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Animal Wellbeing: The Concept and Practice of Tsethar in Bhutan

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Abstract

Bhutan is held as the last remaining Vajrayana Buddhist kingdom in the world. There has been increased pressure on the country to lead a morally stainless existence even as the country is facing development issues of its own such as growing population, increased needs and degenerating values. However, it is true to a large extent that there are uniquely Bhutanese values such as compassion, benevolence, nonviolence and an unbound concern for all sentient beings which are manifest in the country's state policies like that of Gross National Happiness, a development philosophy that stresses on the wholesome wellbeing of all. These positive virtues are most noticeable in the country's positive moral conceptions that translate into care and love for animals. Buddhist principles that guide the country ensure that animals are kindly treated. There are policies in place, and abidance on the part of the general people who abstain or limit their consumption of meat so that lives of animals are saved. This generic essay tries to bring out the religious and cultural sentiments of the people which ensure that the wellbeing of animals is taken care of. The practice of tsethar or saving and preserving lives is analyzed in terms of the country's generally positive worldview based on Buddhist principles. It also attempts to give an account of the state of animal welfare in Bhutan and the dietary habits of the people. The paper is meant to spread the message of non-violence and compassion that will ultimately benefit the benefactor, humankind.

Introduction

Tsethar (*tshe thar*) is the practice of freeing living beings from imminent slaughter and death. *Tse* is literally life and *thar* (literally liberation) has implication of being above the mundane level of emotions like pain. Thus, it can be said that tsethar is the process of helping beings overcome all sufferings and fears in life that come with having to live as either meat or draught animal. In its broadest sense, tsethar can encompass saving every life form on earth including

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vegetation. It is considered virtuous to maintain the environment and refrain from inflicting any harm on living beings. However, tsethar as commonly practiced involves saving lives of animal that are destined to be slaughtered for meat. Animals which are thus spared are absolved from all burdens like draught purpose which is usually entailed upon them in agrarian communities like Bhutan.

While benevolence, compassion and nonviolence are universal Buddhist concepts, tsethar is customarily practiced in Vajrayana countries like Tibet and Bhutan¹ as a noble action which not only obliterate the sufferings of the animals saved, but also as a primary means of gaining merit for the saviours who stand to benefit in their present and successive lives. The practice involves choosing an animal from the family's herd which is given the blessing of life and absolved from all duties for its natural course of life. It is usually done when a member of the family is inflicted with debilitating diseases, or when the general fortune of a family is perceived to have taken a setback, as an offsetting factor against misfortune through the belief in positive karmic reciprocity.

Bhutan has been a largely self-sufficient country which believed in surviving by its own means until recently. Thus, the Bhutanese dietary habit was comparatively frugal. There was only limited consumption of meat which meant that not many animals were slaughtered. Religious and cultural sensibilities made people limit the lives claimed to bare minimum. However, there has been unprecedented development of late. As a result, though still comparatively limited, there has been increased demand for commercial meat production. Thus, tsethar as a moderating factor has assumed greater significance. Monastic establishments, NGOs² and individuals spearhead the drive to save animals at a time when the appeal to the Buddhist restraint is being stretched. However, before we proceed further, we have to take a brief look at the country's history which is infused with Buddhist teachings that created conditions ripe for high moral considerations as cultural values.

¹ In Mahayana countries, such as China, Taiwan etc, this practice is known as *fangshen* – releasing life (Lama Zhenphen Zangpo).

