



Introduction
of
Food of Bodhisattvas
Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining from Meat
Including a short biography of Shabkar
by
Padmakara Translation Group

People who know little about Buddhism but are fairly familiar with its teachings on non-violence and compassion often assume that Buddhists are vegetarians. It is with surprise and sometimes a touch of disappointment that they discover that many (though by no means all) Buddhists, East and West, do in fact eat meat. Leaving aside the host of factors, private or social, affecting the behaviour of individuals, the general attitude of Buddhists toward the consumption of meat has been conditioned by historical and cultural factors, with the result that attitudes vary from country to country. In their traditional setting, for example, the Mahayana Buddhists of China and Vietnam are usually strictly vegetarian. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for Japanese to eat meat. And as Buddhism has spread to Europe, America, and elsewhere, it has seemed natural for new disciples to adopt the attitudes and practices typical of the tradition they follow.

Tibet was the one country in Asia to which the entire range of Buddhist teaching was transmitted from India, and Tibetans have, from the eighth century till the present, been deeply committed to the teachings of the Mahayana in both its sutric and tantric forms - studying, reflecting upon, and bringing into living experience its teachings on wisdom and universal compassion. It is well known, moreover, that these teachings and the attitudes they engendered on the popular level exerted a powerful influence on the relationship between the Tibetans and their natural surroundings. European visitors to Tibet and the Himalayan region before the Chinese invasion were often struck by the richness and docility of the wildlife, which had become fearless of human beings in a country where hunting was rare and universally condemned. Yet the fact remains that Tibetans in general have always been, and still are, great meat eaters. This mainly due to climate and geography, since large portions of the country lie at altitudes where the cultivation of crops is impossible.

Long habit, of course, gives rise to deep-seated predilection and, despite their religious convictions, many Tibetans living in other parts of the world have not changed their diet. This, in itself, is not very surprising. It is difficult for everyone to abandon the habits of a lifetime, and one of the first impulses of travellers and immigrants the world over is to import or procure their own kind of food. In any case, like the rest of humanity, many Tibetans find meat delicious and eat it with relish. But if this was and is the norm, both in Tibet and among Tibetans in exile, the daily practice of the Mahayana - constant meditation on compassion and the Bodhisattva's commitment to liberate all beings from their sufferings

- inescapably calls into question the eating of meat. As a rule, Tibetan Buddhists, even confirmed meat eaters, are not insensitive to this. Many freely admit that the consumption of a food dissociable from the intentional killing of animals is less than ideal and is unsuitable for Buddhist practitioners. Many Tibetans make the effort to abstain from meat on holy days and at certain sacred seasons of the year. Many express an admiration for vegetarianism; and it is rare to find Tibetan lamas who do not praise and advocate it for those who are able, even if, for whatever reason, the lamas consume meat themselves.

Among the Tibetans living in exile in India and Nepal, countries where alternative nourishment is available and where the practice of meat eating is culturally less ingrained, a change of custom seems to be slowly taking shape, particularly among the younger generations. [1] A number of monasteries, including Namgyal Dratsang, the monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, no longer allow meat to be cooked in their kitchens; and even if the personal practice of individual monastics is left to their own decision, a small but growing number of monks and nuns have abandoned meat eating altogether.

For Western practitioners, the situation is rather different. Unlike the Tibetans, we live mostly in areas where a wide variety of wholesome vegetable food is easy to obtain. Nevertheless, we belong to a culture in which religious and ethical traditions sanction and encourage the eating of meat. The compassionate attitude toward animal life, which is inherent to the Buddhist outlook and with which, despite their nutritional habits, Tibetans are as a rule profoundly imbued, is lacking in our society. To a large extent, the humane treatment of domestic animals, where it exists in the modern world, is dictated by sentimentality and curtailed by financial considerations; it is not based on the understanding that animals are living beings endowed with minds and feelings, whose predicament in samsara is essentially no different from our own. In any case, for many Westerners who have become Buddhists, who are carnivores both by habit and desire, the challenge on the question of meat eating posed by Buddhism in general and by the Mahayana in particular tends to be dampened by the fact that, for the reasons just explained, Tibetans have rarely been able to give more than theoretical guidance, albeit sincere.

The situation has been further complicated by the perpetuation in the West of a number of "traditional" rationalizations used to condone the eating of meat by Buddhists. These are often adopted - a little too easily and uncritically, perhaps - by Westerners unable or unwilling to consider an alternative lifestyle. They include the concept of threefold purity, the idea that animals gain a connection with the Dharma (and are therefore benefited) when their flesh is eaten by practitioners, and various other notions derived from a distorted reading of the tantras. As Shabkar demonstrates, these arguments are either false or only half true and call for a careful, honest interpretation. The most that can be said for them is that they are very understandable, very human attempts to salve tender consciences, invoked often apologetically and without much conviction when abstention from meat seems too difficult. In ordinary circumstances and where ordinary people are concerned, it is surely a mistake to regard them as expressions of valid principle.

In any case, it is important to be aware that in Tibet there exists and has always existed another point of view. This was present from the earliest days of Buddhism in the country. It was powerfully reaffirmed by the teaching of Atisha and his Kadampa followers and has been upheld by a few heroic individuals in every subsequent generation. As the texts

translated in **Food of Bodhisattvas** will show, Shabkar was one of this glorious company - Bodhisattva practitioners of both the sutras and the tantras, whose love of others and whose awareness of their sufferings was such that they abstained from meat, at the cost of great personal hardship, in a difficult and unyielding environment. In his discussion of the issues involved, Shabkar raises profound questions regarding various aspects of the Buddha Dharma at its Pratimoksha, Mahayana, and Vajrayana levels and, as a compassionate but clear-sighted observer of humanity, throws a fascinating light on the society and religion of his time.

The Author of *Food of Bodhisattvas*

Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol [2] left behind numerous volumes of writings,[3] - two of which comprise a detailed autobiography, one of the most popular and inspiring in Tibetan literature. In it, amid a wealth of poetry and song, he recounts a spiritual career that began with the first stirrings of renunciation in his early childhood and culminated with perfect attainment. [4] He spent most of his time in solitude, high in the mountains, attended only, if at all, by those of his closest disciples who were able and willing to share the hardships imposed by the physical environment and savor the perfect freedom that comes from the complete abandonment of worldly concerns. He was untouched by social and ecclesiastical conventions and, though an ordained monk, was never closely associated with any of the great monastic establishments, although he visited and endowed them whenever he could, sometimes with spectacular generosity. Living the monastic discipline yet immersed in the yogic practice of the Secret Mantra, he must have cut an eccentric figure on his frequent pilgrimages, wearing his patched monastic skirt and the white shawl and long hair of a yogi.

Shabkar's unusual attire was an accurate reflection of his personality and spiritual endeavour. As monk and yogi, he gathered within his practice the Hinayana path of monastic renunciation, the Mahayana path of universal compassion, and the yogic path of the Secret Mantra - the three vehicles of Tibetan Buddhism, implemented according to the gradual scheme so much associated with the Kadampa tradition. Although by Shabkar's time the Kadampas no longer existed as a separate lineage, their teaching on the *Lamrim*, or stages of the path, had exerted a pervasive influence on all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, inspiring the composition of great and seminal writings that have dominated the religious life of Tibetans until the present day: *The Mind at Rest* of Gyalwa Longchenpa, Je Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the Vidyadhara Jigme Lingpa's *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, and of course *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* by Je Tsongkhapa himself. Following Aatisha's injunction, Shabkar's outer behaviour was marked by the pure discipline of monastic ordination; inwardly, he was a lifelong practitioner and advocate of *lojong*, the mind-training teachings focused on relative and absolute *bodhichitta*; secretly, he was an accomplished yogi who brought to fruition the esoteric teachings of the tantras, especially the highest and most secret instruction of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. The Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana were all united in his practice, which he brought to a state of perfect realization.

Shabkar's attitude toward the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism was unclouded by even the slightest trace of sectarian bias. No doubt this was due primarily to his free and independent lifestyle, uncomplicated by institutional allegiances or dependence on benefactors. He lived an entirely hand-to-mouth existence. He had no fixed abode and reduced his own needs to an absolute minimum. The devotion of his disciples often resulted

in rich donations, which were speedily dispatched in either religious offerings or gifts of charity. The Dharma was for him a matter of personal insight and training, not of allegiance to a school. He loved the Buddha's teaching in all its manifestations, and his attitude to all traditions was one of unfeigned devotion.

