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Violence and Nonviolence in Buddhist Animal Ethics

James Stewart¹

Abstract

Boiled alive for killing an ant. Suffering endless demonic flagellation for trading as a butcher. According to some Buddhist writings, these are just a few of the punishments bestowed upon those who harm animals. Are such promises sincere or are they merely hollow threats intended to inculcate good conduct? Are there other non-prudential reasons for protecting animals? How do these views differ from preceding Indian traditions? These are some of the questions addressed in this paper. I will argue that the threat of a bad rebirth is a major factor in motivating Buddhists to abstain from animal cruelty. By comparing the *Vinaya* (both Mahāyāna and Theravāda) to the Sūtra literature I will argue that such claims may be exaggerations to motivate more compassionate conduct from Buddhist adherents. I also argue that Buddhist texts look unfavorably upon animal killing in a way unheard of in the

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Vedic religious tradition. Although there may be disagreement over what sort of harm may befall animal abusers, it is almost universally acknowledged amongst most Buddhist sects that animal killing is completely unacceptable. However, this pacifism lives in uneasy tension with the promise of extreme violence for impinging on these basic principles of nonviolence.

Introduction

Regarding the treatment of animals, Buddhism is somewhat unique in that it advocates a position of total nonviolence.² This position is an extension of its general principle of nonviolence that is the foundation of Buddhist ethics. Buddhism advocates pacifism and completely rejects violence towards humans, animals, and sentient beings more generally. This position seems to be accepted among the vast majority of Buddhist sects and traditions. That Buddhism speaks in unison on this issue may be considered unusual given how various Buddhist creeds differ over so many issues, including such fundamental propositions as the existence or nonexistence of the self.³

² Discussing the subject of “Buddhism” in this way opens one up for accusations of over-generalization. My objective, however, is not to make any absolute claims about Buddhism in totality, but to only point towards a trend in Buddhism that of course is subject to a much more detailed study impossible in the space of this short article.

³ For example, the Pudgalavādins—a now extinct branch of the Sthaviravāda (Theravāda) tradition—famously accepted the existence of a self. Similarly, it is often argued that Yogācāra school is a brand of Buddhism that accepts the existence of a self. Such fundamental claims are disputed by many other Buddhist philosophical traditions. Such disagreements are much rarer in the arena of ethics.

In this paper I will examine why Buddhism takes animal nonviolence so seriously. Ultimately, I will conclude that it is derived from a combination of prudence and genuine sympathy for the animal. Fear of a bad rebirth is a central reason for nonviolence towards the animal world. However, this is governed by a concern over animalkind's unhappy existence. As will become clear, these two motives are dependent such that prudence encourages genuine concern.

It is helpful to contextualize these issues historically by looking at the antecedent religious and philosophical traditions. Consequently, we will need to look at the pre-Buddhist orthodox religion that has its roots in the Vedic and Brahmanical textual tradition. This tradition now significantly influences and, in fact, underpins modern Hinduism. Early Buddhism rejected the way the Vedic tradition treated animals and this strong stance influenced all subsequent Buddhist traditions. The Vedic tradition had a sense of reverence towards many animals precisely because of its propensity to engage in animal blood sacrifice. In contrast, Buddhists pitied animals instead of venerating them.

Animal Welfare in Vedic India

The killing of animals in the Vedic religious tradition was a complicated affair governed by rules of ritual propriety. Some animals were more sacred than others, although, in principle, most animals could be killed and eaten subject to certain ritual stipulations. One of the most important corpus of texts in the orthodox Indian tradition are the Vedas, and of particular importance is the *R̥gveda*, a text that is foundational for modern Hinduism and the Vedic religion. At the heart of this religion is a rich culture of ritual that centers on the veneration and slaughter of animals.

The *Rgveda* endorses the importance of animal sacrifice, especially the horse. The process and procedure by which the horse is sacrificed is described in some detail (1.162:1), but, in general, the animal is slaughtered in a ritually pure way using a method that can only be carried out by royalty (Flood 44). The horse is regarded with great respect and the hymn of the horse sacrifice is even directed specifically towards the animal to be killed: “Whatever runs off your body when it has been placed on the spit and roasted by the fire, let it not lie in the earth or on the grass, but let it be given to the gods who long for it” (1.162: 11). After the slaughter, the animal is then consumed in a great feast. In general, there is a sense that animate life has special significance in the Vedic world as evidenced by the *Samaveda* which describes how having an animal body is a “gift” since it provides the soul with a vehicle in which one can be mobile (15: 2, 351). This can be contrasted with the later Buddhist traditions, which are more inclined to regard existence as an animal as an affliction rather than a blessing.

These early views on the treatment of animals are expanded upon in later orthodox legal texts. These legal texts are known as the *Dharmaśāstra*. Arguably one of the most important of these *śāstric* texts is the *Manusmṛti* (sometimes translated as *The Law Code of Manu*). Dumont argues that this text dates from at least the third century CE (52; Flood 56). It seems likely that many of the rituals therein pre-date, or are at least contemporaneous, with the rise of Buddhism in North India. Regarding animals, the text is clear that God made “domestic animals for sacrifice” (*The Law Code of Manu* 39: 140). Such animals are intended for human consumption and therefore there are parallels with the Judeo-Christian tradition where the Book of Genesis has been interpreted to suggest that animalkind was created to serve the needs of human beings. Animals exist to be used by humans and, in particular, to be sacrificed by humans to the gods.

