



The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights

Norm Phelps

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Buddhism ought to be an animal rights religion par excellence. It has long held that all life forms are sacred and considers kindness and compassion the highest virtues. Moreover, Buddhism explicitly includes animals in its moral universe. Buddhist rules of conduct—including the first precept, "Do not kill"—apply to our treatment of animals as well as to our treatment of other human beings.

Consequently, we would expect Buddhism to oppose all forms of animal exploitation, and there is, in fact, wide agreement that most forms of animal exploitation are contrary to Buddhist teaching. Yet many Buddhists eat meat—although many do not—and monks, priests, and scholars sometimes defend meat-eating as consistent with Buddhist teaching.

The Great Compassion studies the various strains of Buddhism and the sutras that command respect for all life. Norm Phelps, a longtime student of Buddhism and an acquaintance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, answers the central questions of whether Buddhism demands vegetarianism and whether the Buddha ate meat. He is not afraid to examine anti-animal statements in Buddhist lore—particularly the issues of whether Buddhists in non-historically Buddhist countries need to keep or to jettison the practices of their historical homelands.

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