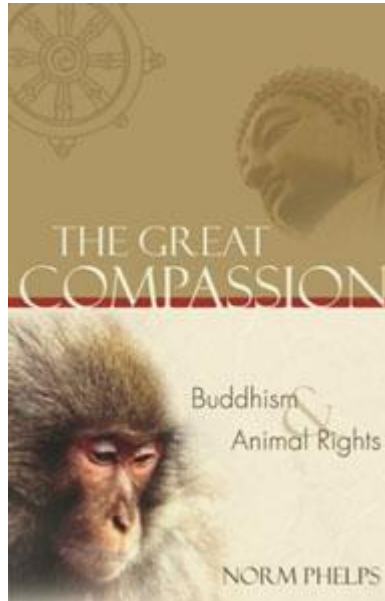


An Interview with Norm Phelps

By Gabe Konrad



Norm Phelps is the author of the groundbreaking book *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*. In *The Great Compassion*, Norm argues that, "Buddhism ought to be an animal rights religion *par excellence*. It holds kindness and compassion to be the highest virtues; and it explicitly includes animals in its moral universe. And yet," he admits with dismay, "Many Buddhists, including teachers, eat meat."

Phelps grounds his plea for a vegan lifestyle firmly in Buddhist teachings on *karuna* (compassion) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Combining rigorous scholarship with an accessible writing style, he presents and evaluates the testimony of the Pali Canon and the Mahayana Scriptures on the Buddha's attitude toward animal flesh. From there, Phelps considers arguments that modern Buddhists often use to defend meat eating, including those that cite Buddhist teachings on emptiness, karma, and "mindful eating" as well as the claim that strict adherence to a vegan diet is a form of clinging or dogmatism. Claiming that Buddhism in the West is at risk of becoming "little more than a feel-good self-help program," Phelps calls upon Western Buddhists to place compassion and nonviolence toward all living beings at the center of their spiritual practice and to make their spiritual practice the basis for their food choices.

A Buddhist practitioner who studied with a Tibetan lama for twelve years, Norm Phelps has received teachings and initiations from such revered masters as His Holiness Sakya Trizin, head of one of the four denominations of Tibetan Buddhism, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. A longtime animal activist, Norm is spiritual outreach director for The Fund for Animals. *The Great Compassion* is available from Lantern Books and major online booksellers.

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VeggieDharma: Can you give me a little background on yourself? How did you come to Buddhism and animal rights?

Norm Phelps: I was born in 1939 and raised in a devout Southern Baptist family. But when I was in high school I left Christianity, and for almost thirty years, I had no religion. In 1984, I began studying with Lama Kalsang Gyaltzen, spiritual director of Sakya Phuntsok Ling Buddhist Study and Meditation Center in Silver Spring, Maryland. The following year, I took my refuge vows from Lama Kalsang, and I studied with him for twelve years. For reasons of distance and health, I'm more of a lone practitioner these days, but Lama Kalsang is still my root guru, and I keep in touch with him and follow the activities of his center.

To me, Buddhism and animal rights are a natural fit. Buddhism teaches boundless compassion for all sentient beings, including animals. "May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from suffering." The First Precept, "Do not kill," has always been understood to protect animals as well as human beings. And yet our treatment of animals, especially those raised for food, is unspeakably cruel and invariably lethal. A steak is simply a cow who has been imprisoned, tortured, terrorized, and murdered. Whenever I see a steak or a burger, I think of the cow – who loves her life as dearly as I love mine – being driven with an electric prod into a slaughterhouse where she has to smell the blood and hear the screams of the cattle ahead of her, and then being shackled by one leg and swung upside down (perhaps rendered unconscious, perhaps not), and sawed into pieces because people enjoy eating her flesh. As the Buddha pointed out in the Lankavatara Sutra, if nobody ate the meat, no one would kill the animals. Every time we buy a London broil or a bucket of fried chicken we are putting out a contract for a hit on a sentient being. Meat, eggs, and dairy come only at the price of imprisonment, pain, fear, and death. So how can animal products be acceptable food for a dharma practitioner? How can they be acceptable food for any compassionate human being who is aware of how they are obtained? I don't see it.

