

Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>
Volume 20, 2013

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Buddhism Between Abstinence and Indulgence: Vegetarianism in the Life and Works of Jigmé Lingpa

Geoffrey Barstow¹

Abstract

Tibetan Buddhism idealizes the practice of compassion, the drive to relieve the suffering of others, including animals. At the same time, however, meat is a standard part of the Tibetan diet, and abandoning it is widely understood to be difficult. This tension between the ethical problems of a meat based diet and the difficulty of vegetarianism has not been lost on Tibetan religious leaders, including the eighteenth century master Jigmé Lingpa. Jigmé Lingpa argues repeatedly that meat is a sinful food, incompatible with a compassionate mindset. At the same time, however, he acknowledges the difficulties of vegetarianism, and refuses to mandate vegetarianism among his students. Instead, he offers a variety of practices that can ameliorate the inherent negativity of eating meat. By so doing, Jigmé Lingpa offers

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his students a chance to continue cultivating compassion without having to completely abandon meat.²

Tibetan Buddhism has long argued for the sanctity of life, condemning the killing of humans and animals alike. For just as long, however, meat has been a staple of the Tibetan diet. Individual religious leaders have dealt with this tension in different ways, but few have done so as revealingly as the eighteenth century master Jigmé Lingpa (*jigs med gling pa*, 1730-1798). In his religious and autobiographical writings, Jigmé Lingpa draws on Buddhist ideals promoting compassion towards all beings and his own unusually strong love of animals to praise vegetarianism and condemn the killing of animals for meat. Jigmé Lingpa also recognizes, however, that vegetarianism is a difficult ideal. Rather than insisting on vegetarianism, therefore, he offers his students a variety of means through which to moderate the negativity of eating meat without fully abandoning it. By doing so, Jigmé Lingpa offers his disciples a method to resolve the tension between Tibetan Buddhism's compassionate ideal and the practical difficulties of a vegetarian diet, allowing one to practice compassion without becoming vegetarian.

Tibetan Buddhism adheres to the Mahāyāna school of Buddhist thought, and, as such, largely defines itself through the persona of the Bodhisattva and the cultivation of compassion. Individuals are called upon to

² At the outset, I wish to extend my appreciation to the Fulbright U. S. Student Program, The Julian Green Fellowship and the University of Virginia, whose generosity supported this research. I would also like to thank Professor Janet Gyatso of Harvard Divinity School, who generously granted me access to her notes on Jigmé Lingpa's *Autobiography*, and Kurtis Schaeffer of the University of Virginia, who commented on an earlier draft. Finally, I would like to thank my research assistant Yeshé Drolma and the many other Tibetans who generously offered their insights to this project, but whose names I am withholding to protect their privacy.

practice religion not out of concern for their own suffering, but out of concern for the sufferings of others. In addition, practitioners are expected to put this compassionate orientation into practice, striving to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings—a category that explicitly includes animals—through both religious and worldly means.

Concerns over the compatibility of this compassionate attitude with a meat-based diet arose early in the history of the Mahāyāna, and several early Mahāyāna texts contain explicit critiques of meat. Among these, the text most commonly cited by later Tibetan authors is the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which D.T. Suzuki notes could have been composed no later than the third century (5). The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* contains an entire chapter devoted to the flaws of meat, focusing on the contradiction between meat and the compassionate attitude a Mahāyāna practitioner should display. Ultimately, the text concludes, “Because they cultivate the idea that all beings are their only child, Bodhisattvas possess the nature of compassion and do not eat meat” (Shakyamuni *lang kar gshegs pa'i mdo* 153b).³ Despite these concerns, however, vegetarianism does not seem to have become normative in Indian Buddhism. The seventh century Chinese monk Yijing, in fact, returned to China after fifteen years in India and explicitly reported that vegetarianism was not found in Indian Buddhist monasteries (Yijing 213.a06-213.a10; I-Tsing 58-59).

Yijing's emphasis on this point was likely prompted by the prevalence of vegetarianism among his own contemporaries in China (Benn 316). By the late seventh century, when Yijing was writing, vegetarianism had become normative for Chinese Buddhist monks (Kieschnick 201). Supported by a conviction that meat eating leads to a negative birth, vegetarianism spread steadily in China and eventually all devout Buddhists, both monks and laity, would be expected to adhere to a meat free diet

³ *sems can thams cad la bu gcig gi 'du shes su bsgom pa'i phyir byang chub sems dpa' snying brtse ba'i bdag nyid can gyis sha thams cad mi bza'o/*

(Kieschnick 187). By the late nineteenth century, vegetarianism had become so closely associated with Buddhism that Christian missionaries in Shanghai saw an individual's willingness to eat meat as proof that they had forsaken Buddhist beliefs (Reinders).

In contrast to the situation in China, meat remained common in Tibet. Despite the emphasis on the practice of compassion for all beings, the traditional Tibetan diet includes large quantities of meat. Meat is eaten dried and raw, steamed in dumplings or boiled in soup. Indeed, along with roasted barley flour and butter tea, meat is a key staple in the diets of most Tibetans, resulting in the death of many animals.⁴

The apparent contradiction between Tibetan Buddhism's idealization of compassion and the fact that Tibetans consume large quantities of meat has not been lost on Tibetan religious leaders, known as *lamas* (*bla ma*), and several reasons have been advanced to explain the importance of meat in the Tibetan diet. Foremost among these is the negative impact of vegetarianism on personal health. Tibetan medicine speaks of a need to maintain balance among the three bodily humors of wind (*rlung*), phlegm (*bad kan*), and bile (*mkhris pa*), and asserts that a meatless diet can result in an increase in wind, disturbing the balance and resulting in weakness and diminished energy.⁵

In addition to concerns over health, interviews conducted among contemporary Tibetans in the eastern region of Kham make it clear that the pervasive presence of meat in the Tibetan diet makes the adoption of a vegetarian diet difficult. Almost all informants, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, agreed that meat tastes good. Seeing it on a daily basis, there-

⁴ The anthropologists Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall note that a moderately wealthy nomadic family of five can consume the meat of as many as forty-five to fifty animals a year (99).

