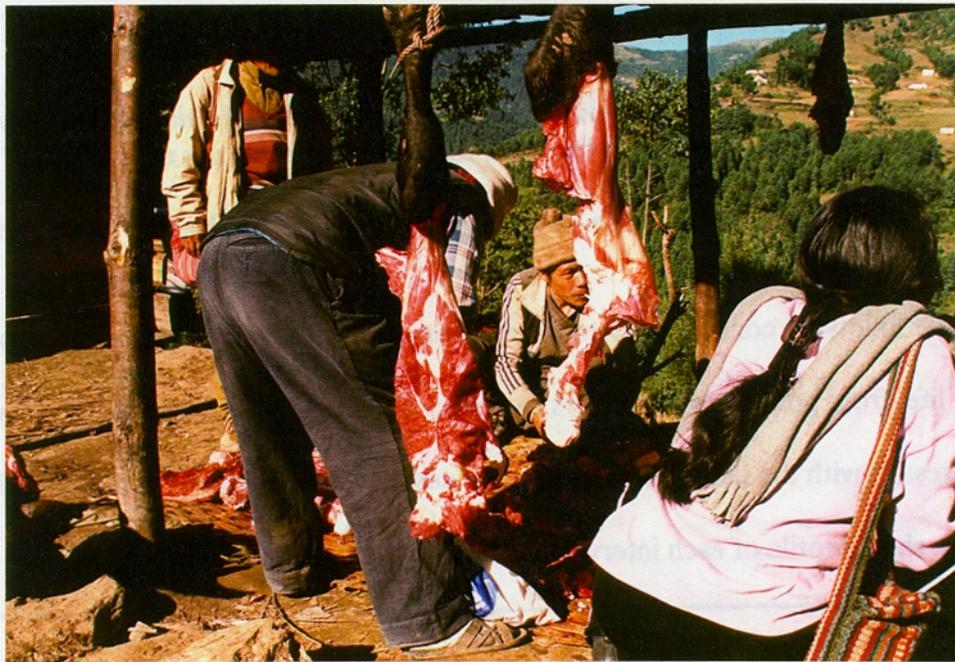


# Chapter Two



**The Interviews—Entering  
The Tibetan Psyche**

# A

n interview can be an excellent way to unlock the treasure chest of opinions and insights inside a person's mind. It can also cause them to make great efforts to say what they think you want to hear or what they think they should say. Keeping this in mind, I asked various Tibetans two questions related to meat eating and got both treasures and rhetoric.

**1) In your opinion, what is the relationship between the Buddhist philosophy of nonviolence and a Buddhist practitioner's life style, for example eating meat?**

**2) Do you consider eating meat to be in violation of the Bodhisattva Vow to not harm sentient beings?**

The following consists of twenty-one interviews I did with Tibetans in various walks of life, from politicians to farmers to monks and lamas. For the most part, I was very impressed with the thoughtfulness of their answers and the depth of their insights. I will give a short profile of each interviewee, followed by their responses.

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### **Tendar—Salesman of Tibetan Carpets, Bangalore, India (Early Forties)**

Tendar is one of three brothers married to Sangye, and was the kindest to me in my time at the Tibetan refugee camp. I stayed at his home in Bangalore twice and we became very good friends. The interview was in English.

1) "I think there are many relationships between the two. What did the Lord Buddha teach to the people? For example, don't do harm to any life—whether man, animal or insect. Treat them as your parents because every being has been your mother in a previous incarnation. One lama visited a family. The father had been reborn as a dog in their family. Their enemy was reborn as their child. They beat and starved the dog, yet carefully nurtured the child."

The lama he is talking about, named Arya Katayana, was quoted as saying “He eats his father’s flesh; he kicks his mother away. He dandles on his lap the enemy that he killed. The wife is gnawing at her husband’s bones. I laugh to see what happens in *Samsara*’s show.”<sup>16</sup> Tendar continues,

“Every life is interchanging—man, animals and insects. That’s why we have to treat all beings as parents according to Buddhist philosophy. We want them happy, not in sorrow. We wish them continuous happiness. We have to treat all animals and men the same. When we are eating meat we don’t think; it is careless when we think about the religious side—very sinful. When we eat, we should try to cause less suffering. As Buddhist philosophy says, human life is very important as to whether we go up or down. It is a good opportunity to become a good person. If we do good things in this life, the next life will be better. If we sin, eat meat, beat dogs, have enemies, fight or cause sadness, the next time we will go down and be born as an animal or worse. If we become an animal, we can’t say anything, like ‘I want water’—we can’t speak. They get all things on their own. That’s why we want the human body, so we can become a Buddha.

“Meat eating—we have to stop. We eat meat in Tibet because vegetables are scarce, but here in India we should change. There are so many vegetables that are more suitable for our health. If we continue to eat meat, we may have health problems. We can stop. Lamas, His Holiness (the Dalai Lama) are only eating meat occasionally—once a week, twice a month. We can do this too and eventually stop. I heard in Nepal, there are many Tamong. They used to be Hindu and kill as many animals as possible, cut off their head in front of the temple and throw blood at the gods. Our lamas taught Buddhism to the Tamong and now they have stopped and taken up the Buddhist teachings. At present Buddhist followers are eating meat. This can be stopped, but it takes some time. It’s best not to harm anybody; killing is not right. Animals don’t speak, otherwise they would ask man why they are being killed. This is very sad, very sad. So this meat eating should be stopped among all these Buddhist followers. Meat eating is against the Buddha’s teachings. All lamas are trying to stop eating meat.”

2) “There is no excuse. It is clearly a violation. All the Buddhist philosophies say we should stop this meat eating and take vegetables. Tibet is Tibet. But now Tibetans live all over the world. They should stop this meat eating and just eat vegetables. If a follower isn’t capable of living without meat, they should repeat the meat mantra seven or 21 times. According to Buddhist philosophy, we should do like this.”

I was fortunate to have a long conversation with Tendar in their SUV on the way

to visiting monasteries in a refugee camp forty kilometers away where they had relatives.

Here is what I recorded from that conversation,

"At Bodhgaya (in late December, 1999), His Holiness made the people promise to stop eating meat on the 8th, 15th and 30th days of the month, as merit is multiplied on these days. When my family saw animals eating animals on TV, they started to get the idea that we should not eat meat. During *Saka dawa* (month of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and entrance into *Nirvana*) and other religious festivals, people have started to abstain from eating meat. His Holiness tells people they should not take meat as it is a sin. When we stop eating meat, our mind is changed—the anger mind is diminished. Eating meat is so engrained in the Tibetan consciousness that no one thinks about it, they don't think about animals being killed. This is the same in the monastery.

"Now, people are seeing the animals being slaughtered and are starting to think that meat is wrong. Monasteries, all Tibetan families, have stopped eating meat for these three days, and on other occasions. At Swayambu in Nepal, a nunnery has a big festival in which they've totally stopped eating meat. They use rice and flour and things instead. Some Tibetans have stopped eating meat altogether. My daughter eats meat about seven days a month. She once saw a chicken's head cut off at a slaughter shop. Its body was still moving after its head was cut off. So now she is disgusted by the meat and the stench. The animals are not killed by us, they are killed by the butcher. So there is not as much sin in purchasing meat from them. We don't say we have no sin, we have sinned, but it is a lesser sin than the butcher. There is a mantra. If we say it for seven or 21 times when we eat meat, praying that 'As I am taking this meat, I pray that this animal will not go to hell, but go to heaven,' this helps the animal to go to heaven. That will help the dead animal. Lamas recite this mantra, but it is too long for normal people. Lamas say we shouldn't take meat; it is very sinful. Animals feel pain, so it is dangerous and sinful. If you can't stop, pray that the animal will go to heaven. Animal killing is very bad because you're inflicting pain on them. You should teach people the mantra. That will help. There are some lamas who don't take meat. There are now many people who are not taking this meat."

**Norbu—Settlement Officer (Chief Political Figure), Bylacopy, India (Late Thirties)**

Norbu had the aura of a leader and was very decisive when he spoke. He was a bit intimidating, but generous and kind. The interview was conducted in English.

1) "Meat eating doesn't need to relate to Buddhist teachings. Meat is compulsive in Tibet. We have a consciousness that we have committed a sin against the Buddhist teachings. The general public inherits Buddhism, but doesn't know much. Mainly the monasteries have Buddhist knowledge. Without meat, there

are health consequences among Tibetans. Tibetans need meat as a continuity of their diet to maintain health, especially for elders. Kindness and compassion are easy to talk about, but tough to practice. As an individual person, we all have our own approach. As a government servant, here the most important thing is one should speak less and try to practice what the Buddha and His Holiness have said—how to be kind. Public officials need to practice honesty, sincerity and selflessness. These shouldn't be negated. Others are more important than oneself. Putting this into practice, however, is hard to do.”