The *Manusmṛti* maintains that since these animals are meant to be killed as part of their very ontological structure, their killing cannot properly be regarded as blameworthy: “Within the sacrifice killing is not killing” (57: 218). In fact, if a person of the right caste status,⁴ temperament, and knowledge sacrifices an animal in the correct ritually prescribed way, then that animal is actually better off dead than alive, since “[the ritualist] leads himself and those animals to the highest state” (39: 140). On the other hand, a killing not sanctioned in these ways is considered strictly immoral, is utterly prohibited, and can lead to various metaphysical and temporal harms.

Certain animals are especially sacred. It is well known, for example, that the cow is highly venerated in Indian-Hindu culture and this seems to have been the case even in the *Manusmṛti*. Nonetheless, the belief that cows should not be harmed at all is a recent invention born largely from Hindu nationalist enterprises.⁵ The *Manusmṛti* simply interprets cow veneration to mean that cow sacrifice is especially meritorious (Dumont 54; Jha 29). On the other hand, killing a cow improperly is a very serious matter that can lead to loss of caste (*The Law Code of Manu* 60: 218, 109: 220). In fact, a cow is so sacred that it is sometimes viewed as equal in worth to that of a Brahman priest (*ibid* 74: 219).

The significance of ritual animal killing is not restricted to just the Vedas or the Dharmasāstric texts. Literary religious works such as the *Mahābhārata* also allows animal slaughter. In accordance with the *Ṛgveda*, horse sacrifice features heavily and is even a measure of other

⁴ Only a so-called twice-born (*dvija*) is entitled to engage in acts of sacrifice. A twice-born is one of the three higher *varnas* who has undertaken his caste obligations and therefore has accepted his proper place in society.

⁵ That cow protectionism is a recent concern has been made clear by Alsdorf and Fuller (99; 101).

good deeds (54.35, 329; 82.5, 387). As with the *Manusmṛti*, there is indecision about the universality of animal killing and sacrifice. As Alsdorf reports, in the *Mahābhārata*, Vasu demands that no animals be sacrificed and is duly rewarded by the god Viṣṇu (43).

What we can gather from the Vedic tradition is that animal killing is generally acceptable but only under very strict conditions. If these conditions are not correctly met, there are serious metaphysical repercussions for violators (Alsdorf 20-1). This is especially clear in the later Dharmaśāstric texts. We can also gather that just as there is a hierarchy of human beings, there is a hierarchy of animals, some of whom are more sacred than others. In the *Vedas*, as well as in later texts such as the *Manusmṛti*, the cow and horse are clearly favored animals, though that sacredness does not afford them protection from being ritually slaughtered.

Finally, there is a strong sense in the Vedic tradition that animals are owed a certain level of respect. Indeed, the possibility that animals are sacrificed at all in fact depends on holding animals in high esteem. In total contrast to this, Buddhism completely rejects animal sacrifice and looks upon animals with pity rather than cherishing them as objects of veneration.⁶

Animal Nonkilling in Buddhism

It is commonly thought that Buddhism is a religious tradition that advocates strict nonviolence. For the most part, this assessment is correct.

⁶ This is generally true, but not always so. As I have argued elsewhere (2014), cow veneration in Sri Lanka by Buddhists is an example of a Hindu practice being transplanted into a Buddhist cultural context.

Buddhism, along with its rival, Jainism, maintains the view that sentient beings should not be killed, and Jainism also extends this protection to plants (Schmithausen *Problem 2*).⁷ Buddhism singles out Vedic animal sacrifice for special rebuke.

As reported in the Pāli canon, we find the Buddha disapproving of Vedic animal sacrifice. The Buddha rejected animal sacrifice for two reasons: (1) because it was cruel and (2) because it failed to “bring the objectives the Brahmins hoped for” (Harvey 157; also Keown 42). Following his usual methodology of reinterpreting Brahmanical practices, the Buddha states that he does not reject all forms of sacrifice. He does, however, reject any sacrifice in which cows, goats, sheep, poultry, pigs and, more generally, all “the myriad living creatures,” are killed, and in so saying the Buddha effectively rejects blood sacrifice (*bili*) completely (AN, 5.4.9, 49).⁸ For the Buddha, blood sacrifice produces no good karma and is therefore useless while protecting animals, conversely, is virtuous and productive of merit. This rejection of blood sacrifice is repeated at various points throughout the Pāli canon.⁹ Similarly, Christopher Chapple has discussed the opposition to animal sacrifice present in the *Jātaka* tales (138-40). Animal sacrifice is rejected in later Buddhism as well. For instance, Tibetan legend has it that, in days gone by, the King of Shambhala (Tibet) foresaw that “because both the Vedas and the religion of the barbarians permitted animal sacrifice, after eight hundred years the descendants of the Brahmans would join the race of barbarians and,

⁷ Schmithausen argues, however, that plants in Buddhism have some moral significance and this is likely borrowed from Jainism, albeit an incomplete borrowing since the Buddhists do not regard plants as fully sentient (60-4; Findly 248-61).

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, or otherwise obvious from the context, the language used to explain technical words will be Pāli.

⁹ Some other cases include: SN 3.9, 171-2; S 2.7.308, 36; S 2.7.311, 36; AN 4.20.8, 220; Iti 4.1, 188; DN 23.31, 366; etc.

as a result of the ensuing miscegenation, the entire population of Shambhala would eventually become barbarians” (Lopez 182). Therefore, animal sacrifice has far reaching negative implications.

