

A photograph of a Buddhist monk in red robes, seen from behind, opening a large wooden door. A sheep is looking out from the doorway. The scene is set in a rustic, wooden building. The monk is holding a key to the door. The sheep is white with a black face and legs. The door is made of vertical wooden planks. The background shows a glimpse of a building with a window and a tiled roof.

Food of Sinful Demons

MEAT, VEGETARIANISM,
AND THE LIMITS OF
BUDDHISM IN TIBET

Geoffrey Barstow

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Introduction

ON JUNE 13, 2003, Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö addressed an assembly of monks, nuns, and laity gathered at Larung Gar, near the town of Serta in eastern Tibet. The occasion was Saga Dawa, the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, and Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö implored his listeners to mark the event by becoming vegetarian.¹ This was not an easy request. Meat has long been one of the most important staples in the Tibetan diet; for many, a meal without meat is not a full meal. But Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö is among the most respected lamas² currently active in Tibet, and his request helped spark one of the most interesting facets of Buddhist practice in contemporary Tibet: the rise of widespread vegetarianism. While the scope of the contemporary vegetarian movement is unprecedented, however, the practice itself is not. Despite the importance of meat in the Tibetan diet, many Tibetans over the last thousand years have made the difficult decision to give it up. When Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö and his peers denounce meat, they are drawing on a well-established tradition of vegetarianism, complete with nuanced theoretical arguments and an awareness of the practical difficulties such a diet entails.

That tradition is the subject of this book. In the pages that follow, I paint a picture of vegetarianism as practiced in Tibet prior to the arrival of communist forces in the 1950s. Over the course of nearly a thousand years, numerous Tibetan religious leaders debated vegetarianism, employing a variety of arguments to critique the consumption of meat. Those arguments, however, did

not exist in a cultural vacuum. At the same time that these figures were exhorting their followers to adopt vegetarianism, powerful social and economic forces mitigated their impact. The result was the consistent presence of a small number of vegetarians among the devout, but only limited adoption of such a diet by other elements of Tibetan society.

Broadly speaking, this book has two main goals. The first is simply to demonstrate that vegetarianism not only existed in Tibet but also was an important aspect of Tibetan religion since at least the tenth century. That may seem like a simple point, but vegetarianism has been largely—indeed, almost entirely—overlooked by the scholarship on Tibetan religion, both in the Western academy and among many contemporary Tibetan scholars. While vegetarianism never became normative, it was a consistent presence, supported by lamas of every geographical region and sectarian affiliation. The very fact that debates over meat eating could persist for a thousand years without resolution suggests that the importance of vegetarianism in Tibetan religiosity outweighs its limited number of adherents.

This book's second—and more complex—goal is to situate the practice of vegetarianism in its broader religious and cultural context. As I show, despite the varied perspectives individual authors have brought to the debate, the overall perspective taken by Tibetan religious leaders is remarkably consistent: eating meat is, at best, morally problematic and, at worst, completely incompatible with a religious lifestyle. Yet actually adopting a vegetarian diet was relatively rare. It did happen, but only among a minority of dedicated practitioners. In order to account for the persistence of meat in the Tibetan diet, despite the broad consensus that it is morally problematic, I look beyond the bounds of religious discussion and debate, highlighting elements of Tibetan culture that restricted the adoption of vegetarianism. First among these is a conviction, found both in the formal Tibetan medical tradition and in popular understanding, that meat is necessary for human health. Without meat, it was widely believed, the body would become weak and feeble. For many Tibetans, therefore, the Buddhist stance against meat was counterbalanced by practical concerns over health and physical strength. For them, meat was a necessary evil, morally problematic but necessary nevertheless.

Importantly, this view of meat continues to adhere to Buddhist ethical norms. Despite how it has sometimes been portrayed, however, Tibet was never a land united in the pursuit of religion. Multiple perspectives and

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ideals—secular, religious, or some nebulous combination of the two—were in play and often in tension. In some of these alternative, nonreligious perspectives, meat was viewed in largely positive terms. Meat eating, for instance, was an important demonstration of wealth, and those whose personal identities revolved around cultivating economic prosperity found it difficult to give up. Perhaps more importantly, meat was intimately connected to heroic masculine ideals. Those who prioritized this aspect of Tibetan culture valorized such virtues as strength, horsemanship, and fighting skill. For them, meat was both a necessary support for physical strength and a display of domination over animals, a public proof of their masculinity. In both of these perspectives, meat was a positive good rather than a necessary evil, an important part of a well-lived life.

