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# Taking Animals Seriously: Shabkar's Narrative Argument for Vegetarianism and the Ethical Treatment of Animals

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# Taking Animals Seriously: Shabkar's Narrative Argument for Vegetarianism and the Ethical Treatment of Animals

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## Abstract

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol's (1781-1851) collected works present one of the most sustained treatments of vegetarianism and animal ethics in Tibetan literature. His arguments for vegetarianism adopt two main formats: philosophical prose and narrative. In this essay, I analyze Shabkar's implicit argument for vegetarianism and the ethical treatment of animals in the narrative passages of his autobiography that describe his interactions with animals. By including animals as significant interlocutors in his autobiography, Shabkar reframes the relationship between animals and humans to be less anthropocentric and more based on the ideal of impartiality (*phyogs ris med pa*). In turn, this serves as an implicit narrative argument for the adoption of a vegetarian diet. This mode of argumentation

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differs from the majority of arguments for vegetarianism in Tibetan Buddhist literature which tend to be more philosophical in nature. Shabkar's narrative mode of argument is an example of the "act of social imagination" first identified by Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist narratives. These types of narratives cultivate an ethical ideal in an audience by prompting the audience into an "act of social imagination" that in turn forms the foundation for moral agency.

## Introduction

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol's (1781-1851) collected works present one of the most sustained treatments of vegetarianism and animal ethics in Tibetan literature. In addition to many short passages throughout his autobiography and songs that discuss animal ethics, Shabkar also devoted entire works or large sections of longer works to the topic. Examples include *Nectar of Immortality* (*legs bshad bdud rtsi'i chu rgyun*), *Wondrous Emanated Scripture* (*rmdad byung sprul pa'i glegs bam*), *Emanated Scripture of Compassion* (*snying rje sprul pa'i glegs bam*), *Dharma Discourse: the Beneficial Sun* (*chos bshad gzhan phan nyi ma*), and large sections of *Amazing Emanated Scripture* (*ya mtshan sprul pa'i glegs bam*).<sup>2</sup> These latter texts alone make up some 220 folio pages devoted to the topics of vegetarianism and animal ethics. In addition to these works, Shabkar's autobiography and *Collected Songs* also contain many passages that argue for vegetarianism or advocate for the ethical treatment of animals.

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<sup>2</sup> *Nectar of Immortality* (*legs bshad bdud rtsi'i chu rgyun*) and *Wondrous Emanated Scripture* (*rmdad byung sprul pa'i glegs bam*) are available in English translation in Shabkar's *Food of Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining from Meat* (Padmakara 2008).

In the context of Theravāda Buddhism, Ledi Sayadaw, one of the founders of the modern form of *vipassana* meditation, remarked that the Dharma is taught in two ways: “formulas suitable for memorizing over long periods of time, and instruction imparted directly and specifically to *individuals*” (Hallisey and Hansen 311). The former corresponds to what we might call abstract philosophical doctrine and the latter to doctrine conveyed in narrative form. Although Shabkar’s spiritual orientation was more Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna than Theravāda, his arguments for vegetarianism adopt the two formats described by Sayadaw: philosophical prose and narrative. Generally, Shabkar’s longer works about vegetarianism tend to adopt the format of philosophical prose and the sections of his autobiography that discuss vegetarianism tend to adopt a narrative format.

In this essay, I analyze the many narrative passages in Shabkar’s autobiography that describe his interactions with animals. I argue that by including animals as significant interlocutors in his autobiography, Shabkar reframes the relationship between animals and humans to be less anthropocentric and more based on the ideal of impartiality (*phyogs ris med pa*). In turn, this serves as an implicit narrative argument for the adoption of a vegetarian diet. This mode of argumentation differs from the majority of arguments for vegetarianism in Tibetan Buddhist literature, which tend to be more philosophical in nature. Furthermore, examining Shabkar’s use of narrative through the lens of Charles Hallisey’s and Anne Hansen’s study of Southeast and South Asian Buddhist narratives also gives us insight into how narratives can cultivate an ethical ideal in an audience by prompting the audience into an “act of social imagination” that in turn forms the foundation for moral agency.