² Nongovernmental organizations

Bhutan: A Buddhist Kingdom

It is claimed that Indian Buddhist influence pervaded in Bhutan from as early as the second century onwards.³ However, unlike the later Buddhist traditions, the Buddhism of this period was Theravada in nature. It is clear that Buddhism was a major factor in shaping the religious and cultural identity from the very beginning in Bhutan, then known as *Monyul* after the Tibetan appropriation of all lands at its southern periphery with places of cultural darkness as against their perceived superior civilization. However, it was the arrival of the Indian saint Guru Padmasambhava⁴ that heralded the Buddhist civilization in Bhutan. He sought to make the people understand and appreciate the complex Buddhist philosophies through a series of mystical display of supernatural accomplishments that are recorded in his biographies which were written by followers of his traditions.⁵

Over the course of the centuries, Bhutan became a favourite conversion ground for many Tibetan Buddhist masters of all traditions. The most noteworthy among them was Phojo Drugom Zhigpo (*Pha-jo 'brug-sgom zhig-po*, 1179-1247) who laid the foundation of the Drukpa influence by engendering his lineage holders who became a source of unmatched power in Bhutan. Buddhism was then firmly established in Bhutan and people's live revolved around the Buddhist worldview. A series of masters like Kuenkhen Longchen Rabjam (*kun mkhyen klong chen rab jam*, 1308-1363) and the Bhutanese born saint Pema Lingpa (*padma gling pa* 1450-1521) helped Buddhism gain wide acceptance in Bhutan.

The arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (*zhabs drung nga dbang rngam rgyal*, 1594-1651) from Tibet to Bhutan in 1616 formed the basis of Buddhist nationhood in Bhutan. The charismatic Drukpa (*'brug pa*) hierarch who fled his Tibetan homeland due to a tumultuous relation with the country's ruling powers unified different principalities of Bhutan under a dual system of governance (*chos srid lu*

³ See Chakravarti (1992) as cited in Dargye (2001: 56).

⁴ A myth relates how the tradition of betel nut chewing emerged in Bhutan after Guru's arrival. It is said that until then, the people lived by hunting and survived mainly on meat. Seeing this as unbecoming of a Buddhist country, he substituted this practice by making people eat betel nut instead. The nut (*areca catechu*) was to be considered as bone, the betel leaves (piper betel) as skin and the lime as the flesh, a combination which will produce a red texture akin to the redness of meat. Thus, we can see that there had been efforts to control Bhutanese dietary habits which excluded the consumption right from the country's inception (Choden, 2008: 98).

⁵ See Aris (1979). *Bhutan: Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*

gnyis). The law (*bka' khrims*) promulgated for the country was based on the sixteen pure human conducts (*me chos gtsang ma bcu drug*) and ten divine virtues (*lha chos dge wa bcu*). Thus, ethical Buddhist conducts were for the first time promoted as national laws and penalties were accordingly meted out for transgressions.

After more than two and half centuries of this system, the Wangchuck dynasty was established by the first monarch Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck (*gong sar orgyen dbang phyug*, reign 1907-1926). As a faithful follower of this dual religious system of governance, the successive generations of the Wangchuck monarchs promoted the rule of law according to Buddhist considerations for wellbeing. Today, Bhutan has emerged as a prosperous constitutional Buddhist monarchy with about seven hundred thousand people. Buddhism is claimed as the state religion by the constitution and the wellbeing of all sentient being is held as the ultimate aim of development in the country.

One can thus see that sustained Buddhist influence over millennia has brought about a value system that places particular emphasis on ethics, compassion (*snying rje*) and non-violence (*'tse med*).

Buddhist Considerations

The Buddhist sutras⁶ enumerate manifold reasons for not committing the negative action of taking lives. One such anecdote tells that there once existed an agnostic king '*phri chen* who reveled in taking lives and eating fresh meat. After his death, the King was born in the lowest of the eighteen realms of hell (Naraka). Seeing his miserable condition, Ananda (*kun dga'*) reported the matter to the Buddha. The Buddha in turn saw through the man's condition and implicates that whatever suffering he has to bear is because of the negative karmic forces he has incurred. Ananda then approaches the Lord of Death (Yamaraja) and the Lord suggests that the only redemption for the now hapless man lies in saving and preserving the lives of as many beings as possible. Thus, Ananda is said to have embarked on an elaborate mission to save beings. The merits that can be accrued from saving lives have been quantified and theorized

⁶ Discourses attributed to the Buddha.

according to this tradition.⁷ Thus, tsethar comes about as a positive action which can both amass instant merit and redress negative karma.