In the end, I argue that questions over meat eating existed at the center of a complex tension, with religious perspectives largely supporting vegetarianism, while practical concerns with health and nonreligious ideals pulled in the other direction. Individual religious leaders tried to navigate this tension using a variety of creative rhetorical and practical strategies. For some, this meant restrictions on the types of meat that could be eaten, such as allowing only the meat of animals that had died naturally. For others, it resulted in prayers or other practices that could be performed to alleviate some of the negativity associated with meat. Others advocated vegetarianism only during certain contexts, such as during a religious retreat or holy festival (Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö's decision to speak on vegetarianism during Saga Dawa was not coincidental). By advocating options that restricted meat but did not reject it entirely, these religious leaders tried to split the difference, critiquing the consumption of meat while also acknowledging the difficulties of maintaining a fully vegetarian diet in Tibetan society.

What Is Vegetarianism?

Before delving into the history of vegetarianism in Tibet, I should take a moment to define what, exactly, I mean when I speak of “vegetarianism.” In the modern English-speaking world, the term vegetarianism can encompass practices as diverse as fruitarianism (only fruits and nuts that can be harvested without harming the plant), veganism (the strict rejection of all products derived from animals), and pescetarianism (in which red meat and

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chicken are rejected, but fish is permitted). Tibetan culture also includes a wide variety of dietary practices that can all be included, if sometimes tenuously, within the category of vegetarianism.

At the outset, it is important to note that this study is concerned with the place of vegetarianism in Tibetan *religion*. Buddhism, Bön, or other traditions may provide this religious perspective, but fundamentally I am looking at Tibetan religiosity. I consider nonreligious interpretations of meat eating (especially in chapters 5 and 6), but always in the context of how these perspectives impact the practice of Tibetan religion. Therefore, this study excludes forms of vegetarianism motivated by nonreligious beliefs or practices, such as concerns about the environment, meat's negative health effects, or even fashion.

In most ways this is a moot point, as I have encountered no references to nonreligious vegetarianism in the sources I have studied. Environmental concerns may motivate some contemporary Tibetans to adopt vegetarianism, and others may do so out of a sense that vegetarianism is progressive, fashionable, or modern.³ This book, however, is concerned primarily with vegetarianism as practiced in Tibet prior to the 1950s, and these concerns are nowhere to be found in relevant sources. Instead, all the sources I have found discuss vegetarianism within a religious context.

I say this is a moot point in *most* ways because there is one important exception: poverty. As discussed extensively in chapter 5, meat has long been more expensive than other foods. In fact, meat has often been seen as a luxury item, to the point where some Tibetans consider the excessive consumption of meat to be an unseemly display of wealth. In such a context, there must have been many people simply unable to afford meat, but who would have eaten it if they could. Strictly speaking, such a diet could be considered vegetarianism. This study, however, is fundamentally an analysis of people who give up meat intentionally. As such, although an analysis of such vegetarianism-through-poverty would be interesting (perhaps casting light on questions of class and wealth), it is beyond the scope of this book.

Limiting the scope of this project to religiously motivated vegetarianism, however, does little to characterize what that vegetarianism looked like. In order to do so, it seems appropriate to turn first to the sources themselves. Throughout much of the Tibetan literature on vegetarianism, a distinction is drawn between food that is *karsé*, literally meaning “white food,” and *marsé*, “red food.”

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FIGURE 0.1 Tibetan restaurant in Manigego advertising both *karsé* and *marsé* foods. Photo by the author.

As this color-coding suggests, *karsé* food is uncontaminated by blood, free from killing. In many ways, this is the fundamental distinction in discussions of vegetarianism. On the one hand you have food that is derived from killing—including all forms of flesh, whether derived from mammals, birds, or fish. On the other you have food that is free from such stains.