### A Brief History of Vegetarianism in Tibet

For much of Tibetan history, vegetarianism was the diet of a small minority within Tibet's Buddhist monastic elite, tracing its roots to the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the thirteenth century, Tibetan Buddhist monastics began to develop a sophisticated scholarly literature that debated whether the consumption of meat should be permitted in their communities (Barstow *Food* 33-34). The tradition of monastic vegetarianism continued to be a relevant issue from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. However, the discussion remained largely confined to the concerns of monastics, focusing on specialized debates such as the compatibility of the consumption of meat with the Three Vows.<sup>4</sup> This literature also tended to be legalistic and philosophic in style.

The eighteenth century marked a turning point in the history of vegetarian thought in Tibet with the works of the Nyingma luminary Jigmé Lingpa (1730-1798). Not only is there evidence that he promoted a vegetarian diet to a wider audience, but within his writings on vegetarianism, there was a marked shift from the legalistic or philosophic tone of previous authors to one that “emphasizes the vivid suffering animals undergo, seemingly trying to create an emotional, empathetic response in his readers” (36). Lingpa served as spiritual predecessor to some of the most important advocates for vegetarianism in nineteenth century Tibet such as Jigmé Gyelwé Nyügu (1765-1843), Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887), and Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol. Like Jigmé Lingpa, Nyügu and Shabkar

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Barstow observes that beginning in the twelfth century, there is textual evidence of Tibetan Buddhist communities discussing the topic of abstaining from the consumption of meat, but there is no evidence that a vegetarian diet was normative (*Food* 31-33).

<sup>4</sup> The “three vows” are the vows of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vows, and the Vajrayāna vows. Geoffrey Barstow discusses the three vows in relation to the consumption of meat in detail in *Food of Sinful Demons* (33-34, 83-85).

both used affective techniques to generate compassion for animals in order to encourage their audiences not to kill animals or eat meat.

Shabkar dedicated his entire life to advocating for the welfare of animals and urging humans to abstain from consuming meat. Throughout these works, Shabkar presents a variety of arguments for vegetarianism. Most of these arguments fall into two main categories that have roots in pre-existent Tibetan and Indian Buddhist canonical literature on the ethics of eating meat. The first argument is that eating meat prevents Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioners from cultivating genuine compassion.<sup>5</sup> Echoing countless Mahāyāna scriptures and treatises before him, Shabkar remarks: “The state of omniscience arises from bodhicitta, which arises from compassion as its root.”<sup>6</sup> According to this line of thinking, if a Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioner does not generate compassion, then it is not possible for the practitioner to develop the mind of awakening (Skt. *Bodhicitta*). In turn, without *bodhicitta*, it is not possible to attain enlightenment. Following in the footsteps of many of his spiritual predecessors, Shabkar holds that “the greatest hindrance to generating great compassion in one’s mind is craving meat.”<sup>7</sup> This is because eating meat involves the act of killing. Because other sentient beings are believed to have been one’s parents in a previous life, killing them represents a grossly uncompassionate act. Shabkar makes regular reference to this argument throughout his works on vegetarianism.

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<sup>5</sup> Shabkar’s two main arguments for vegetarianism—based on the concepts of karma and compassion—are most succinctly captured in a sermon in his autobiography. Excerpts from these passages are translated in Geoffrey Barstow’s *Faults of Meat*, 215. The original reference is Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus 2*: 488.1-488.4.

<sup>6</sup> *Bodhicitta* (*byang chub kyi sems*) means “the mind of enlightenment” and describes the mental vow to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Cultivating it is a foundational practice in both Mahāyāna *sūtra* and tantric Buddhism. Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus 2*: 488.1-488.4.

<sup>7</sup> Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus 2*: 488.1-488.4.

Shabkar's second argument is that consuming meat produces negative karma that leads to rebirth in the hell realms. The karma argument has deep precedents in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist canonical literature that advocates for a vegetarian diet (Barstow *Food* 79). Although Shabkar refers to this argument in all his vegetarian works, he states it most succinctly in one of his sermons on vegetarianism in his autobiography. He states, "Generally speaking, [eating meat] causes rebirth in the lower realms. More specifically, taking life is the main cause for rebirth in the hells. The main reason why people take life is for meat."<sup>8</sup> Again, as he presents the "compassion argument" in multiple ways throughout his collected works, the same is true for his "hell argument."