The Buddha is clear, however, that some types of sacrifice are acceptable. But these are bloodless sacrifices known as *dāna*, which simply means any act of giving done with a pure intention (AN 2.5.1 57). Such acts of giving often involve resource sacrifice through the supplying of alms, usually to monks, but also to beggars, friends and strangers. Alms-giving forms the basis of lay activity in Buddhism, but it is clear that under no circumstances should those alms involve the slaughter of animals.

The basis for the nonkilling of animals in fact originates from the first and, arguably, most important precept in Buddhism: the first precept that demands total nonviolence (*ahiṃsa*). This precept finds its elaboration throughout the canon and it is clear that it is one of the most fundamental cornerstones of Buddhist ethics.¹⁰ One of the oldest early Buddhist texts, the *Dīgha Nikāya*, makes this abundantly clear: “abandoning the taking of life, the ascetic Gotama (i.e. the Buddha) dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings” (DN 1.1.8 68). Such statements are repeated in a stereotypical manner throughout the entire early Buddhist corpus.

What this means is that the Buddha completely rules out certain livelihoods such as working as a butcher or in an abattoir (Horner 11). In numerous passages in the Pāli texts, the following professions are listed as prohibited to any conscientious Buddhist: “butcher, a pig-killer, a fowler, deer-stalker, hunter, fisherman, bandit, executioner, jailer, or one of any other bloody calling” (AN 4.20.108 219; also MN 51.9 447).

¹⁰ Various commentators have observed that the first precept seems to afford protection to animals (Keown 41; Phelps 49; Harvey 156; Chapple *Nonviolence* 22).

Purposefully killing an animal in this way accrues very bad karma such that, “a hunter, bloody handed, given up to killing and slaying, void of all compassion for all tiny creatures” is “cast into purgatory according to his deserts” (AN 10.21.200 185).

The idea that hunters and animal killers will be rewarded with punishment in hell is repeated in the *Jātaka* tales. For example, the *Kuraṅga Jātaka* tells of the Buddha’s former life when he existed as a deer. Due to his cunning nature and good fortune, the bodhisattva deer avoids getting trapped and killed by a hunter. The hunter, enraged, says, “Be-gone! I’ve missed you this time,” and in response the bodhisattva deer replies, presumably in response to his slaying of other animals: “You may have missed me, my good man, but depend on it, you have not missed the reward of your conduct, namely the eight large and sixteen lesser hells and all the five forms of bonds and torture” (Jat 21 58).

Similarly, the *Samyutta Nikāya* describes an encounter with a “piece of meat (i.e., a carcass) moving through the air” and that “vultures, crows and hawks, following in hot pursuit, were stabbing at it and tearing it apart as it uttered cries of pain” (SN 19.2 701). The Buddha reports that the hapless victim was a former cattle butcher who was paying for his former crimes against animalkind. The same story is repeated stereotypically throughout the canon but with different types of punishments for different animal abusers: a former sheep butcher is flayed alive, a former hog butcher is constantly cut by swords, a deer hunter pierced by arrows, and even a horse trainer is repeatedly pricked with needles (SN 19.2 702-3).

What is clear from this is that those who kill or harm animals accrue bad karma and will likely be reborn in a hell realm to be tortured until their sin has been expunged. The *Sūtra* texts and the *Jātakas* completely rule out animal killing whereas in Vedic and Brahmanical texts, animal slaughter is not considered intrinsically wrong at all.

The *Vinaya*, the monastic regulations laid out by the Buddha, take a slightly different approach to animal killing. Of course, monks should not kill animals; they are even prohibited from building huts out of mud for fear that the brick firing process will kill tiny creatures (Vin-Pat 2 65). Similarly, they are not to wear animal hides (Vin-MV 5 258).

However, killing animals is not as wrong as killing human beings. Killing a human being (on purpose) is an offence of the highest order, a *pārājika* offence that requires the offending monk to be expelled from the monastic order (Vin-Pat 3 129). On the other hand, killing an animal is merely an offence of expiation, known as a *pācittiya* offence (Vin-Pat 61 1; 62 3). To put this in context, killing an animal is considered an offence equal to walking alone on a road with a woman. Indeed, an expiation offence only requires that the monk issue a sincere apology and vow not to engage in further offensive activities.

The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the *Vinaya* used in many Mahāyāna Buddhist sects, is almost identical in content to the Pāli canon, albeit briefer. It likewise states that animal killing is a *pācittiya* offence and is no worse than causing feelings of remorse in another monk or failing to return a robe to a colleague (*The Mahayana Mahāparinirvana Sūtra* 86). Such is the seemingly trivial nature of animal killing in the monastic *Vinaya*, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. This might be regarded as a confusing twist, given how thoroughly animal slaughter is condemned in the Sūtra literature.

The tension between the *Vinaya*'s position on animal killing and the Sūtra literature's position is striking: the Sūtra literature regards animal killing as so bad that it entails rebirth in hell whereas the *Vinaya* merely states that a monk ought to issue a public apology and can otherwise continue on with his life as a monk. Nonetheless, the *Vinaya* is quite clear that killing an animal under any circumstances is unacceptable. The main difference between the Sūtra literature and the *Vinaya* is

the nature of the punishment. Perhaps this can be explained as a difference between the cosmological punishment accrued from animal killing versus the worldly punishment for animal killing; a monk who kills an animal on purpose might still go to hell, even if he is allowed to stay in the monastic fraternity.