The term *karsé*, however, refers only to the food itself, not to any ongoing dietary choice. Thus, an individual who generally eats meat can order *karsé* food for any given meal just because they like the taste. It would be quite a stretch to think of such a person as a vegetarian. Tibetan literature, in fact,

lacks a consistent term for someone who adopts such a diet, the equivalent of the English term “vegetarian.” In modern oral usage, both the term *kar-sépa*, “one who [eats] white food,” and *sha masa ken*, “one who does not eat meat,” are used in this way. In older textual material, however, these terms are rarely, if ever, attested.

One term that is used in some older texts is *dokar*. This term incorporates the term *kar*, or “white,” suggesting a kinship with the term *karsé*. If the syllable *kar* in *dokar* clearly refers to “white,” however, the *do* is less straightforward. For one thing, the relevant texts do not agree on a standard spelling for *do*, most often using *rdor*, but sometimes using *sdor*. The *Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* defines *rdor* as “to grind, or sharpen,” a definition seemingly unrelated to vegetarianism.⁴ The same dictionary, on the other hand, defines *sdor* as a spice or condiment, such as one might use to flavor soup.⁵ Drawing on this latter spelling and definition, Hou Haoran has suggested that *dokar* should be defined as “white condiment,” an etymology that is as good as any I have come up with.⁶ If the precise spelling and etymology of this term are unclear, in actual use the term consistently refers to individuals who have intentionally given up meat for a sustained period of time, usually their entire lives. It is often paired with the term *denchik*, or “single seat,” referring to the practice of eating only once a day, during a single sitting. Together, *denchik dokar* suggests a rigorously ethical and ascetic diet.

Even the term *dokar*, however, is not common in Tibetan literature. Most frequently, it is found in texts relating to the Drigung branch of the Kagyü school and the Ngorpa sect of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷ As discussed later, both of these traditions had long and well-established traditions of vegetarianism. In these lineages, saying that someone practices *dokar* is a reasonably common way to refer to vegetarianism. Outside of texts belonging to these traditions, however, the term *dokar* is only rarely used.

Instead, the idea that an individual maintains a consistent vegetarian diet is usually indicated through description. One example (among many) of such descriptive phrasing can be found in Ngawang Lekpa’s biography, *Life of Ngawang Lekpa*, composed in the mid-twentieth century: “Since the time he requested monk’s vows, he abandoned eating meat, drinking alcohol and eating after noon.”⁸ This passage does not use a term—such as *dokar*—to name Ngawang Lekpa’s diet. Instead, it emphasizes his rejection of certain foods and practices. Describing vegetarianism in this way, rather than naming it, is done remarkably consistently across Tibetan literature. In addition to

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Ngawang Lekpa's mid-twentieth-century biography, similar formulations are also found in many other texts, going back at least as far as *The Great Kagyü Biographies* of 1245.⁹ Thus, despite the presence of terms such as *dokar*, on the whole Tibetan literature conceptualizes vegetarianism as a negative (the rejection of meat) rather than a positive (the adoption of a specific diet).

In this book I follow suit, defining vegetarianism not as a particular diet but as any practice that involves the intentional rejection of meat in one way or another. This is an admittedly broad definition, but that breadth reflects the actual practice of vegetarianism in Tibet. As discussed momentarily, Tibetan religion includes a remarkably diverse constellation of practices that reject meat on religious grounds, even if that abstention lasts only a day. By defining vegetarianism in this way, I hope to include all (or almost all) of those practices. Importantly, this definition highlights the actual rejection of meat; it is not enough to simply wish to eat less meat, or to think eating meat is wrong. One has to actually give it up, at least for a time.

Variations on a Theme

Conceptualizing vegetarianism in this way allows a certain flexibility, uniting under a single umbrella a range of practices that all reject meat but that differ in terms of their scope and duration. The first of these, and perhaps the most similar to the English term “vegetarianism,” is the complete rejection of all forms of meat, at all times. Such a diet was by no means uncommon in Tibet. We have just seen Ngawang Lekpa reject all meat following his ordination. Many others did likewise. Indeed, for most of the Tibetan authors I have consulted, full vegetarianism served as something of a baseline. That is, when they mention rejecting meat, unless they specify something else, they are usually referring to full vegetarianism. Once again, I follow suit. Despite formally defining vegetarianism as any intentional rejection of meat, when I speak about vegetarianism in this book, I am usually speaking about full vegetarianism. When appropriate, of course, I discuss other forms of vegetarianism, and I make that clear in the text. Full vegetarianism, however, understood as the complete rejection of flesh on an ongoing basis, serves as a baseline, a standard practice against which others can be measured.

