

## **Buddhist Ethics and Nonhuman Animals**

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### **Abstract**

The question of our moral responsibility to nature and nonhuman animals is increasingly pressing. This article examines Buddhist philosophy, morality, scripture, myths, and contemporary commentary to reveal an animal and nature-friendly approach to the larger world. This article is not critical in nature, but attempts to provide an alternative vision and practice, one conducive to a more peaceful world.

### **Buddhist Ethics and Nonhuman Animals**

*All beings tremble before danger, all fear death. (Dhammapada 54)*

Buddhist concepts such as karma and reincarnation, interconnections and oneness, lend Buddhism to comment on the current topic of our rightful relations with nonhuman animals. Buddhist scriptures overwhelmingly support adopting a vegan diet for spiritual reasons, as part of a life of compassion toward other creatures. Core elements of Buddhist philosophy support animal advocacy and call for change in our contemporary treatment of nonhuman animals.

Buddhism does not assume a strict boundary between humans and animals. In fact, Buddhism presents species as a semi-permeable membrane, at least in part due to the philosophy of reincarnation. Eons of transmigration have had a predictable result: today's duck and dog are yesterdays human sisters and brothers. The Lankavatara Sutra states:

In the long course of *samsara* [the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth], there is not one among living beings. . . who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb. . . . Repeated birth generates an

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interconnected web of life which, according to the Buddhist precept of harmlessness, must be respected. (Chapple 143)

Each cow and chicken was at some point one's parent, and to harm one's parent is a particularly base act in the Buddhist tradition.

As we are all reborn again and again, so all species are subject to the same karmic process; what each being does in life matters to our personal spiritual journey. *Karma* rules the lives of animals and humans alike (Kraft 277): Lassie and the Prince of Wales are both subject to the same moral laws. *Karma* can no more be avoided by a Persian cat than it can by an avahi (woolly lemur). The *Sutta Pitaka* notes that one's actions determine one's future as surely as "the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage" (Burt 52). What is good for the goose is also good for the gal, and the guy. The cosmic process of justice does not stop at human skin.

Buddhism offers a vision of radical inter-identification. A vision where all living beings are identified with all other entities. This vision does not merely teach that we are all in this together, but that we all *are* this, "rising and falling as one living body" (Cook 229). The words of the contemporary Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, reflect this view of radical interconnections, rooted in the concept of "oneness":

I am one with the wonderful pattern of life which radiates out in all directions. . . . I am the frog swimming in the pond and I am also the snake who needs the body of the frog to nourish its own body. . . . I am the forest which is being cut down. I am the rivers and air which are being polluted. (Allendorf 43–44)

No entity is "other"; we are not separate from anyone or anything else. Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

A human being is an animal, a part of nature. But we single ourselves out from the rest of nature. We classify other animals and living beings as nature, as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question, "How should I deal with Nature?" We should deal with nature the way we deal with ourselves. . . ! Harming nature is harming ourselves, and vice versa. (Hanh 41)

Reincarnation and oneness led some Buddhist philosophers to conclude that there

is no independent “self.” Many Buddhists view individuals and species as mere name and form—outward vestiges and labels applied to something indistinct yet enduring, something more fundamental that transcends individual bodies and biological categories. In this view, individual human existence is a mirage: we are mere matter in human form, soon to be disbanded and recreated according to what we have earned through our actions in this and past lives.

“Codependent arising” offers a yet more intense vision of radical interdependence. “Codependent arising” holds that no individual or action can be separated from any other individual or action (Robinson 23–29). Radical Buddhist interdependence does not allow for an independent entity, action, word, or thought; all things influence all other things. Each being, each act, is critical to every other being and every other act. The idea of radical interdependence led some Buddhists to conclude that all things *are* one another *in their very essence*. In the words of a contemporary Thai Buddhist monk: “The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and the Earth. . . . [T]he world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise” (Swearer 5).