2) “Yes, I think so, we have violated the Buddhist teachings. Also we have started now to offer milk and bread at the altar rather than meat and wine. There may be some changes that will coincide better with Buddhist teachings than what we are practicing now.”

**Tsering Dorje—Secretary at local Tibetan Government Post, Bylacopy, India (Late Thirties)**

Tsering was the first man that I interviewed, on the first day of the Tibetan New Year. He later helped me to translate my written questions into Tibetan and was very kind and honest. The interview was conducted with Tsering in English.

1) "Buddhist philosophy is based on nonviolence. If you go deep, you find a lot on nonviolence. Lay people don't know much. Non-harm is in the scriptures, but Tibetans worry that if they don't eat meat they will not be healthy. Since Tibetans have eaten meat for so many years, they feel that they need to keep eating it. Young Tibetan people understand that meat is against Buddhism and that they don't need as much now in exile as they did in Tibet. Tibet is cold and there are no vegetables. We try to eat less meat now. It is bad for the body in the hot climate."

2) "Eating meat is very much harmful to the Bodhisattva. Every Buddhist scripture is basically 'non-harm.' Eating meat very much harms sentient beings. If you do not eat meat, animals will be saved, get freedom, get to eat grass in the open. If you eat meat, the butcher will kill the animals. Animal will lose their life. The old generation knows that eating meat is a sin and that the animals will lose their lives. Even then they are eating meat. I think it is an old, bad habit. So we are trying to change this habit by eating less meat in order to give more freedom to the animals."

**Hlasang Tsering—Freedom Fighter and Activist, Dharamsala (Early Fifties)**

This brilliant man, a former Tibetan Youth Congress president and self-described “freedom fighter” burns the flame of the Khampa guerrilla warriors in his heart. He owns a book store in Dharamsala. The interview was in English.

1) “Of course, there is a contradiction in eating meat. It is an obvious one and it is no doubt against the Buddhist philosophy of nonviolence. Though, a vegetarian diet does involve the lost lives of insects and the labor of beasts, so it is a question of degree and not of essence. In the case of the Tibetan nomads, the matter becomes not one of philosophy but of survival. You can talk about the philosophy of not eating meat in tropical India, but in Tibet it is a question of survival. It goes beyond a philosophical question to one's own survival.”

2) “All I can say is, as a simple Buddhist, it is certainly desired that if possible, one shouldn't eat meat. The habit of meat continues in exile, however. There are a few rare and odd cases of one or two Tibetans becoming vegetarian, but that's about it. His Holiness is honest—he eats meat. He tried to be vegetarian and failed. There is a conflict there. He uses nonviolence towards his enemies yet at the same time he is eating the flesh of innocent beasts who have done nothing wrong. There is a strong contradiction here. My desire and effort to fight with the Tibetan resistance meant taking life, eating whatever was available. I will stop eating meat when Tibet is free. It is a political position for me. When the Tibetan government matures enough to have freedom and independence as its only goal, I will leave my family and fight, eating whatever I can find in the mountains. The choice of not eating meat is not available to me as a freedom fighter.”

**Chunee Tsangma—Regional President of the Tibetan Women's Association, Bylacopy, India (Early Fifties)**

Chunee burned with the passion of her cause and glowed with the radiance of a strong, independent thinker. She lives in Bylacopy and speaks excellent English.

1) “In regard to meat eating by Tibetan Buddhists—Tibet is known as the 'Roof of the World' and is very cold. It may be a big excuse, but in Tibet meat is the main part of the diet. I personally feel that killing is a big sin for us, but one can't survive in Tibet without meat. There are no vegetables in some places. Sometimes you could get some dried vegetables, but this was rare. In exile it is habitual to eat meat. The older generation finds it difficult to stop. The old then pass it on to their children. We Tibetans don't kill directly, but buy only what is dead and has already been killed. In the Buddhist religion, we know that eating meat is a sin, but it is not so much of a sin as killing the animal directly or getting the meat specifically for yourself. There are special prayers to say for the animals

that you eat, and people definitely say them. I'm not saying all people say this prayer; there are many humans on this earth and they have different ways of living and viewing things, but some do say this prayer."

2) "Yes, definitely. It is a violation. I personally don't eat meat now because we know what is good and bad. Of course, if one has health problems from not eating meat, than they might have to eat some meat. As for our religion, we don't eat meat."

**Chonjure Rinpoche—Sera Je Monastic University, Bylacopy, India (Late Twenties)**

This high lama had a glowing aura to him. He was very cheerful and open. The interview was conducted in Tibetan, and translated from the tape recording by Tinley Dhondup.

1) "If the first question is about eating meat, then I would say meat eating is not good. If you are asking if meat eating harms the practice of the Dharma, it might harm it a little bit. Firstly, it does not look nice in the eyes of other people when you eat meat. Secondly, it hams the life of animals. That is my personal opinion. You ask what is the relationship between nonviolence and Buddhist practice. Unless you study the religion, just belief won't help much. In order to practice Dharma you must know how. You must know the purpose and the meaning of Dharma. If you don't know the meaning, the purpose, and how to practice the Dharma, just quoting the Buddha is not enough. That is what my lama told me. It won't be a good practice if we don't know the meaning and the purpose. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between Dharma practice and nonviolence or non-harm. Unless you know and study the Dharma, there won't be any practice. Just merely not eating meat does not become practice. According to Buddhism, practice means something that should be done by the mind. External practice is important, but the mind is the most essential. In order to change the mind, it must change through peace and nonviolence. The mind cannot change through violence."

*Question: What do you make of the three conditions people give that make eating meat acceptable?*

"There is a lot of discussion about this. I don't know or cannot say if these are perfect conditions for eating meat. Some say these points have some valid reason. Some say these are not valid conditions for eating meat. They say these conditions are made by people who are attached to eating meat, so it is hard to say. However, if you say there is less sin in buying meat at a meat shop that was not killed or meant for you, you may have a point. The meat would still be at the meat store even if you didn't go there to buy it. If you kill an animal, then you are doing an act of violence. But if you use your reason and ask for whom did the

animals in the store get killed, it is clear they were killed for the meat eaters. If you yourself are a meat eater, then you are also included as a customer at the meat shop. Therefore you are indirectly involved, although not directly. There is a little difference in this. It is more sinful if you are involved directly. If you are involved indirectly, it is less sinful. That's what I think. What His Holiness says is that there may be less sin for the individual in a place where there are many meat eaters. If you eat meat in a place where there are a lot of vegetarians, it is more sinful because you are requesting the meat and people may have to kill the animals for you. So, if we check these reasons, it is less sinful to buy meat from the store instead of killing animals oneself."

2) "I think eating meat harms the animals. We don't have the internal motivation to kill the animal intentionally, however meat becomes a kind of motivation. It is like a fish. If you take a fish from the water and leave it on the ground, the fish dies because it has to be in the water. You did not intend to kill it but it dies when you put it on the ground. Sometimes motivation happens indirectly, like in this instance."

*Question: It seems that the meat sellers motivation is not to kill animals, but to make money. Thus, the meat customer supplies the butcher's desire for money as much as the butcher supplies the customer's desire for meat. What do you think?*

"In the Tibetan refuge camps, there are no Tibetans who are involved in the killing of animals. The animal killers are Indians. They come to sell to the Tibetans and the Tibetans eat the meat. But the sellers motivation is money, making money. So we have faults of eating meat and are indirectly involved in killing by buying and eating meat. If we don't eat he won't kill animals. We don't directly tell him to kill, but if we keep eating, he will keep killing. So there is a lot of sin in eating meat, the taking of life.

"What we Tibetans say is that our body needs meat. If we don't eat meat, we get sick, become weak. In my opinion our great grandparents survived through eating meat in Tibet, and the children were also brought up eating meat right from childhood—so this meat eating trend continues up to our generation. Our fathers came from Tibet. People under 40 were born in India. People who came from Tibet recently are a different case. They still have a strong habit of eating meat. People like me are born in India. My father eats meat so naturally he taught us how to eat meat. They make food with meat at home. So we eat. I like eating meat. If I don't after some time my body feels weak and tired. Other food does not help me much. If I don't eat meat for one or two months, I feel weak. In Tibet nomads always boiled meat and ate only meat. They didn't have any other food to eat. They don't have side dishes. If we eat meat here, we eat it in little pieces mixed with vegetables, so we are eating less meat. If we continue this process after two or three generations there will be less meat eaters in Tibetan society. But Tibetan nomads will eat meat always."