The book of the Buddha's previous existences (Jataka), which relates in prose and verse the experiences of the future Buddha in each of the 550 states of existence previous to his rebirth as Gautama, has many references to the essentially good nature of animals through their exemplary wit, bravery and loyalty. It is portrayed as debased to even think of committing acts of disservice to them, let alone doing them harm. The Elephant and Ungrateful Forester (Jataka 72: i. 319-322)⁸ shows the shameless behaviour of man driven by insatiable greed. Animals are said to be of nobler character than man because the latter is subject to manipulation.

The Buddhist argument in favour of non-violence (Ahimsa) is based on the belief in karma, the principle of cause and effect. It is claimed that due to the negative karmic forces, beings are endlessly propelled from one birth to another in a cycle of existence called Samsara. The Buddha has said:

The bones left by a single person in the course of his past lives would form a pile so high that were all mountains to be gathered up and piled in a heap, that heap of mountains would appear as nothing beside it.⁹

If this were taken at face value, it would imply that eating any kind of meat would amount to cannibalism¹⁰ and taking a life would be equal to committing fratricide. The Angulimaliya Sutra cites Buddha, "There are no beings who have not been one's mother, who have not been one's sister through generations of wandering in the beginningless and endless Samsara. Even one who is a dog has been one's father... Therefore, one's own flesh and the flesh of another are a single flesh, so Buddhas do not eat meat." Thus, the Buddhist philosophical foundation provides a strong disincentive to kill and eat meat.

⁷ For example, if you save an animal, the merit is equivalent to taking a monk's vow. If you set a lamb free, you would be spared the suffering of the realms of hell once and so the list goes. It further goes that if thirteen animals are saved, then a person who only has three days to live can live up to three years more. Conversely, if a tsethar animal is killed, the sin is equivalent to killing 100 people.

⁸ Burlingame (1922).

⁹ As quoted in Burlingame (1922).

¹⁰ Hopkins (1906) argues that cannibalism has left its trace in India in the stories of flesh-eating Yakkas and Pisacas.

The five precepts (panca-silani) that constitute basic Buddhist code of ethics undertaken by lay followers in both the Theravada and Mahayana tradition forbid causing harm to any living being.¹¹ While abstinence from these actions is virtuous beyond words, the contrary is subject to severe reprimands. Causing harm to others' wellbeing and life is considered the worst of all transgressions.¹²

One can muster even more Buddhist considerations in favour of this argument. However, at this moment, it must also be stated that Buddhism did not impose a blanket ban on all killings and meat consumption. There are times when Bodhisattvas are permitted to commit the seven non-virtuous acts of the body and speech as long as their minds are pure and free from all selfish desire. In a previous life, the Buddha was Captain Compassionate Heart, sailing with 500 merchants who were all non-returning Bodhisattvas.¹³ An evil pirate, Dung Thungchen (Blackspear) appeared, threatening to kill them all. The Captain realized that if Dung Thungchen killed the Bodhisattvas, he would have to suffer in the hells for an incalculable number of eons. Moved by an intense feeling of compassion he realized that if he killed Dung Thungchen now, he could save him from hell. Having no other choice, he then killed the pirate, and in doing so gained as much merit as would normally take 70,000 eons to achieve. On the face of it, the act was a harmful one, since the Captain was committing the act of murder. But it was done without any selfish motivation. In the short term, it saved the lives of the 500 Bodhisattvas and in the long term it saved Dung Thungchen from the sufferings of hell. In reality, it was a very powerful positive act.¹⁴

As per the professed Madyamika way of Buddhism, while indulging in sensory pleasures were off limit for devout Buddhists, people can certainly take meat for sustenance. The Mahasudassana Sutra¹⁵ proclaims, "Eat as you have been accustomed to eat," and "Ye shall eat as has been eaten." Buddhism was practical in its approach and it recognized that under certain circumstances, consumption of meat was unavoidable and sometimes even desirable. Thus, it allows the

¹¹ The other four are stealing, lying, intoxication and sexual misconduct.