When Buddhism traveled to China, it combined with Daoism to form extraordinarily nature-friendly spiritual teachings. One of the most nature-friendly extant religious philosophies, Hua-yen, is a school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism formed around 600 CE. Hua-yen carried “codependent arising” to its logical extreme. In the Hua-yen worldview all things are reflected in all other things. Codependent arising means that our existence is best understood through the image of an infinitely regressing mirror that encompasses the entire universe in “simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*” (Cook 214). Nothing is independent in this “vast web of interdependencies in which if one strand is disturbed, the whole web is shaken” (Cook 213).

If a roadrunner is squashed under the tires of a truck carrying cow’s milk to Phoenix, Arizona, this event affects all living beings. The roadrunner may have been sitting on eggs which will now spoil and never hatch. Something will consume the abandoned eggs, and will therefore not consume someone or something else. That which

was not consumed will go on to effect other creatures, maybe even one of us. Meanwhile, someone else will feast on the dead roadrunner's body, but the new generation of roadrunners will never participate in life on planet earth, or join the food chain—eating and being eaten. Some people will be horrified to see the carnage along the road, and their world will be sadder for the sighting.

And what of the truck that ran over the roadrunner? For this nursing milk to travel to Arizona, cows have been perpetually artificially impregnated, given birth, had their calves snatched from their grasp soon after birth, then milked and re-impregnated until they are “spent” and sent to the butcher. Calves *not* earmarked for the same fate (all males, for instance) generally become veal after six months of deprivation—confined, never knowing their mothers or their mother's milk, which people have stolen. This milk, made to turn a tiny calf into a huge bovine in roughly a year's time, will continue traveling to Arizona, where it will clog human arteries and carry bovine growth hormone (BGH) into consumers. This growth hormone is linked to early puberty in little girls, now common in countries that use BGH. And this does not even touch on the environmental effects of the milking industry: the gasoline burned, chemical fertilizers for feed, or water consumption—all environmentally much more harmful than a lunch of vegetable fried rice. Radical Buddhist interdependence requires people to see that cruelty and exploitation are counterproductive. Harming one entity harms all that exists, including oneself.

Also in China, the influential T'ien T'ai Mahayana Buddhist school teaches that all things are contained in one moment and one moment contains all things. This combination of single and universal in one unity culminated in the concept of “Buddha-Nature” (deBary 156–57). “Buddha-Nature” is *nirvana* in *samsara*, perfection in the mundane, the Buddha in each of us and in every living thing. “Buddha-Nature” is the inherent perfection of each thing *as it naturally is*. All things have “Buddha-Nature,” and to acknowledge this quality is to realize that all things are perfect *in their essence, just as they are*. Everything has inherent value, spiritual value, and one can learn important religious truths from every aspect of the physical world. The mighty Western red cedar and the little winter polypore both have Buddha-Nature, as do the exquisite tamandua, and the now-extinct (but once-exquisite) tarpan (who had the misfortune of requiring land

on which to graze, and was crowded out by the cattle industry).

In Japan, animal and nature-friendly teachings of Mahayana Buddhism were fostered and enhanced. The great Japanese Buddhist philosopher, Dogen (1200–1253), taught that the splendors of nature hold the essence of enlightenment, and that spiritual ideas themselves are “the entire universe, mountains and rivers, and the great wide earth, plants and trees” (Curtin, 198; Swearer 15). The Buddhist tradition, as it traveled across China and into Japan, continued to teach that the physical world has spiritual significance.

Mahayana Buddhist’s further developed the idea of Buddha-Nature and radical interdependence. These combined concepts suggest that nonhuman animals are important in and of themselves, that they are no more or less important than we are, that they are integrally linked with all else, and with the perfection of Buddha Nature. Animals are not lesser or “other,” they also have Buddha Nature.