*Question: Could you tell me about why meat was banned at Sera Je?*

“Khensur Lobsang Tsering was the abbot of Sera Je. He contributed a lot for Sera. Before at Sera Je there were about two or three thousand monks. If we give a feast, we need two or three cows. If you give a fine feast, then you will need 15 cows, so that we don't do. People don't like this to happen, so it is good. Meat eating is banned in the monastery—or in or close to the assembly hall. You can still eat meat in your own room—this could not be banned. They ruled like this:

- 1) Monks should not carry meat in their hands
- 2) Meat sellers are banned to go to sell meat in the monastery

“So these rules are made for Tibetans. Indians would not obey these rules. They don't need to follow the Tibetan rules. So these Indian meat sellers come and they cannot stop them from coming. So to solve this problem, the Tibetans caught buying from the Indian sellers where given a \$3 fine. One problem for us is if we need to buy meat, we have to go to Mysore or Hunsor, which takes an hour or two. So a family cannot go this far for just buying meat. People don't have their own transportation, so the Indians come and the Tibetans buy. So it is difficult to ban meat selling. Meat is expensive here, though, since there is not much. People go to Hunsur and Mysore because there are many Muslims who eat beef in these places. There is no beef here, because everyone is Hindu. People think that by buying at the large meat markets, there is less sin, so they have been going to these places to get their meat since it was banned eight years ago.

“In the monasteries they stopped ordering meat in bulk, so monks had to go and buy it themselves. At Sera Mey there is meat at the offerings. The Indians come to Bylacopy and take meat orders from the monks at Sera Mey. I support the movement to stop having meat. Having so much meat is not good. I had many Indian friends in Mysore who were Jain—followers of Mahavira. They thought Lord Buddha was a disciple of Mahavira and that Buddhism was close to Jainism. So they came to learn more about Buddhism. A Jain monk was visiting Sera and he went to the Sera Mey kitchen and saw monks cutting up meat. Then he told me ‘You are a fake Buddhist eating meat. You are not a follower of Lord Buddha, because you eat meat.’ When that Jain monk came he saw external signs of Tibetan Buddhism, but not the internal.”

### **Geshe Tenzin Dorje—Sera Je Monastic University (Mid-Sixties)**

One of the most highly respected men in Sera Monastery, his picture is hung in the Sera Je library next to the Dalai Lama's. This animated man with unfathomable spiritual depth has the compassion, kindness and humor of a Buddha. He looked very

young and alive. The interview was in Tibetan and translated from the tape recording by Tinley.

1) “Not to harm other people, this is usually the most important. There is a strong relation between daily life and non-harm. Normally, we like those who don't harm. If we don't kill insects, tell bad words or show any anger, then we will be a likeable person. If I become angry, you will become angry. It will harm the other person, which is not good. The daily practice and principles of non-harm have a strong relationship. A Buddhist practitioner should not harm other beings and help them whenever possible. We can't practice all of the teachings of the Buddha. But non-harm is the most important. However, it is difficult to say whether it is possible to cause no harm whatsoever in one's daily practice. Harm happens all the time—slander, harmful speech, stepping on insects. There is almost always some violence. If you eat meat, it harms other beings. How does this happen? Although I don't kill, I am indirectly participating in the killing. So indirectly it becomes a kind of violence. If I buy meat, he kills more and more animals. I don't kill, but they kill—I buy it and eat it. If I buy, you buy, he buys, we all buy—then he will kill more and more. It will become a kind of violence. If everyone stops eating meat, they won't buy and he won't kill. Animals won't die, which is good. If we eat meat, he will kill. Buy once, he will kill—then he'll kill more and more. So indirectly it becomes very violent. Buying meat indirectly becomes a kind of harming. Buy again, he will kill again—so that's why it's not good. Meat eating is not good.”

*Question: Will the butcher be able to achieve Buddhahood faster if less people eat meat?*

“After a long, long time the butcher will be able to achieve Buddhahood—a long, long time. It is a big, big sin to kill animals. It's not easy to get Buddhahood after this—it is a huge sin. If he doesn't kill or harm but rather helps other beings, then he can transform himself into a positive spirit. Then he will be able to achieve Buddhahood quickly. If one cheats, steals, kills, harms others—then it will take a long, long time. If everyone doesn't eat meat, the butcher won't kill animals and won't accumulate sin; then it will be easier for him to achieve Buddhahood.”

*Question: Do you think there is less sin in buying meat from a large meat market?*

“Buying from a small and large meat market entails the same sin. The killing is the same. If you are a meat salesman and I order you to kill 100 kilograms of meat, then both of us receive the same sin. It is definitely an act of harming. There are five chickens. If you buy one there will be four left. If you don't buy, he won't kill. It's less harm if you buy less. If you buy more, it is more harm. The biggest sin is telling the butcher to kill some chickens for me tomorrow.”

*I asked him if there was a prayer for eating meat. He said there were several. He spent the next half-hour looking one up in an old text he had lying around. He eventually*

*found it, but part of the page was torn off and the text was too deteriorated for him to read it. I would later get a meat eating prayer written in Tibetan for me in my notebook, but that notebook was lost when my bag was stolen. So unfortunately, despite many attempts, I have not been able to find a translation of a prayer for eating meat.*

“This sin is the same for killing a big or a small animal. You can't say whether an animal will become a human or god in the next rebirth. If you pray, they might be born in better realms. Not eating meat is better than eating meat with a prayer. It is good to eat meat of animals that die of natural causes, however, and pray for their higher rebirth if you have good spiritual abilities. In Tibet one lama didn't like eating meat of animals that were killed, and would only eat the meat of naturally dead animals. Even though the taste of decayed animals was bad, he would only accept this kind of meat from others. If I'm a big lama, and you're a patron that invites me to your house, if you kill animals for my food—than that is a bad sin for both of us. To say a prayer for a dead or killed animal is good. If you eat meat that has died without external harming being involved than it is fine to eat.”

### **Champa Yeshe—Sera Mey Monastic University, Bylacopy, India (Early Thirties)**

A few weeks away from receiving his Geshe degree, Champa was taking a class with an American scientist at Sera, learning basic Western scientific concepts and ideas. We spent several hours after this interview taking about science, and I taught him much of what I know, to his delight. The interview was in Tibetan, with Tinley translating later.

“Dharma has a wide meaning. Knowing the self-nature is called Dharma. Everything that exists is called Dharma. Buddhadharma is slightly different than Dharma. When you say Dharma, the causes of suffering is involved. The delusions—anger and jealousy, ignorance, the afflictive emotions are the causes of suffering. To protect oneself from these sufferings is the practice done by little beings. For example, in the next life there is suffering in the three lower realms—hungry ghost, hell and animal realms. You know the suffering of these realms and are scared. With knowing the suffering of these realms, we can protect ourselves by giving up the ten non-virtuous actions and accumulating the ten virtues. For example—taking life, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, slander, harsh words, selfishness and wrong view are non-virtuous actions. As opposed to these, there are the ten virtuous activities. Those who practice this are called the little beings, as the practice is for that individual only. I practice this. There is another level of delusions which have a wider meaning. All real Dharma is the liberation from *samsara*. In order to achieve liberation, you must know the

causes of delusion. In order to free ourselves from delusion, we must practice. At this point, they have to know about the desire, form and formless realms. This is different from the practice of the individual. In order to free ourselves from all sufferings, we must first give up delusions. This is called the practice of the 'middle individuals.' When His Holiness talks about Buddhism, he talks about the basic principles of non-harm and dependent co-arising. These two are the basics of Buddhist philosophy. There are many Buddhist tenets, the nature of the mind, the middle path, et cetera. The conduct is non-harm and the philosophy is dependent co-arising. If you are Buddhist, you must know this basic philosophy. The first thing is not to harm other beings, and next comes helping beings whenever possible. Even if you can't help, you shouldn't harm.

“Right now dependent co-arising must be understood as the practice of emptiness. We have to practice non-harm, but dependent co-arising tells you the reason why we should practice non-harm. There is a reason why people practice this thing. If you practice the conduct of non-harm, not only this life but the next life will be happy. The result of non-harm is happiness. Happiness and suffering don't come by themselves—they depend on causes and conditions. If there are no causes or conditions than there will be no result. Things come from causes and conditions. This is called dependent co-arising.

“We are all living our lives and this life should be lived with honesty and sincerity. So when we say 'good life' it doesn't mean having a good house or car. A good life involves the right motivation and thought. For example, you live in America and have neighbors. If you think of them with compassion, happiness and love, taking their sufferings upon yourself, then your life will be happy and you will be genuinely practicing non-harm and getting benefits. So the practice of non-harm should go along with your life. If you go to school without any evil thoughts, you will be happy. If you don't have love and respect for other beings, if you are angry, then you won't be happy. The mere feeling of anger doesn't fit with a non-harm practice. Non-harming practice means taking the suffering of other beings upon oneself.