Fear of A Bad Rebirth

The above explanation has some weaknesses. It does not, for example, explain the peculiar ranking whereby animal killing is deemed no worse than a whole range of seemingly minor transgressions. There are at least two ways to explain this: (1) these minor violations are much more serious than they first appear, or (2) they are, in fact, minor. If the first position is correct then it would imply that, for example, walking alone with a woman is a very serious infraction. However, walking alone with a woman does not cause one to be reborn in hell, quite unlike the killing of an animal as described in the Sūtra literature. This inconsistency directs us to the second option: it may be the case that the cosmic threats issued in the Sūtra literature are actually exaggerations intended to persuade lay people not to engage in activities that lead to the intentional killing of animals. These threats exploit the laity's fear of hell.

This explanation is not without warrant because the Buddhist texts do assume a principle of pedagogical staging whereby untrue doctrines are propagated with the intent that they will be discarded later and the true doctrine adopted. This is known as the skilful means doctrine (Williams 51; Pye; Schroeder). One example of this is the use of personal pronouns in the canonical texts when, of course, most Buddhist schools maintain that there is no such thing as a self. The use of these pronouns is expedient for the purpose of realizing the truth of selflessness later.

Consequently, the threat of hell for killing animals may just be a mechanism to persuade people to at least act out of self-interest in their treatment of animals. The problem is that this pedagogical principle may be a later Mahāyāna invention that may not be applicable to the early texts. The pedagogical explanation depends on whether the early texts also adopt a skilful means doctrine, a question that is contested. If they do not, the tension between the Sūtra and *Jātaka* texts on the one hand, and the *Vinaya* on the other, remains in full force. It may remain in full force anyway depending on whether one believes the skilful means doctrine is to be applied in every situation. Thus, this method of resolving this tension remains in question.

In any case, later Mahāyāna texts, most explicitly the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, a core text of the Mahāyāna tradition, continue to distinguish between the seriousness of the killing of animals as opposed to the killing of humans. The text describes three levels of seriousness in regards to killing. The least serious act of killing is one where an insect or animal is killed; the intermediate level of seriousness is one where a human being is killed; and the most serious level is where one kills one's father or mother, or an enlightened being such as an Arahant, Paccekabuddha or bodhisatta (22 220). In accordance with the Pāli sūtra materials, all these acts of killing involve being cast into hell. The only difference between them is the specific type of hell, and, presumably, the longevity of one's residence there (*ibid*). Similarly, Chapple cites several examples from the Chinese Buddhist tradition emphasizing that those who kill animals will likely suffer an unfortunate rebirth (*Nonviolence* 33-36).

Thus, critical Theravāda and Mahāyāna sources agree that animal killing is wrong and has extremely costly consequences. Of course, in light of what we find in the *Vinaya* we may doubt the seriousness of such claims; it may be that these threats are intended just to instill fear in the

believer. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the existence and metaphysical significance of hell is an important part of Buddhist cosmology and plays a critical role in motivating Buddhists to act virtuously.

Indeed, one of the central concerns of many Buddhists is gaining a good rebirth (Harvey 28; Gombrich 87; Spiro 86). This may surprise those who assume that Buddhists are primarily concerned with gaining enlightenment. Although some are, many Buddhists are mainly concerned with attaining a good afterlife and regard those relative few who aim for enlightenment as especially pious and religious. This fundamental concern with rebirth has ample textual foundation since nearly all Buddhist texts warn of a bad rebirth for improper conduct.

We have already seen that animal killers will be reborn in hell. We can see that these cases are intended to serve as warnings to those who kill animals that they will be punished through the cosmic law of karma for their transgressions. Although there are inconsistencies between the *Vinaya* and the *Sūtra* literature, the mere fear of wrongdoing is in some ways more important than the reality of the punishment.

In fact, fear is an important feature of Buddhist ethics. Fear of blame (*ottappa*) is considered a virtue in the Pāli canonical texts (SN 5.16.2 663). The famous medieval Indian Mahāyāna ethicist Śāntideva similarly values fear as a motivating force in preventing bad action. He writes, “Tormented by the recollection of your own vices, hearing the sounds of hell, and befouling your body with excrement out of fear, what will you do when you are so terrified?” (*Guide* 7.11 78). The answer, of course, is to act with greater virtue.

Śāntideva even explicitly discusses his fear of being reborn as an animal. In explaining his desire for seclusion so that he could focus on his meditation, he says, “It was the fear of all such terrible things that led me to go into the forest” (*Śikṣāsamuccaya* 192). Although Buddhism

condemns many types of fear, it is clear that fear can also be useful as a remedy for moral apathy.

The promise of punishment for the killing of animals is not just a feature of ancient and medieval texts but continues in more recent literary forms. In the *Rājāvaliya*, an eighteenth century Buddhist Sinhalese text, King Keḷaṇitissa, as a result of various contrivances, confuses his brother with a known criminal and therefore sentences him to death by boiling. The text reads:

The Elder [the subject of the execution] perceiving with his divine eyes that retribution was overtaking him for the sin of killing an insect when he was boiling milk in a previous state of existence as a shepherd, laughed, saying 'It is due to a sin committed in a former state of being.' Having spoken to the people declaring that this state of existence is a stain on Buddhahood, he was burnt up and turned to ashes. (*Rājāvaliya* 23)

