put yourself in their place and imagine in detail all they have to undergo. Meditate with fierce compassion upon all those reborn as animals. In particular, if you have animals of your own, treat them with kindness and love. Since all animals, right down to the smallest insect, have feelings of pleasure and pain, and since they have all been our fathers and mothers, develop love and compassion towards them, combining your practice with the methods for the beginning, main part and conclusion."³⁵



A monkey spins a prayer wheel at Swayambu Buddhist Stupa, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal



A monkey meditating on a *dorje*, Swayambu Buddhist Stupa

Patrul Rinpoche continues,

"Except for those in the hells, there is no being who does not shrink from death or who does not value his or her life over anything else. So to destroy a life is a particularly negative action. In the *Sutra of Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*, it is said that one will repay any life one takes with five hundred of one's own lives, and that for killing a single being one will spend one intermediate *kalpa* in the hells. It is even worse to slaughter animals and offer their flesh and blood to lamas invited to your house or to an assembly of monks. The negative karmic effect of the killing comes to both givers and receivers. The donor, although he invited the guests, is making an impure offering; those who receive it are accepting unsuitable sustenance. Any positive effect is outweighed by the negative one. Indeed, unless you have the miraculous power to resuscitate your victims on the spot, there is no situation in which the act of killing does not bring defilement. You can be sure that it will harm the lives and activities of the teachers. If you are not capable of transferring beings' consciousness to the state of great bliss, you should make every effort to avoid taking their lives."³⁶

As many of the monks I talked to suggest, avoidance of harm is not enough. One should make sincere efforts to help suffering beings. In other words, being a vegetarian is a step made to avoid harming others. Striving to be a Bodhisattva, a sincere Mahayana practitioner should make every effort to ease the suffering of all beings. Patrul Rinpoche advises,

"When you think of a sheep being led to the slaughter, do not think of it as just a sheep. Instead, feel sincerely that this is your own old mother that they are about to kill, and ask yourself what you would do in such a situation. What are you going to do now that they are going to kill your old mother, even though she has done no harm? Experience in the depth of your heart the kind of suffering that your mother must be going through. When your heart is bursting with the desire to do something right away to prevent your old mother from being butchered on the spot, reflect that although this suffering creature is not actually our father or mother in this present life, it is sure to have been your parent at some time in your past lives and to have brought you up with great kindness in just the same way. So there is no real difference. Alas for your poor mother who is suffering so much! If only she could be free from her distress right now, without delay—this very instant! With these thoughts in your heart, meditate with such unbearable compassion that your eyes fill with tears."³⁷

Feeling strongly this notion that all beings are one's mother, it was hard for me to hear monk after monk claiming that they were following the Buddha when they followed

the three condition rule and ate meat. No wonder they believed this, with passages like this one, from the “Jivaka Sutra,”

“Jivaka Komarabhacca, the doctor, discussed the controversial issue with the Buddha: 'Lord, I have heard that animals are slaughtered on purpose for the recluse Gotama, and that the recluse Gotama knowingly eats the meat killed on purpose for him. Lord, do those who say (this) falsely accuse the Buddha? Or do they speak the truth? Are your declarations and supplementary declarations not thus subject to be ridiculed by others in any manner?’

“The Buddha replied, 'Jivaka, those who say (this) do not say according to what I have declared and they falsely accuse me. Jivaka, I have declared that one should not make use of meat if it is seen, heard or suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk. I allow the monks meat that is quite pure in three respects: If it is not seen, heard or suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk.’”³⁸

So the Buddha is quoted as saying that meat obtained through following the “three-condition rule” is “pure.” Patrul Rinpoche disagrees, saying,

“ ‘Pure meat,’ does not mean the meat of an animal slaughtered for food, but the meat of an animal that died because of its own past actions, meaning meat from an animal that died of old age, sickness or other natural causes that were the effect of its own past actions alone.”³⁹

I wrote the following during Losar in Bylacopy, after hearing from countless monks that the “three condition rule” obligated them no further in dealing with animal suffering.

Your mother gets home from a long and pleasant day in the field. She falls asleep under the stars. She has exciting dreams. The next morning she gets up as the sun rises and stretches out. Suddenly, she is grabbed from her bed, a rope is tied tightly around her neck and she is dragged to a truck where she is driven along with dozens of others she doesn't know to a busy city. There she is tied to a wooden post, which makes a leg for a table that is seeping blood through its cracks. A large, scattered pile of crimson flesh loads down the table. "Hey!" she thinks to herself, "What the hell is going on here? Where is my son? I raised him well, surely he will help me at a time like this!!" After a day in the hot sun, smelling nothing but rotting flesh, she tries to sleep, but the rope cuts into her skin and she cannot.