“If you can, you can help. If not, rejoice and appreciate others and wish them happiness. Love, compassion, respecting others are all part of a non-harm philosophy. If you forget other beings, thinking only of yourself, you'll have difficulties. Grasping to the self brings suffering to oneself. Caring for others is the root of all wisdom and knowledge. The more you have positive thoughts of benefiting others, the happier you'll be. If you practice this, you'll know it.”

Many of the Tibetan monks and lay people I chatted with, and some of the interviewees, felt that vegetarianism meant physical weakness. That only by eating meat

could one maintain one's strength. My next interviewee, a traditional Tibetan doctor, will now discuss those issues.

**Dr. Tenzin Tsephal—Director of Tibetan Medicine for the Bylacopy Refugee Camp (Late Thirties)**

Tenzin struck me as a highly educated and sharp man who is one of the most qualified in the world in treating illness with traditional Tibetan medicines. He spoke flawless English.

“The main concept of Buddhist philosophy is that if you can't help others, at least don't harm them. You must respect the existence of other beings. As far as practice is concerned, there will be a large variation among individuals in the extent to which they can use these beliefs. A high lama or a yogi will practice it in a different way than the average lay person. They may go into a retreat without much social mingling and can really concentrate on cultivating *bodhicitta* or something. As for myself, I am staying in society and depend on others. The Dalai Lama says, when we are born, we depend on our parents. When we get old we again depend on others for help. Therefore, as grown-ups, we should really help others. I can use the energy I have to help people. Individuals have different capacities to help. I am a doctor, so I try to help people with physical suffering. All life is interdependent, and so helping others also helps yourself.

“As far as meat eating goes, Tibet is at a very high altitude and meat is necessary there due to the cold climate and the lack of availability of meat alternatives. So it is habitual. There was a poor trade situation in Tibet; you couldn't get non-regional food for the most part. Now meat eating is reducing; many Tibetans are becoming vegetarians. The basic Buddhist concept of non-harm is against eating meat, as you have to kill something. The lamas always taught that there is a big difference in killing the animal specifically for you or buying it already dead. There are different degrees of sin, depending on how you obtain the meat, what weapons are used to kill it, what the motivation was, et cetera.”

*Question: Is meat eating necessary to the Tibetan physiology?*

“It is not necessary at all. If someone gets weak, if their energy is very low, then they may need meat for a little while. If there is a lot of imbalance in their body energies, then they should eat meat for a few days, and then go back to a pure vegetarian diet.”

*Question: Have there been any health problems among Tibetans who stop eating meat?*

“No, most problems are caused by eating meat instead. If we have meat for two or three days continuously, too much heat is created and one gets drowsy. If one takes vegetarian food, they feel fresh and alert, with lots of energy. Vegetarian food is perfect for hot weather. Many in the younger generation are not so fond of meat. Among the older ones, they don't want to stop, so they will say that their ears would start ringing if they didn't eat meat for ten days or something. I don't really believe this, though. I think all Tibetans can and should stop eating meat. Losing weight is not really harmful at all. In the Tibetan community there is a paranoia about being thin. Fat is considered healthy and thin is considered bad. When I went home to my parents after becoming vegetarian they remarked at how thin I was as if they were worried. In the West it is good to be thin, but Tibetan culture considers a person who is fat to be a person who is eating well. Being thin is far better in a hot climate. A fat person sweats a lot and can't breathe well when it is hot. Meat is unnecessary. There are a lot of high-protein alternatives like soy. Vegetables and legumes are the best sources of protein.”

*Question: Among young Tibetans who stop eating meat, do you think this is health-related, ethics-related or both?*

“I don't know about others, but as far as my own personal experience, when I was in college I heard a lot about how eating meat is bad. For me it combined the Indian climate with Buddhist ethics, and I gradually stopped eating meat for these reasons.”

*Question: Do you think it is necessary for His Holiness to eat meat to stay in good health?*

“No, it is not necessary for him to eat meat. His Holiness has a crazy routine, he gets only four or five hours of sleep and the rest of the 19 or 20 hours he is very busy and cheerful. You can't compare His Holiness with normal people. His Tibetan doctors visit him every day to check his pulse and so forth and prescribe him medicine for that day. He takes Tibetan medicine faithfully every day, and encourages others to do so as well. He really believes in it. His Holiness likes fruits a lot, I don't know about tofu. But tofu is very popular in Dharamsala in general.”

*Question: If someone stopped eating meat and lost weight, would you prescribe they eat meat again?*

“I would never tell someone to start eating meat again once they've stopped. It is like an alcoholic who stops drinking; it is not good to drink again even though he may have some problems being sober. It is very bad to start drinking again, or eating meat again. Alternatives are definitely the best. I would never prescribe someone to start eating meat again. The Tibetan doctors who do so are a bit old-fashioned and aren't as aware or open to the alternatives to eating meat.”

"Tibetan medicine uses some animal products (snake meat, etc.) but now not too much, as the availability and legality of obtaining such things has changed. Plant alternatives are now used in place of animal products. Namto Ling and Sera Je Monasteries don't serve non-vegetarian meals. I had four vegetarian classmates in Tibetan medicine school and now more and more young people are eating primarily vegetarian food. I ate only one or two non-vegetarian meals a month during college."

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On the topic of health and meat eating, Patrul Rinpoche remarks,

"To have killed in a previous life makes our present life not only short, but also subject to frequent disease. Sometimes babies die at birth as a result of having killed in their past life, and the same thing may well occur over and over again for many lifetimes."<sup>17</sup>

The next nine interviews in this chapter were done in Dharamsala. All of them were in Tibetan, translated by myself. Questions one and two were answered together. The entire responses to the questions cannot be conveyed here, due to my lack of a tape recorder in Dharamsala, and my less-than-perfect language skills. However, to the best of my ability, I wrote down and translated the responses. I give my apologies to the interviewees if any inaccuracies arise.

### **Hlakpa Dorje—the Dalai Lama's Religious Translator (Early Sixties)**

"In the sutras, it says that if one has not heard, seen or has any suspicion that an animal has been killed for them, it is acceptable to eat meat. So most Tibetans follow this, and eat meat from a butcher rather than kill the animals themselves. However, His Holiness has been encouraging the Tibetan community to cut down on their meat consumption, and if possible, adopt a vegetarian diet. He requested in 1993 that the restaurants of the Dharamsala area that normally serve meat dishes become vegetarian so that the Tibetan community can experience delicious vegetarian food and learn how to stop eating meat. Several of the area restaurants became vegetarian after that, and I think that it has turned out how His Holiness envisioned, and people are getting the idea that eating meat is not necessary after all to make good food. Dharamsala has a lot of tofu, which was introduced to the people by the restaurants that switched over to vegetarian. The Dalai Lama, three years ago, took up a new policy for his own diet. He now eats a small amount of meat every other day, and eats pure vegetarian food (including no eggs) every other day. Thus, he tells people that he is vegetarian six months of the year. In

1965, he became pure vegetarian and was very adamant about it. Unfortunately he got frail with hepatitis, and both his Tibetan doctors and Western doctors advised him to start eating meat again. He regained his health soon after. So, the Dalai Lama still eats small amounts of meat. However, he has been very adamant in stressing to the Tibetan people that on special Buddhist holidays and other days where merit is magnified, meat should be avoided altogether. For the sake of the Dharma and for the health of the Tibetans in exile, he requests that his people eat less and less meat and gradually try to become vegetarian.”

**Pema—President of the Tibetan Youth Congress (Mid-Thirties)**

“It is quite clear to me that a serious Buddhist practitioner cannot justify eating meat. Those who say that buying meat from a market doesn’t involve much sin have a fundamental lack of understanding of basic economics—supply and demand. If us Tibetans didn’t buy so much meat in and around Dharamsala, the butchers would simply be out of business and countless animals would be saved from the knife. The Indians don’t buy much meat because most of them are Hindu and vegetarianism is quite widely spread. It is unfortunate that Tibetans still eat so much meat, especially monks at the monastery. That is truly shameful. A monk needs to uphold his vows and one of the primary vows is to not kill. Eating meat is unquestionably a violation of this vow, and thus the monks who continue to eat meat in exile when it is completely unnecessary are disgracing the Tibetan monastic tradition. Especially now since Tibetan Buddhism is spreading so widely throughout the world and to the West, monks really need to stop eating meat. When Westerners see this, and hear the next day at a Dharma talk that they are supposed to be saving all sentient beings from suffering, they often get quite confused. Buddhism is supposed to dispel confusion, not create more of it. Therefore, especially monks, but also lay Tibetan Buddhists, must stop eating meat. If we are to preserve the integrity of Tibetan Buddhism, it is time we realize that meat is very sinful and simply give it up. Eggs, pork and chicken are the worst and should be given up first, as they do not provide nearly as much meat as a yak for instance. But all meat should be avoided if possible.”