That said, it is clear that not all Tibetans who expressed concern over meat felt that full vegetarianism was a viable option. Instead, these individuals

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adopted some form of partial vegetarianism that reduced, but did not eliminate, meat. Many of these diets are discussed in detail later in this book (particularly in chapter 7), but it is worth mentioning them now in order to illustrate the breadth of options available to those who were sympathetic to vegetarianism but who felt, for one reason or another, that they were not able to adopt full vegetarianism.

One obvious variant on a fully vegetarian diet is simply to reduce the amount of meat in an individual's diet. Several contemporary Tibetan religious leaders have advocated this position, including the current Dalai Lama and Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje.¹⁰ Inside Tibet, Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö and many others have also suggested that if individuals feel unable to fully reject meat, they should at least reduce the amount they eat.¹¹ There are fewer references to such a diet in pre-communist literature, but it is clear that at least a few Tibetans from previous generations did adopt a partially vegetarian diet along these lines.¹²

Similarly, some individuals refused to eat meat on specific dates, usually holy days such as Saga Dawa. This holiday is nominally observed on the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month but is often expanded into a month of festivities. As with other special dates, the karma that is accumulated during this time—either good or bad—is believed to be magnified. Thus, a bad deed will accrue worse karma during Saga Dawa than during other times, while a good deed will bring more positive karma. Because of the karmic potency of this event, many contemporary Tibetans refuse to eat meat during this holiday, and textual records also suggest that similar practices were popular at other times as well. Other individuals decided to adopt vegetarianism only during periods of intense religious practice, such as meditation retreats or *nyüingné* fasting rituals (discussed in chapter 4). As with auspicious days like Saga Dawa, the effects of religious practice are more profound during retreats or rituals, and many Tibetans seem to have felt that these were bad times to consume meat.

Another, more widely attested, variation on partial vegetarianism was to limit one's intake of meat to that which had been procured through ethically sound means, usually meaning meat that had "threefold purity." Threefold purity is discussed in detail in chapter 2 of this book, but for now I will summarize it as meat that the consumer has no reason to believe was killed specifically for them. (The "three" in threefold purity refers to having *seen* the animal killed for you, *heard* that it was killed for you, or *suspecting* that it was

killed for you.) Meat with threefold purity, many Tibetans have argued, can be eaten because the consumer bears no responsibility for the act of killing. Even those who disagreed with this notion, however, often found meat with threefold purity to be superior to normal meat. Thus, Shabkar Tsokdrük Rangdröl, himself a strict vegetarian, advised students, “If you are not able to give it up, eat meat that has threefold purity, free of having been seen, heard or suspected.”¹³ Elsewhere, Shabkar is clear that threefold purity should not be used as an excuse to avoid vegetarianism. But for those who feel unable to adopt full vegetarianism, it is better than nothing at all.

Perhaps the clearest example of meat with threefold purity is the flesh of animals that have died of natural causes. In contemporary Tibet, I have found whole villages that claim to rely only on meat that comes from animals killed by lightning strikes, wolves, or accidents.¹⁴ In prior generations, numerous individuals claim to have adhered to such a diet and encouraged it among their disciples.¹⁵ It is, of course, impossible to know how closely these lamas inquired as to the origins of any meat they were served. Indeed, part of the appeal of the rule of threefold purity was that it freed the consumer from any need to inquire too closely; the meat is fine as long as they don’t already think it was killed for them. Still, if adhered to, relying on meat only from animals that had died naturally would require the rejection of at least some meat, bringing it within the category of vegetarianism.