⁵ I base this brief description on a series of interviews with contemporary Tibetan doctors and medical students in Amdo during the summer of 2012.

fore, made complete abstinence a demanding proposition. One lama in his thirties, for example, looked at his friend's plate of meat dumplings and reported that although he had taken a vow to not eat meat for three years, he enjoyed the taste of meat so much he would not be able to continue with vegetarianism after this period was over. Interviews such as this one reflect the concerns of contemporary Tibetans, but we may suppose that similar concerns existed during earlier periods of Tibetan history.

Ultimately, for many Tibetans, meat was simply a part of life. The eighteenth century nun Orgyen Chökyi (*o rgyan chos skyid*, 1675-1729) makes this point elegantly in her *Autobiography*: “When I put goat's meat to my mouth, my mind is sad; Set in this human condition, we need food” (*o rgyan chos skyid* 9; Schaeffer 138).⁶ For Orgyan Chökyi—and presumably many other Tibetans lamas—meat is distasteful and opposes the ideal of compassion, but consuming it is also a necessary aspect of being human.

Not all Tibetan lamas, however, were content to apologize for the consumption of meat, and several have spoken out on the topic, offering a variety of methods for dealing with the contradiction between meat and compassion. For some of these figures, such as Dolpopa Sherab Gyeltsen (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292-1361) and Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl (*zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol*, 1781-1851), meat is simply incompatible with a compassionate mindset. These figures, and others like them, adopted a vegetarian diet and encouraged their disciples to do so as well, sometimes penning stinging critiques of those who ate meat. Other lamas have been more nuanced in their treatment of meat eating. Among these is the eighteenth century luminary Jigmé Lingpa.

⁶ *ra sha kha ru 'jugs dus sems nyid skyo/ mi yi lugs la rten nas zas dgos byung/* Citations in this article include the original Tibetan text followed by the English translation, if one has been published.

Jigmé Lingpa was born in 1730 in Central Tibet, not far from Lhasa. At age six, he became a monk at Palri Monastery (*dpal ri chos sde*), where he studied under several lamas of different schools. In his twenties, he undertook two three-year-long periods of seclusion. During these retreats, he had a series of visions during which he received prophetic teachings from the eighth-century Indian master Padmasambhava (*gu ru rin po che*) and the fourteenth century master Longchen Rabjam (*klong chen rab byams*, 1308-1364). After his retreats ended, he wrote out these visionary teachings and began spreading them to students. These teaching cycles were well received, and he quickly became known as a great master. By the time of his death in 1798, he was one of the most renowned religious figures in Tibet (Goodman 135-146).

Jigmé Lingpa was a prolific author, and his collected works stretch to over seven thousand pages, organized into nine volumes.⁷ These include an unusually candid autobiography, two volumes comprising the visionary teachings he received, and six volumes of assorted works of scholarship, religious advice, and history. Throughout these works, Jigmé Lingpa displays a degree of concern for animals that is uncommon for Tibetan lamas of his stature. He recalls writing a letter to the king of the eastern Tibetan kingdom of Degé, advising the king to free animals so that they may live out their lives in full, without the fear of being killed, “Give the gift of fearlessness, as this will lengthen your life”⁸ (*Autobiography* 409).

Jigmé Lingpa’s concerns for the welfare of animals were not expressed only to the political elite, however, and he also encouraged ordi-

⁷ For the purposes of this article, I am relying on the nine-volume edition of Jigmé Lingpa’s collected works, printed from woodblocks carved in the early nineteenth century and housed at the Degé Printing House (*sde dge dpar khang*). There is also a thirteen-volume collection of Jigmé Lingpa’s collected works, printed from woodblocks and held at Adzom Gar (*a ‘dzom sgar*), and there are also numerous editions of individual texts.

⁸ *mi ‘jigs pa’i skyabs sbyin dang/ bzod pa’i rten ‘brel las sku tshe ‘phel phyir/*

nary people to stop hunting. In doing so, he often used the threat of hell as motivation, bluntly telling one group of villagers, “To pursue innocent deer and destroy beehives is to create the causes for birth in hell” (*Autobiography* 282).⁹ Moreover, as in his letter to the king of Degé, Jigmé Lingpa holds up the promise of positive karma for those who save animals. By doing so, Jigmé Lingpa connects concern with animal welfare with larger Buddhist ethical frameworks, establishing it as an important aspect of an individual’s conduct.

Jigmé Lingpa did not, however, limit himself to encouraging others to practice compassion towards animals. His autobiography recounts numerous episodes during which he ransomed (*tshe thar*) the lives of animals himself. This practice involves purchasing animals destined for slaughter, marking them to show that they have been ransomed, and then releasing them into the wild, where their special markings will prevent them from being captured and slaughtered by others. From 1758 through 1769, Jigmé Lingpa systematically engaged in this practice, paying for the release of sheep, fish and rabbits on an annual basis (*Autobiography* 164). On other occasions, he ransomed animals less systematically, saving five sheep in 1775, for example, and a hundred more in 1780 (*Autobiography* 262, 309).