Instead of focusing on Shabkar's explicit arguments for vegetarianism found throughout his collected works, in this paper I explore the implicit narrative argument for vegetarianism found in Shabkar's autobiography. I argue that the many passages devoted to describing his interactions with animals in his autobiography reframe the relationship between animals and humans to be based on the ideal of impartiality (*phyogs ris med pa*) and thus less anthropocentric. In turn, embedded within the narratives is an implicit narrative argument for the adoption of a vegetarian diet. This type of orientation is not new, but rather a revival of an orientation present in early Indian canonical literature as well as other Buddhist cultures such as Chinese Buddhism. What Shabkar is doing here, however, represents a significant innovation in the history of vegetarianism in Tibet.

### **Animals and Tibetan Buddhist *Namtar***

In its most literal rendering, the Tibetan word *namtar* (*rnam thar*) means "full liberation [story]" (Gyatso 6). The term is rendered into English in a

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<sup>8</sup> Zhabs dkar, *snyigs dus* 2:488.1-488.4.



variety of ways, including “life story,” “hagiography,” or, simply, “life.”<sup>9</sup> According to the first Jamgön Kongtrül (1813-1899), “the term applies to any remarkable story that recounts how someone becomes completely freed from suffering and its causes, and thus is able to free another’s mind-stream from bondage” (3). In traditional contexts, the main purpose of Tibetan Buddhist stories of complete liberation is to generate faith in the audience and to provide a spiritual exemplum for its followers to emulate (Pang 387). Although the exact contents of Tibetan Buddhist life stories may differ from case to case, they are generally devoted to recounting the spiritual deeds of a protagonist such as their spiritual training or religious activities. These stories are often filled with both human and non-human interlocutors. Human interlocutors may be spiritual teachers, religious companions, or ordinary laypeople. Non-human interlocutors may include buddhas, bodhisattvas, *ḍākinīs*, local deities, and even demons.

Animals, on the other hand, while not unheard of, are not typical interlocutors in Tibetan Buddhist life stories. This is especially the case for lamas of high stature (Barstow *Buddhism* 79). For example, when we examine the autobiographies of Shabkar’s most significant predecessors—Milarepa (1053-1135) and Kalden Gyatso (1607-1677)—descriptions of their interactions with animals are included in their collected songs but not in their *namtar* proper. In this respect, Shabkar’s autobiography is highly atypical of the genre in that his autobiography is replete with accounts of his interactions with animals.<sup>10</sup> Shabkar’s autobiography contains numerous detailed descriptions of his interactions with goats, sheep,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, both Kurtis Schaeffer (2004) and Andrew Quintman (2010) translate the term as “Life” in the life stories of Orgyen Chökyi and Milarepa, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> The animals figure mostly in the parts of his autobiography that deal with when he is in mountain retreat. As he moves on, there is less about animals and more about his more traditional religious deeds.

wild horses, wild yaks, cuckoo birds, baby birds, bees, owls, ants, tadpoles, and so forth. He even describes having a conversation with a flower.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Janet Gyatso explains that “the authority of tradition and lineage, and the inspiration of the masters of the past, determine the value of virtually anything” (45). Moreover, the act of introducing something new in the form of an “invention” (*rang bzo*) was highly frowned upon and sometimes even punished (Dreyfus 45; Lopez 245). Because of the value placed on following tradition, Shabkar’s decision to depart from tradition and include so many interactions with animals is especially noteworthy. I suggest that Shabkar’s inclusion of extensive descriptions of his interactions with animals in his autobiography forms an implicit argument for vegetarianism that is the natural extension of the impartial ideal that he lived and advocated in his autobiography.

