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A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON ANIMAL RIGHTS

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NEWS

I want to relate to you two striking examples of animals acting with more humanity than most humans. My point is not that animals are more humane than humans, but that there is dramatic evidence that animals can act in ways that do not support certain Western stereotypes about their capacities.

About fifteen years ago there was an Associated Press article with a dateline from a northern Japanese fishing village. Several people from a fishing vessel were washed overboard in a storm far at sea. One of the women was found still alive on a beach near her village three days later. At the time a giant sea turtle was briefly seen swimming just offshore. The woman said that when she was about to drown the turtle had come to rescue her and had carried her on its back for three days to the place where she was found.

In February of this year, also according to the Associated Press a man lost at sea was saved by a giant stingray:

A man claims he rode 450 miles on the back of a stingray to safety after his boat capsized three weeks ago, a radio station reported yesterday.

Radio Vanuatu said 18-year-old Lottie Stevens washed up Wednesday in New Caladonia. It said Stevens' boat capsized January 15 while he and a friend were on a fishing trip.

The friend died and after four days spent drifting with the overturned boat, Stevens decided to try to swim to safety, Radio vanuatu reported. There were sharks in the area, but a stingray came to Steven's rescue and carried him on its back for 13 days and nights to New Caladonia, the radio said. (*AP, San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 8, 1990)

BASIC BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES

Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, Buddhism affirms the unity of all living beings, all equally possess the Buddha-nature, and all have the potential to become Buddhas, that is, to become fully and perfectly enlightened. Among the sentient, there are no second-class citizens. According to Buddhist teaching, human beings do not have a privileged, special place above and beyond that of the rest of life. The world is not a creation specifically for the benefit and pleasure of human beings. Furthermore, in some circumstances according with their karma, humans can be reborn as humans and animals can be reborn as humans. In Buddhism the most fundamental guideline for conduct is ahimsa-the prohibition against the bringing of harm and/or death to any living being. Why should one refrain from killing? It is because all beings have lives; they love their lives and do not wish to die. Even one of the smallest creatures, the mosquito, when it approaches to bite you, will fly away if you make the slightest motion. Why does it fly away? Because it fears death. It figures that if it drinks your blood, you will take its life. . . . We should nurture compassionate thought. Since we wish to live, we should not kill any other living being. Furthermore, the karma of killing is understood as the root of all suffering and the fundamental cause of sickness and war, and the forces of killing are explicitly identified with the demonic. The highest and most universal ideal of Buddhism is to work unceasingly for permanent end to the suffering of all living beings, not just humans.

EXAMPLES

The Buddha in a former life was reborn as a Deer-king. He offers to substitute his own life for that of a pregnant doe who is about to give birth. In another previous lifetime, the Buddha sacrificed his own life to feed a starving tiger and her two cubs, who were trapped in the snow. He reasoned that it would be better to save three lives than to merely preserve his own. It is better to lose one's own life than to kill another being.

The following selections are from the *Ta Chih Tu Lun*:

The Relative Value of One's Life and the Precepts

Question: If it is not a case of my being attacked, then the thought of killing may be put to rest. If, however, one has been attacked, overcome by force, and is then being coerced [by imminent peril], what should one do then?

Reply: One should weigh the relative gravity [of the alternatives]. If someone is about to take one's life, one [should] first consider whether the benefit from preserving the precept is more important or whether the benefit from preserving one's physical life is more important and whether breaking the precept constitutes a loss or whether physical demise constitutes a loss.

After having reflected in this manner one realizes that maintaining the precept is momentous and that preserving one's physical life is [relatively] unimportant. If in avoiding [such peril] one is only [able to succeed in] preserving one's body, [then] what [advantage] is gained with the body? This body is the swamp of senescence, disease and death. It will inevitably deteriorate and decay. If, [however], for the sake of upholding the precept, one loses one's body, the benefit of it is extremely consequential.

Furthermore, one [should] consider [thus]: "From the past on up to the present, I have lost my life an innumerable number of times. At times I have incarnated as a malevolent brigand, as a bird, or as a beast where I have lived merely for the sake of wealth or profit or all manner of unworthy pursuits. Now I have encountered [a situation where I might perish] on account of preserving the pure precepts. To not spare this body and sacrifice my life to uphold the precepts would be a billion times better than and [in fact] incomparable to safeguarding my body [at the expense of] violating the prohibitions." In this manner one decides that one should forego the body in order to protect [the integrity] of the pure precepts.

The Butcher's Son and the Killing Precept

For example, there once was a man who was a *srota-aapanna* born into the family of a butcher. He was on the threshold of adulthood. Although he was expected to pursue his household occupation, he was unable to kill animals. His father and mother gave him a knife and a sheep and shut him up in a room, telling him, "If you do not kill the sheep, we will not allow you to come out and see the sun or the moon or to have the food and drink to survive."