Once, Jigmé Lingpa even purchased the entirety of Wagom Mountain (*wa gom ri*) in order to seal it (*ri rgya*), legally preventing local villagers from killing bees for their honey (*Autobiography* 395). The practice of sealing mountains against hunting in this manner has a long history in Tibet. In examining this phenomenon, the anthropologist Toni Huber has noted that those who seal mountains against hunting are acting on a variety of motivations beyond mere concern for the hunted animals. As noted above, freeing animals is seen as a way of generating positive karma and eventually a positive rebirth. At the same time, rulers may also have hoped

⁹ *nyes med kyi ri dwags ‘ded pa/ sbrang tshang ‘rdi’ nas dmyal ba’i rgyu bsgrubs/*

that establishing such animal sanctuaries would bolster the legitimacy of their rule. Citing the administrative code of the regent Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1653-1705), Huber argues that by sealing hills and protecting animals, a leader could align themselves with what were perceived to be the duties of an enlightened ruler, thereby creating an aura of legitimacy around his rule (41).¹⁰

Although Jigmé Lingpa did not rule a state as Desi Sangyé Gyatso did, he was still responsible for overseeing a sizable monastic estate. Actions such as the sealing of Wagom Mountain, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to fulfill cultural expectations of what a lama should do, and thereby create a sense of his own legitimacy in that role. By performing—and recording—such actions, Jigmé Lingpa was aligning himself with the expected practices of a Tibetan lama.

Further, all the examples presented so far are drawn from Jigmé Lingpa's autobiography, and, as Janet Gyatso has shown, the autobiographical genre in Tibet often serves as a way of creating a sense of legitimacy around an individual's religious standing. Specifically addressing Jigmé Lingpa's writings, Gyatso argues convincingly that he uses two shorter autobiographical works to present himself and his visionary revelations in a way that aligns with cultural expectations for such a lama, creating an aura of legitimacy concerning his standing as a religious leader (116-121). It could be argued, therefore, that the concern for animal welfare demonstrated in Jigmé Lingpa's *Autobiography* is simply part of a larger program to generate a sense of legitimacy surrounding his status as a lama.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Desi Sangyé Gyatso ruled Tibet in the name of the Dalai Lama, and that his right to rule was not uncontested. He may, therefore, have had particular motivation for trying to generate a sense of personal legitimacy surrounding himself.

The language Jigmé Lingpa uses to describe his interactions with animals, however, suggests that although he is interested in portraying himself as a legitimate religious leader, he also has a sustained and personal affection for animals. In one striking scene, Jigmé Lingpa narrates an experience he had while traveling near the Indian border. In this episode, Jigmé Lingpa saw two female yaks, and decided to ransom them, reflecting that, “From the core of my being, I wished I had the power to save all the animals” (*Autobiography* 271).¹¹

The language he employed here, with the wish to save these animals arising “from the core of [his] being,” displays something of the emotions the experience provoked in him. A similar tone pervades Jigmé Lingpa’s other passages concerning animals. Further, this tone differs from the tone used in other passages of Jigmé Lingpa’s *Autobiography*. The personal nature of Jigmé Lingpa’s writing in these passages suggests that these reactions to animal suffering are not simply part of a broader attempt to justify his religious position through autobiographical writing.

This argument is also buttressed by a comparison between Jigmé Lingpa’s discussion of animal and that found in the autobiographies of other Tibetan lamas. While many such works do mention animals suffering and the actions the author took to relieve it, to my knowledge few do so as frequently as Jigmé Lingpa. Together, these points suggest that Jigmé Lingpa’s writing about animals and animal suffering is not simply a literary representation, but reflects a deeply personal affection and concern.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Jigmé Lingpa’s relationship with animals, however, is the way his compassionate response to animal

¹¹ 'bri gnyis go rar btsud pa mthong bas pha ma bsod du cha ba'i sdug bsngal byung/ de gnyis srog bslu'i brda sbyang bas dngul srang brgyad kyi gong btab/ sde pa'ang snang 'gyur nas 'bri gcig bslu ba mdzad/ sems can thams cad kyi srog skyob pa'i nus pa yod na snyam pa snying thag pa nas skyes/

suffering repeatedly sparks important religious experiences. During one early retreat on a remote mountain, Jigmé Lingpa recalls hearing an animal climb trees at night in search of baby birds to eat. Hearing the cries of the birds, he became very sad. For a time he defended the birds by throwing stones at the animal, but in the end he realized, “These so called 'happy experiences' don't exist anywhere. Thinking like this gave rise to a state of infinite sadness, and while it lasted I chanted the *maṇi*.¹² Within that state, all my coarse thoughts [dissolved] into the ground of all” (*Autobiography* 108-110).¹³

The most important example of Jigmé Lingpa's use of animal compassion to spark religious experiences, however, comes from the opening pages of his *Autobiography*. There, Jigmé Lingpa recalls seeing a group of sheep lined up for slaughter:

Seeing and hearing the killing of these beings, which reminded me of the actions of great dogs, caused me great suffering. I wanted to immediately liberate these beings from their suffering, and wished that I had a safe house to protect them. Such horrific activities occur merely because it was the season for slaughtering animals. Thinking like this, uncontrived compassion arose. Until that day, even though I had recited the words of the mind-training of the four immeasurables hundreds of thousands of times, I had never had true, uncontrived compassion of that strength.

¹² The most famous tantric mantra in Tibet, *om maṇi padme hung*, is often referred to simply as “the maṇi.” It is the mantra of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, and chanting it can be understood as a prayer for compassion.

¹³ *myong bas skyid po zer ba gang na'ang mi 'dug/ ci tshugs byed snyam nas sems sdug lang pa la tshad med pa zhig gi bar du ma Ni 'dren gyi na ba skad tsa na/ de kha'i ngang la 'dus shes 'di 'khrul kun gyi gzhi*

This experience was the most important event of my life.¹⁴
(14)

In this passage, Jigmé Lingpa's distress at the sight of animals awaiting slaughter provokes an experience of uncontrived compassion, an advanced mental state. Further, this experience, the most important event of his life, is explicitly contrasted with the compassion he developed through more conventional practices. For Jigmé Lingpa, compassion directed towards animals was a powerful soteriological method, capable of producing profound religious states.