### **Vegetarianism and the Impartial Ideal**

The words “impartial” and “unbiased” are translations of the Tibetan term *phyogs ris med pa* and its variants. In contemporary times, this set of terms is most often rendered phonetically into English as Rimé in the context of the non-sectarian movement in nineteenth-century Eastern Tibet.<sup>11</sup> In Tibetan Buddhist canonical literature, however, Marc-Henri Deroche explains that the term and its variants “(1) do not deal with the level of religious tolerance; (2) render a variety of Sanskrit terms; (3) apply

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<sup>11</sup> The non-sectarian “movement” first came to the attention of Euro-American scholarship with Gene Smith’s article, “Jam mgon Kong sprul and the Nonsectarian Movement” first published in 1969 and 1970. Since Smith’s groundbreaking contribution, contemporary scholars continue to affirm the importance of this historical moment while problematizing the characterization of Jamgön Kongtrül and his collaborators as a “movement” (Gardner 348).

as epithets to different soteriological ideas; (4) and through the negation of bias express[es] non-dual, transcendental or “universal” perspectives” (143). Thus, in Tibetan Buddhist literature, the term is most often tied to the soteriological context of the different aspects of the Buddhist path. The portrayal of this concept in Shabkar’s *Collected Works* corroborates with Deroche’s thesis. In Shabkar’s *Collected Works*, the word and its variants have a large semantic range; it is used in contexts describing physical location, spiritual training, the ideal form of compassion, and the mind’s natural condition (Pang 435-6).

Shabkar’s concept of impartiality stems from his experience of the awakened mind which encompasses all phenomena, including sects and other beings. In the song of “definitive meaning” (*nges don*) that follows, Shabkar describes the enlightenment experience. This song belongs to the genre of “songs of spiritual realization” (*mgur*) that is composed and performed extemporaneously. Such songs are believed by Tibetan Buddhists to convey the enlightened experience of Buddhist masters in an unmediated way. The following is an excerpt from the song:

Vast like the sky, and profound like the ocean—  
 Bright like the sun and clear like crystal—  
 free from concepts—like grasping at the reality of the atmosphere—  
 the mind itself [is] free from extremes, it is the dharma expanse.  
 Not falling into the extreme of eternalism, nothing whatsoever is established;  
 Not falling into the extreme of nihilism, it manifests as clarity;  
 Not unitary, the multitude of phenomena arise;

Not many, it abides as one taste with the manifest mind.  
 (Zhabs dkar *bya btang* 5:62-5)

In this song, Shabkar describes the enlightened state as “the mind itself free from extremes.” The “extremes” he cites are dualistic concepts such as eternalism and nihilism, one and many, or good and bad. Individuals who have experienced this spiritual awakening are impartial towards all that they encounter. For such individuals all divisions that exist in the human realm such as “species,” “sect,” and so forth are human-fabricated and thus, arbitrary. Indeed, we see this in the way that Shabkar portrays his behavior in his autobiography. The Tibetan Buddhist autobiography, or *namtar*, is supposed to depict the ideal Tibetan Buddhist life lived and provides a model for posterity to emulate. Shabkar describes himself as being impartial in the attention he pays to people from all walks of life. For example, he interacts with kings, beggars, men, women, Buddhists, non-Buddhists, Tibetans, and non-Tibetans with the same kindness and open attitude.

### **Taking Animals Seriously**

One group of interlocutors that figures prominently in the first half of Shabkar’s autobiography is that of animals. Shabkar describes his many interactions with animals in extended narratives. This is highly atypical of the autobiographies of lamas of his stature (Barstow *Buddhism* 79). Not only do biographies of high lamas not describe their interactions with animals in detail, but activities such as life release or the ransoming of animals are generally not seen to be as important as official religious

activities such as giving empowerments, transmissions, and instructions to disciples.<sup>12</sup>

The major thrust of Shabkar's arguments for treating animals kindly and abstaining from meat is at heart an extension of his embrace of the unbiased attitude. In his autobiography in particular, the inclusion of extended passages that describe his interactions with animals serve as an implicit argument that the way Buddhists treat animals matters. According to this line of argument, if one is truly awakened, then one would treat animals in the same impartial manner as one does humans from different socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast to other concepts in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy that emphasize the superiority of humans to animals such as the "Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to the Dharma," Shabkar emphasizes the continuities between animals and humans.<sup>13</sup>

One example of how Shabkar takes animals seriously is how he teaches the Dharma to animals. While en route to the holy mountain Anyé Machen, Shabkar encounters several wild horses and their young. Shabkar pities them for not having the chance to understand the Dharma. He sings the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara "slowly and melodiously" to them (Shabkar 159; Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus*, 1: 270.3-271.4). The horses gather around him and listen as he sings a song teaching them the Dharma. In Tibet, wild horses are afraid of humans, and it is highly uncanny for them to gather around a human. Indeed, Shabkar's two travel companions describe being in awe at the scene. Although the way that Shabkar teaches Dharma to animals is not a common occurrence in the genre of *namtar*, it has deep precedents in Indian Buddhist literature. In the *Haṃsa Avadāna* for instance, there is a story of geese who are part of

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the autobiography or biography of Jamgön Kongtrul (Barron 2003; Gardner 2019).