Buddhist philosophy diminishes human pride with the teaching of *anatta*, or “no self.” Buddhist philosophy holds that the ever-changing nature of the physical universe, and the interconnections of this fluid universe, disallows the existence of an individual self. We are but name and form, a perceived entity that has come to be what we appear to be over eons, through the workings of the cosmos, and which perpetually changes and ultimately dissolves. Buddhist philosophy, through the teachings of Buddha Nature and *anatta* tended to elevate the rest of nature while diminishing the worldly importance of human beings. We are part of an ongoing process, just as are the pea pod and cuckoo.

Buddhist moral conduct is “built on the vast conception of universal love and compassion for all living beings” (Rahula 46). Buddhism inherited *ahimsa* from its land of birth, India, and added some uniquely Buddhist expressions of this universal moral ideal, such as *metta* (loving-kindness) and *karuna* (compassion). Teachings of compassion, including compassion toward nonhuman animals, have a high profile in the ancient and foundational Buddhist Pali Canon, as well as in extracanonical writings (Waldau 149). Nonviolence, lovingkindness, and compassion are applied to human beings and animals alike; Buddhist literature features prominent injunctions not to kill any living being (Waldau 136). The *Dhammapada*, a popular and important text in the Buddhist canon, teaches that those who follow the Buddha will not only avoid causing

harm, but will, “ever by night and day,” “find joy in love for all beings” (78).

This ethic of compassion is consistent with core Buddhist philosophies: karma and oneness. For a Buddhist practitioner, harm done to others is harm done to oneself, for we are all one, and we are bound by *karma*. The *Bodhicharyavatara* of Shantideva (circa 600 CE), teaches that fellow-creatures are *the same as* the practitioner. The Buddhist is to remember that “All have the same sorrows, the same joys as I, and I must guard them like myself” (Burt 139). We are all equally fellow creatures. “There is never a hint in Buddhist teachings that intellectual ability, a sophisticated sense of self, or any characteristic beyond the ability to suffer is relevant to moral standing” (Phelps 40).

Buddhism teaches followers to exhibit “an unlimited selfgiving compassion flowing freely toward all creatures that live” (Burt 46). “Indeed, Buddhists see this orientation to the suffering of others as a sine qua non of ethical life” (Waldau 138). The virtue of compassion is “one of the indispensable conditions for deliverance” (Kushner 148f); the Dalai Lama has often stated that loving-kindness *is* his religion (Gyatso 8). One who is cruel will not attain to *nirvana*; only those who “hurt no living being” will reach *nirvana* (*Dhammapada* 68). A truly great person is not one who succeeds in worldly matters, but one who “hurts not any living being” (*Dhammapada* 74). Buddhist are to vow: “With all am I a friend, comrade to all/And to all creatures kind and merciful” (Burt 79). The Buddhist *Sutta-Nipata* includes the following beautiful contribution to spiritual literature encouraging compassion in humankind:

may all  
be blessed with peace always;  
all creatures weak or strong,  
all creatures great and small;  
  
creatures unseen or seen  
dwelling afar or near,  
born or awaiting birth,  
—may all be blessed with peace!  
  
. . . as with her own life  
a mother shields from hurt her own,

her only, child, —  
let all-embracing thoughts  
for all that lives be thine,  
—an all-embracing love  
for all the universe. (Burt 46–47)

Compassion is expected of monks, saints, and *all* Buddhists, noninjury, is an ethical goal for every Buddhist (Shinn 219).

Buddhists are encouraged to choose their livelihood so as to avoid harm to living beings. It would be unthinkable for most Buddhists to capitalize on factory farming of any kind, as it would be unthinkable for a Buddhist to run a business exploiting the cheap labor of poor children or to earn their living as a soldier. Even keeping animals in captivity is contrary to teachings of loving-kindness, for the captive elephant “remembers the elephant grove” (*Dhammapada* 81). Those who successfully travel the Buddhist path will be filled with mercy, living a life that is “compassionate and kind to all creatures” (Burt 104).

So it is not surprising that Buddhist writings warn that “meat-eating in any form or manner and in any circumstances is prohibited, unconditionally and once and for all” (deBary 91–92). Buddhist teachings state that the moral ideal is to reduce suffering—flesh eating fosters massive amounts of misery among millions of animals. Factory farmed animals—including dairy cows and hens who lay eggs—are brutally exploited. They are deprived of freedom, their young, their nursing milk, their eggs, and ultimately their lives. To support industries that cause such suffering is not compassionate.