¹² Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (1998: 102-104) while enumerating the ten imperfections (*mi dge wa bcu*) regards killing as the worst of all transgressions. *srog gcod gong na sdig gzhan med*.

¹³ Bodhisattvas who have reached a level where they were no longer obliged to return to samsaric existence.

¹⁴ Quoted by Lingpa (n.d.) from the Jataka. <http://animalsavingtrust.org/deer.htm>

¹⁵ Quoted in Hopkins (1906). *The Buddhist Rule against Eating Meat*

consumption of meat as long as the partaker of meat is convinced that he was not in any way a cause for the butchering of the animal¹⁶ that is being served.

The Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism goes even further in this regards by admitting serving of meat for ritual purposes. The Vajrayana tradition insists on the non-duality of reality asserting that there is no ultimate difference between Samsara (cyclic existence) and Nirvana (liberation) existence. Another important Mahayana teaching is the use of Upaya or skillful means referring to timely use of 'circumstances' to progress towards enlightenment or help others along the same path. Tantric Buddhism regards the previously prohibited activities and substances as tools to enlightenment when used by the properly initiated adepts rather than them being held as hindrances to progress. The prohibited substances are referred to four ritual elements: alcohol, meat, fish and parched grain. They are used by some groups ritually and others use them symbolically or as an element in meditation. However, it acknowledges that use of prohibited substances in powerful and dangerous rituals could result in 1000 years in hell for the 'uninitiated' or the 'careless,' and enlightenment in one lifetime for the 'initiated.'¹⁷

Tantrayana Buddhism admits another facet to the issue of tsethar. While acknowledging compassion as one of the fundamental tenets, it lays great emphasis on maintaining a moral relationship (*Samaya, dam tshig*) between the saviour and the saved. The saviour is seen to be responding to Karmic urges to save the life of a being who is spiritually bonded to him. Thus, ritualistic elements are introduced as a compelling reason to do more than just save a particular being. A person is made to dedicate the merit of his action to all sentient beings thus multiplying his capacity to do even more for this cause. A renowned Buddhist scholar from Bengal, Atisha Dipankara, has said that giving compassionate love to the helpless and the poor is as important as meditating on Shunyata, i.e. emptiness. This virtue of compassion is the principal foundation stone of Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁸

This is not an exhaustive analysis. However, anything more than this is beyond the scope of this essay. So, with this understanding of the Buddhist

¹⁶ Jivaka Sutra (Majjh. i 368) as quoted in Thomas (n.d.). *The life Buddha*. pp. 129.

¹⁷ Cited from Dorji (2012). *Alcohol Use and Abuse in Bhutan*

¹⁸ Quoted from Chatral Sangay Dorjee Rinpoche's introduction on Jangsa website <http://animalsavingtrust.org/benefit.htm>

underpinnings in connection with tsethar, an age-old practice of compassion, we will now proceed to its cultural basis in Bhutan.

Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Bhutan like many places in the Himalayas lived on subsistence agriculture. It was usual to maintain livestock besides farming in family owned fields. Families maintained large herds of cattle and reared backyard poultry and piggery. Cattle served dairy and draught purpose and were rarely, if ever butchered. Chicken gave additional nutrition through egg production. However, a normal Bhutanese household would rarely kill chicken for consumption. A pig (*gsad phag*) especially prepared for the purpose was butchered every year on the occasion of the family's annual ritual (*lo mchod*). After making sacrificial offerings to local divinities, the rest of the meat was used for an annual feast. It could be noticed that use of meat for either consumption or ceremonial use was always kept to the bare minimum. Thus, the sacredness of life was maintained in the traditional Bhutanese society.

At this point, it must also be mentioned that pre-Buddhist animist faiths like Bonism (*bon chos*) existed in Bhutan. All these primitive systems could exist in harmony with the mainstream Buddhist religion as they too believed in preserving life which they often took to ritualistic level. It was common practice to barter the lives of animal (by saving it) for the lives of human members of the family in a ritual practice called *srog blugs*.¹⁹ This practice was seen as a means of negotiating with supposed claimants of one's souls in the form of unperceived spirits (*srog bdag*).