Buddhism stresses the fundamental importance of overcoming our clinging to the pleasures of samsara and developing compassion for all sentient beings. By clinging to the pleasures of eating and wearing animal products, we inflict intense suffering and death on more than 60 billion sentient beings worldwide every year (13 billion in the United States alone). Buddhism calls us to be vegan in exactly the same way that it calls us not to be mass murderers of other human beings.

VeggieDharma: The Great Compassion joins Roshi Philip Kapleau's *To Cherish All Life* and Bodhipaksa's *Vegetarianism* – both of which are excellent books on the subject of vegetarianism and Buddhism – but the breadth and scope of *Compassion* is truly groundbreaking in this field, indeed, in western Buddhism. How did you decide to write this book and what sort of research did you do to complete it?

Norm Phelps: I've been studying both Buddhism and animal rights intensively for twenty years. So when I sat down last year to write *The Great Compassion*, the bulk of the research was already done. Mostly, it was a matter of looking up citations and making sure I had the quotations right.

I wrote the book because so many Western Buddhists – laypeople and teachers – seem to be adapting Buddhism to the diet that they grew up with rather than the other way around. Instead

of using the teachings to help them overcome their craving for animal products, they interpret the teachings in ways that condone the enslavement and killing of sentient beings. "I'll be a Buddhist as long as I don't have to give up my chicken Kiev, my bacon and eggs, or my nice leather shoes." The phrase "Western Buddhism" ought to mean a Buddhism adapted to helping Westerners develop compassion for all living beings without exception, not a Buddhism that has been remodeled to excuse our indulgence in cravings that can only be satisfied through cruelty and killing. And so I set out to write a book that would speak to dharma practitioners of all schools on behalf of the tens of billions of sentient beings who suffer and die every year for no better reason than that people enjoy the taste of their flesh.

VeggieDharma: In *The Great Compassion* you really take to task, though with great respect, several well-known – at least well-known in the west – teachers, including Lama Surya Das and Joseph Goldstein, and well-known Buddhists, like Gary Snyder and Philip Glass, for their disparaging comments on vegetarianism and lack of compassion towards non-human animals. While your book was only recently published, have you heard – or do you think you'll hear – from the people you mentioned?

Norm Phelps: I have not heard from them yet, but I hope to. There is a burning need for a dialogue within the dharma community on the subject of compassion for animals. And I wrote *The Great Compassion* in the hope of making a small contribution to that discussion. Western teachers like Lama Surya Das and Joseph Goldstein have performed and continue to perform a great service to the Buddha dharma and to the West. I show them great respect for the simple reason that I hold them in great respect. But when they suggest that the horrifying cruelty that is inseparable from meat eating can somehow be reconciled with the dharma, then I have to speak up.

When Buddhist teachers eat meat or say that meat eating is acceptable behavior for Buddhists, they are contributing to the suffering of living beings, and Buddhist compassion compels us to point that out. It's a question of compassion and respect for the sentient beings who suffer and die to satisfy our cravings, not disrespect for dharma teachers.

VeggieDharma: You practice Tibetan Buddhism. I wonder, is your teacher a vegetarian? Have your compassionate views made it difficult to find teachers? People often speak of the necessity of a teacher to be trustworthy and effective, and that you must feel comfortable with that person, but I wonder if they are not vegetarians, if the rest matters because their idea of compassion is skewed. Of course, insisting on a vegetarian teacher would probably eliminate ninety percent of the teachers in the west!

Norm Phelps: No, my teacher is not a vegetarian, although like most Tibetan teachers he commends vegetarianism as an expression of Buddhist compassion and a higher form of Buddhist practice. To the extent that any generalization can be made, Eastern teachers who are not vegetarian tend to view meat eating as an accommodation to human weakness, while meat eating Western teachers more often try to defend it as consistent with the Buddha dharma. Except for Buddhas, we are all fallible. Even tulkus – great bodhisattvas like His Holiness the Dalai Lama – take on anew the fallibilities of human nature with each rebirth. It is part and parcel of the burden they voluntarily assume out of their great compassion for all sentient beings. They are far better equipped than ordinary beings like me to overcome their human weaknesses, but they are not infallible. As Buddhist vegans, we have to acknowledge this and

encourage our teachers who eat meat to become vegan. This is a situation in which the student has an obligation to teach the teacher. And because of their profound compassion, I am confident that our Buddhist teachers will over time open themselves to the suffering of sentient beings in the animal realm. It won't happen overnight, but I fully expect that mature Western Buddhism will be vegan.