Once, early in life, when visiting the great Gelugpa monastery of Labrang Tashikhyil in Amdo, Shabkar prayed to be able to practice the Dharma perfectly in a manner unstained by prejudice. Referring to this event in his autobiography, he quotes the fifth Panchen Lama declaring the authenticity of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and comments, "In accordance with these words, I always cultivated respectful devotion toward the teachings and teachers, seeing them all as pure." [5] A particularly striking feature of Shabkar's religious personality was the degree to which he combined the teachings of the Nyingmapas with those of the Geluggas, two schools that are often considered to be poles apart. This must have been favoured by the social environment of the region in which he grew up, far from the centres of political power, where practitioners of all traditions lived close to each other and communicated freely.

His own roots were among the Nyingmapa yogis of Rekong in Amdo, famous for the purity of their *samaya* and the miraculous powers resulting from their spiritual accomplishments. It was here that his religious training began, and it is evident from his later life that the teaching he received there, in word and example, left an indelible mark on his character. At the age of twenty, he received monastic ordination from the great Gelugpa abbot and scholar Arik Geshe Jampel Gyaltzen Ozer, who advised Shabkar to seek out his root guru, the great Nyingmapa master Chogyal Ngakyi Wangpo. It was from the latter that Shabkar received all the teachings of the Old Translation school, up to and including the *trekcho* and *thogal* instructions of the Great Perfection, which were to form the core of his personal practice. Nevertheless, as he recounts in his biography, Shabkar frequently received transmissions and initiations of the new traditions, among them his beloved *Migtsema*, the celebrated prayer to Tsongkhapa as the jewel ornament of the Land of Snow. Later, on his journeys, he took delight in visiting the great Gelugpa foundations in the central provinces of U and Tsang, where he made lavish offerings and requested teachings. He also made pilgrimages to the great monastery of Sakya, where he received empowerments from the sons of Wangdu Nyingpo, the thirty-third throne holder. [6] And while in the vicinity, he did not fail to pay his respects to the monastery of Jonang Ganden Puntsoling, the former seat of Taranatha Kunga Nyingpo, a copy of whose teachings he had printed from the wooden blocks still preserved there. [7] Finally, he was completely at home among the Kagyupa yogis of Mount Kailash and elsewhere. Reading Shabkar's life, with its atmosphere of serene devotion and universal respect for all traditions, one would hardly guess the depth of sectarian animosity that had plagued the social history of Tibet for generations. So powerful and so genuine was Shabkar's reverence for all the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism that he has been celebrated as the manifestation of different personages within these same traditions. He is often venerated as an emanation of Manjushrimitra (*jam dpal bshes gnyen*), one of the patriarchs of the Dzogchen lineage of the Nyingma school. He has been recognized as the incarnation of the master Ngulchu Gyalse Thogme, much venerated by the Sakyapas, and as the rebirth of Chengawa Lodro Gyaltzen, a close disciple of Je Milarepa, one of the greatest masters of the Kagyu school and most beloved figures in the Tibetan tradition, that Shabkar is most celebrated. In terms of lifestyle, talent, perseverance, and accomplishment, it was surely in the footsteps of Milarepa that Shabkar most obviously trod.

Shabkar was famous for his affection and concern for animals. His attitude was an expression not only of personal sympathy and aesthetic appreciation; it was rooted in his understanding of Buddhist teaching. For Shabkar, as for other Buddhists, animals are to be considered first and foremost as living beings caught like ourselves in the sufferings of samsara. However different and strange their physical form, and however rudimentary their intellectual and emotional faculties, they are nevertheless endowed with mind and are, in the most basic sense, persons. They cling, no less than humans, to the notion of self. They therefore long for happiness and fulfilment according to their kind, and they suffer when they fail to attain it. Compared with humans, animals are of course at a great disadvantage. Their minds are obscured to a much greater degree by ignorance, and they are overwhelmed by the strength of instinct. They may possess sense faculties far more powerful and acute than those of human beings, but their intelligence is not adapted to the reception of the Dharma and the implementation of methods that enable the mind to evolve from a state of bondage into freedom.

In his long years of silent retreat high in the mountains and on his solitary treks through the Tibetan wilderness, Shabkar had no doubt many occasions to watch animals at close range and to observe their ways. Such opportunities, coupled with the extreme simplicity of Shabkar's own lifestyle, must have further enhanced the natural empathy that he felt toward animals and which we sense on numerous occasions in his autobiography. His life in the wild, with little to eat and only meagre shelter from the elements, must have brought him an appreciation of the hardships and dangers that are the natural lot of wild animals. He must often have been cold and hungry and must have witnessed the fragility and suffering of animals confronted by the unpredictable changes of climate and the menace of their natural predators. He certainly felt a fellowship with animals, and they too, in the course of his long sojourns in solitary retreat, must have grown accustomed to the innocuous presence of that strange human, Shabkar would occasionally speak to them and sometimes – in the chattering of crows, for example or the plaintive cries of the cuckoo – he would imagine them speaking to him or to each other. He once gave simple spiritual instructions to a herd of *kyang*, or wild asses, which seemed to stay and listen, and on one occasion he himself received a heartfelt teaching from an old sheep. It is clear from his writings that he was often moved by the beauty of the animals and derived comfort from their companionship. Very often it was the call of birds and the murmuring of insects that prompted him to spiritual insights, which he then recorded in his songs.

From his earliest youth, Shabkar was appalled by the treatment meted out to animals by human beings. In the first pages of his autobiography, he records a childhood experience that was to mark him for the rest of his life.

One autumn, we had an excellent harvest. Everyone, from all the different households, rich and poor, said that we should celebrate. This of course meant the slaughtering of many scores of sheep. It was a terrible sight. I was horrified and filled with pity. I couldn't bear to be at the slaughtering ground and had to go away and wait till it was all over. When they had finished the killing, I came back and saw the carcasses of the sheep lying on the ground and being cut into pieces. I thought to myself, 'These people are doing something terribly wrong, and they are doing it even though they know that they will have to suffer the consequences in their future lives. When I grow up, I will only ever live according to the Dharma. I will completely turn by back on such evil behaviour.' And I made this promise to myself again and again.

[K W G J (*The King of Wish-Granting Jewels*), f 16]

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Throughout his life, Shabkar, like any other Buddhist teacher, gave instructions on the law of karma, and he encouraged his listeners to refrain from killing, sometimes with impressive results. Like his older contemporary, Jigme Lingpa, he made it his practice to save the lives of animals by buying them and setting them free. In one of his songs, he records that by the age of fifty-six (he was to live to the age of seventy) he had ransomed the lives of several hundred thousand animals.[8] It was, however, during his early adulthood, on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Lhasa, that an experience occurred that was to prove a turning point in his personal lifestyle. Amid his various visits to shrines and monasteries and the paying of respects to lamas and other religious and political dignitaries, Shabkar had been drawn again and again to the Jokhang, the central temple in the city, which houses the famous Jowo Rinpoche, an image of Shakyamuni Buddha, reputedly made in the latter's own lifetime. This image was and is one of the most revered objects in the Tibetan Buddhist world, and over the centuries it has been the focus of countless offerings and devoted prayers. "One day," Shabkar recalls in his autobiography,

"I remained in the presence of the Jowo for a long, long time, and I was praying so intensely that I entered a state of profound absorption. Later, as I was walking along on the outer circumbulation path around the city, I came upon the bodies of many sheep and goats that had been slaughtered. At that moment, the compassion that flooded into me for all the animals in the world that are killed for food was so strong that I could not stand it. I returned to the Jowo Rinpoche, and with prostrations made this vow: 'From today onward, I will abandon the negative act of eating the flesh of beings, each one of whom was once my parent.'" [K W G J, f 201]

The year was 1812; - Shabkar was thirty-one years old.

