



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

Buddhism

Historical and Contemporary References on Animals from the Buddhist traditions

“May all that have life be delivered from suffering.” –The Buddha

General Information

It is important to remember that the term “Buddhism” encompasses a great variety of religious schools in many countries around the world—from Siam Nikaya Buddhism in Sri Lanka, to Shingon Buddhism in Japan, to Soka Gakkai Buddhism in the United States. Nevertheless, it can be said that every form of Buddhism emphasizes acting compassionately towards all life. This, of course, includes animal life.¹

The Buddha

Buddhists are followers of the Buddha and his teachings. The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama in modern-day Nepal. Most scholars believe that he lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE.

According to traditional biographies, Siddhartha was the son of King Suddhodana and Queen Maha Maya. One night, the Queen dreamt of a white elephant. The elephant touched her side and little Siddhartha was miraculously conceived. Seers and Brahmin scholars predicted that the unborn child would become either a great king or a great holy man. When Siddhartha was born, he pointed up with one hand and down with the other, signifying that he would unite heaven and earth. He then took seven steps, and with each step a lotus flower blossomed. Siddhartha proclaimed, “I alone am the World-Honored One!”²

Queen Maha Maya died soon after Siddhartha’s birth. The King raised his son in their lavish palace and shielded the boy from the knowledge of human suffering. However, when Siddhartha was twenty-nine years old, he went on several outings, leaving behind the protective walls of his palace. While travelling, he encountered an old man, a diseased man, and a decaying corpse. Siddhartha was deeply disturbed by these sights. He decided to escape royal life and become an ascetic.³

Siddhartha sought enlightenment through physical deprivation. He renounced worldly goods, fasted, and practiced self-mortification. However, after nearly dying from starvation, Siddhartha began to reevaluate his path. He discovered a Middle Way, a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-punishment. Siddhartha sat underneath a Bodhi tree and contemplated his life. After forty-nine days of meditation, he achieved Enlightenment. He realized the cause of human suffering and the steps necessary to eliminate it. Siddhartha then became known as the Buddha or “The Awakened One.” He began wandering, teaching his new doctrine and assembling a religious community.⁴

Dharma: The Buddha's Teachings

For 45 years the Buddha travelled and shared his doctrine with all sorts of people—from nobles to outcastes. The most important teachings of the Buddha are:

The Four Noble Truths

1. Suffering is an inherent part of existence.
2. The origin of suffering is the attachment to and craving of transient things.
3. Suffering can be stopped.
4. Following the Eightfold Path will lead to the cessation of suffering.

The Eightfold Path: Suffering can be ended and enlightenment attained through...

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Samsara: The miserable cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth (i.e. reincarnation).

Karma: The total effect of a person's actions that determine his/her destiny in his/her next incarnation.

Nirvana: The liberation from suffering. Enlightenment, achieved by following the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, brings about *Nirvana*.

The Five Precepts: The basic Buddhist code of ethics, undertaken by monks, nuns and lay followers of Buddhism.

1. Abstain from injuring and killing living beings. (This precept is referred to as *ahimsa*. It means "to do no harm."⁵)
2. Abstain from stealing.
3. Abstain from sexual misconduct.
4. Abstain from lying.
5. Abstain from intoxication.⁶

Number of Members in the United States:

2 million⁷

Number of Members Worldwide:

350 million⁸

Some Buddhists believe that the distinction between self and other is unreal and, therefore, must be transcended. The differences between humans and animals are illusory.⁹ “Human beings do not have a privileged, special place above and beyond that of the rest of life.”¹⁰ Both are capable of thinking and feeling emotions. Most importantly, both possess the Buddha-nature and can achieve enlightenment.¹¹

However, other Buddhists contend that animals are intellectually and morally inferior.¹² They consider rebirth as an animal in a very negative light.¹³ All Buddhists, though, understand that life is interconnected.¹⁴ Animals suffer and therefore should be objects of our compassion.¹⁵ There are many scriptural, historical, and contemporary examples of this call for compassion—the call for the humane treatment of animals.

Sample of Statements by the Buddha

The Buddha constantly advocated for the humane treatment of animals. His statements were recorded in canonical scriptures called *sutras*.

