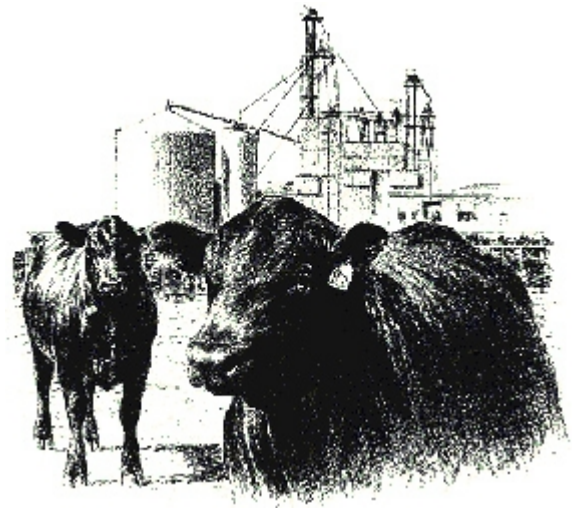


Meat and Poison

By Padma Zhibde



When I was nineteen I read the Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi and was so impressed with his life that I wanted to do something to honour it. I decided to quit eating meat and did so with very little problem. My friends and co-workers (I was working as a counsellor at a summer camp at the time) thought it was odd, but at that age I didn't mind the attention. I lived on dairy products and peanut butter, lost ten pounds (which was nice) and had no health problems. A year and a half later, after giving birth to my first son, I joined an intentional community of vegans. I lived there for the next twenty years, and for six years after that I lived in the loose-knit community of Buddhists around Turtle Hill. All this time I was surrounded by other vegans and vegetarians and never once considered eating meat, even when I had parasites or morning sickness and had trouble with my weight and health.

Tsoks

After I took refuge with Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche, I heard the teachings about not abstaining from anything offered at a *tsok*¹. I learned that this was to avoid clinging to purity and thus preventing the realization of the one taste of all phenomena and the emptiness of all dualities. The amount of meat offered at tsoks was minimal, though and eating a bit was no problem to me. Then I moved out to Denver.

I was shocked to discover that most the Buddhists I met away from our hollow, students of the *Khenpos*² or other lamas, eat meat as part of their daily diet. Some large men explained to me that they'd been vegetarian in the past and felt they needed meat to survive. Others, and most women, admitted that they just liked it. Frequently it was pointed out that many Tibetan lamas, including the Khenpos, eat meat. Indeed, I learned that the Dalai Lama's physician had instructed him to do so for health reasons. It should be noted that all lamas I've heard questioned on the subject, including our Khenpos, say that being vegetarian is better. All agree that unless one is at an exceedingly high level of awareness, eating meat does have negative karmic consequences. Also, they spend much more time at practice and prayer than their indulgent students, and so perhaps are able to ameliorate the effect, if not actually liberate the slaughtered animal.³

Saki

In Boulder and vicinity, when tsok-time comes around, there is always a big platter of meats, as well as lots of fruits, sweets, chocolates and alcoholic beverages. One empowerment I attended was followed by a tsok feast liberally provided with saki, which was eagerly consumed by the attendees. It's interesting to note that this empowerment was by a very accomplished *terton*⁴ who had to include in his teaching the injunction to respect Dharma texts! I thought, "How can we be enlightened enough to get drunk on saki when we don't even know to not step over Dharma texts or place them on the floor?"

1 [Ed.] "Tsok" (Tib.) means "gathering". A "tsok offering" is a coming together of practitioners and offerings.

2 [Ed.] The title "Khenpo" (Tib.) means "Abbot" and "Scholar", a Ph.D. in the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma tradition.

3 [Ed.] Compare: *Chatral Rinpoche's Steadfast Commitment to Ethics* - PDF

4 [Ed.] "Terton" (Tib.) means "Treasure Finder", a revealer of Dharma texts hidden for future generations by the Indian adept *Padmasambhava*, also called *Guru Rinpoche*, who brought Buddhism to Tibet.