"From that point onward," he continued, "no one ever killed animals in order to offer me food. I was even told that, when they knew I was about to visit them, my faithful patrons would say, 'This lama does not eat the meat even of animals that have died naturally; we must not leave any meat lying around where he will see it.' And they hid whatever there was. The fact that no more animals were killed for my sake was, I believe, thanks to the compassion of the Jowo himself." [K W G J, f 201]

Shabkar's decision to abstain from meat represented a considerable sacrifice. Although travellers in Tibet nowadays report that rice and vegetables imported from China can be found in many parts of the country, this was not the case in Shabkar's day. It is true that from time immemorial, in the low-lying regions to the south and east, enough grains and vegetables were grown for most of the population to supplement their essentially meat-based diet. But the cultivation of vegetables on a scale sufficient to provide what would now be regarded as an adequate vegetarian diet was impossible. No crops can grow at altitudes of over twelve thousand feet, and the north of Tibet is covered by immense grasslands suitable only for the raising of livestock: yaks, goats, and sheep. To give up eating meat was therefore a truly heroic act, accomplished by very few. It meant being satisfied with a diet consisting of little more than butter, curd, and *tsampa*, the traditional Tibetan four made of roasted barley, usually eaten as lumps of dough mixed with butter and tea. It meant putting up with a reduced resistance to disease, the result of protein and vitamin deficiencies, and it surely meant a greater vulnerability to cold, felt much more keenly when one is deprived of an adequate intake of fat. It is understandable that such a diet was beyond the capacity of the majority. Even in a country where the principles of the Mahayana were omnipresent, where

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no one was ignorant of the Buddha's teachings on compassion, it was simply impossible for most people to live out such teachings on the level of their eating habits. In the case of the large monasteries, the provision for the monks of adequate supplies of vegetable food, even if they had been inclined to a meatless diet, was completely out of the question. To be a vegetarian in Tibet required powers of endurance and a determination that could only come from the deepest possible conviction.

All these considerations - the breadth of Shabkar's practice embracing the entire range of the Doctrine, his unconditional allegiance to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the perfect integrity of his own character, and the sacrifices he was prepared to make in order to live according to his insights and principles - give Shabkar an unusual authority and entitle him to speak for the whole of the tradition. What he has to say about meat eating and its relation to Buddhist practice is therefore important and should be heard, even if perhaps it diverges from our own views and preferences or seems beyond our powers.

Before considering Shabkar's arguments in greater detail, we should advert to the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of arriving at a definition of the Buddhist teaching on meat eating such as to command assent from all sides. The most obvious reason for this is that the Buddha's own attitude toward meat eating, as presented in the scriptures, appears ambiguous. In some sutras, specifically those of the Hinayana, we find the Buddha advising his disciples to abstain from only certain kinds of meat, thereby implying that meat as such is an acceptable food. He also allows the ordained sangha to eat meat subject to certain conditions. On other occasions, the Buddha is said to have eaten meat himself, and the claim has been made, though not without contestation, that his death was occasioned by the consumption of an offering of infected pork. [9] Elsewhere, notably in the *Lankavatara-sutra* and other Mahayana scriptures, the Buddha criticizes the eating of meat in the strongest terms and forbids it under all circumstances. Finally, in certain texts of the Secret Mantra, the consumption of meat, along with alcohol, seems to be not merely allowed but actually advocated.

Shabkar approaches this conundrum in the spirit of the gradual path and explains the apparent contradictions of the scriptures as manifestations of the Buddha's pedagogical skill. Having attained enlightenment for himself, the Buddha did not seek to demonstrate his own greatness by proclaiming sublime truths into the void, beyond the reach of his audience. His first wish was to bring others to his own level of understanding, and in this he was a pragmatist. Knowing that people are transformed only by what they can understand and actually assimilate, he did not mystify them with subtle and abstruse words or try to impose on them disciplines that were beyond their strength. Instead, he spoke to them according to their ability and need.

The teachings recorded in the scriptures are therefore circumstantial, bestowed in a given situation and to specific individuals. A teaching appropriate for one person or group of persons is not necessarily suitable for others. Instructions intended for disciples of great acuity, and that approximate more closely the Buddha's own understanding, are not appropriate for disciples of more modest capacity, who need a more gradual approach. Buddhist scriptures present an entire spectrum of instruction, all of which has a single aim: to lead beings to liberation.

Two important conclusions follow from this. The first is that there exists a hierarchy of teaching, a scale of validity, according to which basic instruction is regarded as provisional, set forth according to need and superseded by higher, more demanding instruction to be expounded when the disciple is ready. For Shabkar, as for all teachers of Tibetan Buddhism, the instructions set forth on the Hinayana level are of vital importance in laying the foundations for correct understanding and practice. But they are not final. They are surpassed by the teachings of the Mahayana, just as, within the Mahayana itself, the sutra teachings prepare the way for, and are surpassed by, the tantra. It is thus that the entire sweep of the Buddha's teaching fits together in a harmonious and coherent system, in which teachings that seem incomplete from the standpoint of a higher view are assigned an appropriate, preparatory position lower down the scale. Viewed in this light, the teachings of both the Hinayana and Mahayana scriptures may be reconciled, and it is unnecessary to speculate, as some authorities have done, about the possibility of interpolated texts and the wilful misrepresentation of the Buddha's words by later generations.[10]

The second important conclusion is that the validity of a given teaching depends on the circumstances in which it was imparted. It is a mistake to quote teachings out of context, applying them too broadly, in situations for which they were not designed. Thus an instruction given in a Hinayana setting is out of place, and does not retain the same validity, in a Mahayana context. As Shabkar demonstrates, it is owing to a superficial and incorrect reading of scripture that much of the confusion about meat eating has arisen.

As we have seen, despite the presence of the Mahayana in Tibet, and of great masters who expounded and lived it in all its purity, its implementation on the point of meat eating was not a practical option for most people. And as we have already suggested, the use of scripture quoted out of context to justify the consumption of meat is part of a very human scenario. When people are constrained by weakness to act in a manner that is at variance with their ideals, it is natural for them, whether to save face or simply to alleviate the resulting psychological pressure, to try to rationalize their behaviour and justify it. In situations of genuine difficulty, it is also natural to follow the line of least resistance. For example, in Kham or Amdo at the winter's end, everyone is intensely hungry. If meat is available, it would be a hard heart indeed that would criticize or even question those who buy and consume it without worrying over-much about how it has been procured, telling themselves that they are not responsible for the animal's death.

But no matter how cogent the circumstantial argument may be, and there is little doubt that it was and is so in Tibet, it is still important to preserve the essential principle. However much the eating of meat may be justified in the case of given individuals and circumstances, this should not be allowed to obscure the basic fact that meat eating does violence to the Mahayana ideal and circumstances, this should not be allowed to obscure the basic fact that meat eating does violence to the Mahayana ideal and is in normal circumstances indefensible. It is clear from Shabkar's writings that this was one of his main preoccupations: However difficult the practical conditions are, it is necessary to proclaim the truth and to keep the ideal alive. All this serves to throw Shabkar's position into even sharper relief. His teaching on the consumption of meat appears extraordinary and idealistic even in the affluent West; how much more so in the harsh conditions of Tibet.

Still, the fact remains that there are no inflexible rules. Whatever the geographical and cultural environment, behaviour is a matter of individual capacity and choice. It is obvious that informed sincerity is the most important factor, although it must be admitted that, where judgement is liable to be swayed by desire and the strength of habit, self-deception can be a tenacious companion.

Shabkar was perfectly aware of these complicating factors, and his attitude was one of compassionate realism. He deplored the objective situation, but he knew very well that he was advocating a practice that was out of reach for many of his fellow Tibetans. He advocated it all the same but without being moralistic or judgemental. He grieved for the victims of the butchers, and he was impatient at the hypocrisy and sophistry of certain established practices. But he knew that in the circumstances - perhaps any circumstances - the best way to improve the situation was by persuasion and example.

The first part of his autobiography concludes with a verse in which he reviews his exploits so far, that is, up to the age of fifty-six. Speaking for himself, he says,

“I kept all the Pratimoksha vows, the Bodhisattva vows, and those of the Mantrayana. I gave up meat, alcohol, garlic, onion, and tobacco, and sustained myself on the three whites, on the three sweets, [11] on tea and butter and tsampa.” [K W G J, f480b]

He then mentions his disciples: his 108 great spiritual sons, the 1,800 great meditators, both men and women, the tens of thousands of monks and nuns who were his followers living in the monasteries, and the countless yogis, village practitioners, and devoted householders who did what they could in the practice, by prayers, fasting, and recitation of mantra. Of this immense following, he singles out for special mention those practitioners who, “having attained perfect loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta, gave up eating meat.” [K W G J, f480b] There were about three hundred of them - a tiny proportion - which he mentions nevertheless with delighted appreciation.