Jigmé Lingpa, a Tibetan Buddhist master, writes in his autobiography, "To pursue innocent deer and destroy beehives is to create the causes of birth in hell" (Barstow 80). As with the *Rājāvaliya*, and consistent with the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, Lingpa is convinced that even killing tiny animals such as insects can lead to rebirth in hell. Insects and other tiny creatures are considered morally relevant in Buddhist texts, though in practice there is considerable disagreement over the relative seriousness of killing different sorts of animals (Harvey 175; Schmithausen 21). This disagreement seems to be in part geo-culturally specific. In Sri Lanka, killing small animals is considered less serious (Gombrich 305) because they are less sentient than killing large animals, while in Tibet slaughtering large beasts such as yaks is considered less problematic because only one life is lost but many people are fed (Har-

vey 161; 165). This is reinforced by a comment made by the Dalai Lama in his book *World in Harmony: Compassionate Actions for a Batter World*:

An Indian friend told me that his young daughter has been arguing with him that it is better to serve one cow to ten people than to serve chicken or other small animals, since more lives would be involved. In the Indian tradition, beef is always avoided, but I think there is some logic to her argument. Shrimp, for example, are very small. For one plate, many lives must be sacrificed. To me, that is not at all delicious. I find it really awful, and I think it is better to avoid these things. (38)¹¹

Regardless of these cultural differences, however, the assumed serious repercussions for killing animals will obviously considerably influence how people choose to act in relation to animals and is likely to encourage a more pacifist disposition.

Compassion Towards Animals

From a cosmological perspective, animals and humans exist on the same continuity; humans can be reborn as animals, and vice versa (Gowans 54; Waldau 7). Rebirth is predicated on a cosmology that assumes a number of distinct realms or destinations (*gati*). The Pāli canon tells us that there are four other destinations of birth apart from hell: the realm of animals, ghosts, human beings and gods (MN 12.35 169). This general cosmological structure, with minor variations, is accepted by all Buddhist traditions.

¹¹ However, the Dalai Lama does go on to add that, “It is very dangerous to ignore the suffering of any sentient being” (ibid).

The animal realm is considered a very bad place to be reborn in and the term for “animal class,” *tirachhāṇayoni*, is used elsewhere to denote low activities. For example, unworthy activities such as palmistry and horoscope preparation are described as *tiracchāṇvijj* (animal knowledge) and gossip is called *tiracchāṇakathā* (“animal talk”) (Childers 508). Clearly, some lower human activities bring human beings down to the realm of animalkind and should be therefore avoided. Indeed, ignorance and delusion are one of the main causes of rebirth as an animal. Tibetan philosopher Dolpopa illustrates this point:

Those sentient beings who, when earlier they were cattle, fought against their own mothers and were crazed, will when they sleep, tap and grind their own teeth and do not believe the doctrine of the matrix-of-one-gone-thus, [i.e.,] suchness [Dolpopa’s particular metaphysical view]. In the future also, those sentient beings who whistle through their teeth and do not believe the matrix-of-one-gone-thus will not be otherwise; venerable Purna, they, being cattle, do not know the noumenon. (*Mountain Doctrine* 156)

This also shows how being born as an animal is itself to be feared—unlike the Vedic tradition, animals are not sacred but are to be pitied because their material conditions are unhappy. Recall that in the *Manusmṛti*, cows are of equal worth to Brahman priests. Such a view is impossible under Buddhism. As intimated by Dolpopa, because they are ignorant of the facts of Buddhism they cannot easily exit their state of animal servitude and are therefore condemned to their animal state with little prospect of speedy recovery.¹²

¹² Of course, the capacity of animals to follow the Buddhist path is complicated by other Buddhist writings that suggest that animals can act in accord with Buddhist principles. This is most obvious in the *Jātaka* tales where especially wise and compassionate ani-

Life as an animal is routinely described in negative terms. The Buddha, for example, reports through his superhuman vision that, “I see that on the dissolution of the body, after death, [an immoral human] has reappeared in the animal realm and is experiencing painful, racking, piercing feelings” (MN 12.38 170). Another sūtra regards animal life as unpleasant because animals feed on grass, others eat dung, and many are “born, age, and die in filth” (MN 129.18-22 1020). Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa, commenting on Nāgārjuna, elaborates:

In rebirth as an animal there are various sufferings—being killed, bound, beaten, and so forth. Those who have cast away the virtues of peace horribly eat each other. Some die because of their pearls, fur, bone, meat, or skin. Other powerless animals are put to work by being kicked, hit, whipped, jabbed with an iron hook or prodded. (*Stages on the Path* 169)

Furthermore, it is considered “untimely” to be reborn as an animal because only human beings are truly equipped to engage in virtuous activities, accrue karma, or achieve enlightenment.¹³

Buddhists are invited to look upon animals with compassion because of their abject suffering. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is a key Buddhist virtue the development of which is considered vital to success on the Buddhist path. In the Pāli canonical literature, the Buddha repeatedly urges

mals sometimes improve their lot through virtuous actions and even instruct other animals on Buddhist principles (Chapple “Animals” 135-136).

¹³ This idea is universal in Buddhism. Take Tsongkhapa, for example, who says: “After you have reflected on the difficulty of obtaining a human life of leisure and opportunity in this way, develop the desire to take full advantage of such a life. Think, ‘If I use this life for wrongdoing, it is extremely wasteful. In light of this, I will spend my time practicing the sublime teaching’” (*Stages on the Path* 126).

his followers to adopt an attitude of compassion not only towards friends and strangers, but also towards animals and even one's enemies. Indeed, a key refrain in the literature is that Buddhists should maintain a good will based on compassion towards all sentient beings everywhere. In the *Samyutta Nikāya* the Buddha informs his followers that an enlightened being "dwells pervading [all four quarters] of the world with a mind imbued with compassion" and this phrase is stereotypically repeated throughout the canon (SN 4.42.8 1344). The need to develop compassion is also a cornerstone of Mahāyāna Buddhism; the moral life of a bodhisattva is conceived of as a life dedicated almost exclusively to compassion and sympathy. Śāntideva, for examples, urges that all bodhisattvas should will that all animals be free of suffering and misery (*Śikṣāsamuccaya* 259 266). Arguably compassion is the most important moral quality in Buddhist thought.