Jigmé Lingpa also codified this idea, that compassion towards animals can spark religious experiences, in his advice manuals. In one such work, *Engaging the Path of the Buddha*, Jigmé Lingpa advises students to think that the animal whose meat they are about to eat was, in a past life, their kind parent and so should be treated with kindness in return. In so doing, he concludes, "If you are a normal minded person thinking about this, your heart will break, and you will necessarily develop compassion towards the animal. Then, even if you can't develop perfect compassion, something similar will definitely arise" ('jigs med gling pa *Engaging* 723; Jigme Lingpa *Entering* 133).¹⁵

¹⁴ *sems can gyi srog gcod pa mthong zhing thos pa'am/ khyi rab sogs kyi byed spo yod yid la dran pa tsam nas rang yang shin ti sdug bsngal zhing/ sems can 'di dag sdug bsngal 'di las da lta nyid du thar na snyam pa dang/ 'di thams cad kyi srog bskyab pa'i gnyer khang la yod na snyam pa dang/ sems can gsod pa'i nam zla shar ba tsam nas rnam pa kun tu gnas skabs 'di na mi bzad pa'i las 'di lta bu zhig yod 'ong snyam nas snying rje'i blo bcos min du skye ba 'di da lta'i bar du yod pas tshad med bzhi'i blo sbyong gi tshig tsam 'bum ther gsog pa bo las bcos min gyi snying rje shugs drag skye ba 'di don gyi chod che bar 'gyur grang snyams pa 'di bdag gi rnam thar bzang shos yin/*

¹⁵ *snyam du bsam mno zhig btang na blog zur gnas shig yin phyin chad snying rtsi shum shum ba dad sems can de la snying rje dbang med du mi skye ba'i thabs med/ de'i tshe byang chub kyi sems mtshan nyid dang ldan pa ma byung kyang rjes mthun zhig nges par skye ba*

There is also evidence that Jigmé Lingpa had a reputation for this technique among later Tibetans. In his *Notes on The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, for instance, Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang (*mkhan po ngag dbang dpal bzang*, 1879-1941) writes:

When meditating on compassion, the system of Apu [Patrül Rinpoché (*dpal sprul rin po che*, 1808-1887)] and Jowo [Atiśa (*a ti sha*, c. 982-1054)] is to meditate on one's present mother. According to the intention of Rigdzin Jigmé Lingpa, when you observe a being which is about to be killed, such as a sheep awaiting slaughter, or when you observe someone with a painful illness, imagine that they are either yourself or your old mother. Whichever method you want to use is fine.¹⁶ (*mkhan po ngag dbang dpal bzang Notes* 214; Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang *Guide* 148)

Their own written works demonstrate that both Atiśa and Patrül Rinpoché were also concerned with the well-being of animals, and yet Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang singles out Jigmé Lingpa as a proponent of developing compassion by contemplating animals awaiting slaughter. By the early twentieth century, it seems, Jigmé Lingpa was known for his relationship with animals, and for using that relationship to provoke religious experiences.

Among Tibetan lamas, Jigmé Lingpa was not unique for directing his compassion towards animals. Nor was he unique for having religious experiences sparked by the sight of animals suffering.¹⁷ His deeply per-

¹⁶ *snying rje bsgom pa la a bu dang jo bo'i lugs la/ rang gi rtsa ba'i ma nas bsgom/ rig 'dzin 'jigs med gling gi dgongs pa ltar na/ bsha' lug la sogs pa sems can gsod du nye ba'am nad pa dang sdug bsngal can zhig la dmigs nas rang ngam rang gi ma rgan gyi 'du shes bzhag nas bsgom pa yin/ gang ltar bsgom kyang chog la/*

¹⁷ Shabkar, for instance, had such an experience after saving insects dying in a pool that was slowly drying (zhabs dkar *Autobiography* 146a; Shabkar *Life* 169). Similarly, Jigmé

sonal responses to animals suffering, however, as well as the extreme importance he attached to experiences that arose through animal compassion, demonstrate a level of concern with animal welfare that is unusual among Tibetan lamas. Indeed, as Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang demonstrates, Jigmé Lingpa's spiritual heirs understood him to be particularly focused on compassion towards animals, contrasting his approach with ones promoted by other figures.

Given the strength and consistency of Jigmé Lingpa's concern for animals, it should not be surprising to find that several of his works are strongly critical of eating meat. In a short poetic work of religious advice, *The Well-Grounded Rabbit*, he declares, "Because meat is sinful food, think of it with deathly fear" (772).¹⁸

In articulating this critique of meat eating, Jigmé Lingpa relies on the importance which Tibetan Buddhism, as a part of the Mahāyāna, places on compassion. This point is made in the *Chariot of the Two Truths*, where, in the course of an extended discourse on the flaws of meat, he reflects, "Rather than some other system, where one pretends to be a follower of the Mahāyāna, but actually seeks only to eat meat and drink alcohol,¹⁹ those who follow after our Teacher [the Buddha's] great heart-teaching seek only to save the lives of beings" (349).²⁰ As this passage makes clear, Jigmé Lingpa sees both meat and alcohol as incompatible with Mahāyāna practice.

Gyelwé Nyügu (*jigs med rgyal ba'i myu gu*, 1765-1842) is said to have had a profound experience sparked by the sight of a sheep being slaughtered for him (mkhan po ngag dbang dpal bzang *Autobiography* 80).

¹⁸ *sha ni sdig pa'i zas yin pas/ gsad pa'i 'jigs pa dran par bya/*

¹⁹ As a sinful object of consumption, alcohol is often critiqued alongside meat in Jigmé Lingpa's works, as well as the writings of other Tibetan lamas.