Buddhist logic promoted, to a large extent, the idea that tsethar was to be used as upaya for worldly wellbeing. Thus from longevity of life to material prosperity, from communal harmony to instantaneous enlightenment, the method of tsethar was employed. Tsethar thus emerged as an elaborate social mechanism for the conduct of welfare. At the same time, tsethar also became increasingly associated with rituals and ceremonies, which of course only led to the popular acceptance of the practice.

¹⁹ See Dorji (2002). *The spider, the piglet and the vital principle: A popular ritual for restoring the srog*.

Across the Himalayan region including Bhutan, the ritual of tsethar involved choosing an animal from the family's herd. All domestic animals were eligible candidates for this benevolence, subject to the motivation for the action and the saviour's state of affluence. Roosters were usually the preferred specimen and were released in the safe compound of monasteries. However, it was not uncommon to free bigger animals like lamb, pig and cattle from all manners of pains and sufferings in their lives. The saved animals were then called *tse nor* if it is cattle or *tse phag* if it is a pig, thus implying that they have been given mastery over their lives.

The selected animal is taken to a monk who in turn recites the Dharani mantra of Amitayus (*tshe dpag med*, Buddha of eternal life) close to its ear. He is then released from the worry of a violent death. He is at the same time freed from all his normal duties as a beast of burden. Then the animal is smeared with butter on his chest, head and horns. It is symbolic of his offering to the triple gem²⁰. A red string is tied around his neck indicating deathlessness through the blessing of Amitayus. The animal is then washed from head to toe thus cleansing him from the defilements of the world. During this process, the owner makes his pledge to the animal by saying that you are now freed, we won't kill you for meat, we won't sell you for a price, we won't make you work for us, we won't use your wool (in case of a lamb), let the moment be auspicious, let the *rten 'brel*²¹ be good. The owner then wish the spared animal a long life.

Bhutanese reservation on violence can also be seen in their attitude towards the act of killing. Therefore, even when the committing purposeful act of butchering an animal for sustenance, a person other than a member of the family will be hired to execute the job. Buddhist sources corroborate that "only the slayer is sinful, not the eater²²" under such circumstances. The butcher is given a share of the meat called *sdig sha*, literally meaning sinful/unwholesome meat. Because of the negative image attached with the profession of a butcher, people of lowly social position or mentally challenged people bereft of the capacity to judge were coerced into doing the job. Sometimes, there were whole communities of such people. A case in point is the village of Chali where the people's main occupation

²⁰ Triratna; the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

²¹ Karmic bond between the saviour and the saved. By extension, the dedication of merit will be for the benefit of all sentient beings through this virtuous act.

²² Hopkins (1906) cites from the Telovado Jataka (No. 246) defending eating meat when the person consuming harbours no cruel intent.

was meat trade called *toka tshong*.²³ However, with increased awareness and opportunities for alternative profession, even they have left what was otherwise an age-old livelihood.²⁴ It can also be heuristically observed that most people involved in commercial meat production today are those who belong to faiths other than Buddhism.

Bhutanese Dietary Habits: Meat Consumption in Bhutan

Because of compelling spiritual traditions and societal norms, consumption of meat is limited in Bhutan at just about 3 kilograms per capita.²⁵ At this level, Bhutanese are the most frugal consumer of meat with even poorer countries than Bhutan like Nepal showing much bigger appetite.²⁶ It must be said that because of the favourable conditions for agriculture, Bhutanese diet was predominantly based on cereals and vegetables. Bhutan was once a famous rice field though the country produced an assortment of other cereals. Bhutanese trade composition with its northern neighbour Tibet consisted in large measures of rice and chilli. Thus, Bhutanese had dietary alternatives to meat²⁷ which helped it to maintain their non-violent habits.