The need to act compassionately towards animals is also influenced by the fact that animals are continuous with humans. This is apparent in works such as the *Jātaka* where stories are told of former humans, and future Buddhas, who are born as various animals. These tales effectively treat animals as humans insofar as the animals are typically regarded as having the same cognitive potentiality as humans, are socially organized, and are able to strategize and communicate with each other as human beings do. The implication, therefore, is that hurting an animal is like hurting a fellow human being. In addition, there is considerable fear that killing an animal may be killing another human being. In fact, it is prudent to think in this way. The Mahāyāna *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* in arguing for vegetarianism states that:

. . . in this long course of transmigration here, there is not one living being that, having assumed the form of a living being, has not been your mother, or father, or brother, or sister, or son, or daughter, or the one or the other, in var-

ious degrees of kinship; and when acquiring another form of life may live as a beast, as a domestic animal, as a bird, or as a womb-born, or as something standing in some relationship to you; this being so how can the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who desires to approach all living beings as if they were himself and to practice the Buddha-truths, eat the flesh of any living being that is the same nature as himself? (212)

The same argument is made elsewhere in the Mahāyāna literature. Jigmé Lingpa recommends that one think of an animal as being a former parent. He concludes, “If you are a normal minded person thinking about this, your heart will break, and you will necessarily develop compassion toward the animal. Then, even if you can’t develop perfect compassion, something similar will definitely arise” (Barstow 84). Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol, an 18th century Tibetan Buddhist monk and well-known animal welfarist, tells the following story in his autobiography:

One day I stayed in front of the Jowo [one of the most sacred Buddhist images in Tibet] a long time, making such fervent prayers that I became absorbed in a state of profound *samadhi* [meditative absorption]. Afterward, when I was walking along on the outer circumambulation path, I saw many sheep and goats that had been slaughtered. Feeling unbearable compassion for all animals in the world who are killed for food, I went back before the Jowo Rinpoche, prostrated myself and made this vow: ‘From today on, I give up the negative act that is eating the flesh of beings, each one of whom was once my parent.’ (Tsogdruk 232)

The need for compassion towards animals is also made evident in Chinese Buddhism. Vegetarianism in Chinese Buddhism is extremely

common (Welch 112; Chapple *Nonviolence* 34, 38-39), more common than in any other Buddhist culture.¹⁴ This is sometimes derived from extremist animal welfarist beliefs. The extremity of these views is clear from the tale of Puan. Puan was in the habit of buying back animals before they could be slaughtered. On one occasion, Puan was trying to save three pigs but could not afford the outrageous price set by the seller. This did not dissuade Puan:

Then Puan pulled out a knife. He sliced the flesh of his thigh and said ‘Mine and theirs [the pigs] are both flesh. Pigs eat shit and filth yet you still eat them. Furthermore, if people ate grain [instead of meat], then human flesh would be more valuable.’ The people of the altar [the sacrificers], having seen and heard this, simultaneously released [the pigs]. The pigs, having attained their escape, circumambulated Puan three times. They snuffled at him with their snouts out of love and respect. The result was that within fifty *li* southwest of the suburbs pigs and chickens had their lineages discontinued [that is, they were no longer raised domestically]. (Benn 82-3)¹⁵

¹⁴ Despite the fact that Chinese Buddhism strongly endorses vegetarianism it is not necessarily the case that this is born from concern over animal welfare but, as John Kieschnick points out, is rather born out of ascetic leanings, fear of reprisal from other animals and an avoidance from bearing karmic responsibility (192). The latter, of course, is consistent with fear of a bad rebirth. Christopher Chapple’s work on Chinese vegetarianism does bear out this assessment, although Chapple includes some examples of vegetarianism motivated by genuine sympathy and concern for the animal (*Nonviolence* 37-39).

¹⁵ Despite the fact that Buddhism rejects violence, acts of self-directed violence are not altogether uncommon throughout Buddhism. This is especially the case in Mahāyāna Buddhism, where self-harm is sometimes construed as a devotional act. The *Lotus Sūtra* is especially famous for this.

This story dramatically illustrates a key point made by Puan himself, namely that the flesh of humans and the flesh of pigs are metaphysically the same and should be treated with equal respect and ethical regard. This point is also made by the following Chinese poem titled *Flesh of Our Flesh* (Chapple *Nonviolence* 38):

The swine are also sentient beings.
 Their bodies possess the same elements as ours.
 Seeing their grievances and helplessness.
 Rouses the all-mighty heart of sympathy.
 An appeal to the world of man –
 For the sake of protecting life,
 Do not kill,
 And, when you do not eat flesh,
 You have already done a job for the love of humanity.