²⁰ *theg pa chen po'i gang zag tu khas 'ches nas sha chang gi bza' btung 'ba' zhig don du gnyer ba ni lugs gzhan pa zhig las bdag cag gi ston pa thugs sde chen po dang ldan pa de'i rjes su zhugs pa rnams kyis ni sems can gyi srog skyob pa 'ba' zhig dang du blang zhing/*

When making this argument, Jigmé Lingpa repeatedly comes back to the notion that any given animal was once one's parent. In his *Autobiography*, he recalls an event during which villagers killed many animals in order to offer meat to the religious practitioners present:

In the view of the villagers, killing is a minor fault, and they hope that giving [to the meditators] will bring great [karmic] benefit. They think it is acceptable, because [giving to the meditators] will purify their faults, and it will connect the animals to religion with an iron chain. How could I be such an optimist? ... They are worldly people, so they do not recognize that all beings were their mothers. Thus they are able to kill them. But how can we dharma practitioners eat it without incurring a fault? These fathers, mothers, kinsmen and friends were all cherished in previous lives. ... Having now become animals, our previous lives's fathers, mothers, siblings, friends, etc., all tremble with fear in these butchers's hands, panting for breath with tears streaming from their eyes. In that state they wonder what to do. Alas, there is no refuge!²¹ (125-126)

²¹ Elided passages largely repeat the arguments made here and have been removed for the sake of brevity.

khong tsho'i snang ba la gsod ba'i nyes pa chen po de mi brtsi bar/ phran tshegs byin pa la phan yon chen po 'ong du re bas khong rang tsho'i nyes pa 'dag pa dang/ sems can de nged chos lcags thag 'then 'then byas chog pa lta bu'i re ba chen po zhig bdag ste ga nas yod/ ... sems can thams cad kyi rang gi ma byas/ khong 'jig rten pas de ltar ma rig ste gsod nus kyang/ rang re chos pa tshos bza' nus pa'i kha na mi 'dug/ de ci'i phyir na skye ba sngon ma'i pha dang/ ma dang/ spun dang/ mdza' bshes la sogs pa yid la gces ... lag tu rang gi skye ba sngon ma'i pha dang/ ma dang/ spun zla gnyen bshes la sogs pa de dag mthar chags su rtsis sprod byas ba'i tshe/ ma rgan de dag lus 'dar phri li li/ mig mchi ma khram khram/ dbugs spud pa lhed lhed pa'i ngang nas 'di snyam du/ da ci drag kyi hud/ 'bros sa ni med/

In this passage, one of his longest discourses on eating meat, Jigmé Lingpa bases his argument against meat on the idea that all beings have been one's parent and one's friend. Those who eat the meat of slaughtered animals, therefore, are repaying the kindness of their parents with violence.

In this passage Jigmé Lingpa also uses strikingly vivid language to describe the suffering animals undergo while awaiting slaughter, claiming they “all tremble with fear in these butchers's hands, panting for breath with tears streaming from their eyes” (*Autobiography* 126).²² Clearly, Jigmé Lingpa had a keen awareness of animal suffering. By using such vivid descriptions, Jigmé Lingpa tried to pass that awareness on to his readers. Further, this description of animal suffering makes clear that Jigmé Lingpa believed animals to have feelings and an awareness of their fate, and that these combine to produce an intense fear.

The critique of meat presented here hinges on the relationship between eating meat and killing animals. Many Tibetans who eat meat argue that this is entirely divorced from the act of killing. In this argument, a butcher who kills an animal is solely responsible for the death of the animal; the person who buys the meat does so after the death has already occurred, and bears no culpability, karmic or otherwise.²³

Given Jigmé Lingpa's concern for animals, it should not be surprising that he disagrees with this logic. We can see this implicitly in the

²² *ma rgan de dag lus 'dar phri li li/ mig mchi ma khram khram/ dbugs spud pa lhed lhed pa'i ngang nas 'di snyam du/*

²³ I have yet to find any Tibetan texts that actually promote this idea, though it was widely mentioned by contemporary informants in Tibet, India and Nepal. Further, it has been repeatedly critiqued by many authors supportive of vegetarianism, including Dolpopa, Shabkar and Patrül Rinpoché in addition to Jigmé Lingpa. It seems likely, therefore, that the idea that eating meat is wholly separate from the killing of the animal has been current at many points in Tibetan history.

above quote from his *Autobiography*, but it is made explicit in other works, such as the short *Tale of the Deer*. Here, Jigmé Lingpa tells the story of a hermit who encounters a hunter, whom he encourages to give up his sinful ways. The hunter is unimpressed, however, accusing the hermit of being a hypocrite, “Even if it is hunters like me who do the actual killing, the meat is bought and eaten by all of the so called ‘religious ascetics.’ It is laughable to claim there is a difference between the sin of killing and the sin of eating.” While the hermit eventually wins the overall debate, he is forced to concede on this point, “It is true: the religious ascetics who behave immorally, and the monks who uphold the 250 vows of the monastic code, will all be pursued by their karma” (‘jigs med gling pa *Tale* 759; Jigmé Lingpa *Story* 7).²⁴ Although they disagree about whether it is acceptable to kill, both the hunter and the hermit agree that the one who buys the meat is just as karmically responsible for the death as the hunter.

In addition to these appeals to Tibetan Buddhist ideals of compassion, Jigmé Lingpa also argued that eating meat is incompatible with the vows taken by monks. In *The Chariot of Two Truths*, he notes, “A Sūtra says, ‘Offering meat and alcohol [to monks] is like offering poison and a sword.’ Thus, the great faults of offering such things have been shown. What need is there to mention actually using them?” (348).²⁵ If substances such as meat and alcohol are inappropriate to offer to monks, Jigmé Lingpa concludes, they are also inappropriate for monks to consume.