For the Buddhist, good conduct requires “putting away the killing of living things” and holding “aloof from the destruction of life,” even at the dinner table (Burt 104).

All beings tremble before danger, all fear death. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.

All beings fear before danger, life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.

He who for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness.

He who for the sake of happiness does not hurt others who also want happiness, shall hereafter find happiness. (*Dhammapada* 54)

The Buddha is said to have described a worthy and enlightened human not by caste, but by actions. More specifically, an enlightened human is one who, “whether feeble or strong, does not kill nor cause slaughter” (Burt 71). It matters little who kills the turkey; the one who buys a dead bird *causes* another to be raised and killed, and has thereby *caused* unnecessary suffering. Buddhist philosophy teaches that a flesh-eater can no more avoid negative *karma* from eating flesh, than one can escape the effects of dust thrown into the wind. Those who seek happiness in this life but cause misery to others “will not find happiness after death” (Burt 59).

The first, and most fundamental Buddhist precept requires followers to refrain from killing—not just human beings, but all living beings. This proscription against killing “is central to the Buddhist tradition. Indeed, it is in fact one of the few common features across the vast Buddhist tradition and its many sects, strands, and branches” (Waldau 143). To suppose that this injunction absolves those who do not kill directly, is only to suggest that Buddhist ethics are vacuous and meaningless. For to purchase body parts and body fluids is to purchase suffering, misery, and premature death.

The Buddhist moral obligation to show concern for other life-forms is “a significant, indeed a radical, message,” particularly given that Buddhist lands included animals who posed a threat to human beings (Waldau 123). In a restaurant in Dharmasala, India, I watched a Tibetan Buddhist restaurant owner carry a live-trapped rat from his restaurant, away to a new life in the thick forests of northern India. The power of one’s commitment to compassion is challenged when the being protected is not a large-eyed fuzzy creature, but a cow or a crocodile. Whether turkey or viper, Buddhist morality teaches practitioners not to kill.

As an expression of this expansive ethic of compassion, in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition spiritual adepts called “bodhisattvas” commit themselves to the task of saving *all* creatures from suffering. Bodhisattvas vow to return to the earth again and again through reincarnation, rather than disappear into nirvana. They come back to suffer the trials and tribulations of life in order to help *every individual of every species* to

escape from ongoing suffering and rebirth.

[C]ompassion is given an especially prominent place in the Mahayana branch of the Buddhist tradition by virtue of its association with the central ideal of the bodhisattva, although concern for living things is conceptually no less central in the Theravadin branch. The bodhisattva is known, and even defined, by his or her commitment to the salvation of other beings. (Waldau 138)

As the sun illuminates the entire earth, while a glowworm offers only a tiny spot of light, so the bodhisattva commits to the task of lighting the way to nirvana for “countless beings” (Burt 130–31). No creature is excluded. A bodhisattva thinks: “As many beings as there are in the universe of beings,” with or without form, with or without perception, “all these I must lead to Nirvana” (Conze 164). Buddhist sutras explain a bodhisattva’s commitment:

A Bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering, I am resolved to do so, I will endure it. I do not turn or run away, do not tremble, am not terrified, nor afraid, do not turn back or despond. And why? At all costs I must bear the burdens of all beings. In that I do not follow my own inclinations. I have made the vow to save all beings. All beings I must set free. The whole world of living beings I must rescue, from the terrors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth, of all kinds of moral offence, of all states of woe, of the whole cycle of birth-and-death. . . . from all these terrors I must rescue all beings. . . . I must rescue all these beings from the stream of Samsara, which is so difficult to cross; I must pull them back from the great precipice, I must free them from all calamities, I must ferry them across the stream of Samsara. I myself must grapple with the whole mass of suffering of all beings. (Burt 133)