The rest of Shabkar’s disciples were meat eaters - whom he accepted as students to be trained on the path. In *The Faults of Eating Meat*, Shabkar quotes the *Mahapariniroanasutra*, in which the Buddha says, “My teaching is not like that of the naked ascetics, I, the Tathagata, established rules of discipline in relation to specific individuals.” Following in the same tradition, Shabkar was not an intolerant fundamentalist, advocating a single rule in all circumstances. His concern was that people should change and grow. For us who follow the path, faced as we are with objectives that are, for the moment, beyond us, to adopt a humble attitude and to be prepared to “start where we are” using the raw material of our personality as we find it, with all its needs and weaknesses, is the most - indeed the only - realistic approach. If, for whatever reason, we cannot do without meat, then it is as meat eaters that we begin to train. And the fact that we are training and progressing toward a goal is the very reason it is so necessary to respect the ideal and not obscure it with specious arguments. The acceptance of the possibility of change is a precondition for moral progress. In following the way of the Bodhisattvas, one must expect to be transformed; and given the depth and extent of that transformation, the possible modification of one’s diet might well seem only a minor adjustment.

The Hinayana And Threefold Purity

Whatever opinions Buddhists of different traditions may entertain about the eating of meat, all are in agreement about one thing: It is evil to take life. The vow to abstain from killing is the first Buddhist precept, and the very fact of becoming a Buddhist, by taking refuge in the Three Jewels, automatically involves the commitment not to inflict harm on any sentient being. In addition, Buddhists agree that, in ordinary circumstances, the taking of life also plants the seed of suffering in the mind stream of the perpetrator. Now it is obvious that the availability of meat involves the death of the animal it came from; and if the animal concerned has been killed, as opposed to dying from natural causes, the question is whether the karmic consequences of the killing are transferred to, or in any way shared by, the eater of the meat. Perhaps concern about this question was one reason the Buddha enunciated the principle of threefold purity. According to this teaching, it is possible to eat meat without sharing in the fault of the killer if one has not seen, has not heard, and has no suspicion that the animal in question has been killed for the express purpose of providing oneself with food. Conversely, to eat meat while knowing that the animal in question has been killed for one's own nourishment establishes a complicity with the killer and a share in the act. It generates a negative karma commensurate with the killing itself. The principle of threefold purity was, like many of Buddha's disciplinary directives, dictated by circumstances - in the present case, that of wandering monks receiving their daily food by alms giving.[12] This practice, still followed by the Theravada monks in Thailand and elsewhere, is carried out according to a simple and beautiful ritual, normally in an atmosphere of complete anonymity. Leaving their forest *viharas* as soon as it is light enough to see their way, the monks arrive at the entrance to the village where the devoted lay people place in their bowls a share of the food, whatever it may be, that they themselves will eat later on. No word is spoken. The monks signify their gratitude by bowing and then walk away. There is no sense of mundane conviviality, no discussion of the origin of the food. The monks are then expected to eat mindfully the contents of their bowls, good or bad, delicious or revolting, accepting whatever comes their way in a spirit of detachment.

In addition to being evil in itself, the act of killing, or causing another to kill, constitutes, for the sangha, a root violation that entails the destruction of monastic ordination. For monks and nuns, it is thus a matter of some importance whether the acceptance of a food offering containing meat involves complicity with the killer. The principle of threefold purity was thus intended to specify the occasions when the monks could eat meat - should it ever appear in their begging bowls - without damaging their ordination. The preoccupation, in other words, is primarily with purity of discipline and the possible accumulation of negativity. The focus of interest is the monks themselves, who, in this Hinayana context of Pratimoksha, are chiefly concerned with the task of self-liberation from the round of suffering and, as an accessory to this, with the purity of their vows.

It is obvious that in cultural settings other than the one just mentioned, meat endowed with threefold purity is practically impossible to find. It may well be that the forest monks remain completely unaware of the origin of their food, or they may quite reasonably assume that what is placed in their bowls on a daily basis forms part of the standard fare of the donors and that if scraps of meat appear in their bowls, they are part of what the villagers have either killed or bought for themselves. Outside this very specific milieu, the circumstances and their moral implications are naturally very different. The religious institutions of Tibet

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are a world away from the forest hermitages of India and south Asia. Tibetan monasteries were often immense, and many were located in remote, sparsely populated regions. Provisions were required on a large scale and had to be purchased and transported. This, as Shabkar observes, implies commerce and the market forces of supply and demand. And wherever there is a market, be it a Himalayan bazaar or a local supermarket in Europe or America, the possibility of threefold purity is ruled out. In discussing it, Shabkar's intention was to place it in its proper context and to show that it could not be invoked to justify the eating of meat by Tibetan monks. The purpose of the principle was to isolate the only kind of meat the consumption of which did not impair the Pratimoksha ordination. On the other hand, the large-scale provision of "pure" meat is, practically speaking, a contradiction in terms. However unavoidable the eating of meat may be in Tibet, it is illegitimate to appeal to such a principle in order to defend and normalize it.

For those who were able and willing, abstention from meat in the harsh climate of Tibet implied a readiness to live practically on the brink of starvation. Such a lifestyle was obviously not for the majority. Yet Shabkar was not an isolated case. In the earliest period of Buddhism in Tibet, abstinence from meat in the monasteries must have been the norm, as can be seen from the legislation of King Trisong Detsen (a fact that Shabkar mentions in another of his works [13]). Admittedly, the monastic institutions at that time must have been much smaller and less numerous than they were to become. They also enjoyed royal patronage and so were well provided for. But in any case, at all times in Tibetan history, there have been famous masters, and no doubt a proportion of their disciples, who abstained from meat. Many of the Kadampas did so, beginning with Atisha himself, and they were followed by masters and practitioners of all schools - Milarepa, Drikung Kyobpa, Taklung Thangpa, Phagmo Drupa, Thogme Zangpo, Drukpa Kunleg, and so on, down to masters of more modern times like Jigme Lingpa, Nyakla Pema Dudul, and Patrul Rinpoche. In the case of Patrul Rinpoche, the celebrated author of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, it is well known that, through his incessant exposition of the *Bodhicharyavatara* and his repeated teachings on the helpless plight of animals, he effectively abolished, in many parts of eastern Tibet, the practice of slaughtering animals and offering their meat to visiting Lamas.[14]

Meat Eating And The Mahayana

The principle of threefold purity was set forth in the context of the Hinayana teachings as a guideline to ensure the integrity of the Pratimoksha vows. In the Mahayana, there is a profound change of emphasis: from the wish to free oneself from suffering to an intense awareness of the suffering of all beings and the cultivation of the wish to protect and liberate them. Since the ability to free others implies the achievement of freedom also for oneself, the Hinayana is by no means rejected; it is the basis of the Mahayana and is incorporated and transfigured by it. The need for "self-liberation" is acknowledged, but the shift of emphasis is toward "other liberation," or, to be more exact, to a state of wisdom in which the distinction between self and other is seen to be unreal and is transcended.

It is important to reflect and dwell upon this polarity of self and other. It is an axiom of Buddhist doctrine that all living beings without exception experience the impression of being "I," of having a self to which they cling. They serve the interests of this imagined self, and they fear and resist anything that menaces it. They want to be happy; they do not want to suffer. This fundamental desire, rooted as it is in self clinging, is the basis not only of personal existence but also of the spiritual quest. Like everyone else, practitioners on the

Hinayana level are also striving for happiness, the definitive happiness of nirvana. The wish for individual liberation, of liberation for oneself, is perfectly in line with the same fundamental urge that in less skilful beings results in samsara. It is a mark of the Buddha's pedagogical genius that the basic impetus of self-interest is utilized as the energy source that impels the trainee beyond samsara and the self-clinging that is its cause. As the Dalai Lama often says, we are self-centred beings; the Buddha has taught us how to be wisely self-centred. With this in mind, we can appreciate why the training on the Hinayana level is in the nature of a disciplinary restriction. The energies that, uncontrolled, result in the futile sufferings of samsara are bound by vows; they are channelled and utilized to good effect. One learns to abandon negativity and to adopt the skilful techniques of discipline, concentration, and wisdom, according to the direction of one's original impetus: the desire for one's own happiness.