Though unconditional vegetarianism was not popular in Bhutan, vegetarian practices in the modern sense did exist. As part of their devotional practices, people refrained from taking meat for varying periods of time. For some rituals like those associated with Drolma (Tara), complete abstinence from all non-vegetarian diets was a prerequisite. People also observe vegetarianism for

²³ Mentioned in Tobias & Morrison (n.d.) *Animal Rights in Bhutan*.

http://www.dancingstarfoundation.org/articles_Animal_Rights_in_Bhutan.php

²⁴ Domestic meat production has been on a constant decline with exception of a few places. Latest data from the eastern district of Tashigang shows that from more than 30 metric tonnes (MT) in 2007, pork production has decreased to 9.8 MT. Beef production on the other hand decreased from 69.24 MT in 2007 to 37.4 MT in 2011. Religion induced community pressure has been seen as one of the reason for this decrease (Wangdi, 2012).

²⁵ Figures for the year 2002 cited in Tobias & Morrison (n.d.) *Animal Rights in Bhutan*. The same source show that Nepal which has comparatively lesser per capita income had consumption of 10.3 kg per capita. Western countries are by far the most voracious meat eaters with their consumption at least 50% more than that for Bhutanese. As against the restraining effects of Buddhism, these countries live on the assumption of the absolute mastery of man.

²⁶ For example, see Choden (2008: xviii) and Ura, K (2012) who cites a passage from the two Portuguese Jesuit visitors to the court of Zhabdrung, the founder of Bhutan's tradition including its gastronomic culture where they mention that Zhabdrung was famous for "his abstinence, as he never eats rice, meat or fish...."

²⁷ Meat in Bhutan are mostly eaten after being sun or air dried. Because Bhutanese did not produce meat round the year, they preserved their stock of meat and ate only sparingly.

extended periods for other devotional practices. However, turning vegetarian is now on the rise in Bhutan. Studies show that the trend of vegetarianism is more among younger people as a result of increased awareness, though they also factor in health and environmental concerns when determining their dietary preferences.²⁸

Sl No	Year	Item	Quantity (In Kg.)	Value (In Nu.)
1	2004	Meat and related products	1150699	68526674
		Fish and related products	1370309	50976248
2	2005	Meat and related products	3115180	780609382
		Fish and related products	1501979	57322222
3	2006	Meat and related products	4097931	241075749
		Fish and related products	1915050	77877237
4	2007	Meat and related products	3662947	239685476
		Fish and related products	1651582	76318175
5	2008	Meat and related products	3854200	262419562
		Fish and related products	1076279	91853265
6	2009	Meat and related products	4392476	367500688
		Fish and related products	1749965	114593410
7	2010	Meat and related products	4929453	438685418
		Fish and related products	1875810	135889078

Fig 1: Trade statistics on meat import for consumption²⁹

The undeniable fact today is that there is increased consumption of meat in Bhutan. Increased affluence and availability of commercial meat has led to consumption in unprecedented quantities, and around the year unlike in the past. Except for minor deviations, the trend from 2004 to 2010 shows a constant rise in the consumption of imported meat of all kinds. Thousands of cattle, pigs, chickens and goats, besides countless fishes, are consumed. The consumption enumerated here is based on just those products that are imported from neighbouring India. Although in much lesser quantities, meat is also imported from other countries as well as produced locally. Thus, the actual meat consumption is higher than this data shows.

²⁸ Lhamo (2011).

²⁹ *Bhutan Trade Statistics, 2004 to 2010* published by Department of Revenue and Customs.

However, it must be stated here that Bhutan has a substantial non-Buddhist population. There is an ethnic Nepali minority which constitute not less than 20% of the population of Bhutan.³⁰ This portion of the Bhutanese population, with even some Buddhists among them, are not subject to the same Buddhist restraints as the general Bhutanese population. Then there is a burgeoning population of expatriate workers that is the result of the present construction boom in the country.³¹ For a small population, the expatriate population causes huge distortion of trade and other statistical figures.

Animal Welfare in Bhutan: State, Monastic and Public Initiatives

Considering the general public interest in preserving the sanctity of all sentient beings, the state has put in place policy safeguards against cruelty and mistreatment of animals. It has also ensured that there are measures to limit the consumption of meat by passing various legislations and bans.