Buddhist animal tales also “illustrate and underscore the position that life from one form to the next is continuous,” through reincarnation, and that compassion for all creatures is foundational in the Buddhist religion (Chapple 143). The *Jataka* tell of the Buddha’s past incarnations. In the process, these entertaining stories feature animals of every kind (including humans). Animals are not incidental to *Jataka* stories; they are primary, and are “presented with remarkable detail and accuracy” (Chapple 143). This menagerie of stories includes such diverse creatures as a crow, jackal, snake, swan, quail, horse, goose, tortoise, boar, cuckoo, pigeon, woodpecker, chameleon, chicken, mongoose, mosquito, otter, shrew, beetle, osprey, and many more. Numerically, the most

important animals in these tales are monkeys, who appear in twenty-seven stories, followed by elephants (twenty-four), jackals (twenty), lions (nineteen), and crows (seventeen). In all there are seventy different animals in the *Jataka*, many acting as central characters in the stories in which they appear (Chapple 134, 145–46).

*Jataka* stories focus on animals as individuals, with personality, volition, flaws, and moral excellence. Buddhists are often introduced to *Jataka* tales at a young age, and children begin to learn that a rabbit is not just an alien other, a thing, but an individual, a member of a rabbit community, and also a member of a larger community that includes all life. The *Jataka* help remind Buddhists of the significance of other species.

In *Jataka* tales many humble animals turn out to be the Buddha in previous lives. These animals exemplify the all-important spiritual qualities of the Buddha: self-sacrificing generosity “for the benefit of all living beings” (Martin 98). One tale reveals the Buddha in a former life as Prince Mahasattva, who comes upon a hungry tigress that is too weak to hunt for her offspring. She and her little ones are on the edge of death, and the bodhisattva comments, “Holy men are born of pity and compassion.” Prince Mahasattva then offers his own body that the tigress and her young might live (Conze 24–26). The message is one of radical and generous compassion, and Buddhist readers know that Prince Mahasattva is eventually reincarnated (due to good *karma*) as Siddhartha Gotama—the Buddha. *Jataka* tales instruct Buddhists to live mindfully—with an awareness of the likely effects of each and every action, and the knowledge that human actions toward spiders and piglets matters not only to the spider and the pig, but also in an ultimate sense—to one’s future existences.

In many *Jataka* stories animals “set an example” for humans and also “deepen the threads of human experience” (Chapple 135, 144). *Jataka* animals frequently exhibit “compassionate and often heroic self-giving” (Martin 97). One story tells of a monkey leader who saves his followers and community by using his body as a bridge to form an escape route. The monkey’s back is broken, but his companions are saved through his self-sacrifice. An observer comments to the monkey: “It is not your sword which makes you a king; it is love alone” (Khan 18).

*Jataka* tales highlight the horrors of hunting, and reveal hunting as a base activity. In one *Jataka* tale, deer are perpetually hunted by a king, who chases them through the

woods, wounding many and ultimately killing one. . . if not more than one through mortal wounds and injuries. The deer agree that it would be better to volunteer for death than to be so hunted, and so each day one of the deer must go forward to the king to be killed. But one day a doe draws the short stick, and she is with young. The leader of a group of deer offers his life so that this new mother, tending her young fawn, is able to remain alive. The hunter, who happens to be the king of the realm, is impressed by the magnanimous nature of the stag, and so spares his life. But the stag does not beat it for the hills, counting his blessings. He inquires after the lives of the other deer, will they also be spared, not just today, but tomorrow? The king agrees, seeing the sense of the argument. But the stag is not done. What of the many other creatures of the forest, would they not also wish to live? The king is quite amazed, but grants the truth of the stag's inquiry, and agrees to cease hunting the creatures of the forests. But even so, the stag is not done. He next asks about the birds of the air, and the king once again must admit that it is better not to shoot down those busy about their lives in the air. When the king believes nothing else can be questioned by this remarkable stag, the deer asks his final question: What of the fish?

