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Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet

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A Review of *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet*

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Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet. By Geoffrey Barstow. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, 312 pp., ISBN 978-0-2311-7997-3 (Paperback), $27.00.

Geoffrey Barstow's *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet* is a highly readable, immaculately researched, and engaging contribution to the growing literature on dietary ethics and Buddhism.

The conflict between the Buddhist principle of non-violence and the practice of eating meat has often captured the attention of scholars who focus on Buddhist applied ethics. However, despite the fact that Tibetan Buddhism is one of the most well-known and appreciated forms of Buddhism in the world today, there has been little substantive analysis of ethical vegetarianism in the Tibetan context. *Food of Sinful Demons* remedies this deficiency comprehensively with a detailed examination of

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Buddhist and non-Buddhist arguments around the question of diet from a Tibetan perspective. *Food of Sinful Demons* is therefore recommended reading for anyone interested in applied Buddhist ethics broadly and virtually compulsory for those interested in the more specific matter of Buddhist dietary ethics. Barstow's masterful writing style ensures that this book is highly accessible and will be of interest to academics and the general public alike. Barstow has not unnecessarily burdened the text with extraneous technical language, and when he has found it necessary to introduce technical concepts, he explains their meaning in a lucid manner.

Barstow's overall argument in the book is twofold: First, he argues that Tibet has a strong vegetarian tradition largely inspired by Buddhist moral principles. Second, he argues that this vegetarian tradition has been complicated by countervailing beliefs, customs, and social practices which must be considered to properly contextualize the vegetarian tradition in Tibetan society (184). These arguments are put forward in a clear and well-reasoned manner, drawing primarily upon evidence from the Tibetan textual tradition. Barstow acknowledges the limitations of the project, noting that the project mainly focuses on the pre-communist period, prior to 1951 (15). Even so, Barstow does make some observations around contemporary practices of vegetarianism in Tibet in the last chapter, and notes that these contemporary movements would require further research.

In the following paragraphs, I will summarize the chapters in the book with some comments on areas that I found particularly interesting.

In Chapter One, "Introduction," Barstow outlines the overall goals of the book, discussed above. Barstow also introduces some of the key figures in the history of Tibetan vegetarianism and provides a general overview of some of the trends in this tradition. Of particular note here is the apparent lack of influence Chinese vegetarianism has had on the development of ethical vegetarianism in Tibet (29). Throughout the book we learn that Tibetan vegetarianism has largely been subject to internal debate over the proper interpretation of Buddhist scripture.

In Chapter Two, "Meat in the Monastery," we are introduced to the important observation that ethical vegetarianism has been mainly associated with Buddhist monasticism and that lay Buddhists are typically not expected to adopt this restricted diet (51). Even so, Barstow notes that the prevalence of vegetarianism was not particularly common even amongst the monastic community and the vast majority of clergy likely consumed meat. Of those who promoted vegetarianism, it was necessary for them to consider the Buddha's pronouncements that allow for meat to be eaten provided it is "pure in three respects." Vegetarian monks questioned these and other allowances in a range of different ingenious ways such as arguing that the "pure in three respects" rule is so narrow that monks may not eat meat in the vast majority of instances (54). Alternatively, vegetarian monks argued that the Buddha only intended for this rule to apply provisionally (57). Barstow also notes that the practice of vegetarianism comported well with the image of the monk who is considered morally pure and disciplined (63).

In Chapter Three, "The Importance of Compassion," Barstow clearly establishes the important role the Buddhist virtue of compassion played in the development of Tibetan vegetarianism. In the Mahāyāna tradition, we learn that the Bodhisattva Vow plays a significant role in motivating Buddhists to abandon meat consumption. Because Tibetan Buddhists regard the vow for personal liberation (*pratimokṣa*) as auxiliary to the vow to liberate all sentient beings, monastics are able to side-step the Buddha's injunctions that permit meat eating (84). Tibetan vegetarians are able to ignore the Buddha's allowance that meat may be eaten if it is "pure in three respects" by stating that this allowance is intended only for those on the "lower" path, whose focus is on attaining personal liberation, rather than the focus of compassion that is central to the Mahāyāna path. It is also interesting to note that Tibetan vegetarians deploy arguments common to other Buddhist vegetarian traditions, such as the view that meat eating leads to bad karma (78) and that we should view the meat we eat as if it were a loved one (82).