In this way there are two avenues for why we should act with compassion towards animals. First, we should act with compassion because their lives are miserable and we should show pity towards those who are in a worse situation than us; second, we should act with compassion because: (1) an animal might very well be another human being—or even a relative—and because we would not wish to harm a fellow human, we should not harm an animal; and (2) an animal is sufficiently ontologically similar to a human being that it is owed similar moral consideration. Note that neither of these avenues casts animals in a particularly good light. The first point of view considers animals as inferior and lacking in dignity. The second point of view assumes that the worth of an animal depends primarily upon its relationship to humankind either in the sense that it may be a human being who is in the form of an animal, or that the animal is similar enough to a human being to warrant our attention.

This apparent judging of animals in terms of human interests has led some critics, such as Paul Waldau, to argue that Buddhism is actually “speciesist.” “Speciesism” is the Western animal welfare concept that animals are irrationally discriminated against for the trivial reason that they are of a different species from us.¹⁶ Perhaps one of the strongest pieces of evidence for this is the *Vinaya*’s insistence that the killing of animals is a minor offence and no worse than a range of extremely trivial misdemeanors. This, in addition to the concerns noted above, seems to indicate some form of speciesism. Waldau argues that there is a “constant disparagement or belittling of any biological being outside the human species” (153) and that animals are treated as having merely instrumental value (154).¹⁷ I do not think that these concerns, although true in some cases, show that Buddhism is speciesist, unless speciesism

¹⁶ “Speciesism” was originally coined by Richard Ryder in his essay *Experiments on Animals* (1971) but has been popularized by animal welfare intellectuals such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan.

¹⁷ A more detailed investigation is needed of Waldau’s claim that Buddhism views animals as being of merely instrumental value. Waldau focuses in particular on elephants here and says that, “In fact, the stories are always told against a background acceptance of captivity and instrumental uses of elephants. Accordingly, they most frequently appear as tools of war, vehicles of transportation, work machines or possessions of ordinary humans, or royal possessions” (118). These complaints overemphasize the importance of animals in the texts cited and deemphasize the actual subject matter of the tales. For example, Waldau cites *Bhīmasena Jātaka* as an example of elephants being used as a “tool of war.” It is true that the *Jātaka* does mention an elephant being used as a tool of war and it is also true that the bodhisattva does not object to its use in this capacity, but the *Jātaka* is not about animal cruelty but about the vice of immodesty. The presence of elephants and other animals in the tale are a means for telling a story intended to instruct laity on a particular virtue. Waldau’s criticism might be fair if Buddhist texts never dealt with the subject of animal cruelty at all. But as is clear from the previous discussion, the texts do. Moreover, they thoroughly reject it. Waldau’s criticisms also demonstrate a failure to understand the contextual nature of Buddhist texts and their sometimes extremely narrow pedagogical purpose.

means that animals and humans should be treated *identically*. This is not how speciesism is typically interpreted in the classical animal ethics literature. Divergent animal ethicists such as Tom Regan (xviii-xxix) and Peter Singer (107) both agree, for example, that killing an animal is not as bad as killing a human even though they both believe that we should reduce or even completely abstain from animal killing.

Although Buddhism may not be strictly speciesist, Waldau is not entirely wrong to say that Buddhism treats animal with a certain level of disdain. This sense of disdain, however, is used to motivate feelings of pity and compassion. This attitude towards animals is rather different from that of the Vedic tradition, which reveres many animals but does not hesitate to slaughter them in sacrifice.

Benefits for Helping Animals

Fear of rebirth and the need to act compassionately are just two reasons for why we should be kind to animals. Buddhist writings elucidate a number of other positive benefits from acting kindly towards animals.

The principal benefit is that acts of kindness towards animals are karmically beneficial (Keown 40; Harvey 173). For example, in his commentary to Atiśa's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, Geshe Sonam Rinchen writes, "Even small positive actions, like giving a handful of food to an animal . . . create inexhaustible virtue" (68). The virtue of giving (*dāna*) is a fundamental virtue of Buddhist ethics and is the practical expression of feelings of compassion and sympathy. Providing for animals is one way that this virtue can be expressed. Geshe Rinchen's assertion that giving even small amounts of food to animals constitutes a good deed that will accrue great merit is repeated throughout various Buddhist traditions. The Pāli canon maintains, for example, that even throw-

ing “dishwater into a pool or cesspit for insects and other creatures to feed on” is meritorious (Harvey 172).

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of animal assistance involves the great Mahāyāna Buddhist sages, Asaṅga. This story is reminiscent of the Puan story since both involve a monk sacrificing his body for the benefit of an animal. According to this legend, after meditating in a cave Asaṅga emerged to find a sick stray dog with sores covered in maggots. The maggots were causing the dog suffering, which Asaṅga wanted to relieve. His dilemma was that he did not want to hurt the maggots because that would be a violation of the first precept. Asaṅga remedied this situation by cutting off a strip of his own flesh; he gently placing the maggots on the filets so that they would live and, at the same time, the dog’s suffering would be alleviated (Thurman 29). As it turned out, the dog was really the bodhisattva Maitreya in disguise and the puzzle was really a test intended to examine Asaṅga’s moral character. Through this test, Asaṅga was able to come closer to his goal of enlightenment. One Jātaka tells a story where a bodhisattva sees a tigress at the bottom of a ravine who, out of starvation, is about to eat her own cubs. From compassion the bodhisattva throws himself into the ravine so that the tigress will eat him instead thus saving her cubs (Dayal 182; also cited in Chapple *Nonviolence* 24).