Chapter X of the Livestock Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2001 has the following provisions for the welfare of animals.

Welfare standards

- The Ministry shall prescribe a set of minimum standards for animal welfare.
- Livestock shall be kept, cared for and transported with due attention paid to their health and welfare.
- Livestock shall not be subjected to any unnecessary suffering or injury.
- All livestock and poultry must be provided with adequate feed, water and shelter.

The 79th session of the National Assembly in 2000 banned the slaughter and sale of meat in Bhutan for the 1st and the 4th Bhutanese months of the year coinciding with auspicious events in the life of the Buddha. Similar restrictions apply throughout the year on the 8th, 15th and 30th day of each Bhutanese month.

³⁰ The 2010 nationwide GNH survey puts the non-Bhutanese sample population which is nationally representative at 17.83%. <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/index/>

³¹ Kuensel (2012). *A substantial wage bill leaves the country*. According this report, the Labour Secretary estimates the expatriate labour population to be between 75,000 and 80,000.

Besides, this ban is also applied on those days which coincide with spiritually auspicious days.

The state monastic body (Zhung Dratshang) has been an active advocate for the cause of animal welfare in general and restriction on meat use for rituals in particular. The monastic community successfully intervened on many occasions where rituals involved sacrifice of animal.³² Vegetarian substitute has been instituted as *dkar chos*³³ with commandment and blessings of the Je Khenpo (*rje mkhen po*).³⁴ As part of its initiative to lighten the overall burden of funeral costs on the Bhutanese people, the monk body has proclaimed that serving of meat to the Sangha which is often beyond the means of ordinary people should be banned. Serving of meat was also banned from all religious ceremonies in the monasteries as a righteous action. Besides, the Dratshang has also limited the use of meat where complete ban was not possible during the annual rituals (*lo mchod*) of the households with much success. This was one occasion where extensive use of meat was prevalent as portrayed earlier. The Dratshang was also the biggest lobby group behind the legislative restriction on the sale of meat. Even after the nature of governance changed in Bhutan,³⁵ this restriction endured. All these methods of public pursuance have created great awareness among the people on the issue.

Apart from the state apparatus, the NGOs have been actively involved in creating awareness and taking concrete actions against meat use and for the promotion of animal welfare. One such NGOs, Jangsa Animal Saving Trust³⁶ maintains about 600 bulls, 40 yaks, 137 pigs, 23 sheeps, two goats and nine ducks in the eastern and northern regions of the Bhutan. There are also numerous other groups who work for the benefit of animals. They buy animals destined for slaughter and release them in safe environments. Thousands of animals which include chickens and fishes too are thus saved every year.³⁷ As great as this

³² See for example Ura (2001). *Deities and Environment*. Part 3. *Invocation of Deities*.

³³ Literally white religion, the avoidance of violent sacrifice that is advocated by Buddhism and mainstream primitive faiths like Bonism.

³⁴ The Lord Abbot of Bhutan. This institution has existed as a parallel religious power to the secular establishment of the country and it retains much of the spiritual authority even now.

³⁵ Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy with two elected houses of parliament in 2008.

³⁶ <http://animalsavingtrust.org/>

³⁷ An interview conducted with the village Tshogpa (elected representative) of Ura where about 400 yaks have been relocated after being saved and the *Kuensel* story of Rinzin (2012) show that even though the animals are rescued from the butchers, the animal welfare organizations are not always able to cope with the aftercare of the animals leading to them being abandoned which bring about

intervention is, they have been most successful in creating unprecedented awareness on this issue as an ethical question with which every people should be concerned with. They have also been able to create guilt in not only the ill treatment of animals but also the natural act of eating meat. Thus, these initiatives which also provide advocacy materials like pamphlets and videos on cruelty have proved to be great deterrents against violence and meat consumption.