By contrast, there is in the Mahayana something that goes against the grain. Honest self-scrutiny reveals that we are not naturally selfless, that is, concerned for others to the detriment of our own interests. Altruism takes us beyond ourselves and is something that we must consciously learn. It is moreover a matter of experience that in order to feel commitment to any kind of training, it is necessary to be inspired and to have a longing for the goals to be achieved. This is why, in the *Bodhicharyavatara*, a distinction is made between bodhichitta of aspiration - the interest and wish to attain complete enlightenment for the sake of others - and bodhichitta in action - the actual engagement and practice of the Bodhisattva path that brings about such a goal.

As the teachings explain,[15] these two facets of bodhichitta are associated with different vows and disciplines, and at the beginning of *The Nectar of Immortality*, Shabkar mentions two practices that are specifically associated with bodhichitta in aspiration. The first is the famous seven-stage instruction, designed to create a feeling of closeness with others. This is based on the understanding that all beings have, at some moment in their samsaric career, been linked to us in a parent child relationship. The object of the exercise is to come to the recognition that all beings, in whatever shape or form they happen to be now, have at some point been close to us and have loved us deeply. They have cherished us and protected us, and we have been precious to them. It is the ever-repeated tragedy of our samsaric condition that we have completely forgotten those who once cherished us, just as we are soon to forget those - wife, husband, lover, parents, children - who are dear to us in our present existence. The conclusion we are to draw from such thoughts is that all beings, human and animal, friend and foe, known and unknown - all are our long-lost loved ones.

The second of the techniques associated with bodhichitta in aspiration is the practice of "equality and exchange." This is expounded at length by Shantideva in the *Bodhicharyavatara* and is more philosophical approach. It uses logical reflection to undermine the seemingly watertight distinction between self and other, showing that these are conceptual constructs without intrinsic validity - no more real than optical illusions.[16] These two techniques work well together. The practice of equality and exchange creates the right mental environment, demonstrating that compassion is essentially reasonable. By contrast, the seven-stage instruction has a much more emotional appeal and is designed to create an unbearable sense of the closeness of other beings and of their suffering, so that the mind is galvanized with the wish, in fact the decision, to do something to relieve and liberate them. When both understanding and feeling have been developed and brought to a sufficient pitch of

intensity, genuine compassion becomes possible. Once again, it should be stressed that these two trainings form part of the commitments associated with bodhichitta *in aspiration*. It is only when they are perfected that genuine bodhichitta arises in the mind. This does not of course mean that one must wait for these trainings to be complete before engaging in the activities associated with bodhichitta in action (generosity and the other paramitas). On the other hand, the later trainings will not be complete until the earlier trainings have achieved their purpose.

The trainings associated with aspirational bodhichitta are therefore the very foundation of Mahayana practice, and that Shabkar should mention them at the opening of his work is not at all unusual. What is striking is the connection he makes between these trainings and the consumption of meat. For he actually says that when these mental disciplines have been perfected - when, for instance, one has a vivid sense that all beings have been as kind and close to us as our own dear parents - it becomes literally impossible to feed upon their flesh. By contrast, the taking of meat, regarded as an ordinary food and eaten unreflectively on a regular basis, implies an unawareness and an indifference to the suffering of beings that is incompatible with the mind training. The continued craving for meat and the satisfaction of this craving may thus be taken as a sign that the training in aspirational bodhichitta is not yet perfect. To this it must be added that, in adopting this position, Shabkar is focusing not upon meat as such but upon the beings that have been tormented and killed in order to make meat available. It follows that his censure covers not only the consumption of meat as food but the use of all products the procuring of which has involved the killing and abuse of animal.

For many of us, perhaps, this teaching is difficult to accept. It suggests that however long we have been practising Dharma, our desire for and consumption of meat and animal products indicates that we are no more than beginners on the Mahayana path. We will return to this point, but as a preparation for the reading of Shabkar, it may be helpful to consider a little further the basic orientation of the Mahayana, which explains and gives legitimacy to Shabkar's position.

In addition to training in the two disciplines mentioned above, aspirants on the Bodhisattva path are encouraged to cultivate four "boundless" attitudes, so called because their field of action (all sentient beings) and the resulting merit are incalculably vast. These attitudes are love (the sincere wish that others be happy), compassion (the sincere wish that others not suffer), sympathetic joy (a heartfelt rejoicing in the good fortune of others), and impartiality (the ability to apply the previous three attitudes to all beings without differentiation). Of these four attitudes, the fourth is the most significant and challenging.

When we survey the world from the apparently central position that we ourselves occupy, we find that the aggregate of living beings falls into three categories. First, there are those who seem close to us, who appear beautiful, attractive, good, and important. Then there are those whom we dislike of fear and who seem distant, menacing, and bad. Finally, between these two extremes, there is the vast multitude of beings whom we simply do not know, who do not engage our interest, and with whom we are linked in a relation of indifference. To perceive matters in this way is part of what it means to be in samsara; it is the inescapable result of having a sense of self and of clinging to it. This division of the world into good, bad, and indifferent is such a deep-rooted instinct that we habitually take it for objective reality, yet it is no more than an illusion created by our own self-clinging. The truth is of course that

no one is intrinsically pleasant, intrinsically bad, or intrinsically unimportant, and the practice of impartiality is intended to break down the sheer narrow-mindedness of such egocentric assumptions. For it is only when we call these ideas into question that we may achieve a glimpse of other beings separate from us, as it were *from their own side*, in a manner that is undistorted by our own self-centred attitudes and expectations. And we perceive, perhaps for the first time, that, quite independently of us and our relationship with them, they are all the same - all without exception, from our own dear children to the least significant (to us) insect. Everyone wants only one thing: to be happy and to avoid sorrow. All living beings, human or animal, wish for fulfilment according to the nature and scope of their present embodied state.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which this insight runs counter to our basic instincts. We naturally attach importance to whatever falls within the gravitational field of our own ego, to the detriment of what does not. We overlook those who are unfortunate enough to be outside our group, forgetting that in their one basic desire, all are alike. We have a built-in predilection for *our* family, *our* community, *our* tradition, *our* country, nation, race, and so on, and it seems natural to cultivate and defend them as our first duty, leaving the rest to their own devices. And to these categories must also be added *our* species. We think that only humans are important

It is true that Buddhism attaches a supreme value to the human condition. It does so because it is in the human form alone that effective spiritual training and eventual liberation are possible. But apart from this, all beings - humans and animals both - are the same. They try to avoid frustration. Clinging to the illusion of self, beings wander in samsara. They all - we all - suffer, and it is our suffering, not our existential status, that qualifies us as objects of compassion. *All* beings, not just human beings, are therefore the beneficiaries of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the liberation of them all is the goal of the Mahayana path. It is true that, on the whole, humans are more intelligent and resourceful than other species, and it is true, too, that, because of their spiritual potential, humans are not normally to be sacrificed for the sake of animals (although, in the case of highly realized Bodhisattvas this might occur, as with the earlier incarnation of Shakyamuni Buddha, who gave his body to feed a starving tigress). From the Buddhist point of view, on the other hand, it is a fallacy of theistic religion to suppose that Man has been made "Lord of creation" and that the other species have been provided for our use, our sustenance, and our amusement. Beings appear in the world according to their karma; they all have an equal right to be here. The realization of this fundamental truth is one of the aims of the practice of impartiality. It is the sympathetic appreciation of the predicament of all beings, human or otherwise, independent of our self-centred perspective, our interests, and our desires.

Once this basic notion has been grasped, the difference between the Mahayana and Hinayana approaches to meat eating is easy to understand. In the Mahayana, the object of concern is no longer the eater of the meat and the possibility of his or her defilement. Instead, it is the victim, the living being that dies in fear and pain so that its body can be consumed or used for some other purpose. This lies at the heart of Shabkar's thought and practice, and it surfaces again and again in his autobiography. He could not remain silent, haunted as he was by the torment of animals, hunted to their deaths, slaughtered by the thousand to provide food for those who could not or would not nourish themselves in any other way. Shabkar was of one mind with Patrul Rinpoche in acknowledging the obvious but ignored

truth that, weak and stupid as animals may be, they do not want to die. And he lamented that their liver, their only possession, are taken from them by and for those who, in contravention of the principles of mind training, construct their happiness upon the misery of others.

