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Animals for dinner - a karmic tale

by Ron Epstein

ALMOST DAILY, the elderly Chinese American woman hurried into the San Francisco temple, bowed to the Buddhas, put her offering of food on the altar, lit incense, tidied up the temple and rushed out the door.

After watching this routine for many years and getting to know her a bit, I complimented her one day on her piety and sincerity.

"Oh, no, no," she replied. "You don't understand. My husband and I are in a terrible business. The monk here, who is my spiritual teacher, told me that we should sell it or we will face horrible karmic retribution, but we just can't seem to extricate ourselves. I just try to create a little merit to help us, but I know it is not enough."

Then I learned that she and her husband owned a Chinatown delicatessen famous for its barbecued poultry.

They struck it rich with a special recipe that called for killing the animals just before the moment of immersing them in flames, making the meat especially fresh-tasting and succulent.

Only a few weeks after our conversation, their fancy house in the Marina District caught fire during the night. The entry of firefighters was slowed by door locks and window bars that had been installed to protect them and their precious possessions.

Firefighters found them huddled together in the back of the house, barbecued to death. The fatal fire 13 years ago clearly illustrates, to Buddhists, the system of cause and effect called karma.

Buddhism, the largest religious denomination in China, is

well-represented in San Francisco's Chinese American community. Its basic teaching is respect for all life and an ethical system based on the causal relation between one's actions and later experience.

Although the Chinatown merchants engaged in live-animal slaughter have tried to justify their practices on cultural grounds, they present a one-sided view. China has a long cultural tradition, primarily but not exclusively Buddhist, of animal rights.

Thus the practice of slaughtering live animals also is abhorrent to many Chinese and Chinese Americans. In fact, many have approached me privately and asked me to present their views publicly.

The basic issue in live animal slaughter is how we can justify such extreme pain and suffering. Traditional Western arguments claim the animals don't really suffer because they have no souls. That stance so radically contradicts our personal experience with animals that very few really believe that.

According to the Chinese Buddhist tradition, even primitive forms of animal life have awareness, feel pain and have the potential for future enlightenment. If we torture them and do not respect their right to live out their natural life span, then we will suffer the karmic consequences.

Multicultural understanding is essential for harmony in our community. Nonetheless, the live animal slaughterers of Chinatown need to acknowledge that a major element of their own cultural tradition rejects their practices.

A Chinese sage wrote: "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?"

Examiner contributor Ron Epstein, a Ukiah writer, has taught Chinese spiritual traditions since 1971 as part of the philosophy and religion program at San Francisco State University.