“Let him not destroy, or cause to be destroyed, any life at all, nor sanction the acts of those who do so. Let him refrain from even hurting any creature, both those that are strong and those that tremble in the world.” –from *The Sutta-Nipata*

“There is not a single being, wandering in the chain of lives in endless and beginningless *samsara*, that has not been your mother or your sister.” –from *The Angulimala-sutra*

“One must not deliberately kill any living creature either by committing the act oneself, instructing others to kill, or approving of or participating in acts of killing.” –from *The First Precept*

“Because he has pity on every living creature, therefore is a man called Holy.” –from *The Dhammapada*

“All beings tremble before violence. All fear death. All love life. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt?” –from *The Dhammapada*

“One who, while seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other living beings who also desire happiness, will not find happiness hereafter.” –from *The Dhammapada*

“The eating of flesh extinguishes the seed of great compassion.” –from *The Mahaparinirvana-sutra*

“Wicked people, hard to train, kill harmless beasts.” –from *The Kalachakra-tantra*

“Your kith and kin in one existence, they have donned a different shape in later lives. They have become animals, wild or tame, beast or bird...All those who wish to follow in my footsteps—how could they consume the flesh of living beings?” –from *The Lankavatara-sutra*

“Between the stench of the burning flesh of corpses and the burned flesh of a beast there is no difference. Both are equally revolting.” –from *The Lankavatara-sutra*

“It is unfitting, it is wrong...for those engaged upon the *Bodhisattva*¹⁶ path to partake of meat. Therefore they should abstain from it.” -from *The Lankavatara-sutra*

“*Bodhisattvas*...must shrink from meat as they would shrink from the flesh of their own children.” -from *The Mahaparinirvana-sutra*

“One’s own flesh and the flesh of others is the same flesh. Therefore the Enlightened Ones eat no meat.” -from *The Angulimala-sutra*

“If one eats meat, actions motivated by hatred are performed.” -from the *tantra* of *The Compassionate One, Churning the Depths of Samsara*

“If one were to eat the flesh and blood, still warm, of animals that one has oneself slaughtered...one will be born in one’s very next life in a hell of molten boiling bronze...” -from the *tantra* of *The Compassionate One, Churning the Depths of Samsara*

“If you eat intestines and the meat of dogs and swine, you will be reborn in an infernal state that is filled with filth.” -from *The Sutra Describing Karmic Cause and Effect*

“...Meat eating in any form, in any manner, and in any place is unconditionally and once and for all prohibited.” -from *The Lankavatara-sutra*

“If one is trying to practice meditation and is still eating meat, he is like a man closing his ears and shouting loudly, and then asserting that he heard nothing. -from *The Surangama-sutra*

“He who has given up harming creatures, whether feeble or strong, who neither kills nor causes to kill—him do I call a *brahman*.” -from *The Dhammapada*

“In [undertaking the Five Precepts], one gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, one gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. -from *The Abhisandha-sutta*

Historical References on Animals

Buddhism is ripe with examples of individuals, monastic communities, and even entire countries that have made references to animals in Buddhism or acted charitably towards animals.

Ashoka, who ruled in the third century BCE, was one of the greatest emperors of India and propagators of Buddhism. He frequently showed concern for animals. In *The Edicts of Ashoka*,¹⁷ he stated, “I have enforced the law against killing certain animals and many others, but the greatest progress of righteousness among men comes from the exhortation in favour of non-injury to life and abstention from killing all living beings.”¹⁸

Fa-hsien was a famous Chinese Buddhist traveller during the fourth century CE. During one trip, he recorded, "The inhabitants of India are numerous and happy...Throughout the country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor...they do not keep pigs and fowl, and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butcher shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink...Only the *chandalas* [the lowest cast] are fisherman and hunters and sell flesh meat."¹⁹

Japanese emperor Temmu, who ruled during the seventh and eighth centuries, outlawed the consumption of all meat, including fish, in Japan. His proclamation had such a great impact that from the eighth century until the late nineteenth century, the eating of most meat was not permitted.

Dogen was the founder of the Soto Zen school of Buddhism, the main sect of Zen Buddhism. In the twelfth century, he began requiring a vegan diet for all of his students. Today, observant Zen practitioners still obey Dogen's decree.

Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol was an eighteenth and nineteenth century Tibetan Buddhist master and poet. He announced, "Feeling unbearable compassion for all animals in the world who are killed for food, I went back before the Jowo Rinpoche [a great statue of the Buddha in Lhasa], prostrated myself, and made this vow: 'From today on, I give up the negative act that is eating the flesh of beings.'"²⁰

In *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case for Becoming Vegetarian*, Roshio Philip Kapleau, a twentieth century American teacher of Zen Buddhism, wrote "Anyone familiar with the numerous accounts of the Buddha's extraordinary compassion and reverence for living beings - for example his insistence that his monks strain the water they drink lest they inadvertently cause the death of any micro-organisms could never believe that he would be indifferent to the sufferings of domestic animals caused by their slaughter for food."