If such was Shabkar's approach to the eating of meat in Tibet, it is not difficult to imagine his reaction to the situation, had he known it, of his fellow Tibetans in exile or of Buddhist practitioners in the affluent West, where the procurement of wholesome and delicious alternatives poses no real difficulty and where in so many ways the production of meat constitutes an immense, cruel, and utterly inhumane industry;. Above all, he could not tolerate the perversion of the teachings, as he saw it, by those who sought to justify their practices by specious and self-serving rationalizations. He firmly dismissed the argument of threefold purity, first because it is out of place in a Mahayana context, and second because it was manifestly irrelevant in Tibet. He had little time for the ostensibly pious practices of praying for the animals, the real purpose of which was to salve the uneasy consciences of killer and consumer, and he strenuously objected to the idea that animals are benefited when their flesh is eaten by those who claim to be practitioners but who consume meat out of ordinary desire.

On the other hand, Shabkar recognized that there are always exceptions to the rule. He recognized too that the consumption of meat might, in exceptional circumstances, represent the better course - in cases of extreme need, for instance, when there is literally nothing else to eat, or when it is necessary to remedy the physical debility of aged masters whose passing away would greatly hinder the preservation of the teachings.

Meat in the Mantrayana

The Mantrayana, the vehicle of skilful means whereby the objects of the senses are utilized on the path, is thought by many to allow and even to advocate the consumption of meat as well as alcohol. The texts certainly declare that, in the *ganachakra* offering, "meat and alcohol should not be lacking." In practice, this is often interpreted as meaning that the *ganachakra* is an occasion to enjoy meat and wine, sometimes in large quantities, in the ordinary sense of the word - and as sanctioning their consumption on a day-to-day basis. The fact, however, that some of the greatest tantric masters in the history of Tibetan Buddhism abstained from meat at all times, and encouraged their disciples to do the same, suggests that the matter is less straightforward than it appears. The teaching of the tantras on the use of sense objects is very subtle and, as with all complex subjects, is easily misrepresented and misapplied.

Generally speaking, each of the three vehicles - the Hinayana and the sutra and tantra vehicles of the Mahayana - displays a characteristic orientation. The Hinayana is concerned with self-liberation. Its specific quality of mind is renunciation (*nges byung*), the definitive decision to leave samsara. Building on that determination, the Mahayana is concerned with bodhichitta, and its hallmarks are an altruistic concern for others and an understanding of the wisdom of emptiness. In the case of the Mantrayana, which is often referred to as the resultant vehicle because it takes as the path the enlightened qualities already implicit in the *tathagatagarbha*, or buddha-nature, the emphasis is on the realization of the primordial purity and equality of all phenomena. Here, the concepts of clean and unclean (a distinction deeply rooted in our psychological make-up and reflected and reinforced by our cultural setting), together with other dualistic pairings such as pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, good and

bad, and so on, have no meaning. They are regarded as self-centered illusions to be transcended. This explains the unconventional lifestyles of many of the great *siddhas* and tantric masters of the past. Living on the margins of society, they often appeared, and often behaved, in ways that ordinary people found disgusting if not actually horrific. Kukuripa, for example, lived among the dogs; Virupa nourished himself on the foul, glutinous entrails of rotting fish; while, in Tibet, the celebrated Tsangnyon Heruka once regaled himself with putrid, maggot-infested brain matter taken from some decapitated heads he found hanging on a city gate.[17] Such figures have also been an important, if exceptional, feature of tantric Buddhism right up to modern times.

The overcoming of the dualistic concepts of purity and impurity is one reason meat and alcohol, normally regarded in a Buddhist context as unclean or reprehensible, are demanded as ingredients for tantric practice. In stipulating their presence at the ganachakra, the scriptures and *sadhana* instructions prescribe elements - the five meats and five nectars - - that ordinary practitioners of the Mahayana, or anyone else for that matter, might be expected to find impure, unacceptable, or even repellent. The ganachakra is never to be understood as a pretext for ordinary indulgence. The Dalai Lama has observed, "In this regard, someone might try to justify eating meat on the grounds that he or she is a practitioner of Highest Yoga Tantra does not discriminate by taking the meat but not the dirty substances. But we cover our noses if such dirty substances are anywhere near us, let alone actually ingesting them." [18] In view of all this, there is surely something ridiculous in ganachakra ceremonies where the yogis and yoginis dine on fillet of steak washed down with liberal drafts of Burgundy.

Practitioners who are able to enjoy the five meats and five nectars, or anything resembling them, in a state beyond duality are genuine tantrikas. To pretend otherwise - to use the ganachakra as a pretext for ordinary enjoyments - is at best to reduce the practice to the level of an empty ritual. On the other hand, even in the case of authentic yogis, the principle of "pure meat" is said to apply. At least in the case of practitioners who are unable to lead the consciousness of the dead to a buddhafield, the appropriate offering should come from an animal that has died a natural death. By contrast, to make a ganachakra offering of the good, fresh meat of an animal slaughtered for consumption is, according to Patrul Rinpoche, a complete aberration. It is like inviting the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to a banquet and offering them the flesh of their own children.[19]

In answer to this, it may be argued that the meat and alcohol offered in the ganachakra are no longer ordinary. They are purified and transformed by the power of mantra. It is therefore permissible to enjoy them. This, however, is true only when the people offering the ganachakra are accomplished beings who have realized the primordial purity and equality of all phenomena and for whom the offering substances really are transformed. It is only they, moreover, who are able to benefit the beings from whose bodies the meat has been taken.[20]

It is sometimes said, quoting from the tantras, that "the compassionate one eats meat; the holder of samaya drinks alcohol." To this Shabkar replies,

"If this is the case, since the Buddha and his Shravakas, the six ornaments and the two supreme ones of India,[21] Atisha and his spiritual sons, and all the other holy beings

consumed neither meat nor alcohol, one is forced to conclude either that they were without compassion and had not been observing samaya, or that their compassion was less than that of the people who put forward this objection.”[22]

In other words, the literal exegesis of the text in question cannot be seriously entertained. It would be more reasonable to regard the quotation as an example of “indirect teachings expressed in metaphors,”[23] on the same level as the injunction to slay one’s parents and assassinate the king. As Shabkar comments elsewhere, “When in the Secret Mantra teachings it is said that one should eat meat, this is not an explicit teaching. In the commentary to the tantra *mkha’ ‘gro rgya mtsho* it is specified that the eating of meat refers to the ‘devouring of discursive thoughts.’ “ [24]

It is sometimes said that when practitioners of the Dharma and especially of the Vajrayana eat meat, their actions are justified because they are creating a connection between the slaughtered animal and the teachings. They are conferring a special benefit on the animal. It is therefore good to eat meat, in quantity and on a regular basis. Shabkar considered this line of reasoning particularly laughable. Like many false but attractive arguments, it is constructed of half-truths. The principle of interdependence, it is urged, is universally applicable and must of necessity be operative in the present case. If it is possible to gain a connection with the Dharma by seeing, hearing, or touching representations of the teaching, it is logical to suppose that an animal gains a connection with the teachings by being eaten by a Dharma practitioner. No doubt there is some truth in this contention. But the question that must now be asked is whether the principle is universally applicable and whether, in particular, it is applicable to *us*. if, given interdependence, it is possible for an animal to be benefited through the consumption of its flesh, much will depend on the status of the consumer - on his or her own connection with the Dharma and on the degree of his or her spiritual attainment. If the person eating the meat is an enlightened being - a Buddha or a great Bodhisattva residing on the grounds of realization - it is not difficult to suppose that, compared with other animals slaughtered for their meat, the being in question is indeed fortunate. But honesty must surely oblige us to admit that, in our case - that of ordinary people, struggling with the practice - “connection with the Dharma” consists of listening to a few teachings, reading a few books, attending an empowerment or two, having the blessed substances placed upon our heads, and trying, when we have time and the mood takes us, to meditate and practice. When all is said and done, our own connection with the teachings is tenuous enough. And if it were ever to occur to us to wonder about the predicament of the being whose body we are in the process of eating, who of us would be able even to locate its mind in the bardo, let alone lead it to a Buddha field? What possible benefit could conceivably come to an animal by having its flesh eaten by the likes of us - mere aspirants on the path, who are without accomplishment and are ourselves prisoners of samsara?

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that, according to the principle of interdependence just mentioned, there are exceptional beings, far advanced along the spiritual path, with whom contact of any kind establishes a link with the teachings and is a source of great blessing. Accomplished masters and yogis do exist, capable of benefiting beings by eating their flesh. Shabkar of course was perfectly aware of this and warned his disciples to tread carefully in their regard and to abstain from all criticism. This question is discussed at length in *The Emanated Scripture of Pure Vision*, a text in which Shabkar departs from his usual emphasis on renunciation and lojong suited to most practitioners and discusses the use of sense pleasures

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and bliss, characteristic of the teachings of the Secret Mantra. He carefully describes the kind of people qualified to implement such techniques appropriately, without danger to themselves and others.

