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*Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary
Buddhism*

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A Review of *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism*

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Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism. By James J. Stewart. London: Routledge, 2015, ISBN 1138802166 (hardback), \$128.94.

In *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism*, James Stewart situates his ethnography of contemporary Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka as a site for the formation of a form of modern Theravādin Buddhism. Stewart highlights many different Sinhalese Buddhist perspectives, both lay and monastic, to shed light on how Buddhists view issues of animal welfare, vegetarianism, and other dietary ethics. Stewart argues that the lived reality of Buddhist traditions for Sinhalese Buddhists is complex and encompasses a variety of voices and practices. Along these lines of inquiry, Stewart's work is positioned within the study of "popular religion," and valuable in understanding the practices and beliefs that play out and are lived out on the ground, in the streets, and at times contradictory to canonical Buddhist doctrine. Pointing specifically to the ethical discussions surrounding animal welfare and vegetarianism, the author problematizes and disrupts their assumed Buddhist endorsement. Stewart works to attend to the complex, and at times contradictory relationship between Buddhism in general and animal welfare

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and vegetarianism as this presumed connection has largely gone without critique. In addition to understanding the multifaceted lived traditions and religious practices of Sinhalese Buddhists, Stewart complicates the general vegetarian reputation of Buddhism, which he argues has been romanticized through European colonization. The expectation of vegetarianism in areas where lived reality involves meat consumption, Stewart argues, “may even be just another example of Western cultural neo-colonialism or orientalism” (5). Stewart’s work is a powerful addition to Buddhist Studies, particularly in regards to what has been interpreted as the dietary restrictions of the historical Buddha, while implicitly adding to the growing interdisciplinary fields of food studies and animal studies.

Stewart’s first chapter, “The lion and the cow,” begins with two seemingly “incompatible and at the same time mutually dependent” myths (12). As a symbol of Sinhalese ethnicity, lion imagery is common throughout Sinhala society as it is believed that the Sinhalese people were created through the union of a lion and a princess. The lion, as a fierce, carnivorous symbol, is instructive for Stewart. The use and prominence of this symbol calls into question the seemingly ordinary and religious activities of vegetarianism and nonviolence toward animals. On the other side of the duality is that of the cow, seen as a peaceful and innocent creature that, in her generosity, gives Sri Lanka the nutrition necessary to sustain the nation. The cow is humble, peaceful, nurturing and in need of constant protection. Stewart argues that this duality, between the symbolic relationship of lion and cow, “lies at the heart of the complicated attitudes Sinhalese have towards animals, animal welfare and the attitudes they have about food ethics” (12).

Through this symbolism, Stewart confronts the false assumptions regarding the vegetarianism of the Buddha and King Aśoka, exposing an enduring myth. Stewart’s textual and historical discussions then trace the ways in which animals were considered, protected, and eaten in Sinhala colonial society, under both the Portuguese and the British. While the *Mahāvamsa* and *Janavamsa* offer vegetarianism as a moral ideal, there was also the imposition of Portuguese and British colonizers, and the romanticization of Buddhism that sought vegetarianism as a way to “up-

lift the Asians out of their supposed moral degradation,” bringing the “true spirit” of Buddhism back to the Sinhalese people (29). In this first chapter, Stewart sets the stage for a complex discussion of the entangled tensions between vegetarianism and concern for animal welfare as the religious ideal and its lived reality, while also preparing readers to explore the inculcation of reform, known as Protestant Buddhism, in Sri Lanka.

In chapter two, “Eating, drinking, killing: Vegetarianism and animal welfare in Sinhala literature,” Stewart engages modern Sinhalese literature and literary activists influenced by the Buddhist canon as they attempt to persuade readers to vegetarianism. From the *Jātaka Tales* to Buddhist revenge literature, Stewart juxtaposes the seemingly indifferent attitudes toward vegetarianism in Buddhist canonical texts, not to mention the meat-eating tendencies of the Buddha himself, and the two distinct motives modern Sinhalese pro-vegetarian authors, such as the Vegetarian Society of Sri Lanka, propagate: (1) fear of other—worldly hardship or punishment in the afterlife; and (2) the Buddhist ethical goal of compassion and loving—kindness for the other. Suggesting yet another site of contention, Stewart situates the discussion between “the pro-vegetarian philosophical implications of the Buddha’s teaching, versus his explicit denial of the necessity of vegetarianism” (67).

Stewart’s chapter three, “Food of compassion,” describes vegetarianism as a religious ideal, but not something that is necessarily adopted in practice. For some of Stewart’s Sinhalese informants, vegetarianism was one type of practiced purity while others argued that vegetarianism was unnecessary. For pro-vegetarian informants (primarily Buddhist laity), Stewart found vegetarianism represented as “the first, arguably most important, principle of the five Buddhist precepts: the precept of nonviolence. To eat meat is to condone violence towards animals and animal violence is explicitly condemned by the Buddha himself” (74). In addition, these informants viewed vegetarianism as one way to purify one’s diet. By “[directing] compassion towards animals,” one could both exemplify kindness to all beings and protect against the possibility of

“accidentally killing a bodhisattva” or “indirectly [harming] former human beings [one] knew previously” (79).

While these pro-vegetarian and animal welfare stories seem to be religiously and culturally pervasive, Stewart is careful to also identify the detractors, or informants who were less than enthusiastic about refraining from eating meat. Many informants valued intention over action: “A good-hearted meat eater is better than a maliciously minded vegetarianism” (80). Many of these individuals further believed vegetarianism to be unnecessary “because, so long as they themselves are not killing the animal, there is no blame associated with buying and consuming meat” (81). While vegetarianism remains a “contested diet in Sinhala Buddhist communities,” Stewart notes that its widespread use may also be due to its comparable inexpensiveness, particularly when using food in religious and social occasions (95).