<sup>13</sup> For a classic discussion of these Four Thoughts, see Patrul Rinpoche's *Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

an assembly who listen to a sermon by the Buddha (Ohnuma 34). After they die, they are reborn among the gods.

Shabkar also envisions animals as possessing the capability to teach humans the Dharma. While on meditative retreat on Tsonying island at the center of Lake Kokonor, Shabkar sees a cuckoo bird on the island. A fellow hermit remarks that he had not seen a cuckoo since his ten years on the island. Shabkar, concluding that the bird could be a bodhisattva, composes a series of songs from the bird's perspective (Shabkar 112-114; Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus* 1:186.5-190.3). In a song dialogue with Shabkar, the bird exposes the hypocrisies of human Buddhist practitioners and urges them to practice the Dharma properly. Through what we might call a role-playing exercise, Shabkar attempts to empathetically understand what an enlightened bodhisattva-cuckoo would have to say about the behavior of humans. This is the ultimate example of seeing things from the cuckoo bird's perspective.

Using stories about animals to illustrate the faults of the human world is a very old literary technique in Buddhist literature which has precedents in the *jātaka* tales (Ohnuma 51-52). In the *jātaka* tales, the animals are used as a foil to expose the immoral behavior of humans (Ohnuma 51-52, 77). The difference between the *jātakas* and Shabkar's tale of the cuckoo is that the *jātakas* are presented as if the tales actually transpired whereas in Shabkar's songs of the cuckoo, it is clear that he is composing on the cuckoo's behalf. Thus, in creating a less anthropomorphic focus by taking on the perspectives of animals, Shabkar is not inventing something new but reviving a popular trope from ancient Indian literature.

Another way that Shabkar demonstrates an impartial attitude towards animals is by paying attention to life forms that are usually overlooked or seen as pests by humans such as insects. While meditating at Tigress Fort, Shabkar describes a "small, beautiful, sweet-voiced bee"

challenging him about his claim of using “appearances as books” (Shabkar 83; Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus* 1: 136.3). Shabkar sings a song to the bee. Impressed, the bee respectfully circles around Shabkar in a clockwise direction and then flies away. Shabkar treats animals as if they were humans, embodying the ideal of impartiality and the Mahāyāna ideal that all sentient beings were once his mother.

In this interaction with the bee, Shabkar is making an indirect commentary on an incident from his spiritual predecessor Kalden Gyatso’s collected songs. In the incident, Kalden Gyatso describes remaining aloof to a group of bees who attempt to initiate a conversation with him in the wilderness (Sujata 98-102). The bees remind him of his religious vows and criticize Gyatso for being a hypocrite. In the end, Kalden Gyatso thanks the bees for their lesson. Shabkar was intimately familiar with Gyatso’s songs; his encounter with the bees must be read in relation to the story from Kalden Gyatso’s life. Unlike Kalden Gyatso, Shabkar does not fall into the trap of looking down on the bee, but rather, he adopts an utterly impartial attitude towards it, treating it as he would a human. Shabkar’s wholehearted interaction with the bee decenters the human and expresses the “impartial” (*ris med*) ideal. Thus, in contrast to Kalden Gyatso’s initial aloofness towards insects, Shabkar encounters insects with an open attitude that decenters the anthropocentric point of view prevalent in Tibetan Buddhist literature. In addition to conversations with bees, in his autobiography Shabkar also describes how he saved the lives of small tadpoles and did rituals for the consciousnesses of dead ants (Shabkar 169, 103-4; Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus*, 1: 289.4-290.2, 168.6-170.1).