The next morning the rising sun burns into her mind of torment. Her rope is slowly untied. "Alas," she thinks, "my son is here to save me and get me back to the field." For a moment her thoughts drift to her favorite willow tree by the river where she

would often relax on warm days. Her thoughts are jerked into the sides of her skull as the rope cuts into her neck again. She is brought into a small shed behind the table. A large knife is raised in the air, blocking the sunlight that had peeked through a small hole in the shed. "Where is my son? I thought he came to save me!" The knife swiftly cuts through the rank air and your mother's soft throat is sliced with a thud, blood from her delicate veins spurting onto the wall, staining the floor a brilliant red. Your mother's eyes roll to the back of their sockets, turning whitish blue. She tries to make one last call for her son, but the wind from her lungs jets empty through her severed windpipes, going unheard into the morning air. Her body still quivering, the knife works its way across her soft skin, exposing her flesh, naked and warm. Her skin is placed in a heap; her arms, legs and breasts are displayed on the table. Two hands pick her head up from off the floor and place it neatly on the table. A splotchy red rag is used to clean off your mother's face, so the beauty she was always known for can attract visitors to the table. Stall number 79 at the Mysore meat market.

A man with a shaven head walks up, his clothes matching the color of the place itself—dark red blending with dark red. He walks up to stall 79, smiles briefly as he gazes upon the freshly severed head of his own mother, the mother that carefully nurtured both of you. The mother who with limitless patience and compassion, raised you for 17 years in your previous life. The monk points to your mother's breasts and asks for five kilograms. The hands pick up your mother's breasts and place them in a cold, metal tin. The monk's lip twitches slightly as a five-kilogram-weight is placed in the other pan. Your mother's breasts are placed in a plastic bag, then another to support the weight of her severed body. The money is exchanged and the monk steps into an awaiting SUV, which zooms off back to the monastery.

In the preceding account, all three conditions were met. The monk didn't use the knife to kill his mother, the monk didn't request previously that his mother be taken from her favorite willow tree and onto his plate, and the monk had no doubt that his mother was killed generically—not just for him. Still, he ended up taking the flesh from his mother—the very breasts he had been nurtured on in previous lives—and participated in her death in the most direct way possible, economically speaking. He paid the man in rupees for his mother's flesh. The motive of this knife-wielding man was not blood and guts, it was not the thrill of killing an animal, a beautiful goat, it was the stack of rupees handed over by the monk. The monk's rupees were the sole motivation for him killing your mother. This man of the Dharma, your brother the monk, told the butcher with the exchange of those rupees that, "You run a fine business here at stall 79. It's too bad you're going to spend a few *kalpas* in hell, but now you'll be able to buy another sheep or goat with the money I gave you. You can now afford to kill my sister and grandmother too. See you next week, when I pick up their carcasses at the same time, 9 a.m."

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this according to the three condition rule, nothing what-so-ever. A pure monk eats his pure meat and upholds his vows. According to the "Jivaka Sutra," the Buddha Shakyamuni himself would pat this monk on the back and say, "Keep up the pure ways, my son." Let's listen in on the butcher's conversation in Mysore.

Butcher 1: "Hey Ram, when do you think the monks from Sera Mey will come?"

Butcher 2: "Shit, there are over 4000 of them, they come nearly every day, are you kidding? I know they'll come for more of my tasty goat meat. The head on the table gets 'em every time."

Butcher 1: "Yeah, thanks to them I've been able to buy a shiny new knife and our family eats meat twice a day."

Butcher 2: "Hell yeah, I heard there are three new stalls opening up just to keep up with the local Tibetan monks."

Butcher 1: "Yeah, Lord Krishna knows most Indians can't afford meat, but those Tibetans love their meat. They work hard and are doing pretty well bringing in the money. They keep this meat business flourishing! No wonder the Buddha is fat, if he ate as much meat as these monks!"

Butcher 2: "Yeah, I've seen more than my share of lard tubs in monk's robes."

They both laugh as another fleet of monks approaches.



Monks at Sera Mey scramble to get into the cafeteria, where meat is regularly served.

I guess the reason it was so challenging for me to do this work at the monastery was that it was emotional for me. To not find people supporting my vegetarianism

through their own actions in an institutional community of Buddhist practitioners was heart-breaking. Beacons like Chatal Rinpoche and Geshe Phelgye were what prevented me from doubting myself succumbing to confusion.

My last night in Bylacopy was the fifteenth and final day of Losar. It was a full moon, and I was at a cultural performance at a monastery. Before it started, I went down to the nearby pond to give some of my *puja* offerings from earlier in the day to the fish. I was delighted to see dozens of young Tibetans doing the same. The fish swarmed at the surface and attacked our biscuit crumbs and *tsampa* cake with a voracious appetite. Then two monks from the tiny monastery that was hosting the cultural performance came down with huge bags of biscuits and cookies. The monks tossed the biscuits in the pond and recited *mantras* with each handful. One of the little boys who was throwing his *puja* offerings into the pond exclaimed, “It’s the last day of Losar. We’re giving the fish food that has been blessed. Those are some happy fish!” These young Tibetans felt genuine compassion toward these fish and took delight in making them happy.

I must now admit that one of the primary motivations for undertaking this aspect of my research was to understand to what extent Tibetans are responsible for the trend of American Buddhists eating meat. I have been told by many Buddhist practitioners in the Madison-Chicago area that they have not given up meat because their Tibetan lamas, whom they look up to as pristine examples of Buddha Dharma, continue to eat meat. This is a disturbing trend that I would like to see reversed. Although all romantic notions I may have had about Tibetan Buddhist monks have been eradicated, the incident on the last day of Losar seemed to expose a beautiful motivation that Buddhism has managed to implant in some Tibetans. For this, they have my sincere admiration.