Sacrificing one’s own flesh for the benefit of animals is not entirely uncommon in Buddhist legend. Compared to the Brahmanical literature things are turned on their head: whereas in the Vedic tradition animal bodies are sacrificed for the benefit of the gods—and therefore for the benefit of human beings—in Buddhism human bodies are sacrificed for the benefit of animals. This amply illustrates just how Vedic values can become inverted under Buddhist analysis. Of course, in the Buddhist case human sacrifice is not without benefit for the human—they are always amply rewarded for their selfless deeds. It should be

noted, however, that there are also cases where animals sacrifice their bodies for human benefit. Chapple outlines some of these cases in the following passage:

The *Avadāna-kalpalatā* tells of an elephant who throws himself off a rock in the desert to rescue starving travelers. A lion and an elephant rescue some men from a dragon, sacrificing their lives in the process. In the *Śāśa Jātaka*, a rabbit offers his body to a Brahman for food, jumping into the fire piled up by the rabbit himself. The Brahman was in fact the god Indra in disguise, who then placed the figure of the rabbit in the moon. (*Nonviolence* 24)

Such examples of animal sacrifice nonetheless differ significantly from the Vedic position because in these Buddhist scenarios the animal *willingly* and *voluntarily* sacrifices itself for the human being. In the Vedic view, the animal is sacrificed for human benefit without any regard for whether the animal is a willing participant or not. As is common especially with the *Jātaka* tales, these animals are acting essentially in the same manner as virtuous human beings.

Helping animals is clearly beneficial. However, it should not be thought that the helping of animals is equal to the helping of humans. There is a definite karmic hierarchy when it comes to the furnishing of alms and animals do not rank especially highly. Supplying alms to animals provides very little merit. Giving to monks, however, is extremely fruitful karmically because, in principle, monks are closer to the ideal set out by the Buddha. Indeed, the most karmically fruitful act of giving would be to give to a Buddha or other enlightened being (AN 9.10.20 262-34). Animals, by contrast, are very much the opposite: they are unvirtuous, ignorant of the Buddhist path, and, in any case, unable to follow the Buddha ideal in any reliable way. Prudentially, the instrumental benefit of giving to animals has serious limitations. This supports a fundamental

hierarchy in Buddhism, already established by looking at the *Vinaya*, in which animals do not necessarily rank very highly in the moral stakes.

This ranking of benefit is the flipside of the ranking of killing described above: killing an animal is bad, but the punishment is limited compared to the killing of a human (or, worse, one's parent). Similarly, helping an animal is always a good thing and meritorious, but the extent of the merit is also limited. This can, again, be contrasted to the Vedic religious traditions where sacrificing an animal can produce enormous material benefit. The Buddhist tradition totally condemns animal killing of any kind—and preaches, contrary to the Brahmanical tradition, that such actions are sinful—but it takes a sober view of the virtues of helping animals. Despite the assertions of Geshe Rinchen, it seems that donating to animals has rather limited benefit in many Buddhist traditions and is really the last resort of a desperate donor looking to scrape up some much needed karma.

Although there is limited karmic value from avoiding hurting animals on the one hand or helping them on the other, other benefits are set forth in Buddhist texts. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* states that those who abstain from violence and the destruction of life will live without “fearful animosity” (SN 12.5.41 578). This feeling of animosity is construed as a negative mental state that causes anguish in the one possessing it. By abstaining from violence completely, the pacifist is able to live without mental anguish. Conversely, an abattoir worker will live an unhappy life because he is engaged in an activity that fundamentally involves the destruction of life. This unhappiness may be rooted in, for example, guilt, but from a Buddhist perspective it might also involve the dread of a bad rebirth. People are motivated not to kill animals because they are fearful of a bad rebirth, but the fear itself is also a kind of suffering that can only be allayed by not killing. Therefore, there is considerable self-interest involved in abstaining from animal violence.

Conclusion

Violence towards animals is condemned throughout Buddhism. This is consistent with the general rule that Buddhist moral principles have gone relatively unchanged throughout the course and development of the various Buddhist traditions. In contrast, Buddhist metaphysics underwent radical transformations in its travels from India to China, Japan and elsewhere.

Despite this agreement that animals should not be harmed, the Sūtra literature and the monastic legal texts differ greatly over the seriousness of violence against animals. We find that threats of hell in the Sūtras are called into question by the apparent trivial treatment of animal violence in the *Vinaya*. Despite these difficulties, it is clear that animal violence is roundly rejected regardless of reason, and there are also independent reasons for good conduct towards animals. The better treatment of animals is widely accepted as a proper expression of the virtue of compassion, and there are some additional instrumental benefits to be gained from animal kindness.

We can also see that this view contrasts with the Vedic outlook where animals are valued as objects to be slaughtered for the gods. Oddly, this position suggests that the orthodoxy regarded animals with greater veneration than the Buddhists do even though the Buddhists abstain from animal violence completely. For the Vedic tradition, killing animals is good precisely because animals are special and are sometimes even owed special veneration. The Buddhist view is that animal life is miserable and animals should be pitied. The best thing for an animal is for it to stop being an animal altogether. Apart from the textual differences mentioned above it is also interesting to note another important point of tension in the Buddhist view: although violence is practically

rejected, the *threat* of violence as a repercussion for harming animals is accepted as a mechanism to deter people from behaving in a violent manner.

The Buddhist position towards animals is, therefore, straightforward in terms of how animals should be treated, but it is less straightforward in terms of how animals are valued. Similarly, the rejection of animal violence is made peculiarly ambiguous by the acceptance of violence as a way to rid people of violent impulses.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
Iti	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
Vin-Pat	<i>Vinaya Pātimokkha</i>
VIN-MV	<i>Vinaya Mahāvagga</i>

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