



On Meat Eating

by
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Meat, the sinful food, is not permitted according to the three vows: the vows of individual liberation, the Bodhisattva vows and the tantric vows. Thus Buddha stated: "I have never approved, do not approve, and will never approve of a meat diet." He declared: "my followers must never eat meat."ⁱ

In general, both the butcher and the buyer of meat will suffer in such realms as the burning and boiling hells.ⁱⁱ As Buddha said, "Killing animals for profit and buying meat are both evil deeds; these kinds of actions will result in a rebirth in the horrifying realms of hell."ⁱⁱⁱ Intentionally eating meat is a violation of Buddhist principals.^{iv} The Buddha said [in the *Lankavatara-sutra*],

No meat can be regarded as pure if it was premeditated, asked for or desired; therefore refrain from eating meat. Both myself and other Buddhas forbid adepts from eating meat. Those sentient beings who feed on one another will be reborn as carnivorous animals. The meat-eater is ill-smelling, contemptuous and born deprived of intelligence. He belongs to the lowest class of men. Since the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and *sravakas* have all condemned meat-eating, one who still eats meat without shame will always be devoid of sense. Those who give up eating meat will be reborn as wise and wealthy Brahmans. Meat that one has seen, heard, or suspected to have come from an animal slaughtered for meat is to be condemned. Theorizers who are born as meat-eaters will not understand this. These people will make foolish remarks about meat-eating, saying, "Meat is proper to eat, unobjectionable and permitted by the Buddha." An adept enjoys vegetarian food in appropriate quantity and views meat as unfit to eat as the flesh of one's own son. For those who are abiding in compassion, I forbid meat at all times and in all circumstances. Eating meat is a horrifying site and prevents progress towards Nirvana. Refraining from eating meat is the mark of the wise.^v

In the *Parinirvana Sutra*, Buddha spoke to Kasyapa, saying,

Blessed son, those who have the mindfulness of the *śravakas* are not allowed to eat meat from now on. Even if one is offered meat with genuine faith, one should see it as the flesh of one's own son.

Bodhisattva Kasyapa asked Buddha, "Lord, why do you not allow the eating of meat?" Buddha replied,

Blessed son, eating meat hinders the development of compassion; therefore, all who follow the way of the Buddha should not eat meat from now on. Kasyapa, wherever a meat eater lies, sits, or walks other sentient beings become fearful upon smelling him. Blessed son, just as when a man eats garlic others will keep away because of his bad smell, likewise, when animals smell the meat eater, they fear death...

Kasyapa asked Buddha, "Lord, as monks, nuns and novice monks are dependent on other people for their food, what should they do when they are offered food with meat?" Buddha replied to Kasyapa,

Separate the food and meat, wash the food, and then eat. You may use your begging bowl if it does not have the smell or taste of meat; otherwise you should wash the bowl. If the food has too much meat, one should not accept it. Do not eat food if you see that there is meat in it; if you do you will accumulate demerit. There will be no end if I speak thoroughly about the reasons I do not allow meat eating. I have given a brief reply because the time has come for my *parinirvana*.^{vi}

Buddha has further elucidated the faults of meat eating in the *Angulimala Sutra* as well as in the *Sikṣasammucaya Compendium of Precepts*. Furthermore, the terma teaching of Padmasambhava called *Rinchin Dronme* clearly condemns the eating of meat for both lay and ordained people: "All the followers of Buddha—monks or nuns, novice or lay—have seven main principals to follow. These are 'the four root principles'^{vii} and abstinence from alcohol, meat and evening food."

Those who argue that Buddha's condemnation of meat applies only to the seven classes of Theravādayana vows^{viii} and is not related to the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna are clearly indicating their lack of proper knowledge. They have not seen the following Mahāyāna sutra passage:

Meat-eating is a diet that convolutes the three realms [of Sāra]. It is a sword that severs the potential for liberation. It is a fire that burns the seed of Buddhahood. It is a shaft of lightning that ends rebirth in the higher realms or a precious human rebirth.

Since meat eating is not approved for anyone—not for monks, nuns or lay people—those who are committed Buddhist practitioners should never eat meat. One who has taken the Bodhisattva Vow will incur great sin in eating the flesh of sentient beings who were one's parents in past lives. Even in Vajrayāna meat is forbidden until one attains the ultimate view of pure perception.^{ix}

Trulshig Pema Dudul, speaking of a pure vision, said:

The Great Compassionate One [Avalokiteshvara] appeared in the sky in front of me and spoke, "You have made some progress on the path and acquired some knowledge, yet you are lacking in love and compassion. Compassion is the root of the Dharma and with compassion it is impossible to eat meat. A person who eats meat will experience much suffering and illness. Look at the miserable ones! Every one is experiencing suffering according to their deeds...One who gives up meat will not experience this suffering. Instead, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the guru, deities and dakinis will rejoice and protect you."