In relation to such beings, the ordinary person is on a knife edge, since it is a natural tendency to evaluate the character and actions of others and to compare them with oneself. In normal circumstances, such comparisons may not be out of place and may even be beneficial. But if one is foolish enough to measure oneself against an accomplished master and if one presumes to criticize him or her, the karmic consequences may be very serious.[25] In the colophon to *The Emanated Scripture of Pure Vision*, Shabkar remarks that on numerous occasions he had pondered the need for such a text, since he had noted, in the course of his travels, a general tendency to criticize certain Vajrayana practitioners for not renouncing meat, alcohol, and sex. And he remarks elsewhere that since as a rule one is unable to judge the spiritual level of others, it is better always to assume the best and to practice pure vision, refraining from any kind of criticism of people whose spiritual realization may be far in advance of one's own. Pure perception is in fact one of the cardinal features of the Vajrayana path. After explaining why the latter is generally a matter of secrecy, Shabkar concludes, "One must be careful to cultivate a pure perception of the activities of the Bodhisattvas and great Siddhas. On the other hand, simple and immature disciples should not recklessly try to imitate them." [26]

In the majority of cases, it is obvious that the argument that one is helping animals by eating them is absurd. In a long poem contained in his autobiography, Shabkar refers to the matter with ironic humour. He describes himself sitting in a meadow, surrounded by a large flock of sheep and goats. An old sheep comes forward and speaks to him, lamenting the terrible destiny of domestic animals, even in a religious country like Tibet.

*The fate of goats and old mother ewes
Lies in the hands of visiting lamas.
Now, in the bardo, and in our future lives,
The guru is our only hope,
So pity us.
Do not now betray us in this time of hope!
Let us live our lives out to the end,
Or take us, when we die, to higher realms.
If you do not do so,
Pain will be our lot in this and future lives.
From one life to the next we're killed and killed again.
Do not let your wisdom, love, and power be so feeble!*

*Patrons come to you the lamas, cap in hand.
"Visit us, come to our house," they say.
But don't pretend you do not know
That as they're greeting you,
It's us the sheep they're planning to dispatch!*

*When the lama comes into the house
And takes his seat upon his comfy throne,
They're killing us outside, just by the door!
Don't pretend you do not know,
You who are omniscient!*

Shabkar replies with the standard argument. Throughout the animals' past lives, not once have they been able to contribute something to the preservation of the Doctrine. They should now be glad at such an opportunity! By relinquishing their bodies to nourish the lama, they are doing something worthwhile.

"Is it not a noble thing," Shabkar exclaims, "to give up one's body for the Dharma?" As I said that, the goats and sheep exclaimed with one voice: 'Oh, no! He is one of *those* lamas!' And terrified, they all ran away." [KWG], f167-168b]

The idea that one shows compassion to beings by feeding on their flesh is certainly a strange one. Few would deny that if *we* were given the choice of receiving a connection with Dharma at the price of being devoured, there is not much doubt that Dharma would be something we would happily forgo. It is not difficult to see that the use of such an argument is not at all expressive of a genuine concern for animals; it is a piece of self-serving sophistry, used to mask a very ordinary desire. If one really were concerned about animals and wished to give them a connection with the Dharma, it would surely be more rational and more effective to buy them from the butchers and set them free in their natural environment, after giving them blessed substances to eat and so on.

Finally, there is another argument sometimes adduced, this time in the attempt to weaken the position of those who advocate abstention from meat. It is that the production of all foods, including vegetables and cereals, involves the death of sentient beings. Many insects and small animals are killed in the cultivation of crops and the preparation of no meat foods, so what is the difference between vegetarian and meat based diets? At first sight, there seems to be some validity in this point of view, since it is undeniable that enormous numbers of insects do die, especially given modern farming methods. A moment's reflection will show, however, that the argument is false both in principle and in practice. Compassion and the desire to protect from suffering - inner qualities essential to the Buddhist outlook - are grounded first and foremost in intention. Now the voluntary killing of animals is intrinsic to the production of meat; no meat can be made available otherwise. This on the other hand is not true of the cultivation of crops, where the destruction of sentient life, however great, is not intrinsic to the production of the crops themselves. It is brought about, or at least greatly aggravated, for motives of efficiency and profit. Any gardener knows that it is possible to grow vegetables without destroying insects *except by accident*. The consumption of vegetables therefore does not automatically involve the wish that others perish. But how can anyone possibly consume meat while sincerely wishing that the animal in question remain alive? In any case, this same argument, which is used to make vegetarianism seem irrational and ridiculous, cannot be adduced without undermining the position of its proponents. For it is well known that the raising of beef cattle, for instance, itself requires enormous quantities of grain, with the consequent loss of insect life that is superadded to the deaths of the livestock in question. Thus vegetarianism once again emerges as an effective means of reducing the slaughter!

Conclusion

For many of us, even committed Buddhists of long standing, Shabkar's words will seem a hard teaching. From childhood we are used to eating meat and making use of all sorts of other animal products. We belong to a society where the consumption of meat is encouraged and regarded as normal. Finally, we all enjoy delicious food, and our culinary traditions are

such that our taste for meat is certainly no weaker than that of the Tibetans. It is surely a good deal stronger, given the variety and succulence of meat dishes available in our wealthy society. Furthermore, we may sincerely find that it is physically difficult, perhaps too difficult, to do without meat and fish; and perhaps socially, given our family and professional situations, a radical change of diet is for all intents and purposes out of the question. At the same time, we find that many of the arguments and practices commonly used to justify meat eating or to attenuate a sense of guilt, and which we might have used to quiet our uneasy consciences, are demolished by Shabkar, who shows them to be either untenable or just silly. So, given the sincerity and truth of Shabkar's teachings, how are we to assimilate and live by them, according to our capacity and circumstances?

The essential point to remember is that, as a Buddhist teacher, Shabkar, like the Buddha himself, aims only to draw beings on the path and to help them to progress toward freedom and enlightenment. *Progress* is the operative word. Although Buddhist teachings do not hesitate to point out the karmic consequences of actions and to issue the appropriate warnings, the imposition of a rigid morality, to be embraced come what may, by denying and repressing old habits and needs, is foreign to the Buddhist spirit and is in any case usually a hopeless enterprise. Instead, the Dharma is often described as a medicine - a therapy - whereby bad habits and perceived needs are examined and transformed from within. Techniques are applied according to one's ability and situation, above all, gradually, so that the teachings are seen not as a series of burdensome injunctions but as steps toward the acquisition of inner freedom. The aim is not to repress one's desire for meat or to terminate one's use of animal products by a draconian act of will. Instead, our task is to develop a heartfelt compassion and a genuine sensitivity to the suffering of animals, such that the desire to exploit and feed on them naturally dissolves. Shabkar's main concern is not to instill a sense of guilt or inadequacy; it is to elevate the mind toward new and more noble objectives.

In the immediate term, it may be very difficult for us to give up meat or to forgo commodities (leather, detergents, cosmetics, and so on) that are manufactured with methods involving the abuse and torment of animals. But even when it is impossible to abstain, there is still a great deal that we can do to ameliorate the karmic situation and to dispose the mind so that, when the opportunity eventually presents itself, change is possible and even easy.

The first and perhaps the most important task is to make an effort to remember what the consumption of meat implies. It is a willingness to look beyond the mendacious publicity of the food industry, which does everything to conceal, behind a façade of aesthetic or sentimental advertisements (fluffy lambs, cartoon chickens), the horrific realities of the factory farm and the slaughterhouse - all of which exist for one reason only: that we may be well supplied with abundant and inexpensive meat. Many of us eat meat, but few of us would have the stomach to visit the places where our food is prepared - to witness not only the terror and agony of the animals transported, selected, and killed in their thousands on a daily basis but also the dreadful callousness and brutality of their butchers, who in providing us with meat are working on our behalf.

Alas, need and desire make use easy victims of deception and pretence. Yet it is precisely here, on the level of our daily sustenance, that the principles of the mind-training teachings are most easily neglected and betrayed. To forget where one's food has come from, to be

careless of how it has been produced and at what cost, to eat insensitively, consuming meat in a routine manner without a moment's thought of the suffering involved, is to turn away from beings. It is to abandon them in a vast, anonymous ocean of suffering. How can this be compatible with the teaching of the Buddha?