In the *vinaya* (*‘dul ba*), the formal rules for monks, alcohol is clearly forbidden. The regulations regarding meat, however, are more open to interpretation. Strictly speaking, the *vinaya* permits meat as long

²⁴ *gsod pa rngon pa ngas gsod kyang/ za ba dge spyong rnams kyis za/ za dang gsod pa'i sdig pa la/ khyad par yod na gad mo bro/ ... tshul min spyod pa'i dge sbyong dang/ 'dul khrims srung ba'i nyan thos kyis/ nyis brgya lnga bcu'i khrims rtsal/ las kyis bda' 'ded 'phyugs ba med/*

²⁵ *mdo las/ sha dang chang gi sbyin pa dang/ dug dang mtshon cha'i sbyin pa dang/ zhes gnas ma yin pa'i sbyin pa'i nyes dmigs rgya cher bstan na/ longs spyod pa po smos ci dgos te/*

as the monk eating the meat is not directly responsible for the animal's death (Shakyamuni *'dul ba gzhi* 25a-25b). Tibetan commentators have often differed on how much emphasis to place on this rule, with many concluding that meat is broadly permitted, while others assert that such blameless meat does not exist, and monks should forsake all meat. By linking meat and alcohol in this manner, Jigmé Lingpa aligns himself with the latter interpretation.

Jigmé Lingpa's advocacy of vegetarianism was not without caveats, however. In several of his works, Jigmé Lingpa first strongly critiques meat, only to immediately soften his stance on the issue. In some instances, he does this by offering his readers prayers said to reduce the negative karmic repercussions of eating meat. In others, he presents a graded approach to avoiding meat, where it is important for some groups, but less so for others. Ultimately, despite his repeated critiques of meat and praise of vegetarianism, at no point did Jigmé Lingpa ever mandate a vegetarian diet among his students.

The most common way Jigmé Lingpa tempers his pro-vegetarian stance is by offering readers prayers they can recite to purify the meat they consume. Such prayers, usually recited over a plate of meat before it is eaten, but sometimes said at a distance, are intended to create a positive karmic connection between the animal and the religious practitioner about to eat the meat, helping the animal achieve a better re-birth. An example of such advice can be found in *Engaging the Path of the Buddha*, where Jigmé Lingpa encourages his readers to think of the dead animal whose meat is laid before them as a parent. As discussed above, Jigmé Lingpa suggests that contemplating in this way will naturally give rise to strong feelings of compassion. Jigmé Lingpa did not, however, ask his readers to use this compassion as motivation for adopting vegetarianism. Instead, he suggests, "Without reducing the strength of those thoughts, recite the *Kamkani*, the *Tsuktorma Mantra*, and the essential *Takdröl* as much as

you can. Then blow on the meat. Remaining aware of the situation, make strong prayers [for the animal's rebirth]" ('jigs med gling pa *Engaging* 723; Jigmé Lingpa *Entering* 133).²⁶ In *A Wondrous Ocean of Advice for Solitary Retreat*, Jigmé Lingpa recalls that he himself performed this practice during his periods of retreat, and encourages other retreatants to do the same ('jigs med gling pa *Ocean* 705; Jigmé Lingpa *Ocean* 5).

In addition to prayers to benefit the animals, Jigmé Lingpa also prescribes prayers specifically meant to purify the individual who has eaten the meat. Again, *Engaging the Path of the Buddha* provides a good example, "To repair the [karmic] faults incurred by eating meat, recite the mantra of *The Root Tantra of Manjusri* one hundred times and blow on the bones" ('jigs med gling pa *Engaging* 729; Jigmé Lingpa *Entering* 139).²⁷ Thus, Jigmé Lingpa offers prayers that enable a meat eater to purify both the dead animal and himself.

Purificatory practices such as these are not limited to questions regarding meat, but are part of a larger program of purificatory practices found in Tibetan Buddhism, including prayers and mantras such as those mentioned above, the twice monthly confession that all monks must make (*gso sbyong*) and the multi-day purificatory rituals known as *nyügné* (*smyung gnas*), during which all meat is forbidden (Wangchen 181-188). Jigmé Lingpa was, therefore, drawing on common models of purificatory practice and specifically applying them to meat.

By asking his readers to recite such prayers, Jigmé Lingpa softens his argument against meat, suggesting that although meat is bad, the reci-

²⁶ Merely hearing these mantras pronounced is said to lead beings towards liberation, even if they do not comprehend the meaning of the words.

de kha'i shes pa ngar mnyams pas kaM ka ni dang/ tsug tor ma'i gzung/ btags grol gyis yang snying sogs ci nus bzla/ sha la phul 'debs/ de la dmigs nas smon lam drag po gdab/

²⁷ *sha zos pa'i nyes pa bsal phyir 'jam dpal rtsa rgyud las bshad pa'i rig sngags ... / zhes tshar rgya tsam brjod cing rus pa la hus gdab/*

tation of the proper mantras and prayers can benefit the animals and so reduce meat's negativity. His followers are thus able to continue cultivating compassion and expressing concern for the welfare of animals without fully renouncing meat. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Jigmé Lingpa does not claim that purifying meat makes it fully acceptable. Not only did Jigmé Lingpa never make such a claim, but the practice of praying over meat before eating it serves as a constant reminder that meat is a fault requiring purification. Such a practice, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to bridge the tensions surrounding the consumption of meat by recognizing its sinful nature, while also allowing those unable to fully renounce it the ability to continue practicing compassion.

Jigmé Lingpa was not unique in using prayer to temper the negativity associated with meat, as can be seen in the *Autobiography* of the early twentieth century female lama Sera Khandro (*se ra mkha' gro*, 1892-1940). Sera Khandro was a lifelong vegetarian, but at age thirty she became ill and was advised to eat meat for a month, thereby restoring her strength and leading to recovery. She only ate this meat, however, after purifying it through prayers (356). Further, once she recovered her health, she returned to her customary vegetarian diet, indicating that despite having purified the meat through prayer, a fully vegetarian diet remained preferable. For Sera Khandro, as for Jigmé Lingpa, prayers recited over meat could reduce meat's negativity, but not negate it entirely.