In Chapter Four, "Tantric Perspectives," Barstow explores the esoteric practice of Tantrism and its problematic relationship with vegetarianism. Vegetarian Tibetan Buddhists are confronted with a new difficulty, namely that the Tantric vows typically require the consumption of meat as part of ritual practice (92). Because the Tantric vows are the highest vows in Tibetan Buddhism, they are thought to supersede even the Bodhisattva Vows, which more clearly seem to preclude meat consumption. Barstow illustrates how vegetarian Buddhists attempt to address these Tantric requirements while still adhering to their vegetarian convictions in several interesting ways. For example, we learn that vegetarian monks sometimes use meat substitutes, such as appropriately shaped dough, and merely visualize the consumption of meat (101). Some insist that these Tantric injunctions are merely meant figuratively (96), while others relent and eat only a trace amount of meat in order to meet the needs of their vows (100). In general, we learn that Tantrism represents a genuine hindrance to the complete adoption of ethical vegetarianism.

In Chapter Five, "A Necessary Evil," we begin to see further how vegetarian practices in Tibet can be complicated by other countervailing factors. Indeed, the structure of the book overall is to begin with the vegetarian position as understood from a Buddhist perspective, and then gradually complicate these convictions through the introduction of specific practices, customs, and beliefs. In this chapter Barstow clearly articulates some of the negative consequences attached to vegetarian practice. We find that there is a strong view in the Tibetan literature that vegetarianism has negative health repercussions (115). These views are so strong that vegetarian Buddhists often allow for the suspension of vegetarianism during times of illness (126). As in other Buddhist cultures, such as Sri Lanka, vegetarianism is delineated according to class and affluence. Vegetarianism is not always practical, especially in the context of nomadic Tibetans who depend upon meat in the harsh Tibetan climate (119).

In Chapter Six, "A Positive Good," Barstow discusses the positive dimensions of meat consumption and the use of animals more broadly.

We find, for example, that Buddhists in Tibet are caught between a range of competing demands. On the one hand, there is the Buddhist impulse that seems to commit Buddhists to vegetarianism on moral grounds; yet on the other hand, medical necessity, masculine self-imagery, and economic necessity act against these Buddhist impulses. For example, Barstow illustrates that Tibetan Buddhists can find vegetarianism unappealing as it is sometimes viewed as emasculating (155). It is also construed as harmful to pecuniary interests as many Tibetans depend upon animal husbandry, and the products of these activities, for their livelihood (146). These observations are important as it shows that ethical vegetarianism in Tibet, as in other societies, is situated in a complex social and cultural context and that vegetarians must navigate competing concerns.

In Chapter Seven, "Seeking a Middle Way," Barstow discusses the way that these competing interests are managed by Buddhist authors in order to realize a compassionate life largely free of animal suffering. To achieve this middle way, Buddhist authors sometimes endorse partial vegetarianism (172), or encourage the consumption of meat from only animals that have died due to chance (176). Others maintain that cruel animal slaughter practices should be abandoned and individuals should at least buy meat from the market rather than killing the animal at home (175). Alternatively, they suggest that if meat is to be eaten it should be viewed with regret (176) or that a prayer should be said before the meal consumed (178). All these methods are intended to heighten an awareness for the more compassionate treatment of animals.

In Chapter Eight, "Epilogue: Contemporary Tibet," Barstow concludes the book by examining how these practices in the pre-communist era have impacted vegetarianism in modern Tibet. Barstow contextualizes the rise of the new vegetarian movement in light of the social and cultural upheaval Tibet has undergone as a result of Chinese occupation. Contemporary vegetarians in Tibet draw largely upon ideas and arguments from important historical figures outlined in the previous chapters (197). However, a new appreciation of Western medicine has helped address some of

the anti-vegetarian arguments around health and wellbeing (200). Even so, Barstow notes that while vegetarianism is becoming more popular in Tibet, there is still a strong opposition to its practice. In particular, some Tibetans see vegetarianism as a foreign interpolation that is eroding Tibetan nomadic culture (206). Likewise, Chinese economic reforms have only cemented the importance of wealth, generating even more of a market for Tibetan animal products (203).

In summary, *Food of Sinful Demons* is a comprehensive study of Tibetan vegetarianism within the context of the pre-communist era. It is a pleasurable read, thoughtfully written, and deploys well supported arguments that draw upon a wealth of Buddhist literature. I would encourage anyone with an interest in Buddhist ethics to get a copy of this book. I look forward to Barstow's further contributions to this subject.