**Lobsang Tsering—Director of the Center for Human Rights and Democracy (Late Twenties)**

“It is important for a Buddhist practitioner to practice nonviolence in all that they do. One who believes in or practices Buddhism should not eat meat. Buying meat from the market harms animals because it encourages the butcher to kill more and more. The main philosophy in Buddhism is that all beings are our mothers and to harm them is to have a severe lapse of compassion. Since compassion is central in Tibetan Buddhism, and its most basic manifestations are non-harm and nonviolence, having a hand in the killing of animals by eating meat is a bad practice for Buddhists.”

**Ngawang Rinpoche, Director of the Religion and Culture Department and Member of the Dalai Lama’s Cabinet (Seventies)**

“In the Hinayana texts, there is a passage that says that monks are allowed to eat meat if they do not hear, see or suspect it has been killed for them. However, there are other Mahayana sutras that strictly forbid eating meat, giving twenty-five reasons why it is sinful and harmful to the practice of the Bodhisattva to eat meat. So, since Tibetan Buddhists are in the Mahayana school of thought, meat eating has to be given up. I believe there is a little bit less sin in buying meat than in killing it directly, but it is still contributing to the killing process and thus causes harm to sentient beings. There have been a few books written in Sanskrit and Tibetan about how vegetarianism is a necessary aspect of Dharma practice. However, many lay people still follow the Hinayana ‘three condition rule’ and eat meat. His Holiness encourages all Tibetans to gradually cut their meat consumption and one day stop altogether. Genuine Mahayana practice necessarily involves the avoidance of harming beings. I believe that eating an animal that has been killed causes harm. Do you think there would be sin in eating an animal that has already died of natural causes? I don’t think there would be, personally. In Tibet it was possible for some yogis and lamas to get their meat that way, and great efforts were made to sustain oneself without harming beings. Nowadays, these kinds of efforts aren’t practical and maybe not even possible, so vegetarianism is definitely the best diet for a Mahayana Buddhist monk or lay practitioner.”

**Tenpa Samkhar—Political Secretary of the Kashag ( Equivalent to Prime Minister —Late Forties)**

“Tibetans get asked this question a lot by foreigners. The two most common replies are that Tibet is cold and that vegetables don’t grow there. As far as our present day situation, I think these are lame excuses for still eating meat. The weather here is mild and there are a plethora of vegetables and other foods in the markets. What was true in Tibet should no longer play a factor in how meat eating is viewed by Tibetans today. Many also say that buying from the butcher is O.K., as the meat has already been killed. This is a foolish idea. If you wouldn’t buy the meat the butcher wouldn’t be encouraged to kill more animals for you to buy again next week. His Holiness strongly encourages and I believe too that Tibetans should try to gradually become vegetarian. When I was younger, I used to eat a lot of meat and think nothing of it. Then I began to realize that as a Buddhist it wasn’t right for me to be eating so much meat. So I ate less and less and now I eat meat only three times a month or so. I think an important part of the Dalai Lama’s middle path philosophy is to gradually reduce one’s meat consumption until one reaches the goal of vegetarianism.”

**Jamyang—Intellectual Employee of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (Early Twenties)**

“In Tibet, for the most part, it is very cold. We didn’t have central heating or any kind of basic heaters at all. So the primary way to heat our bodies was through eating meat. Also you couldn’t get many vegetables as the climate is like a tundra and only certain things like barley grow. So it was really important for one’s survival to eat meat. Now in exile we have heaters and all kinds of fruits and vegetables to eat, as well as new kinds of grain and also daal and tofu. So meat has become a bad habit for Tibetans—one that we must break in order to remain true to our Buddhist heritage. A lot of the younger generation are eating mainly vegetarian food although our parents often encourage us to keep eating meat as that’s all they know and they think it’s healthy. I think that if you are out shopping and you happen to see some meat that is already dead, it is acceptable to buy it if you don’t have a strong desire for that meat. Knowing the meat has been killed for you to eat and desiring meat are very big sins. But otherwise, if you just happen to come across it and buy it, there is no problem there.”

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On buying meat, Patrul Rinpoche responds,

“Some people imagine that only the person who physically carries out the killing is creating a negative karmic effect, and that the person who just gave the orders is not—or if he is, then only a little. But you should know that the same karmic result comes to everyone involved, including even anyone who just felt pleased about it—and therefore how much more so the person who actually ordered that the killing be carried out. Each person gets the whole karmic result of killing one animal. It is not as if one act of killing could be divided up among people.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Monk at the Dialectical School at the Monastery of the Dalai Lama (Thirties)**

“Meat is not really a good thing, but if you obtain it from a butcher where it has already been killed, there is not much sin there. Almost all of one’s actions involve killing (insects)—breathing, walking, and eating vegetables. Rice involves killing a lot of insects when the patty is plowed, the fields flooded and the knife harvests it. So all eating is going to involve some killing. Killing cannot be avoided. Therefore, there is really no problem with eating meat, because killing is a part of life for humans. As Buddhist monks, we are still human. We still have to live. Meals are not substantial without meat. I don’t think it is very tasty with no meat. His Holiness eats meat; almost every monk eats meat. At the Dialectical School there are maybe seven vegetarians out of one hundred monks. There is a sutra that if a monk doesn’t hear, see or suspect that meat has been killed for them, then there is no problem in eating it. Monks and all Tibetan lay people that I know of follow this policy. Therefore, I don’t find a problem in eating meat. It is about as much a sin as breathing or going for a walk, because in these simple actions insects are being killed. Buddhism is a Middle Path. Vegetarianism is a bit extreme. Eating meat that follows the three-condition rule is really the most sensible thing for the middle path. Therefore,

almost all Tibetan Buddhists eat meat, and don't have any particular ethical problem with it."

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On meat eating among Buddhists, Patrul Rinpoche responds,

"In Buddhism, once we have taken refuge in the Dharma we have to give up harming others. To have an animal killed everywhere we go, and to enjoy its flesh and blood is surely against the precepts of taking refuge, is it not? More particularly, in the Bodhisattva tradition of the Great Vehicle, we are supposed to be the refuge and protectors of all infinite beings. The beings with unfortunate karma that we are supposed to be protecting are instead being killed without the slightest compassion, and their boiled flesh and blood are being presented to us and we—their protectors, the Bodhisattvas—then gobble it all up gleefully, smacking our lips. What could be worse than that?"<sup>19</sup>

**Dawa Tsering—Head of the Welfare Office (Equivalent to Mayor of Dharamsala—Forties)**

"Eating meat is not congruous to a compassionate lifestyle. The philosophy and practice of non-harm is not limited only to humans, but applies to all beings. If we ate humans who got killed, it would probably be viewed as absurd. But really, thinking that buying meat from a market is an acceptable thing for someone who believes in Buddhism, is equally absurd. I used to eat a lot of meat, but I gradually cut down. First I stopped eating fish and eggs, then beef and pork. And recently I stopped eating chicken. So now the only meat I eat is mutton. This is my one weakness. From what I hear, the Dalai Lama as well only eats mutton. All of my family members have taken up the same diet, and my wife and nine children are vegetarian except for mutton. The people of Tibet ate meat rather compulsively for thousands of years because of the cold climate and lack of vegetables.

"But there has still been an ethic of meat eating since the time of Songtsen Gampo to the present Dalai Lama. For instance, in Tibet we never ate seafood or chicken because it is not good to kill an animal and then get so little meat out of it. So the Tibetans would only eat the larger animals like yaks, cows and sheep. Eggs were also considered unethical to eat, as it was killing an undeveloped chicken and did not provide a lot of food like a yak steak does. There was also a major awareness about trying to avoid killing insects. Buddhists themselves would not kill the yaks or cows, but rather leave it to the small Islamic community in Tibet. The butcher has a lot of sin, but the buyer has much less. In exile, I see more and more Tibetans eating chicken and fish and eggs. I think this is really awful. It is really a shame to have taken such a moral step down since leaving Tibet by eating these small creatures. If Tibetans are unwilling to lower their meat consumption or become vegetarian, at least they should avoid eating what they avoided in Tibet.

“For the monks who say that all food involves killing and so why bother avoiding meat, I think this is a very dangerous and out of hand way of thinking. If they think that the insects killed in harvesting rice make the animals killed in their meat soup acceptable by default, then where does it end? Why not kill humans and eat them? Why not cut off a piece of your own leg and chew on it? It is completely insane to say that since the killing of insects is inevitable, there should be no moral restrictions in killing elsewhere. This is a severe perversion of the Buddha’s teachings. It is the monks who need to stop eating meat and stop making excuses. They have to uphold their vows and the teachings of the Dharma more so than the lay people. If lay people like myself are making efforts to stop eating meat, then it is really embarrassing for the monks to still be eating meat and making excuses like that. Tibetans need to wake up to the practical applications of Lord Buddha’s teachings. Eating meat is a sin, regardless of how you may try to justify it.”