Contemporary References on Animals

Today, many Buddhist leaders and lay people are becoming even more vocal in their support of animal welfare.

In August, 2010, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama issued a statement in the wake of the largest egg recall in United States history. In a letter, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate decried the egg industry's cruel treatment of hens and urged egg buyers to switch to cage-free eggs:

"The abuse we inflict on hens has always been particularly disturbing to me and I have always been particularly concerned toward how these animals are treated in industrial food production. I am troubled to learn about the practice of confining egg laying hens in tiny cages. In these cages, birds cannot engage in their natural behaviours, such as spreading their wings, laying eggs in a nesting area, perching, scratching at the ground, even standing on a solid surface. Each hen has less space to live than the very sheet of paper I have written this letter on. Turning these defenseless animals into egg-producing machines with no consideration for their welfare whatsoever is a degradation of our own humanity. Switching to cage free eggs would reduce the suffering of these animals."²¹

In *The Vegetarian Way*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote, "Life is as dear to the mute creature as it is to a man. Just as one wants happiness and fears pain, just as one wants to live and not to die, so do other creatures."

The Dalai Lama also stated that "Today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of Universal Responsibility, not only nation to nation and human to human, but also human to other forms of life." Finally, the Dalai Lama added, "Compassion is most important for happiness. We must treat fellow human beings as equal, that is very important, but also all beings who have capacity for feeling. So the innate desire for happiness that is the basis of human rights extends to all sentient beings, including animals and insects.

There are now some individuals and organizations who care about animal rights and are showing concern about the suffering or torture of animals. I have noticed among ordinary people, out of their love and compassion, growing efforts for promotion of vegetarianism. These are the right kinds of expression of compassion, very positive and encouraging signs."

The Venerable Thich Nhat Hahn wrote, "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." The great Vietnamese Zen master also proclaimed, "We must look deeply. When we buy something or consume something, we may be participating in an act of killing. This precept [The First Precept] reflects our determination not to kill, either directly or indirectly, and also to prevent others from killing."

In recent years, many Buddhists have created animal protection organizations. In Taiwan, for example, the Buddhist Life Conservation Association fights against the evils associated with private tiger ownership and horse racing.²² Other Buddhist organizations are leading a growing movement to publicly acknowledge and reflect on the use of animals for biomedical purposes.²³

In a recent article in *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Professor Lisa Kemmerer stated, "There is no greater suffering, in numbers affected, pain inflicted, and deprivations endured, than in factory farming. If we buy eggs, milk products, or flesh, we support and encourage this cruelty."²⁴

Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede is the current abbot of the Rochester Zen Center in New York. In *The Buddhist Review*, he wrote, "With such a variety of nonanimal foods available, who would choose to support the slaughter mills and foster the misery involved in factory farming by continuing to eat flesh?...It is sad to see how many American Buddhists are managing to find a self-satisfying accommodation to eating meat... [In the First Precept] we commit our compassion to all beings, not just humans. Eschewing meat is one way to express that commitment to the welfare of other creatures."

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¹ Shabkar, 3; McDaniel, Pelicans, 93.

² "BBC; *The Buddha*; O'Brien, "Birth.

³ "BBC; *The Buddha*; O'Brien, "Birth.

⁴ "BBC; *The Buddha*; O'Brien, "Birth.

⁵ Lesco, 309.

⁶ Buswell; Powers.

⁷ "CIA - The World Factbook: Religions." (Estimations vary.)

⁸ "CIA - The World Factbook: Religions." (Estimations vary.)

⁹ Shabkar, 23.

¹⁰ Epstein, "A Buddhist Perspective on Animal Rights."

¹¹ Epstein, "A Buddhist Perspective on Animal Rights"; Harris, 208-09; Swearer; 19-22; Vargas, 218.

¹² Schmithausen, 29.

¹³ Harris, 207-17.

¹⁴ McDaniel, *Earth*, 41.

¹⁵ Shabkar, 29.

¹⁶ A *Bodhisattva* is an enlightened being who, motivated by great compassion, chooses to remain in *samsara* to help other sentient beings achieve enlightenment.

¹⁷ *The Edicts of Ashoka* were written by the emperor himself. They make up a collection of thirty-three inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka, a series of columns dispersed throughout northern Indian.

¹⁸ Dhammika, Venerable Shrivasti.

¹⁹ "Faxien.

²⁰ Shabkar *The Life*, 232.

²¹ "The Dalai Lama; The Dalai Lama.

²² "A Brief Introduction to the Life Conservation Association."

²³ Lynch, 131-32; Iliff, 38-47.

²⁴ Kemmerer, 98.

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