Given Shabkar’s intimate relationship with animals, it makes sense that he would not eat them. In one of the most famous scenes in Shabkar’s autobiography, Shabkar vows in front of the Jowo statue in Lhasa to never eat meat again for the rest of his life after seeing hundreds of carcasses of

slaughtered goats and sheep stacked along the route for sale by butchers. Shabkar recounts:

Feeling unbearable compassion for all the animals in the world who are killed for food, I went back before the Jowo Rinpoche, prostrated myself, and made this vow: “From today on, I give up the negative act that is eating the flesh of beings, each one of whom was once my parent.” (Shabkar, 232; Zhabs dkar snyigs dus 1:401.6-402.1)

Shabkar’s vow to abstain from meat arises from a feeling of unbearable compassion upon seeing the corpses of animals—whom he truly views as his equals—beings sold for meat. His vow is not the result of abstract philosophical reflections on how eating meat will result in his accruing negative karma or prevent him from generating genuine compassion, but rather, a visceral reaction to the suffering of his fellow sentient beings. In other words, Shabkar becomes a vegetarian because that is what one does if one truly views animals with the impartiality of the enlightened experience.

Related to the issue of not eating animals is the issue of not mistreating them. Shabkar advocates for the humane treatment of animals throughout his autobiography. His *Dharma Discourse: the Beneficial Jewel* gives a more sustained treatment of this topic. There, he lists the many ways that humans exploit animals: horses that are placed in stirrups and harnesses and whipped as if their buttocks were a drum; dzos, yaks, and donkeys who are sold for profit; dogs who have stones thrown at them, and so forth (Zhabs dkar *chos bshad* 101.5). He also gives more specific examples such as of people who abandon their old dogs after they have committed a life of service to their family (Zhabs dkar *chos bshad* 92.1), or “demon women” who do not feed these dogs, in effect starving them to death (Zhabs dkar *chos bshad* 92.5). Shabkar warns them that such actions will lead to dire karmic consequences, such as being beaten repeatedly by the



Lord of Death and having boulders hurled at oneself after one dies (Zhabskar *chos bshad* 93.1, 101.1-3). In future lives, one will also be subject to painful chronic illnesses as a result of beating other sentient beings (Zhabskar *chos bshad* 101.4).

Therefore, the narrative descriptions of Shabkar's interactions with animals make an implicit argument that the voices of animals need to be taken seriously and that they should be treated as equals with humans. This is an extension of Shabkar's embracing of the ideal of impartiality, which encompasses all phenomena. Because it is not common for *namtar* to include animal voices the way Shabkar's does, this is a noteworthy occurrence that draws our attention. By including diverse inter-species interlocutors, Shabkar's autobiography demonstrates a less anthropocentric orientation than is typical of the genre, which forms the basis of one of the implicit arguments for vegetarianism found in the narrative sections of his autobiography.

### **The Power of Narrative Argument**

Inspired by theorists of narrative such as Martha Nussbaum and Frank LaCapra, Anne Hansen and Charles Hallisey have considered the role that narratives play in Buddhist ethical lives in South and Southeast Asia. I will show how their study illuminates how Shabkar's interaction with animals in his narrative writing works to cultivate an ethical ideal in its audience. In turn, this helps to uncover potential reasons why Shabkar chose to defy convention and include extensive stories about animals in his autobiography.

One memorable scene in Shabkar's autobiography involves his interactions with thousands of baby birds while on meditative retreat on Tsonying Island in Lake Kokonor. I quote the scene in its entirety because it illustrates the extent to which Shabkar used narrative to convey the story. Shabkar describes the scene as follows:

When I was living at Tsonying, I noticed an eagle that, each spring day, caught three or four of the thousands of baby waterfowl that couldn't fly yet. The eagle tore out and devoured their hearts while they were still alive. Feeling intense pity, each year during those two spring months, I tried to protect the small waterfowl from the eagle. They soon understood that I was protecting them and would come and gather near me on the shore of the island. Whenever the eagle approached, they cried out miserably.

One day I ran after the eagle wielding a slingshot; when the eagle saw me it faltered and fell into the water. It lay there flapping in the water, exhausted and it began to sink, looking right at me. I felt sorry for it, hauled it out of the water, and put it on the shore. When it had dried a little. I tied the slingshot around its neck and scolded it, saying, "When you're killing little birds, you're quite brave, aren't you? I tapped it several times on its beak and claws with a twig, and just left it there for a while, then freed it. It didn't come back for some time.