### **Geshe Thupten Phelgye—Founder of Universal Compassion Movement (Thirties)**

Geshe Thupten Phelgye from Sera Je monastery is now living in Dharamsala, running his organization Universal Compassion Movement and serving as a member of the International Gelukpa Executive Committee. He gets his income by running a four-story apartment complex, which forbids meat inside its walls. Non-vegetarians aren’t allowed to apply for a room. He has a billboard across from the Dalai Lama’s residence at one of Dharamsala’s main intersections that reads, "Take Pity on Animals, Don't Cause Their Slaughter, Become a Vegetarian." The same message is written in Tibetan. He also puts up flyers around town to encourage Tibetans to follow the Buddha's teachings and become vegetarian.

He was born in Bylacopy, India to very poor parents who farmed their small plot of land and often had trouble putting food on the table. He wanted to help his family to improve their standard of living, so he tried to join the army at age 13. He was turned down because of his age, so he tried again at age 14. The army recruiter felt sorry for him and paid for his education until age 18. At this point, his mother became sick and

wanted him to look after her. However, Thupten had his life ahead of him and didn't want to spend more time at home. He told his parents he would either go back to school or go to the monastery, so his parents sent him to Sera Je. He flourished at Sera, and after the required training, had earned a Geshe degree.

In 1980 in the nearby town of Kushal Nagar, he saw a chicken that had been in the grass and eating corn days earlier, with its head cut off, convulsing in the butcher shop. At this point, he decided to give up meat and eggs. For his Geshe degree reception, he agreed to have all of the traditional foods, just no meat. The monks at the reception raved about how good the vegetarian food was. Shortly after, there was an all-day food offering given to the monastery by a local Tibetan, complete with three truckloads of meat.

He relates: "The monks spent all morning *chop, chop, chopping* the meat, hacking away at the red flesh with their big knives. There was meat momos, meat soup and just plain meat. By the end of the day there were so many bones on the ground that it was hard to walk. It was horrible." He talked to the Abbot about it and said that something had to be done. He said that it was hard for him to be a monk and have all of this suffering and sorrow in the form of meat being caused by the monastery. The Abbot agreed. Soon after, at a large *puja*, the Abbot announced that from that day forward, there would be no meat allowed at offerings, *pujas* or in the mess hall at Sera Je Monastery. Monks who wanted to continue eating meat would have to do so on their own.

Soon after receiving his Geshe degree, Thupten and his mother went to Dharamsala to receive the Dalai Lama's blessings. The Dalai Lama encouraged Geshe

Thupten to go to America and teach, but the young Geshe decided he wanted to work on reforming the Tibetan community, and stayed in Dharamsala. He had difficulties finding his mother a place to stay, so in exasperation had to build his own house. A plan for a simple residence turned into a four-story building with two and three-room apartments for rent. He started the Universal Compassion Movement and is now working on making it an influential organization.

He acquired hepatitis several months ago, which his doctors told him could be fatal. He is taking many Tibetan medicines, and showing improvements, but still worries about launching his organization before he passes away. He is a remarkable man. On his book shelf lie animal rights staples, such as Peter Singer's Animal Liberation, John Robbin's Diet for a New America and Eric Marcus' Vegan, the New Ethics of Eating. He has pictures of animals on his shrine to the Buddha, below a large picture of the Dalai Lama. He drinks milk, but says he would be vegan if he lived in America, due to the poor treatment of cows there.

His laugh is full and comes easily. He looks quite healthy and is neither thin nor fat. His face is beautiful and large, kind of like Mao's. His mother lives in the apartment room next to his own. He tells me that he has always been a sort of rebel, and his views on Tibetan culture and religion show this. He thinks the primary purpose of Buddha's philosophy is to apply it to everyday life. For instance, he told me,

"Instead of lighting countless butter lamps and emitting black smoke into the realm of the gods, why not put up a new street light? Instead of circumambulating a stupa, buy an animal back from the slaughterhouse. Putting the Buddha's teachings into action is sorely lacking in how Tibetans approach Buddhism. The fact that almost all Tibetans eat meat is a sad example of this."



## AN APPEAL TO YOU

The world today has become very cruel: humans are eating almost all the animals -- innocent sentient beings, domestic and wild-- among them poultry, snakes, frogs and the various animals that live in the sea. All of them experience the same pain and suffering when they are brutally slaughtered.

So to enjoy meat is absolutely contradictory to the nature of love and peace-- the principles of all true religion. Even in the general sense, to eat meat is totally unjust to helpless animals. Therefore as Buddhists, we must pay more attention to this fact since our commitment is to practice compassion to all mother sentient beings. Furthermore, human welfare is dependent on the environment of which these living beings are also a part. Thus, when we destroy them, we destroy ourselves.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very much concerned about this and has spoken many times about the importance of vegetarianism. The Buddha also strictly condemned meat eating. In the Lanka Vatara Sutra found in the fifth volume of the Kagyur, he said "All sentient beings are equal to me as my only son-- how can I allow my followers to eat the flesh of my son..." He added, "Eating meat, to me, is out of the question. I have never allowed, am not ever allowing and will never allow it because I have strictly condemned meat eating in every way.

There is another benefit too: saving others' lives extends one's own life. Even in regard to health, refraining from eating meat can prevent heart disease, cancer, tuberculosis, high blood pressure and so on.

Therefore my appeal to you is this: give up eating meat from today-- for the rest of your life, even for a few years, one year or a few months. At least try to reduce the meat in your daily diet.

Please do this for the following reasons:

- to cause the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other world leaders for peace
- to save the lives of innocent animals
- for your own health and long life
- to preserve the environment for coming generations.

*Thank you.*

Concerned people should send their contact details and thoughts to:

**Geshe Thupten Phelgye**  
**Ahimsa House, Library Rd.**  
**McGleod Ganj, 176219 H.P India**

### **Geshe Gepal—Sera Je Secretary (Thirties)**

“In 1980, when I was in Kathmandu, I went on a picnic with some other monks from Sera. There was a Nepali family there and they had a goat tied up and some chickens. They let the chickens go, and then their little boys chased them around the park until they caught them. When they caught the chickens they cut their heads off and roasted them over a fire. It really made me sick. Later, I offered to buy their goat to save its life, but they got really nasty with me and told me to leave them alone. At that point, I realized that eating meat was evil and I stopped eating meat and eggs.

“I used to be very strong. I could lift two forty-kilogram sacks of grain over each shoulder and run with them. I could pick up 250-pound monks without a problem. But when I became vegetarian, I started to lose my strength. My parents and my doctor were worried about me, and they begged me to start eating meat again. After they had done this, I lay in my bed thinking, ‘Do I want to live a compassionate lifestyle or not?’ I was certain that eating meat was wrong, and so I told myself that even if I die, I am going to do what is right for myself, the animals and the Buddha. So I continued to be a vegetarian. I learned how to get enough protein, and gradually I gained back my weight.

“I served awhile as the director of the Sera Health Advisory Committee, and tried to introduce tofu into the monastery. I brought in all the equipment to make it, and it was available for the monks for several months. They found it too expensive, however, and hard to keep in the hot weather, so this idea failed. I kept trying to come up with creative vegetarian options for the monastic dining halls, and after several years of effort, I resigned.

“I think that all people need to realize their ethical stances on their own terms, so I don’t harass others about eating meat. Of course, I think it is wrong for a monk to do, but I recognize the realities of Tibet and the time it is going to take for Tibetans to adapt to a vegetarian diet. In southern India, a vegetarian diet is best. I find I have a lot of energy, and can outlast the other monastic workers. I feel strong.”

### **Penor Rinpoche, Supreme Head of the Nyingma Order and Abbot of Namto Ling Monastery, Bylacopy, India**

“There is no meat served at my monastery, and very few of our monks eat meat on their own. All sentient beings have been our mothers in past lives, and so to kill them and eat their flesh is not at all consistent with the Dharma. However, since we have come from a land where eating meat is sometimes necessary for survival, we have come up with ways to make the most out of eating meat, as far as Dharma practice goes. Some try to reach a high level of spiritual practice where they can help the animals they are eating through prayers and guide the animal’s spirit to a higher rebirth.

“Nyingma yogis at certain advanced levels of practice sometimes partake in the ‘five meats’ to work on non-dualism understanding. These meats are undefiled by harmful action, because they are not ones traditionally used for consumption. They are dog, elephant, human, cow and horse meat. At these high levels of spiritual understanding, yogis can eat meat from animals that have died of natural causes and guide them through the intermediate stages between life and death. Compassion and meat can coincide, but for the average lay person and unaccomplished monk, meat should be avoided.”