The son thought to himself, "If I kill this sheep, then I will [be compelled to] pursue this occupation my entire life. How could I commit this great crime [simply] for the sake of this body?" Then he took up the knife and killed himself. The father and mother opened the door to look. The sheep was standing to one side whereas the son was [lying there], already expired.

At that time, when he killed himself, he was born in the heavens. If one is like this, then this amounts to not sparing [even one's own] life in safeguarding [the integrity of] the pure precepts.

End Notes: A *srota-aapanna* is a first-stage arhat, otherwise known as a "stream-winner."

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PRACTICES

I. The Rite of Liberating Living Beings is a Buddhist practice of rescuing animals, birds, fish and so forth that are destined for slaughter or that are permanently caged. They are released to a new physical and spiritual life. The practice exemplifies the fundamental Buddhist teaching of compassion for all living beings.

A disciple of the Buddha must maintain a mind of kindness and cultivate the practice of liberating beings. He should reflect thus: 'All male beings have been my father and all females have been my mother. There is not a single being who has not given birth to me during my previous lives, hence all beings of the Six Destinies

are my parents. Therefore, when a person kills and eats any of these beings, he thereby slaughters my parents. Furthermore, he kills a body that was once my own, for all elemental earth and water previously served as part of my body and all elemental fire and wind have served as my basic substance. Therefore, I shall always cultivate the practice of liberating beings and in every life be reborn in the eternally abiding Dharma and teach others to liberate beings as well.' Whenever a Bodhisattva sees a person preparing to kill an animal, he should devise a skilful method to rescue and protect it, freeing it from its suffering and difficulties... (*Brahma Net Sutra* I 162)

In China the Rite of Liberating Living Beings was very popular and has continued to be so to the present day. It also is practiced in the United States at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Mendocino County and at other Buddhist centers.

II. Vegetarianism

All beings-human or beast-

Love life and hate to die.

They fear most the butcher's knife

Which slices and chops them piece-by-piece.

Instead of being cruel and mean,

Why not stop killing and cherish life?

(*Cherishing Life*, I, 83)

In Buddhism adhering to a completely vegetarian diet is a natural and logical ramification of the moral precept against the taking of life. The Bodhisattva Precepts also explicitly forbid the eating of non-vegetarian food.

Student: "...when you eat one bowl of rice, you take the life of all the grains of rice, whereas eating meat you take only one animal's life."

The [Venerable] Master [Hua] replied: "On the body of one single animal are a hundred thousand, in fact, several million little organisms. These organisms are fragments of what was once an animal. The soul of a human being at death may split up to become many animals. One person can become about ten animals. That's why animals are so stupid. The soul of an animal can split up and become, in its smallest division, an organism or plant. The feelings which plants have, then, are what separated from the animal's soul when it split up at death. Although the life force of a large number of plants may appear sizable, it is not as great as that of a single animal or a single mouthful of meat. Take, for example, rice: tens of billions of grains of rice do not contain as much life force as a single piece of meat. If you open your Five Eyes you can know this at a glance. If you haven't opened your eyes, no matter how one tries to explain it to you, you won't understand. No matter how it's explained, you won't believe it, because you haven't been a plant!

"Another example is the mosquitoes. The millions of mosquitoes on this mountain may be simply the soul of one person who has been transformed into all those bugs. It is not the case that a single human soul turns into a single mosquito. One person can turn into countless numbers of mosquitoes.

At death the nature changes, the soul scatters, and its smallest fragments become plants. Thus, there is a difference between eating plants and eating animals. What is more, plants have very short life-spans. The grass, for example, is born in the spring and dies within months. Animals live a long time. If you don't kill them, they will live for many years. Rice, regardless of conditions, will only live a short time. And so, if you really look into it, there are many factors to consider, and even science hasn't got it all straight." (*Buddha Root Farm*, 64)]

Mahakashyapa asked the Buddha, "Why is it that the Thus Come One does not allow eating meat?" The Buddha replied, "It is because meat-eating cuts off the seeds of great compassion." (*Cherishing Life*, II 5)

Although the following guidelines for working on animal rights issues follow clearly from fundamental Buddhist teachings, they are by no means exclusively Buddhist. My hope for this conference is that many of the participants, regardless of their religious views, will wholeheartedly embrace them in their future work for animal rights.

- 1) We should reduce the fear, hate, and thoughts of revenge generated by the torturing and killing of animals.
- 2) We should not be prey to negative emotions or violence. They compound the problem. Real solutions come from changing people's minds rather than from creating confrontation and friction.
- 3) We should not limit our compassion to the animals and to those of like mind, but extend it to all living beings, even if we feel that some are clearly in the wrong. Compassion should be the basis of all our interactions with others, regardless of their views and actions in the area of animal rights.