One day the eagle came back and caught a fledgling. I rushed after it and when it landed on a boulder, I hit it with a stone from my slingshot, almost killing it. It flew off, leaving the baby bird sprawled on its back. I thought the little bird's heart had already been torn out, but when I picked it up, I saw it had just lost consciousness out of fear. Upon reviving, it looked at me and then scampered back into the water.

Protecting them in this manner during those two years, I saved several thousand small birds. When they could fly, I used to make this prayer:

Like these fledglings  
 That now can fly about happily,  
 Free from fear of the eagle,  
 May all beings be freed from all fears  
 And be established in happiness.

I told the other retreatants staying in this sacred island to protect the small birds as I had done; later I heard they did so and saved many lives. (Shabkar 139; Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus* 1:235.2-236.6)

This scene could have most certainly been described in a few sentences or less. In fact, Shabkar's spiritual predecessor Jigmé Lingpa recounts a similar incident in his autobiography in less than three sentences (Barstow "Buddhism Between" 83; 'jigs med 108.2-.3). Why did Shabkar choose to narrate the incident in a detailed manner? One reason is that Shabkar used stories to teach Buddhism in a way that made the doctrine more palatable to readers. Shabkar states this as his reason for adopting narrative or poetic modes in his autobiography and other works (Shabkar 10, Zhabs dkar *snyigs dus* 1: 22.6-23.1). This strategy of mixing Buddhist doctrine "with honey to make it drinkable" is very old, as in the example of the second century CE Indian poet-philosopher Āśvaghoṣa in his *Buddhacarita* (Steiner 94).

Still, considering Hansen's and Hallisey's studies on the subject, another possible reason the passage is more descriptive is that narratives represent "acts of social imagination" where the audience can "enter imaginatively into the experience of a character in a narrative" (313-314). Through the extended description, the audience develops sympathy for the baby birds and comes to understand what motivates Shabkar's actions. We earlier saw Shabkar do something similar with his description of what a cuckoo-bodhisattva would say about humans. In the words of

Hallisey and Hansen, Shabkar's encounter with the cuckoo bird represents an "act of social imagination" where the audience enters imaginatively into the experience of the cuckoo bird.

The power of narrative does not stop there. The second component of this "act of social imagination" is that it serves as the foundation for moral agency. In other words, "narrative prefigures moral life because it cultivates the capacity of imagination that is essential for ethical action" (316). By using narrative to convey this story, Shabkar is creating the potential for the audience to cultivate the foundation to engage in ethical action by inviting them to see the world from the perspectives of the characters in the narrative. After reading or hearing the story, these ideals do not remain in the realm of abstract philosophical doctrine, but rather embed themselves in the ethical imagination of the audience. Thus, whereas an argument expressed in philosophical prose might convince an audience that a vegetarian diet is the most ethical one for a Buddhist, this would not necessarily compel the person to act. The same argument expressed in a narrative, however, has the potential to translate into actual ethical action because the audience enters the imaginative world of the characters of the story.

The fact that narratives have the potential to be an "act of social imagination" and serve as the foundation for moral agency fits well into Shabkar's own understandings of the functions of Buddhist life stories. Throughout his collected works, he exhorts his audiences to emulate the lives of past masters (*rnam thar skyong*). According to this theory, one learns to be a Buddhist by listening to the life stories and emulating the behavior of past masters. The point of reading their life stories is not for them to remain in the abstract realm of philosophical discourse, but rather for practitioners to live their lives according to Buddhist ideals and practices.

Furthermore, narratives also can convey the lived experience of Buddhist ideals in a way that philosophical prose cannot (317). Take the doctrine of karma, for example. As put by Richard Gombrich, “by the law of karma every intention good or bad will eventually be rewarded or punished, so prudence and true morality must necessarily coincide” (246). However, this law fails to capture the nuances of how the doctrine of karma may *feel* on the ground. In their analysis of the story of Bandhula, about the death of an honest judge, Anne Hansen and Charles Hallisey point out that stories such as this serve to bridge the gap between the explanatory function of karma and how it feels experientially in everyday life (318). Similarly, in the case of Shabkar and the baby birds, Shabkar’s narrative captures the ethical nuances of protecting the baby birds in a way that philosophical prose cannot. When moral rules are conveyed in philosophical prose, they seem clear cut. The moral practice expressed in Shabkar’s story about the baby birds is the practice of giving protection from fear within the section the practice of the *pāramitā* of generosity, which is part of the bodhisattva path. The *Torch of Certainty* by Jamgön Kongtrül is a work of philosophical prose that describes this practice. He writes:

