



Buddhist Teachings on Animals

By Dharma Voices for Animals

Overview

Buddhism is the world's sixth largest religion with some 385 million adherents, most of whom live in South, Central, and East Asia. It is also among the fastest-growing religions in the West. Buddhism was founded some 2500 years ago by the Indian sage Siddhartha Gautama.

"Buddha" is a title meaning "the enlightened one." Buddhism is divided into two schools: the Theravada (TAIR-uh-VAH-duh), or southern school, which is prevalent in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, and the Mahayana (MAH-hah-YAH-nuh) or northern school, prevalent in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia and Viet Nam.

Each of these schools is organized into several denominations, usually based on country of origin. Doctrinally, the differences between the two schools are minor, and are mostly matters of emphasis rather than outright disagreement. Rituals and practices, however—which are typically based on some form of sitting meditation and/or mantra recitation (sometimes in the form of chanting)—may vary considerably from one Buddhist community to another.

Teachings

Like its sister religions, Hinduism and Jainism, Buddhism is a path of liberation; that is to say, it teaches that there is a higher, truer level of reality than the one we experience every day, and that the goal of life is to escape this lower, coarser everyday world and gain union with the ultimate reality, where sorrows, trouble and death cannot intrude. In Buddhist terms, this is often called "enlightenment," "Buddhahood," or "Nirvana."

One enters Nirvana by training one's mind to directly intuit the ultimate reality that lies hidden behind the appearances of everyday life while simultaneously generating boundless, universal compassion for all sentient beings. All forms of Buddhist practice, in every denomination, are first and foremost programs for training the mind in gaining immediate, intuitive insight into the nature of the true reality and generating ever greater compassion for all sentient beings.

Buddhist Ethics

Buddhist ethics are consequentialist and based on the intention of the agent. An act that is committed with the sincere intention of creating happiness for others—or easing their

suffering—is virtuous, while an act committed with the intention of harming others, or with a callous disregard for their suffering, is nonvirtuous.

Judaism and Christianity have the Ten Commandments. Buddhism has the Five Precepts, which are *Do not kill*, *Do not steal*, *Do not lie*, *Do not commit sexual misconduct* (usually interpreted to mean acts that break a vow, such as a marriage vow, or acts that are coercive, such as rape or sex with a minor) and *Do not use alcohol or other drugs that cause heedlessness* (except for legitimate medical reasons).

Nonhuman People

The traditional understanding of the First Precept, *Do not kill*, is not restricted to its literal meaning. Peter Harvey, a Buddhist scholar and ethicist at the University of Sunderland in the UK, points out that, “Each precept has a positive counterpart.”¹ And American Buddhist scholar at the University of Virginia, and former translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, tell us that “Not merely not killing, but preserving lives is the first of Buddhism’s commandments.”²

This precept has always been understood by all denominations of Buddhism to apply to all sentient beings. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen teacher who is, along with the Dalai Lama, one of the two Buddhist teachers best-known and most-revered in the West, tells us that, “In every country in the world, killing human beings is condemned. The Buddhist precept of non-killing extends even further, to include all living beings.”³ And Nhat Hanh goes on to say, “I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world . . .”

Vegetarianism

The Mahayana scriptures portray the Buddha as requiring his followers to be strict vegetarians in all circumstances. In the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha is quoted as saying, “I have not permitted meat eating by anyone. I do not permit it. I will not permit it.” In this same scripture, he gives the reason, “If meat is not eaten by anybody for any reason, there will be no destroyer of life.”

The Theravada scriptures (known as the Pali Canon, from the ancient Indian language in which they are written) describe one specific circumstance in which meat could be eaten. Monks ate only one meal a day, which they begged from householders in the community. According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha allowed his monks to eat meat placed in their alms bowls if and only if they had no reason to suspect that the animal had been killed specifically to provide meat for them.

Some modern Buddhists argue that they can eat meat bought in restaurants and supermarkets because the animal was not killed specifically for them. In fact, they say, the butcher didn’t even know they existed. But this argument misses the moral point of the Buddha’s teachings on

meat. The meat sold in supermarkets and restaurants comes from animals who are killed specifically to provide meat for whomever will buy and eat it.

When you buy meat in a restaurant or supermarket you are paying a butcher to kill an animal. The fact that the animal is typically killed in anticipation of the order being placed, rather than after the order is received, is merely a peculiarity of our modern style of commerce. When you buy meat, you are voluntarily enlisting in the class of people for whom the animals were killed. And the grocery store or restaurant where you bought the meat will immediately place an order for another animal to be killed to replace the meat that you purchased.

The Buddha never forbade eating milk and eggs. But the Buddha never saw a factory farm in which laying hens are crammed into tiny battery cages for their entire lives. And living in ancient India, where cows were sacred and it was forbidden to slaughter them, he never heard of milk cows being killed when they were too old to produce or their male calves being slaughtered to make veal.

There are no reliable statistics on the number of Buddhists who are vegetarian, but worldwide it is probably about half. In the West, the percentage may be a good bit lower.

Conclusion

The key teachings of Buddhism about animals are these:

- 1) Animals and humans share the same essential nature. We are not a separate class of beings to whom a separate class of ethical rules applies.
- 2) The highest Buddhist virtue is compassion, which we are to show to all sentient beings at all times.
- 3) We should do all in our power to avoid causing suffering or death for any sentient being.

As the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*, perhaps the most widely known and best loved of all Buddhist scriptures:

All beings tremble before danger. All fear death. When you consider this, you will not kill or cause someone else to kill. All beings fear before danger. Life is dear to all. When you consider this, you will not kill or cause someone else to kill.

¹ Harvey, Peter, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; pg 68.

² Thurman Robert, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*. New York, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998; pg. 123.

³ Nhat Hanh, Thich, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guides for Engaged Buddhism*. Berkeley, Parallax Press, 1987; pg. 42.

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