In addition to offering such prayers, Jigmé Lingpa was also clear that he expected more from certain categories of individuals with regard to eating meat than from others. Above, we saw an extended quote from Jigmé Lingpa's *Autobiography*, laying out his case that meat was inappropriate because the animal had previously been one's mother. Speaking about the villagers, Jigmé Lingpa reflected, "They are worldly people, so they do not recognize that all beings were their mothers. Thus they are able to kill them. But how can we dharma practitioners eat it without in-

curing a fault?" (125).²⁸ Jigmé Lingpa was apologetic on behalf of the villagers; their ignorance of religious norms allows them to kill the animals without—or at least with less—fault. Religious practitioners, on the other hand, are aware of the need to treat all beings as one's parent, and so are unable to eat meat without fault.

In addition to arguing over the legitimacy of meat as a daily food, Tibetan Buddhists have also debated the permissibility of using meat during feast offering (*tsok*) rituals. Such feast offerings are an important part of Tibetan ritual practice, and usually include meat and alcohol, which are said to be purified through the course of the ritual. Tibet's more strident vegetarians, however, have often argued that meat and alcohol are inappropriate offerings for enlightened deities, whose minds are suffused with compassion. The eleventh century lama Gampopa, for instance, argued that, "Harming beings, and then offering them to the Three Jewels, is like cutting off a child's flesh and then serving it to the mother. It is useless" (Gampopa 197, 173).²⁹

On the other hand, many authors who are otherwise supportive of vegetarianism allow that, because the ritual purifies the negative aspects of meat, it is permitted and even required in such offerings. Jigmé Lingpa firmly backed this view. In his commentary on the ritual cycle known as the *Collected Intent of the Lamas*, he writes:

When performing many feast offerings, look at base and dirty foods such as the five meats, five nectars, garlic & onions, and impure meats such as fish and pork and [regard them] all as offering substances. Because they are offering

²⁸ *sems can thams cad kyi rang gi ma byas/ khong 'jig rten pas de ltar ma rig ste gsod nus kyang/ rang re chos pa tshos bza' nus pa'i kha na mi 'dug/*

²⁹ *sems can la gnod pa bskyal nas dkon mchog mchod pa ni/ bu'i sha bcad nas ma la ster ba dang 'dra ste don med*

substances, all dualistic thinking—dividing things into pure and impure, clean and unclean—must be abandoned.”³⁰
(303)

Here again, Jigmé Lingpa takes a moderate position on the use of meat, allowing it in certain ritual contexts.

Finally, despite repeatedly critiquing meat, Jigmé Lingpa never explicitly demanded vegetarianism from his students, instead relying on implication to induce his audience to avoid meat. We have just seen how Jigmé Lingpa, in his *Autobiography*, asserts that religious practitioners cannot eat meat without fault. Asserting that eating meat is a moral fault strongly implies that it should be avoided, but Jigmé Lingpa refrains from explicitly calling on his disciples to do so. A similar pattern is revealed in other works with significant discussions of meat, such as *Engaging the Path of the Buddha*, where Jigmé Lingpa critiques meat, but never actually mandates vegetarianism, instead offering readers prayers which can temper meat’s negativity.

In *The Chariot of the Two Truths*, where Jigmé Lingpa presents one of his most extended critiques of meat, the strongest statements against meat are all drawn from scriptural citations. When Jigmé Lingpa’s own voice is revealed, he is more moderate in his critique, repeating the assertion that meat is bad, but never demanding a vegetarian diet. For instance, he quotes the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, “O Mahamati, I view every sentient being as like my only child. How could I grant permission to the monks to eat my child’s flesh? To say that I have allowed my monks to eat [meat] and that I do so is not correct” (348).³¹ A few lines later, Jigmé

³⁰ *tshogs kyi yo byad ni sha lnga dang/ ... bdud rtsi lnga dang/ ... sha chang/ sgog btsong/ ... nya phag la sogs dman pa dang btsog par blta dgos pa thams cad tshogs pa yin phyir/ de'i dbang gi zhim mngar gtsang btsog thams cad la bzang ngan dang gtsang me'i gnyis rtogs med par/*

³¹ *blo gros chen po/ nga'i 'phags pa nyan thos rnams ni kha zas tha mal pa'ang mi zan/ sha dang khrag gi zas mi rung ba lta ci smos/ blo gros chen po/ nga ni sems can thams cad la bu gcig bzhin*

Lingpa speaks with his own voice, “Rather than another system, where one pretends to be a follower of the Mahāyāna, but actually seeks only to eat meat and drink alcohol, those who follow after our Teacher [the Buddha’s] great heart-teachings seek only to save the lives of beings” (349).³² As noted previously, this passage makes clear that Jigmé Lingpa felt meat is opposed to Mahāyāna ideals. Unlike the scriptural citation immediately preceding it, however, Jigmé Lingpa critiques meat without explicitly forbidding it.

Jigmé Lingpa’s reluctance to explicitly prohibit meat among his students, instead merely pointing out meat’s flaws, raises the question of his own diet. Was he a vegetarian? The numerous passages in his works where he critiques eating meat, denouncing it as sinful and pointing out the negative karmic consequences of eating it, would seem to suggest that he would not eat it himself. And yet, as we have seen, in *A Wondrous Ocean of Advice For Solitary Retreat*, he mentioned eating meat during at least one of the retreats he undertook in his late twenties.

