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# The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights

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# Review of *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*

L. A. Kemmerer\*

*The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights.* By Norm Phelps. New York: Lantern Press, 2004. 208 pages. Paperback. ISBN 1590560698.

The first precept of Buddhism forbids the taking of life; eating flesh requires killing animals. Buddhist ethics are rooted in compassion, and animal industries in the West are shockingly cruel. So why do so many Western Buddhists eat meat, and even defend the practice? In *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights* (Lantern 2004), Norm Phelps explores Buddhist ethics in relation to dietary practices.

There is little point in discussing Buddhism, compassion, and diet if one does not know about animal industries, so Phelps provides a brief historic view of factory farming, along with statistics and an explanation of common practices in several animal industries, such as dairy, broiler hens, eggs, veal, beef, and hogs. “Ten billion cows, pigs, sheep, goats,

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chickens, ducks, and turkeys are killed for food and fabric. Of those, nine billion are chickens. Worldwide, 48 billion land animals are killed for food and fabric, of whom 46 billion are chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese” (3). And their deaths are often only the end, Phelps reminds us, of dismal lives at the hands of people who view farmed animals primarily as commodities, not as sentient beings.

Phelps then turns to explore Buddhism. He offers brief explanations and background information on topics such as texts and languages, disagreements and schisms, the life and death of the Buddha, *karuṇa*, *ahiṃsā*, and emptiness. He contrasts Eastern ideas with a brief survey of Western thought, including such notables as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Bentham. Phelps draws heavily from the writings and words of important contemporary Buddhist spiritual leaders, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the XIVth Dalai Lama (including personal communications), as well as contemporary scholars such as Philip Kapleau and Tony Page. His wide-ranging discussion of Buddhist schools encompasses both Theravada and Mahayana, along with an entire chapter on Tibetan Buddhism. Voices represented in *The Great Compassion* include practitioners from around the world. This dense material is covered in a familiar fashion, with anecdotes to bring home important points.

Phelps explains why we cannot be certain of the Buddha’s exact words. He looks closely at a handful of teachings from the Pali Canon and Mahayana scriptures, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, which includes an entire chapter on the question of eating flesh, the *Brahmajāla Sutra*, the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, and the *Jivaka Sutta*. He discusses the “almsbowl exemption” in depth—did the Buddha permit followers to eat flesh if it was offered to begging monks? He provides four possible answers to this particular conundrum, but with regard to all other flesh-eating, Phelps is clear: “both sets of scriptures agree that the Buddha forbade his disciples

to eat meat. *The Buddha's message to the modern world about meat is simple: Don't eat it* (80).

Phelps briefly discusses other forms of nonhuman animal exploitation, such as research, before examining a list of Buddhist teachings sometimes used to justify the eating of flesh. In this portion of the text, Phelps's voice is strong; he clearly speaks from his own experience and knowledge as a vegan Buddhist. For example, Phelps explores the question of equality between humans and other animals. He poses the question as many flesh-eaters have probably posed the question to Phelps: If all lives are equally precious, how come bad karma leads to birth as a pig or a dog, while good karma leads to birth as a human being? Shouldn't we let these animals live out their bad karma, including the horrors of factory farming, in the hope that they will gain a better birth in the future?

After explaining the question, Phelps offers necessary background information on such topics as the realms of rebirth in Buddhist cosmology. He explains that a human birth is more precious than other forms of existence because we have an opportunity to lead spiritual lives—human lives are spiritually precious. This does not make human life more valuable in the sense most Westerners tend to conclude. In Buddhist philosophy, all beings are “not simply equal, but are indistinguishable in their essential nature” (97). The only hierarchy with regard to karma and rebirth is one of suffering, not one of moral value. Living in the nonhuman animal realm often involves greater suffering than the human realm. This does not mean “that animals are inherently inferior to human beings or less entitled to our respect and our compassionate treatment” (98). On the contrary, Phelps notes, it is precisely because we are more fortunate that we ought to treat other beings with gentle consideration. To do otherwise is to fail to show Buddhist compassion, which might leave one at risk of an unhappy rebirth, perhaps in the animal realms. As he so often does, Phelps helps his

readers understand by offering an example: if an infant fell from a window, would we refuse to catch the tot, arguing that the wee person needed to live out his or her karma? If we came upon a car wreck would we leave the wounded to suffer their fate? The inevitable force of karma cannot be used as an excuse to turn our backs on suffering beings, let alone to participate willfully in such suffering.