The king is much moved by the compassion of the stag, his willingness to die for others, and his ability to speak up on behalf of all the suffering individuals of the forest, air, and waters. The king ultimately agrees to stop killing sentient animals for food; he will hunt and fish no more, neither the four-footed animals, the birds, or the fish will ever again suffer and die at his hand. He will have to kill—but nothing will suffer, as vegetables have no central nervous system. Because of the deer, “Love had entered into the heart of the King,” and he ceased to kill animals so that “all the living creatures in his realm were happy ever after” (Khan 33). The stag is, of course, the Buddha in a future life.

Other *Jataka* tales reveal a rabbit and elephant offering their bodies so that starving people might eat. The rabbit flings himself into a fire to be cooked while the elephant runs off a cliff to land at the feet of those who needed food. Eating flesh is acceptable when an animal offers his or her life, and the flesh is already absent of life. In each instance the Buddha is revealed to be the brave and generous rabbit and the self-sacrificing elephant. All living beings are infused with spiritual possibilities.

*Jataka* stories remind readers that there is a difference between those who have nothing to eat *except* dead animals, and those who *choose* to kill for food by purchasing body parts or by hunting. Stories of self-sacrificing compassion, stories of the Buddha in earlier lives, remind readers and listeners that the Buddha has been in many forms, as have all living beings, and that each living entity is capable of respectful and compassionate actions. No animal is so very insignificant or “undesirable” that he or she is unable to house the karmic presence of the future Buddha; no animal is morally irrelevant.

*Jataka* tales remind readers and listeners that animals are an integral part of our spiritual world, and are subject to the same moral laws (Waldau 150). *Jataka* stories reveal “the essence of the Buddhist attitude, . . . the attitude of universal compassion. . . flowing from the knowledge of inner oneness” (Martin 98). In the *Jataka*, “animals have their own lives, their own karma, tests, purposes, and aspirations. And, as often brief and painful as their lives may be, they are also graced with a purity and a clarity which we can only humbly respect, and perhaps even occasionally envy” (Martin 100).

Animals in the *Jataka* speak out against harming other species, against animal sacrifice, and against hunting and eating animals (Chapple 135–38). We are born, we die, we are born again. Those who ate the rabbit who had cooked himself in their fire did not know that they consumed a future Buddha, so we cannot know today who we are eating in our hamburger. No Buddhist would take lightly the possibility of dining on a future Buddha. And how many future Buddhas and Bodhisattvas—future enlightened souls—are now among us in animal form? How is our spiritual journey affected if we consume these spiritually enlightened beings? A contemporary Buddhist, reflecting on the *Jataka*, noted:

Was not the Buddha a hare? a quail? a monkey, a lion, a deer or ox? Who is to say that the dog guarding our porch or the cat twining around our legs is not a Bodhisattva. . . ? Entering the market one sees live rabbits and chickens and turkeys for sale. And one wonders, “Why are they here?” and is torn. “Should I buy them all? How can I save them?” For in the *Jatakas* one has seen that their inner life is the same as our own. One seeks to save them all, and they too, looking out at us with black or with golden shining eyes, yearn only to liberate us. (Martin 100)

Through the lives of animals, *Jataka* tales encourage aspirants to follow the compassionate path of the Buddha, to see animals as individuals worthy of compassion, as bodhisattvas and future Buddhas, as spiritually important.

One of the most famous Chinese Buddhist stories is the novel, *Monkey (Journey to the West)*. The main characters in *Monkey* are the monk himself (a human), a monkey, a pig, and a horse. The virtue of compassion is featured prominently in *Monkey*. In one sense it is a true story about a monk in the early seventh century who traveled across China in order to transport Buddhist scriptures from India, a journey that took seventeen years (Mair, *Columbia* 966). His travels became a folk legend sprinkled with religious satire and spiritual insights (Sommer 239). At one point in this tale of adventure, a man releases a fish back into the river, and his aging mother comments, “To release living things. . . is an act of piety. I am very glad you did it” (*Monkey* 87).