### **Chatal Rinpoche**

This 88-year-old Nyingma lama and yogi, is the abbot of dozens of monasteries in India and Nepal. He is extremely active, traveling constantly and helping sentient beings with his every action. He has been a vegetarian since he came from Tibet in 1958, and spends most of his money releasing fish from the Calcutta fish markets. Meat is not allowed in any of his monasteries, and his wife estimated that 20% of his several thousand disciples are vegetarian.

*Question: Why did you decide to stop eating meat? How old were you when you made this decision?*

“It is written in the Hinayana and Mahayana texts that one should not eat meat. There is also a Vajrayana text which says the same thing, that one should not enjoy meat or alcohol. Because of this I am following the instructions of Shakyamuni Buddha. Being a religious person myself I don’t take meat or alcohol and at the same time I try to tell other people not to take these things. This is my reason—I’m just trying to motivate other people not to take alcohol or meat. I was 47 years old when I went to Bodhgaya and made a vow to all of the Buddha’s and Bodhisattvas to give up meat and alcohol.”

*Question: Why do you think vegetarianism is an important aspect of practicing the Dharma?*

“If you take meat, it goes against the vows one takes in seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Because when you take meat you have to take a being’s life. So I gave up eating meat.”

*Question: Some claim that one can help the animals one eats by praying for them, and thus eating meat is compassionate. Other than for the most accomplished yogis and lamas, what do you make of this claim?*

“With super natural power gained through certain meditations, it is true there are some who can revive animals from the dead and help them reach higher rebirth or enlightenment by consuming small amounts of their flesh. But this is not done for sustenance, only for the purpose of helping that animal. I personally do not have that power and because of that I never eat meat. Eating meat in one’s diet is much different than eating flesh to liberate a being through super natural powers. I am just an ordinary monk who really doesn’t have these qualities. So, if I ate meat it would be the same if you or any other lay person ate meat. I would be committing sin and I would be getting negative karma. I don’t pretend as if I have some powers and eat meat. I just avoid it altogether.”

*Question: What is your opinion on His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s meat eating?*

“Well, you’ll have to ask him yourself about meat eating. With regard to what he’s telling people about meat now and before, it is all dependent on the state of his mind and his spiritual development. After His Holiness came to India, I didn’t see him. So I never had the chance to meet him, so I have nothing to say. One should be very decisive of the things one talks about. You shouldn’t be ambiguous, but must say ‘This is it. This is what I believe.’ ” (*He is referring to the Dalai Lama’s discouraging meat consumption, yet eating meat himself.*)

*Question: Do you know other lamas who are vegetarian?*

“I know many of them from Tibet. There are Nyingma, Sakya and Gelukpa vegetarians in Tibet. Compared to the many meat-eating lamas, vegetarian lamas are very few though. I’m 88 and during my experience I have come across many lamas in Kham, Amdo—all parts of Tibet—who don’t eat meat. There are lamas who eat meat and those who don’t. At my monastery in Tibet there are also lama’s who take meat and those who don’t.”

*Question: Many Buddhist practitioners in the United States eat meat because their Tibetan lamas eat meat. How do you think this situation can be remedied?*

“If it is so, there are great meditators in India who drink enormous amounts of alcohol, keep drinking alcohol all day and they can suspend the sun in the sky and keep it from revolving around the earth. It’s a kind of magic. They stop time and they don’t let the sun pass in the sky. Naropa, Tilopa—these are great adepts. If you gained some of these super natural powers within yourself, then you don’t need to follow the same standards of normal people and you can drink alcohol and eat meat. The people with these super natural powers, who eat meat and drink alcohol, can still give great teachings and bring all sentient beings on the right path. They can show really magical things without doubt or hesitation. These people can really help sentient beings. So, if the teachers in America are like that, ask all your friends to join them and drink alcohol and eat meat. It all depends on the kind of lama you have. A lama can bring people in the right path, even

though they eat meat. So then the lama and disciples can collectively enjoy these things, but still you can get on the right path with this lama who has super natural powers.”



Chatal Rinpoche

*Question: Do you see Tibetan Buddhists in exile making a sincere effort to reduce their meat consumption and become vegetarian, or has meat eating become an entrenched aspect of Tibetan culture?*

“In Tibet, there’s only meat and tsampa—there is no other staple food. Tibet is at a high altitude and the climate is like a tundra. There are not many vegetables and fruits. After getting here, you really don’t have to follow the Tibetan customs of meat and tsampa. There are fruits and all kinds of vegetables, nutritional supplements—all kinds of good foods. Everything is available. So there is really no need to talk about the customs of Tibet. It’s a different place. You can take vegetables and fruits here in abundance and it is not necessary to eat meat. If you don’t take meat, it’s very good from my experience. I’m 88 and ever since I stopped eating meat, I haven’t gotten any major sickness. If I sleep, I sleep well. If I get up, I can walk right away. If I read religious texts, I can see them properly. I have very good hearing and can listen attentively. I have had no major sickness. These are the qualities I have experienced from not taking meat. I didn’t get sick when I stopped eating meat. I didn’t die. Nothing came—no negative consequences came to me. I can travel by vehicle, airplane or train without a problem. I never vomit. I don’t get dizzy or get headaches. So these are all qualities of giving up meat. This is what I experience. I am also a human being formed with flesh and blood, and am proof that giving up meat does not make one ill, like many Tibetans seem to think. If there were negative effects from giving up meat, I would have felt them, which has not been the case. Only good things have happened to me from giving up meat. I’m telling this from my own experience.”

*Question: Many Tibetans quote a Hinayana text that says that if meat is not heard, seen or suspected to have been killed for you, then it is acceptable to eat it. How do you respond to this?*

“If the animal being killed is unseen, then it is something like stealing something without being caught. That is also allowed in this thinking. You can say something dirty without being heard, as if you need evidence to judge whether it is a sin or not. What they say is not right. Killing, stealing and other negative actions can never be gotten away with. Even if other people don’t see you do them, the deities and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas see you doing these things. There is a Tibetan saying that even if one does not get caught committing a sin, that the gods catch you every time. It is impossible to do anything without being seen. You’re always being watched by the deities. They see and understand what you did—they know that you helped to kill an animal by buying meat. This is my answer.”

*Question: Some monks have told me that since insects are killed in the production of rice and other vegetables, then there is really no difference between eating those things and eating meat. What do you think about this?*

“This would mean that you wouldn’t eat anything and let the people die. If you say you were going to go for a week without killing insects through the food you eat, then you would die. If you die, this precious human life is being wasted. So if you just let your body be destroyed, that means you are taking your own life, which is killing in itself. You can always take the insect from the rice when you see it and let it free outside. You don’t necessary have to kill beings to eat. Although, when we walk we crush many insects under our feet. We may not see them or observe them, but still we must be killing them. Not being aware doesn’t mean that we have not created any sin. Because after all, cause and effect are always there.

“Every year there was a festival called *Yoray*. It was a time of year that the Tibetans don’t travel so much. It was observed primarily to avoid killing insects by walking. But, now in this decadent age, hardly any people make the effort to stay in one place for this long. We are nearing the end of an era, where people who say they are followers of the Buddha steal, commit adultery, and run businesses that profit from dishonesty. They do all sorts of unrighteous things. There are some bad obstacles to the Buddha Dharma, and due to this people do these things they are not supposed to do. Because of this, there is a lot of war, weapons and all sorts of negative things happening. The big nations and small nations all have disputes with each other most all the time. There is unrest everywhere. All of the negative actions are running rampant and sins are frequent. Because of that there is no timely rainfall, which leads to droughts. Natural disasters are common. Whenever someone says something it is always tinged with negativities. Those who live in peace and tranquility are being robbed. Those who are giving teachings of the holy Dharma to other people are not given the proper respect and the sacred Dharma is wasted. The situation is becoming very bad. Both outside and inside, there are disputes—among families and nations. These are the results of our past negativities, and we must take responsibility for them.”

### **Pema—Student of Buddhism (Late Twenties)**

I was fortunate to meet with the daughter of Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche, named Pema. Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche is the most prominent Nyingma figure in the United States, and his daughter grew up in the U.S., studying at Berkeley. She considers herself to be close friends with Chatal Rinpoche.

“Most Tibetans in Tibet don’t eat eggs. When Chatal Rinpoche was offered crepes a while ago, he asked me if they had eggs in them. I shook my head yes, and Rinpoche was repulsed by it and refused to eat them. Meat eating is high on Chatal Rinpoche’s spiritual radar. Rinpoche is so connected with animals. He loves animals. He loves watching wildlife videos on T.V. His great compassion

caused him to stop eating meat. He gives all his money to save 70 truckloads of fish in Calcutta. It is his most important yearly activity. He prays for every bucket-full he dumps into the ocean, trying to bring them to a higher rebirth. Tibetans have a guilt complex about their meat eating. When I say I'm vegetarian, they say 'That's great!' as if it is an enormous sacrifice that they can't fathom. In the Dharma, it is not just a matter of not doing something—not eating meat for instance—but actively protecting life. Rinpoche lives this. He is so connected on a vast level to sentient beings and their suffering.