We should not deprive ourselves of precious teachings because the teacher eats meat. But neither should we passively accept the teacher's contributions to the suffering and death of sentient beings. It is also true that our dharma communities need our example and influence. If we withdraw from our sangha, we lose the opportunity to sensitize our fellow practitioners to the plight of animals, and to nudge the sangha in the direction of greater compassion. Evangelical Christianity uses the term "witnessing" to mean spreading the gospel by both word and example. It's never easy to see the products of suffering and death being eaten in our dharma centers, but sometimes we can best serve the blessed Buddhadharma by remaining in meat eating sanghas and gently witnessing for the animals.

VeggieDharma: You make a statement in *The Great Compassion* that is so simple, but so accurately reflects the truth: "It's not about us; it's about the animals." This single line disputes all the typical arguments held by meat-eating Buddhists (arguments, by the way, that you soundly discredit in your book). Does not "it's not about us" clearly describe Buddhism as a whole and the Bodhisattva ideal?

Norm Phelps: Absolutely. I could not agree more. As I say in *The Great Compassion*, Western Buddhism is at risk of being reduced to a kind of self-help program with no higher purpose than to teach us how to have better self esteem, less guilt, less anxiety, etc., etc. Buddhism for our own benefit is not Buddhism; it is a worldly teaching dressed up in Buddhist language. The paradox at the heart of Buddhism is that it uses our selfish desire for happiness as a tool for developing in us universal, unbounded compassion toward all living beings without exception. It teaches us how to use our selfishness to become selfless. Western Buddhism cum self-improvement program reverses this process and reduces compassion to a technique for making ourselves happy. It uses the ideal of selflessness to reinforce our selfishness, and in so doing, it strengthens, instead of weakening, our egos.

To understand why meat eating is incompatible with Buddhist morality, you have to turn the spotlight away from the supposed mental attitude of the Buddhist practitioner who enjoys dead animal flesh and shine it instead on the suffering and death upon which the meat eater's enjoyment depend. "Does Buddhism require a vegetarian diet?" is the wrong question. The proper question is, "Should a dharma practitioner (or anyone else, for that matter) eat food that can only be obtained by tormenting and killing sentient beings?" It is also true that if we have genuine compassion for meat eaters, we will do all that we can to stop them from continuing to accumulate the terrible karma that the Buddha described as accruing to those who eat meat.

VeggieDharma: Another topic you visit in *The Great Compassion* is ultimate truth vs. relative truth. We are striving for ultimate reality, but exist in the relative truth. This has been a stumbling block for Buddhists for ages. As American Buddhism grows and morphs, does it seem that "all is emptiness" is becoming more and more of an excuse for bad behavior?

Norm Phelps: Yes, unfortunately. The problem is that we Western Buddhists come out of an intellectual tradition that is built on sophistry and clever argument. In Western philosophy, the best argument wins the debate. But in Buddhism, the proof of the practice is in the living, not the arguing. It is the growth of compassion and the loosening of the bonds of clinging that represent victory for a Buddhist practitioner.

Buddhism, perhaps more than any other religion, requires that we be honest and unsparing in recognizing and acknowledging, at least to ourselves, the true motives behind our behavior. Clever rationalizations for bad behavior are the polar opposite of the blunt, straightforward self-examination that is the foundation of effective Buddhist practice.

The Buddha's ethical teachings are very precise and very extensive, and nowhere do they include the notion that we are free to cause suffering and death to sentient beings because they are empty of inherent existence. The Buddha's foundational ethical teaching is that we must be strict practitioners of ahimsa whose treatment of other living beings is guided entirely by compassion. By contrast, the teaching on emptiness is not an ethical teaching at all. It is intended to help us overcome our clinging. When we use it as an alibi for continuing to indulge our clinging, we are actually turning the teaching against itself.

VeggieDharma: Thank you, Norm. I think that about does it. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Norm Phelps: Just that I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk to your readers. VeggieDharma is an outstanding website with a vital message for the dharma community, and I feel honored to be a small part of it.

Special thanks to Norm for doing this interview.

~ In Gassho ~