Chapters that focus on Monkey, an out-of-control primate, captivate almost any reader. Monkey is a powerful and likeable, though of a somewhat questionable character. He “represents the human mind and, as such, is resourceful and intelligent, but at the same time is unbridled and wild unless controlled” (Mair, *Columbia* 967). He combines “beauty with absurdity” and “profundity with nonsense”; Monkey exemplifies “the restless instability of genius” (*Monkey* 7–8). He causes so much trouble in the Halls of Heaven that, as punishment, he is trapped in a stone for five hundred years in the side of a mountain. He is only released by the bodhisattva Kuan-yin in order that he might help the monk on his journey to India. He promises to do so faithfully. But soon kills a handful of thieves, for which he is scolded by the monk. The undisciplined primate readily abandons his promise, and his responsibilities, in the face of such blunt criticism.

Kuan-yin gathers the various animals for the journey, which is at the core of the novel, *Monkey*. She makes them each ready, and watches over them on their way; she is their “guardian and protector” (Kinsley, *Goddesses*’ 37). She gives to each what they need along their spiritual journey.

With help from the bodhisattva Kuan-yin, the monk secures a cap and jacket to keep Monkey under control. Monkey quickly dons the cap, not knowing of its powers (always ready to act without thinking), and is vexed when he finds the cap impossible to remove. Thereafter, whenever the monk recites a certain spell, the cap gives Monkey a

terrible headache (*Monkey* 133–37). Monkey is forced to focus on accomplishing the spiritual task at hand, which he has promised to fulfill.

The bodhisattva Kuan-yin, who releases Monkey from the stone in which he is trapped, and brings him into submission with a headache skullcap, is also a prominent character in *Monkey*. Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, remains the most worshipped and popular of all Chinese spiritual beings (Kinsley, *Goddesses* ' 26).

“Kuan-yin” means “She Who Listens to the World’s Sounds,” revealing her role as the compassionate assistant to all who find themselves in distress (Kinsley, *Goddesses* ' 35). Kuan-yin listens and responds to those who cry for help. Like all bodhisattvas, her goal is to free *all* sentient beings from suffering, to help “all beings on earth to attain enlightenment” (Sommer 127; Storm 194).

Kuan-yin “is a state of perfection” (Kinsley, *Goddesses* ' 51); she embodies spiritual perfection because she hears all of the agonizing cries of those in need, and assists any living being who cries out. Kuan-yin embodies both wisdom *and* love; she is the “essence of mercy and compassion” (Kinsley, *Goddesses* ' 26). In the Buddhist worldview, those who are knowledgeable, those who are spiritually enlightened, are also compassionate. To be cruel is to be spiritually ignorant. To be perfectly compassionate is to be perfect.

The Bodhisattva of Compassion is surrounded by an array of animals. In one story she is aided by a gigantic tiger; in another she relates that she has more than once been a “noble horse” (Blofeld 69, 75). In a third, tigers bring her firewood and birds collect vegetables, at the behest of the gods (Palmer 70). In a legend of Kuan-yin’s youth, the bodhisattva saves a cicada, falling from a wall in the process. When she alights, she has a bleeding wound, but remarks that a scar is “a small price to pay for the life of a cicada” (Palmer 67). Kuan-yin also releases a carp caught by fishers. (The carp happens to be the son of a dragon king dwelling deep in the waters (Kinsley, *Goddesses* ' 48).) Through Kuan Yin readers discover a special spiritual importance in every living creature. A small fish might be the offspring of a great and powerful ruler, or a tiger might be working for ones no less than the gods, on behalf of Kuan Yin, and how we treat these other beings is a matter of great spiritual importance.

Always, in all forms, Kuan-yin shows mercy and compassion, but she is not

merely an abstract concept of love, a helpful bodhisattva, nor merely a popular and beneficial goddess. *She is what each of us is meant to be*—what we are to strive for. Practitioners are not just to cry out for Kuan-yin’s assistance, but to cultivate the spiritual virtues of this great bodhisattva: compassion, mercy, and selflessness toward all (Kinsley, *Goddesses*’ 51). Buddhists devoted to Kuan-yin are expected to do their share of listening, to do their part in healing the wounds of the world, and to aid those who cry out in agony, whether cat or kinkajou.