Having heard this, he gave up meat forever.

Many more renowned adepts have condemned meat as a poisonous food. Machig Labdrön, a legendary female practitioner of *chöd*,^x said, "For me eating meat is out of the question. I feel great compassion when I see helpless animals looking up with fearful eyes."

Rigzin Jigme Lingpa, a great yogi of the Nyingma tradition stated,

Just as in the story of Arya Katayana going to beg for food,^{xi} I see that the animal that this meat came from was our mother in previous lives. If so, can we eat the flesh of our own mother who was slaughtered by butchers? Imagine how much concern would arise! Therefore, if we reflect honestly, there is no way we won't feel compassion for the animal.

Some people who claim to be practitioners say, "at least some meat and alcohol is necessary to keep healthy, otherwise weakness or death might come about." This is not true. However, even if death should follow from engaging in the Dharma practice of abstaining from meat and alcohol, then it is worth it. As the great adept Tsele Rigzin^{xii} said,

From the bottom of my heart I pray
Never to be with carnivores and drinkers.
In this and lives coming
May an ordained never be born where meat
And alcohol are used without morality.
Even if I should die
Due to the absence of meat and alcohol,
I will be living in accordance with the Buddha's precepts.
Thus I will be a genuine practitioner!

Bodhisattva Jigme Chökyi Wangpo [Patrul Rinpoche] said,

As Buddhists we have taken the triple refuge [the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha]. To take refuge in the Dharma, one must practice non-violence to sentient beings. Thus, if we continue to eat meat—which has come from the slaughtering of innocent animals—then is this not a contradiction of our Buddhist commitments?

Knowing all of the faults of meat and alcohol, I have made a commitment to give them up in front of the great Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions as my witnesses. I have also declared this moral to all my monasteries. Therefore, anyone who listens to me is requested not to transgress this crucial aspect of Buddhist ethical conduct.

(Revised from the translation of Geshe Thupten Phelgye and Aaron Gross.)

ⁱ *Lankavatara-sutra* (Tib. *lang kar gshegs pa'i mdo*), Tohoku 107.

ⁱⁱ In Buddhist cosmology, there are six realms of samsaric existence, all marked by their own types of suffering. The god realm is marked by laziness and subsequent lack of accumulated merit, which leads to the dread of descending into lower realms at the end of their long and luxurious lives. The jealous gods (*asuras*) have a lush life, but are always fighting out of envy. The human realm is marked by the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death, the suffering experienced when things change, suffering that compounds previous suffering and suffering resultant from prior negative action. The animal realm is marked by ignorance; animals can't speak to other species and so are easily exploited by humans and are often in helpless or fearful situations. Hungry ghosts (*pretas*) have insatiable desire and attachment and are described as having tiny mouths and huge bellies, causing them to be perpetually hungry and thirsty. The sixth realm represents anger and hatred and includes eight types of hot hells, eight types of cold hells and two additional types of hells. Chatral Rinpoche is referring to two types of hot hells – the boiling and burning hells.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lankavatara Sutra.

^{iv} Based on the line from the Lankavatara Sutra that says, "One who eats meat against the words of the Buddha is evil-minded [and is the] destroyer of the welfare of the two worlds."

^v Lankavatara Sutra.

^{vi} *Parinirvana* refers to the Buddha's physical passing from the human realm into the state of perfect Enlightenment.

^{vii} "The four root principles" are refraining from sexual misconduct, killing, stealing, and lying.

^{viii} The seven classes of vinaya vows are monk vows, nun vows, novice monk vows, novice nun vows, intermediate nun vows, lay male vows and lay female vows.

^{ix} An advanced yogi like Tilopa can liberate animals like fish by consuming their dead body parts. Another advanced yogic practice is to eat that which is normally taboo, viewing it as pure nectar in its essence. Included in this are the "five meats" of elephant, dog, cow, human and horsemeat and the "five nectars" of urine, feces, brains, blood and semen.

^x *Chöd* means "cut" and is the practice for lessening ego and helping other beings by visualizing offering your body, cut into various pieces and converted into pure nectar, as sustenance for the enlightened ones, the hungry ghosts, demons and other sentient beings. It is historically practiced at a cemetery.

^{xi} The lama Arya Katayana once visited a family on his begging rounds in which he could see through his clairvoyance that the father of the husband living in the house – who had died a few years earlier – had been reborn as a fish the family was now having for dinner. The dog of the house had been the husband's mother and their enemy had been reborn as their son. The husband's step-mother was also at the table. Arya Katayana was quoted as saying, "He eats his father's flesh; he kicks his mother away. He dandles on his lap the enemy that he killed. The wife is gnawing at her husband's bones. I laugh to see what happens in samsara's show!" [*Words of My Perfect Teacher* (1994) p. 50]

^{xii} Tsele Natsok Rangdrol (*rTse le sNga tshogs Rang grol*, 1608-?)