“Rinpoche is drawn to dark, sinful, murderous places—to Hindu animal sacrifice areas. He took myself and his daughter Sera Sati to one once. It was beautiful on the outside, with flowers and carvings. He bought some birds in a cage and released them at the top of the roof. Then we came to the goat sacrifice place. At first I had my eyes closed, but then I saw it—innocent goats being murdered and blood everywhere. I was horrified. Rinpoche calmly walked all over the goat blood as if he was doing walking meditation. He wasn't a bit fazed by it. I think he was trying to teach us the lesson of being fearless and patient in the face of suffering. Goats are very sensitive beings—they were very afraid. It's so awful. Meat was such a turnoff to me at the cafeteria in Berkeley, where I went to school. Seeing it made me nauseous.

“Young monks who do not have good protein sources feel that meat is the essence of their diet. A small dollop of daal on their rice is about all they get without the meat. I can sympathize with this. I don't think it is a common thing to recite prayers while eating meat, although there may be some kind of an apology for the animals they are eating. The key is for high-level lamas who teach compassion to not eat meat themselves. Instead of just talking, they need to show compassion through their actions. It is common for Mahayana practitioners to look down on Hinayana monks—who are mostly vegetarian. They often say that since they have taken the Bodhisattva vows, they are above the Hinayana vows not to kill. But, of course, the Vajrayana recognizes that all three schools are essential aspects of cumulative Dharma.”

Chatal Rinpoche wrote a piece called On Flesh Eating which I will re-produce in its entirety at this point. It was translated by my friend Geshe Phelgye, and is yet unpublished in English, but available in Tibetan at bookstores.

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### **On Flesh Eating by Chatal Rinpoche**

Meat, the sinful food, is never permitted in all the three vows: not in the vows of individual liberation, the Bodhisattva vows, nor the tantric vows. Thus Buddha stated “I

have never approved, do not approve, and will never approve a meat diet.” He declared: “my followers must never eat meat.”

In general, both the butcher and the customer of meat will suffer in such realms as the burning and boiling hells. As Buddha said, “Killing animals for profit and paying for meat are both evil deeds; whoever does them will be reborn among the screams and cries of the hells.” Intentionally eating meat is violating Buddhist principles. “Even the so called ‘approved meat’ requires the effort of checking (if it is ‘approved’) and begging or some other means of attainment. Therefore, one should never eat meat. Both myself and other Buddhas say: an adept will not eat meat. Those beings which consume each other will be reborn as carnivores...they will give off a stench and be held in low esteem. Even after such miserable human births as these, they will descend lower, being reborn as such animals as cats and owls. Since the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and *sravakas* have all condemned meat-eating, one who still eats meat without shame will be reborn into insanity. Those who give up eating meat will be reborn as wise and healthy Brahmins. Meat which one has seen, heard, or suspected to have come from an animal slaughtered for meat is to be condemned. Dialecticians who are born as meat-eaters will not understand this. These close-minded meat-eating gossipers will one day blame me, saying that the Buddha has said that there is no sin in eating meat! An adept enjoys vegetarian food in appropriate quantity and views meat as unfit to eat as the flesh of one’s own son. Eating meat is a horrifying site and prevents progress towards *Nirvana*. One should not eat meat, for (practicing non-harm) is the victory banner of liberation.”

In the “Parinirvana Sutra,” Buddha speaks to Kasyapa saying, “Blessed son, those who have the mindfulness of the *shravakas* are not allowed to eat meat from now on. Even if one’s master offers one meat with genuine faith, one should see it as the flesh of his own son.” Bodhisattva Kasyapa asked Buddha, “Lord, why do you not allow the eating of meat?” Buddha replied, “Blessed son, eating meat hinders the development of compassion; therefore, whoever is mindful of me should not eat meat from now on. Kasyapa, wherever a meat eater goes, lies, sits, or walks other sentient beings become fearful upon smelling him. Blessed son, just as when a man eats garlic others will keep away because of his bad smell, likewise, animals, when they smell the meat eater, fear death.” Kasyapa asked Buddha, “Lord, as monks, nuns and novice monks are dependent for their food on other people, what should they do when they are offered food with meat?” Buddha replied to Kasyapa, “Separate the food and meat, wash the food, and then eat. You may use your begging bowl if it does not have the smell or taste of meat; otherwise you should wash the bowl. If the food has too much meat, one should not accept it. Do not eat food if you see that there is meat in it; if you do then you will accumulate demerit. There will be no end if I speak thoroughly about the reasons I do not allow meat-eating. I have given a brief reply because the time has come for my *parinirvana*.”

Buddha has further elucidated the faults of meat-eating in the “Angulimala Sutra” as well as in the “Siksammu Caya” compendium of precepts. Furthermore, the treasure teaching of Padmasambhava called “Rinchin Dronme” (“The Precious Lamp”)... clearly condemns the eating of meat for both lay and ordained people: “All the followers of

Buddha: monks or nuns, novice or lay have seven main principles to follow. These are 'the four root principles,' and abstinence from alcohol, meat and evening food."

If some people argue that Buddha's condemnation of meat applies only to the seven classes of Vinya vows and is unrelated to the Mahayana and Tantrayana, then this clearly indicates their lack of proper knowledge. They have not even seen the following chapter from the Vinya sutra: "Meat-eating is the diet that vanquishes the three realms (desire, form and formless realms). It is the weapon that destroys the potential for liberation. It is the fire that burns the seed of Buddhahood. It is the shaft of lightning that ends rebirth in the higher realms or a precious human rebirth." Since meat-eating is not approved for anyone, not for monks, nuns or lay-holders, those who are committed Buddhist practitioners are never allowed to eat meat. One who has taken the Bodhisattva vows will incur great sin in eating the flesh of sentient beings who were one's parents in past lives. Even in Tantrayana meat is not allowed until one attains the ultimate view and wisdom.

Tulshig Pema Dudul, speaking of a pure appearance, said: "The great compassionate one (Avalokiteshvara) appeared in the sky in front of me and spoke 'You have attained generating stages and acquired some knowledge, yet you are lacking in love and compassion. Compassion is the root of the Dharma and with compassion it is impossible to eat meat. One who eats meat will experience much misery and illness. Look at the miserable ones! Every one is experiencing suffering according to their deeds...One who gives up meat will not experience this suffering. Instead, great guru Buddha's deities, Bodhisattvas, and *dakinis* will rejoice and protect you.'" Having heard this, Tulshig gave up meat forever.

Many more renowned adepts have condemned meat as a poisonous food. Machig Labdron, a renowned female practitioner of *chod* had said, "For me eating meat is out of the question. I feel great compassion when I see helpless animals looking up with fearful eyes." Rigzin Jigme Lingpa, a great yogi of the Nyingma tradition stated, "Just as in the story of Arya Katayana going to beg for food, I see that the animal which this meat must have come from was our mother in earlier lives. If so, can we eat our own mother's flesh that was slaughtered by butchers? Imagine how much concern would arise! Therefore, if we concentrate honestly, there is no way we won't feel compassion for the animal."

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

“From the bottom of my heart I pray  
Never to be with carnivores and drinkers  
In this and lives coming  
May an ordained never be born where meat  
And alcohol are used without morality  
If I should die

Due to the absence of meat and alcohol  
That will be fulfilling of Buddha's wishes  
Thus I shall be a most successful adept!"

Bodhisattva Jigme Chokkyiwangpa said, "As Buddhists we have taken the triple refuge. To take refuge in the Dharma, one must practice nonviolence to sentient beings. Thus, if we continue to eat meat which has come from the slaughtering of innocent animals, then is this not a contradiction of our Buddhist commitments?"

Knowing all these faults of meat and alcohol, I have made a commitment to give up meat and alcohol in front of the great Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions as my witnesses. I have also declared this moral to all my monasteries. Therefore, any one who listens to me is requested not to break this Dharmic moral.

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The majority of these interviews seemed to have an anti-meat slant. Yet all but two of the interviewees ate meat. Some of the monks I talked to that I did not include in this chapter became very defensive about their meat eating, saying it is a central part of Tibetan culture and that it shouldn't be messed with. Others got angry, feeling they were being judged. However, my motivation throughout this process was simply exploration of how Tibetan people, known throughout the world as valuing compassion, justify killing animals for food. For the most part, I was very impressed with their sincerity and the thought put into their responses. We will see if the Tibetan custom of eating meat gradually changes to be in closer accord with the Buddha's doctrine, or if it remains integral to the Tibetan lifestyle.