In a chapter titled “The Cabbage and the Cow,” Phelps takes on the argument that killing is killing, one must kill to eat, and it matters little whether one kills and eats a cabbage or a cow. He focuses on the obvious difference between a vegetable and a mammal—sentience—and brings to light the link between Buddhist ethics, compassion, and sentience. This leads to a brief explanation of the doctrine of emptiness: Is the suffering of a Red Wattle hog an illusion? Phelps explains the distinction between ultimate reality and conventional reality, then recounts an exchange he once had at a Buddhist retreat. A young man, aware of Phelps’s commitment not to harm farmed animals, commented that vegetarianism “reflects a very superficial understanding of Buddhism,” then offered Phelps the argument from emptiness. Phelps responded by picking up a knife, testing its blade, and asking the young man to position himself over the sink so that his blood would not get onto the clean floor (116). The unsuspecting flesh-eater looked startled. “What are you worried about?” Phelps asked, “After all, in the ultimate sense, you don’t exist, I don’t exist, and my act of killing you won’t exist” (117). Whether or not one is schooled in Buddhist philosophy, it is as difficult to miss Phelps’s argument as it is to offer a viable Buddhist refutation.

Phelps repeatedly reminds readers that a vegan diet is not about salvation—it is not about humans at all. Choosing a compassionate diet is about farmed animals. For them, suffering and death in this world are intensely real. Consequently, Buddhist teachers who give the green light to

eating flesh may bring new converts into their ranks, but they misrepresent Buddhist moral teachings. Phelps quotes the works of Joseph Goldstein and Lama Surya Das and respectfully notes that they appeal to a Western world that is in the habit of eating flesh, but fail to teach Buddhist compassion. Phelps raises a critical question: Should Buddhists eat farmed animal products, given that these products do not reach us without extreme suffering and inevitably premature death, when we have other options and human beings have no nutritional need to eat animal products?

Phelps takes his argument one step further. Those who fail to encourage others to become vegetarians (or better yet, vegans) fail to practice the first perfection, *dāna*. Phelps explains that *dāna* includes “three types of gifts: food, fearlessness, and dharma” (160). He argues that practitioners who are too “compassionate” and non-judgmental to speak out against eating flesh fail to speak up for the weak and voiceless, and thereby fail to be compassionate. Phelps openly criticizes Buddhists who speak of compassion then buy suffering and death to satiate their palates: “vegetarianism *is* a more virtuous diet than meat-eating; it causes less suffering” (121). Strident? Maybe so, but Phelps is very clear that silence in the face of suffering is not consistent with Buddhist ethics, which are linked to wisdom and enlightenment. To explain his point of view, he asks if abolitionists should have been silent in order to avoid offending slave-owners.

Whether one is a Buddhist or not, whether one is a scholar or not, Phelps’s book will spark interest and encourage dialogue. His informative and entertaining work forces us to think more carefully about Buddhist morality and what we choose to eat. Whatever one chooses for dinner, Phelps makes a strong case: Buddhist ethics are to be lived in daily life; Buddhist ethics are about compassion. There is no greater suffering, in numbers affected, pain inflicted, and deprivations endured, than in factory

farming. If we buy eggs, milk products, or flesh, we support and encourage this cruelty. In retrospect, I am surprised that such a book is needed—but it is. Readers cannot help but wonder how Buddhists who defend flesh-eating will respond to *The Great Compassion*.