Of course, it may be just too difficult for us to avoid eating meat or using animal products, but if such is the case, even the experience of regret and the desire that the situation be other than it is are themselves significant and of immense value. They are a step in the right direction. It takes courage to acknowledge a principle and an ideal even when one is unable to live by it, and yet it is this very acknowledgement that opens the door to change and progress. The rest follows gradually, according to one's possibilities. One may for whatever reason - physical need, social situation, or the strength of one's craving - be unable to give up meat, but it may be possible to reduce the amount one eats or to select the kind of meat that entails the least loss of life. The same principle applies to those who manage to abstain from meat completely but who find it too difficult, for the moment, to do without fur for their coats, leather for their shoes, certain kinds of soap, and so forth. Above all, it is precisely by cultivating a tender conscience, rather than dulling it with specious casuistry, that moral progress is made possible. Eventually, we may arrive at the point where our bodily needs and our way of living cease to be a source of terror and pain for other living beings.

Shabkar's convictions and feelings forced him to exhort others and to encourage them to the actual practice of compassion for all beings, humans and animals alike. But he realistically accepted that, at least in Tibet, he was speaking to a minority. "It is quite possible," he writes, "that no one can or will heed me. On the other hand, one or two intelligent and compassionate people might. So for their sake I must set this teaching forth to the best of my ability and wits." [27]

Toward the end of Shabkar's life, Patrul Rinpoche, moved by the stories he had heard, made the long journey from Kham to Amdo in order to meet him. He had gone only halfway when he received the news that Shabkar had died. He made a hundred prostrations in the direction of Amdo and sang a prayerful supplication for Shabkar's swift rebirth. "Compassion and love," he exclaimed, "are the roots of Dharma. I think that in the whole world, there is no one more compassionate than Lama Shabkar. I had nothing special to ask him, no teachings to request, and none to offer. I wanted only to gather some merit by gazing upon his face." [28]

Although Shabkar discusses the question of meat consumption in several of his writings [29], the two texts translated in **Food of Bodhisattvas** are of particular interest. The first is an excerpt from *The Wondrous Emanated Scripture*, [30] dealing with the faults of meat eating (*sha'i nyes dmigs*), and for the most part it consists of quotations, some quite extensive, from the Mahayana scriptures and the teachings of masters of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Aside from the inspiring nature of the quotations themselves, the collection is of interest because it shows that, contrary to commonly held opinion, the condemnation of meat eating is not an exclusive feature of the sutras. It is also to be found in the tantras, including the highest tantras of the *anuttarayoga* level. The second text, *The Nectar of Immortality* [31], is a fully developed discourse in its own right. It is Shabkar's most powerful and concentrated statement on the subject and constitutes what must rank as one of the most impassioned indictments of meat eating to be found in Tibetan literature. This text was recently

rediscovered, in manuscript form, by Matthieu Richard in the course of a visit to Amdo in 2001. It was found in a monastery in the Shophon Valley, not far from Rekonng where many yogis and practitioners of Shabkar's lineage still live. The text was lent for copying by Yundrung Gyal, the nephew of the famous scholar Gendun Chopel. We are profoundly grateful to both Yundrung Gyal and Matthieu Ricard for sending the text to us.

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FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, Rapsel Tsariwa, *The Remedy for a Gold Heart* (Chamrajnagar, India: Dzogchen Shri Singha - Charitable Society, 2002). This short and excellent booklet was widely distributed, free of charge, to the people who had gathered for the Kalachakra initiation in Bodh Gaya, India, in 2002. [return]
2. Shabkar was a nickname meaning "white foot." He was so called because "wherever he set his foot, the country all around became white with virtue." See *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*, trans. Matthieu Richard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), xiv, 433. [return]
3. A complete edition of Shabkar's works has recently been published simultaneously in India (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003), 14 volumes in traditional pecha format, and in Tibet (in: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2002-3), 12 volumes in book format. [return]
4. The autobiography of Shabkar comprises the first two volumes of the collected works. The full title of the first volume is: *Snyigds dus 'gro ba yongs kyi skyabs mgon zhabs dkar rdo rje 'chang chen po'imam par thar pa rgyas par 'dod rnams kyis re ba skongs ba'I yid bzhin nor bu bsam 'phel dbang gi rgyal po*, henceforth referred to as *The King of Wish-Granting Jewels*. This volume has been translated into English. See *The Life of Shabkar*. However, all citations from the autobiography in the present book are our translations. [return]
5. See *The Life of Shabkar*, 31. [return]
6. See *The Life of Shabkar*, 452. [return]
7. See *The Life of Shabkar*, 460. [return]
8. See *The Life of Shabkar*, xxx, n. 53. "Nomads of the high plateaus of Tibet rely chiefly on meat and other animal products to subsist. They are, however, well aware of the evil involved in harming and butchering animals. It is a common practice among Tibetans to ransom the lives (*srog bslu*) of animals. Buddhists from all over the world traditionally buy fish, birds, and other animals from the marketplace and set them free. In Tibet, it is often the owners themselves who mercifully spare a certain fraction of their livestock. In the case of sheep and yaks, they will cut the tip of one of the animal's ears and tie to the remaining part of the ear a red ribbon as a sign that the animal should never be slaughtered; the animal is then set free among the rest of the herd. The owner usually strings together all the ear-tips thus obtained and offers them to the lama, requesting him to dedicate the merit accrued through this compassionate act. Lamas and devotees often give large sums of money to herders, asking them to spare in the same way the lives of a given number of animals." Shabkar also specifies on occasion that he would offer large

- numbers of goats and sheep to the monasteries, but only for the purposes of providing wool and milk. - [return]
9. See Philip Kapleau, [To Cherish All Life](#) (Rochester, N.Y.: The Zen Center, 1986), on Buddha's last meal. The fact is that we simply do not know for certain what he ate. [return]
 10. See Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life*, for a different presentation of this point. [return]
 11. The three whites are butter, milk, and curd. The three sweets are sugar, honey, and molasses. [return]
 12. It seems likely that, as with the Hindu population nowadays, the people of ancient India were largely vegetarian. The presence of meat in a monk's begging bowl was probably a comparative rarity. [return]
 13. See *Collected Works of Shabkar*, vol. 7 (Ja), *The Emanated Scripture of Compassion (snying rje sprul pa'i glegs bam)* New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003. [return]
 14. See Tulku Thondup, *Masters of Meditation and Miracles: Lives of the Great Buddhist Masters of India and Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 203. [return]
 15. See Longchen Yeshe Dorje, *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 185 ff. [return]
 16. See Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 180. [return]
 17. The mahasiddhas and the life of Tsangnon Heruka in E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001) 59. [return]
 18. See Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of Its Philosophy and Practice* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 112. [return]
 19. See Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 208. [return]
 - 20 See longchen Yeshe Dorje, *Treasury of Precious Qualities* 205-6. [return]
 - 21 The six ornaments are the Indian masters Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga, and Dharmakirti. The two supreme ones are Shakyaprabha and Gunaprabha. [return]
 - 22 See *The Emanated Scripture of Compassion*. [return]
 - 23 *bsgyur ba Idem dgongs*. See Longchen Yeshe Dorje, *Treasury of Precious Qualities*, 251 [return]
 - 24 See *The Emanated Scripture of Compassion*. [return]
 - 25 See Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo, *Lady of the Lotus-Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 183, where Yeshe Tsogyal reproves the former attitude of one of her disciples. [return]
 - 26 See Matthieu Richard, *The Collected Writings of Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol (1781-1851)* (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003), a descriptive catalogue accompanying the complete works. [return]
 - 27 See Page 120 of [Food of Bodhisattvas](#) [return]
 - 28 See [Life of Shabkar xv](#). [return]
 - 29 In addition to the texts translated here, see also *The Emanated Scripture of Compassion* and *The Beneficial Sun (chos bshad gzhan phan nyi ma)* in *Collected Works of Shabkar*, vol. 10 (Tha) (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003). [return]
 - 30 *rmad byung sprul pa'I glegs ban*, in *Collected Works of Shabkar*, vol. 8 (Nya) (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003). [return]

31 *The Nectar of Immortality (legs bshad bdud rtsi'i chu rgyun)* in *Collected Works of Shabkar*, V12 (Na) (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2003). [return]

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