“Giving fearlessness” means curing disease, protecting others from misfortune directing them out of chasms, escorting them out of danger and removing hindrances to their achievement of siddhis and moral conduct. Truly, practice this type of generosity as much as you can. Protect others from the “four injuries”: legal punishment, enemies, thieves and wild animals. Then pray for the ability to save them from the miseries of the three lower realms. (106)

The practice of giving fearlessness, as expressed here in philosophical prose, seems straight-forward. However, as is illustrated by Shabkar’s narrative treatment of this ideal, by protecting the baby birds, he is in fact

depriving the eagle of his food.<sup>14</sup> If he were truly being impartial, he would protect the baby birds while also giving the eagles a food source. The narrative treatment of this passage reveals how on the ground, the practice of Buddhist ethical ideals is a nuanced experience. The ideals may be clear-cut, but the actual lived experience of it is not.

As is demonstrated in his works devoted to the topic of vegetarianism and animal ethics such as *Nectar of Immortality* and *Emanated Scripture of Compassion*, it is clear that Shabkar is deft at making robust philosophical arguments supported by citations from Tibetan canonical literature. What we see in his autobiography is the narrative expression of these same ideals that he writes about at length in his more philosophically styled works. Philosophical prose is the realm of the learned Tibetan monastic scholars. Philosophical works on vegetarianism are important for establishing authority and validity of the arguments among the learned religious elite. But how effective are they for convincing the mass populace to engage in a vegetarian diet? If philosophical arguments for vegetarianism in Euro-American philosophy are a good indicator, convincing someone logically that they should be a vegetarian does not necessarily translate to them becoming a vegetarian (Gruen “Introduction”). While we do not have objective empirical data that surveys the effectiveness of Shabkar’s narrative arguments for vegetarianism, work by scholars of narrative such as Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen indicate that narrative has the capacity to serve as an “act of social imagination” that forms the foundation for moral agency. When he preached about

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank Barbara Ambros, Janet Gyatso, Eric Meyer, and Reiko Ohnuma for making this point during the 2020 AAR annual meeting in the “Animals and Religions” Unit. In particular, Ambros noted how Shabkar’s response is limited in comparison to literature by advocates for vegetarianism in other Buddhist tales such as the story in the form of a jataka tale in Zhuhong’s *Jiesha fangsheng wen* (*Tract on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Life*) in which the Buddha cuts off a piece of his own flesh to feed the hawk that was deprived of food as the result of saving a pigeon.

vegetarianism, the bulk of his sermons were in the form of stories. Shabkar understood that narratives could move his general audience more than philosophical prose.

### Conclusion

Through his autobiography and other works, Shabkar presents one of the most sustained treatments of vegetarianism and animal ethics in Tibetan literature. In this essay, rather than focus on Shabkar's more explicit discussion of vegetarianism in works such as his *Nectar of Immortality* or *Wondrous Emanated Scripture*, I have analyzed Shabkar's implicit argument for vegetarianism as found in his autobiography. I demonstrated that the many extended passages within Shabkar's autobiography that describe his interactions with animals serve to reframe the human-animal relationship in Tibetan Buddhist literature to be less anthropocentric.

Specifically, adopting the impartial attitude that arises with the awakened mind, Buddhists should treat animals as they would their human counterparts. This includes treating them humanely, not killing them for meat, and not eating them. Drawing from the work of Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen on South and Southeast Asian Buddhist ethical narratives, I further argued that Shabkar giving space to animals in his autobiography represents an "act of social imagination" that serves as the foundation for moral agency. By encouraging his readers not just to pay attention to animals, but to imagine their perspectives as well, the animals become embedded within the ethical imagination of the audience. Here, Shabkar is beginning to solve a problem that Euro-American philosophers of animal ethics has struggled with, namely, how convincing someone on a logical level that they should not eat meat does not necessarily translate to lived behavior. By making an implicit argument for vegetarianism

through narrative, Shabkar demonstrates how he understood that stories could move his audience in a way that philosophical exposition could not.

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