It has been rightly said that “the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”³⁸ In Bhutan, this holds true in as much as the people and the state’s intolerance of untoward encroachment of animal rights is concerned. It is estimated that there are as many as 50,000 stray dogs in Bhutan. Bhutan spent millions of its limited resources on the care and protection of this dog population as the country is bound by its dedication to non-violence.³⁹ It is virtually unthinkable in Bhutan to employ a drastic eradication method. This is most visible in the human wildlife conflict in Bhutan. A nationwide survey⁴⁰ found that rampant wildlife destruction of crops and domestic animals is common in Bhutan. Farmers have been forced to leave their fields fallow in absence of any guarantee to their livelihood. However, bounded by their religious commitments, these people still support the strong state measures to preserve the environment and wildlife at all cost.

Conclusion

The Buddhist ethics and moral considerations have served to uplift humanity for thousands of years. With each passing moment, we continue to realise the profound wisdom contained in the philosophy behind them. A case in point is the Buddhist stand on compassion and meat consumption. It is now corroborated by scientific findings that meat has indeed much less nutritional health benefits than previously thought. In fact, excess indulgence in meat based diet, that is

problems like sickness and lack of pasture and proper nutrition. While *tsethar* was originally conceived in a rural setting in Bhutan, now things need to be arranged so as to accommodate the shift towards a non-agricultural society.

³⁸ Mahatma Gandhi in his speech *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism* as quoted in Tobias & Morrison (n.d.).

³⁹ The Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animal in tandem with the Royal Government and other NGOs started a campaign to humanely manage the spiraling dog population at a cost of Nu 46 million.

⁴⁰ The result of the GHN survey 2010 as cited in Thinley & Chopel (2012).

incidentally most condemned by Buddhism, is linked with increased morbidity⁴¹. On the contrary, research evidences show that vegetarians enjoy relatively lower blood cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, less obesity and consequently lower risk of mortality from ischaemic heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer and lower rates of all-cause mortality.⁴²

New findings also show that the current rate of commercial meat production is unsustainable. Commercial meat production is damaging to our existence on earth on two major accounts. Commercial animal rearing requires huge space and resources that has been associated with large scale environmental degradation.⁴³ The inefficiency of animals to convert plant protein to animal protein means that large areas of land are used up for animal feed production. It is estimated that about six kilograms of plant protein is needed to yield one kilogram of animal protein.⁴⁴ Concurrently, animal farming has also been associated with high levels of pollution. Grain-fed beef is estimated to need 35 calories of fossil fuels for every calorie of beef.⁴⁵ Most damaging in this regard is that livestock and its by-products would account for more than 51% of all man originated greenhouse emissions.⁴⁶ Thus, it is plain to see that livestock farming for meat production is one of mankind's most harmful activities that not only endangers all the other species on earth that have to make way, but also our own survival on this earth.

In any case, inevitable cruelty on mute and defenceless animals that comes with meat eating is a less than honourable act. However, there is hope, as this article tried to prove, in our own traditional wisdoms based on the restraining philosophies of Buddhism. While Buddhism does not promote asceticism as an alternative, it does show that there should be a natural limit to our consumption.

Bhutan's culture and tradition that is dear to its populace promotes values of compassion, love and kindness to all. In this age of high consumerism, these values act as a guide towards a sustainable way of life that protects the interest of all, including our environment and the beings that it harbours. Meat

⁴¹ Gold, M. (2004). *Global Benefits in Eating Less Meat*

⁴² American Dietetic Association (1997) as quoted in Lhamo. (2011).

⁴³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2009). *The State of Food and Agriculture*

⁴⁴ Pimentel & Pimentel (2003) and Baroni et al. (2007) as cited in Lhamo. (2011).

⁴⁵ Horrigan et al (2002) as cited in Lhamo. (2011).

⁴⁶ Goodlands & Anhang (2009) as cited in Lhamo. (2011).

consumption and animal cruelty is now not just an ethical question, but a matter of our own interest. We cannot continue to mistreat the earth by consuming our own compatriots in this Samsara without running the risk of being forever wiped out from the face of the earth. Thus, Bhutan's best practices in regards to its impressive treatment of animals and its moral restraints are things that people all over the world will do well to emulate.

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