Confused

Being the kind of person who doesn't like to make waves, I've rarely said much to other practitioners here, preferring instead to ask questions in an effort to understand. And I must admit I'm still confused. Meat and alcohol are specifically named as the two substances that must be included in many tsok-feasts and must be eaten by all participants. Why is this?

The only way to explain it is to go back to the original teachings of the Buddha to abstain from meat and alcohol. Then it makes sense to eat them to overcome ideas of purity and as a symbolic recognition of the 'one taste' of all existence. But if we don't abstain in our everyday life, how is the partaking of meat and alcohol at tsok-feasts meaningful? I have to draw the conclusion that it isn't. It seems to me to be another example of misunderstanding and abuse of the more subtle teachings.

Motivation

At most of the feasts I've attended, the lama and a few students may have been partaking of these forbidden substances with understanding and proper motivation, but most of the other participants seemed to be merely having a good party.

Recently, I've been exposed to different discussions on the topic of eating meat, and have been giving it a lot of thought. As someone who has many shortcomings myself, I can hardly get heavy with others about their dietary missteps. What I object to, though, is the stance that mealtime consumption of meat is not ignoring the Buddhist teachings to refrain from killing.

Argument

A favourite argument is that we can't refrain from killing as long as we're alive (i.e. insects and micro-organisms.) I don't see how this is an argument in favour of eating meat. It points out that life IS inseparable from experiencing and causing suffering, and that it takes much intense practice before we are purified. It keeps us from feeling smug if we are able to avoid grosser levels of taking life, and points us to the subtle and hidden aspects of the teachings. If we can't avoid taking life, why do we try? Consideration of this question and the Buddha's teaching to abstain from meat leads to understanding the truth of interdependent origination.

An addendum to the 'we can't refrain from killing' stance is that 'even eating vegetables is killing.' Pardon my laughter here. If we don't eat vegetables, we die. Out of compassion for other beings, we draw the line where we can. I was also happy to hear that the Khenpos have said that plants are not sentient beings. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't value the life of plants. Even the inert objects in our lives should be respected. But the Buddha never said anything about eating plants and there's a reason for it.

Lamas

Another puzzling argument is that most Tibetans, including lamas, eat meat. Every lama I've heard speak or read on the subject has stated that abstaining from meat is best. There are other things that most lamas can do that most of their students can't: sitting in a meditation position for long hours, elaborate visualizations, chanting numerous texts by heart. Why don't we imitate these behaviours instead of the one they suggest we avoid? Do we see the lama as a teacher who gives us trick instructions that don't really need to be followed?

Another area of discussion centers around who killed the meat, how far removed they are from you, the eater, whether abstention from eating meat actually saves any lives in our modern world, etc. I must admit I consider most of this type of arguments to be word-smiting. As someone who decided to eat meat from an inspired position, this aspect of the discussion seems conceptual and based on philosophy rather than spiritual principles. Since it is important to consider all arguments, I will address them here.

Difference

I'm sorry if I can't get too serious about the idea that if you don't do the killing or know the butcher and the meat wasn't killed just for you, it's okay to eat it. The moral stance here is one of saving life, not killing, so how can someone else doing it make a difference? These arguments were apparently more common in Tibet, whereas here and now, where large quantities of meat are consumed daily, people favour the idea that one person not eating meat won't really save any lives.

A study of economics will show that boycotts can be effective, the market is affected by demand. Therefore, the less meat consumed, the less raised and the less animals killed for that purpose. One person's action in this regard may seem like a drop in the bucket, but this is where we must start, economically, morally and spiritually.

Judgements of this type are very touchy, as every situation must be carefully observed. It's better to be stricter with oneself than when judging others. Again, consideration of the matter, striving to follow the teachings, leads us to a subtlety that can only be understood in the context of the Buddha himself. Finally we gain the ability to see as He sees, and argument ceases.



About the author

Padme Zhibde (Bonnie Holsinger) was born in 1950 in Denver Colorado and grew up there in a Quaker family. Formal Buddhist practice entered her life in 1989, when she took refuge with [Khenchen Palden Sherab](#) and [Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal](#), who continue to be her teachers.