A Tibetan folktale about a frog highlights the lack of a clear species division in Buddhist cosmology, and the morality that goes with this philosophical understanding. In this tale a frog begs an old widow to adopt him as her son. After several days, she finally agrees and quickly comes to love the frog. The frog soon proceeds to hop off to secure for himself the most beautiful young woman in the area. The young woman’s family is mortified at the thought of their only child, their beloved daughter, marrying a frog. The frog reminds the reticent people that “[h]uman beings, animals, birds, even frogs” are all “of the same spiritual force” (Hyde-Chambers 177). Nonetheless, a frog son-in-law is a hard sell to a human family, and they offer the frog *anything* else he might want. He again offers a Buddhist rationale: “Can you not see that all beings, human or animal, are the same?” (Hyde-Chambers 180). Apparently they cannot, and the frog resorts to a series of disruptive events, revealing his powers, to convince the parents to let him marry their daughter.

Once he forces the parents to acquiesce, he must still gain the young woman’s heart. She is no less disappointed in her webbed-toed marital match than her parents, and at her father’s instruction, makes three attempts on the frog’s life, and each time the frog patiently returns her weapons, saying, “Remember that we are all one” (Hyde-Chambers 180). Eventually the frog does win her heart, and consistent with Western folklore, she discovers him to be a handsome young man wearing a magic frog-skin. But the moral of the story bears no resemblance to that of Western lore, which focuses on the inner qualities of human beings. Instead, this Buddhist tale concludes: “[A]ll things differ only in their ‘skin’. . . . [A]ll are really one nature” (Hyde-Chambers 186). This charming children’s story teaches oneness, *anatta*, reincarnation, inter-being, *metta*, *karuna*, and Buddha-Nature.

As in the *Jataka*, Tibetan Buddhism has carried on the tradition of shunning the hunt. One of the most famous Tibetan Buddhist saints, Milarepa, is often depicted as an ascetic harboring a deer in the presence of a passing hunter. In this artistic rendering, the hunter usually pauses to show his respects to the great ascetic, honoring and respecting this protector of animals. The Buddhist tradition views hunting as a cruel pastime, a way of life inimical to Buddhist spirituality. In the story of Milarepa, the hunter acknowledges the spiritual superiority of one who does not kill. Buddhist stories honor those who would rather starve than kill for sustenance.

Buddhism is a practical religion aimed at salvation; acts of kindness and generosity are critical to Buddhist salvation. Buddhist teachings must be enacted *in daily life* if devotees are to avoid ill affects in future lives. Thus, King Ashoka (India 250 BCE), a Buddhist of great power who ruled northern India, was not only concerned with his human subjects, but also with the welfare of animals (Harris 386). He “famously attempted to integrate the First Precept [not to kill (or harm)] into his rule”; engraved writings “posted around his large realm testify again and again to a respect for the lives of other animals” (Waldau 143). His Buddhist compassion was not an isolated incident, but part of a lived Buddhism that required him to protect and nurture all beings.

Buddhist philosophy teaches that people are merely one small ephemeral part of an interconnected and interdependent universe. The core of Buddhist spiritual practice is loving-kindness and compassion; the first precept condemns killing. Teachings of karma and reincarnation reinforce this spiritual imperative: the chicken on our plate was once our best friend; our teacher, our beloved, may have been a future Buddha, and we will suffer in the future for any suffering we cause. Buddhism entails a philosophy that is sensitive to the pains and needs of animals, and this philosophy is not merely peripheral, but belongs “to the core of the tradition” forming “the foundation of Buddhist morality” (Waldau 138). Buddhist philosophy indicates that Buddhists will adopt a vegan diet and stand with on the side of animal liberation.

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