In chapter four, “The disciple’s diet,” Stewart uses the *Māḷigāva* almsgiving hall as a metaphor, “indicative of the complications associated with monastic attitudes toward vegetarianism . . .” (98). He describes two motives for abstaining from meat: one ethical and the other prudential. The former takes into consideration the harming of an animal while the latter tends to relate to possible health risks or conforming to social expectations. Understanding the difference between these ethical and social concerns, as Stewart effectively argues, is critical in understanding the multiple and complex attitudes Sinhalese Buddhist monastics have toward vegetarianism. Stewart relates that “monks interviewed routinely reject ethical vegetarianism outright or are otherwise indifferent” citing many who believed vegetarianism to be an extreme ascetic practice not endorsed by the Buddha (101–102). However, in concluding this chapter, Stewart revisits chapter two to compare monastic and lay perspectives on vegetarianism, and the differences and diversions within each, such as Venerable Kosgoda, whose vegetarianism was actually a monastic exception. Stewart argues that “this divide in the Sinhala literature between laity who are pro-vegetarian and monks that are anti-vegetarian again reinforces the significance of the Protestant Buddhist impulse, an impulse that tends to ally itself with the laity who seek to

reform Buddhism. Monks, on the other hand, prefer traditions to be maintained” (120).

“Milk of life,” Stewart’s fifth chapter, explores the efforts of the cow protection movement through vegetarian and animal welfare movements generally, and the *halāl* abolitionism movement in particular. While the vegetarian and animal welfare campaigns are less politically organized, the latter is more “radical and politically active” in the cow protection movement, specifically targeting Islam and the Sri Lankan Muslim community. Stewart confronts the special status and veneration of the cow, over other species, arguing that to contextualize the question is to look to Indian influences, the presence of cows in cultural areas such as literature, music, film and social media, and the underlying influences of the Kiri Ammā cult, which gives the cow protection movement a “quasi-religious element” (142). The significance of the cow over other species is due in part to this religious and historical trajectory: “The cow has reached a quasi-deified status while other animals have not” (142). As a deity, the cow is in need of both nourishment and protection. In addition, the cow’s milk is often related and directly connected to that of the human mother in Sinhala culture as a life source that “sustains the entire nation” (142).

In Chapter Six, “Meat aversions: vegetarianism, health food and medicine in Sinhala society,” Stewart opens with a story about the *Gangula Veda Medure (River Medical House)*. Noted as an exception in Āyurvedic medicinal treatment, which tends to employ animal parts in medicines and treatments, the family medical practice is known for its refusal to use animal products, rather creating treatments exclusively through plant-based products driven by their ethical concerns for the welfare of animals. While pointing to vegetarianism as a healthy life choice of many Sinhalese Buddhists, and simultaneously noting its inferior status to nationalist commentaries that view “non-Sinhala food and practices as a corrupting influence that harms people’s health,” Stewart successfully presents the vacillating tensions of politics, religious practice, and food of the “non-Buddhist Other” setting the stage for Chapter Seven, “Food politics” (170).

Stewart begins his discussion on the politics of food with the Sinhala Rāvaya, a nationalist Buddhist organization that seeks to outlaw *halāl* foods in Sri Lanka: “We are not asking the Muslim people to stop eating beef . . . we are just asking them to stop cattle slaughter” (175). Stewart argues that the issues at stake here are not just about the Buddhist ideal of compassion and loving-kindness but are at the heart of ethnic politics. Chapter Seven explores and unpacks the “entanglements of animal welfare with xenophobia and islamophobia . . . a peculiar development in modern Sri Lankan politics” (176). Noting Sinhalese Buddhist participation in anti-Muslim activities that have, at times, led to violent conflict, Stewart explores the influence of nationalism in Sri Lanka, the complicated history of Islam and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, specific Buddhist nationalist groups, and *halāl* abolitionism. Stewart ends this chapter with an interesting and thought-provoking tale of just how extreme *halāl* abolitionism can be by exploring suicidal ideation in connection with cow protection.

Stewart ends his monograph with a short conclusion, succinctly and articulately recounting his arguments. Primarily, Stewart is concerned with making sure the reader is aware of the multiplicity and often contradictory tendencies on the part of Sinhalese Buddhists when it comes to vegetarianism and animal welfare. Stewart argues that “to either completely dismiss vegetarianism or incorrectly assume its common practice are both overly simplistic” (200). Furthermore, there are clear distinctions between the choices of lay and monastic Sinhalese Buddhist practitioners, and exceptions even within these differing religious paths, due in large part to nationalizing tendencies and the modernization of Buddhism.

Overall, Stewart clearly presents the contemporary and historically complex attitudes of Sinhalese Buddhists, as an exposition of modern Theravada, toward vegetarianism and animal welfare. While he efficiently confronts the intersections of animals, food, ritual, and politics, focusing on religious practice and social movements, I would have liked to have seen more emphasis on the ways in which this text can be used in other disciplines besides the study of Buddhism, or how it situates it-

self within certain new, burgeoning fields, such as Food Studies and Animal Studies. With its interdisciplinary approach and its consideration of, and attention to, nonhuman animals, *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism* could be included in many other subfields. While his work is a new and powerful contribution to Buddhist Studies, particularly when considering the suggestion that the Buddha himself ate meat, Stewart may have missed an opportunity to explicitly contribute to and position his work in Food Studies and Animal Studies. However, by tracing myth, medicine, food, and religious practice, Stewart offers a comprehensive ethnography that would benefit many undergraduate or graduate classrooms on contemporary Buddhism, politics of food, animals and society, and much more.