The fact that he ate meat in his late twenties, does not, of course, mean he ate meat later in life. For further evidence concerning the presence of meat in Jigmé Lingpa’s diet, therefore, we must return to his *Autobiography*. Although this text does not mention eating meat, it also makes no claims that he ever adopted a vegetarian diet. The many passages in this work that do mention animals highlight his compassionate attitude and actions towards them, leaving no doubt of his willingness to discuss such topics and his desire to be seen by readers as compassionate to-

gyi 'du shes dang ldan pa yin na/ ji ltar bdag gis bu'i sha bza' bar nyan thos rnams la gnang bar bya/ rang gis za ba lta ci smos/ ngas nyan thos rnams la gnang ba dang/ bdag nyid kyis zos so zhes bya ba 'di ni blo gros chen po gnas med do/ ngas nyan thos rnams la gnang ba dang/ bdag nyid kyis zos so zhes bya ba {349} 'di ni blo gros chen po gnas med do/

³² theg pa chen po'i gang zag tu khas 'ches nas sha chang gi bza' btung 'ba' zhig don du gnyer ba ni lugs gzhan pa zhig las bdag cag gi ston pa thugs sde chen po dang ldan pa de'i rjes su zhugs pa rnams kyis ni sems can gyi srog skyob pa 'ba' zhig dang du blang zhing/

wards animals. Further, other autobiographies written by Tibetan vegetarians do highlight this aspect of their author's lives. Vegetarianism was rare among Tibetans, and those who adopted this diet generally wanted this fact to be known, as it demonstrated to others the authenticity of their religious practice. In that context, if Jigmé Lingpa was a vegetarian late in his life, when he wrote his *Autobiography*, or even if he had been a vegetarian for a period of time earlier, it seems likely that he would have mentioned this fact. Thus, without clear evidence that Jigmé Lingpa either did or did not eat meat, we have to entertain the possibility that Jigmé Lingpa himself may not have been vegetarian, despite his reservations about eating meat.

And yet Jigmé Lingpa clearly wrestled with this issue, on a very personal level, as can be seen in the passage from *The Tale of the Deer* quoted previously. In this text, written in the early 1760s, when Jigmé Lingpa was in his early thirties, he presents a dialogue of mutual recrimination between two figures, a hermit and a hunter.³³ In the exchange, we can see Jigmé Lingpa arguing with himself over the question of eating meat. Ultimately, the hermit wins the debate, but in the process he acknowledges the validity of the hunter's argument, perhaps reflecting Jigmé Lingpa's own struggle between eating meat and his recognition that by doing so he would be implicated in unethical activity.

Jigmé Lingpa's moderate stance on this issue contrasts with other Tibetan advocates of vegetarianism, such as Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl. Shabkar flourished roughly fifty years after Jigmé Lingpa, and his works have been described as offering "the most sweeping indictment of meat-eating to be found in Tibetan Literature" (Ricard 21). Like Jigmé Lingpa, Shabkar's *Autobiography* reveals a clear love of animals, and a consistent concern for their welfare. Unlike Jigmé Lingpa, however, Shabkar's auto-

³³ This text is undated, but Jigmé Lingpa's *Autobiography* mentions that it was composed shortly after his retreats concluded (160).

biography states explicitly that he adopted a vegetarian diet in his early thirties, maintained it throughout his life, and was not afraid to critique others for eating meat. He was so well known as a vegetarian that patrons were afraid of being rebuked if they even brought meat into his presence (zhabs dkar *Autobiography* 201b, Shabkar *Life* 232).

In addition to his personal vegetarianism, Shabkar penned several lengthy treatises on the topic, arguing against meat in the strongest possible terms (Ricard). Pointedly, Shabkar rejects the idea that meat can be purified through the recitation of prayers. In *The Nectar of Immortality* he compares people who recite such prayers to a cat which toys with a mouse before killing it, concluding, “Compassion like this, [reciting mantras] after the animal is killed and the meat is eaten, is like playing at prayer. Those who do so may appear lovely in the eyes of laypeople, but when examined, their intention and behavior is neither suitable nor helpful” (zhabs dkar *Nectar* 594; Shabkar *Food* 109).³⁴ Shabkar thus rejects Jigmé Lingpa’s primary technique for reducing the negativity of meat, accusing it of being mere sophistry, “playing at prayer.” Instead, Shabkar articulates a strategy of strict vegetarianism as the only means to fully embrace the ideal of compassion.

When compared with Shabkar’s strident rhetoric, Jigmé Lingpa’s moderate approach to vegetarianism is striking. Jigmé Lingpa never articulates the reasons for his reluctance to fully embrace vegetarianism, but we can suppose that he was drawing on many of the same reasons given by other Tibetans for the prevalence of meat in their diet: negative health consequences, lack of other food sources, and, perhaps most importantly, the simple difficulty of adopting a diet so strongly opposed to the surrounding culture. Jigmé Lingpa seemed to recognize that giving up meat is

³⁴ *bsad tshar zos tshar ba'i rjes kyi snying rje de dang/ rgyags rtsed kyis 'don pa 'dra bton na skye bo'i mi nag pa tsho'i mig sngar mdzes kyang/ bsam sbyor gang la bltas rung phan pa'i tshod na mi 'dug/*

a difficult step, beyond the reach of many—including, perhaps, himself. Thus, he may have been reluctant to fully embrace or advocate vegetarianism, despite his deeply held love of animals and his acknowledgement that eating meat is inseparable from the death of the animal.

It is clear that Jigmé Lingpa viewed meat as sinful. Even when prayers are used to purify the meat, he never claimed that these can completely eliminate the sinful nature of meat eating, or the negative karma which accrues from this practice. Any debate about meat in Jigmé Lingpa's works, therefore, was over practical, rather than ethical or philosophical, issues. As noted at the beginning of this article, meat is central to the Tibetan diet and abandoning it was felt to be quite difficult. Jigmé Lingpa recognized and respected this difficulty. Rather than simply mandating vegetarianism, Jigmé Lingpa tried to meet students half way, consistently condemning meat but also offering strategies to offset meat's negativity. By trying to bridge the tension between Tibetan Buddhism's compassionate ideal and the pervasive presence of meat in the Tibetan diet, Jigmé Lingpa established a practice which allows his students—and himself—to practice compassion without abandoning meat.

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