Practices such as these, where meat is given up only on a specific date, or only for a period of retreat that might last only a few days, carry no implication that a meatless diet will be followed later on. As such, these practices fall short of full vegetarianism. Still, as practices that involve intentionally giving up meat for religious reasons, it is important to include them in this study. Tibetan religion includes many variants on a vegetarian diet, and, in search of a comprehensive understanding, I have tried to include as many as possible. Thus, my definition of vegetarianism is intentionally broad, encompassing the entire constellation of religious practices that relate to the rejection of meat.

Meat, Alcohol, Garlic, Onions, and Tobacco

This study is focused on debates over meat eating and vegetarianism. Often, this debate was conducted entirely on its own terms. Sometimes, however, meat was discussed alongside such other items as alcohol, garlic, onions, and

tobacco. All of these substances are, in one way or another, problematic for devout Buddhists. At the same time, the logic behind each is quite distinct, making their association with each other curious. Frequently, it seems, the only connection between these various substances is that they are all consumable and perceived to be negative in one way or another.

Alcohol is a great example of this. It is far and away the substance most commonly paired with meat. It is not at all unusual to read in a biography that someone gave up alcohol at the same time they abandoned meat. There are also several texts dedicated solely to critiquing both meat and alcohol. Clearly, the authors of these texts perceived a strong connection between these substances. At the same time, however, the actual faults attributed to meat and alcohol are quite distinct. Over the next few chapters, I show that, in one way or another, most discussions of meat return to the fact that eating meat entails harming animals. Alcohol, on the other hand, does not directly harm others. Instead, it is a problem because it diminishes one's mental stability, awareness, and inhibitions. As Jigmé Lingpa puts it, "Alcohol instantly turns you into a madman, so always avoid it."¹⁶ In such a state, of course, one may do things one would otherwise avoid, and Tibetan texts frequently worry that drinking will lead to other forms of misconduct.¹⁷ This is a secondary issue, however, distinct from the direct harm that eating meat entails.

Further, alcohol is unambiguously forbidden by the Vinaya, the monastic code containing the rules monks are expected to live by. As I show in the next chapter, the prohibition of meat is not nearly so unambiguous. Most interpreters of the Vinaya, in fact, argue that it explicitly allows monks and nuns to eat meat, at least under particular circumstances. Both of the primary arguments used to critique alcohol (that it makes you lose control and that it is explicitly forbidden) are, therefore, distinct from the primary argument against meat (that it harms animals).

Like alcohol, garlic and onions are sometimes held to harm the consumer, in this case by throwing the body's subtle energies off balance. Also like alcohol, the Vinaya expressly forbids garlic and onions. Their chief fault, however, seems to be their repulsive smell, and its effect on those around you, both human and nonhuman. Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen notes, for instance, that the smell of someone who eats garlic or onions will drive away the positive spirits and deities, leaving the area spiritually barren.¹⁸ While eating meat is sometimes also said to drive away good spirits, this is not because of its odor,

but because of what it says about the consumer's morality. Again, therefore, the arguments are quite distinct from those used to critique meat.

Distress over tobacco only begins to appear in Tibetan texts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Daniel Berounský has demonstrated, the concerns found in these texts are twofold: there is a fear that the smoke will damage the relationship between humans and the spirit world, and a concern that smoke will interfere with the body's subtle energies.¹⁹ In many ways, then, concern over tobacco is analogous to concerns with garlic and onions. It is not, however, analogous to the issues with meat.

The distinctive nature of these arguments, in fact, leads me to question just how connected they actually are. This suspicion is bolstered by a close look at the texts themselves. While discussions of these substances are often found in the same text, they are usually treated in parallel, rather than at the same time. A good example of this is Dolpopa's *Prohibition of Meat and Alcohol*, which only turns to debates over meat after it has concluded its discussion of alcohol.²⁰ Both meat and alcohol are included in the same text, but the actual discussion of one is entirely distinct from the other. Similar patterns can be found in many other works as well.

In the end, these various substances seem to be united simply as consumables that are understood to be sinful in one way or another. Beyond this shared identity, however, they encompass distinct issues and debates. Therefore, given this book's focus on issues surrounding meat, I have largely avoided discussions of these other substances. Alcohol and the rest appear occasionally in the pages that follow, but never as a sustained object of analysis. While this decision was necessary in order to keep this work to manageable proportions, I remain hopeful that future researchers will shed light on the precise contours of the relationships among meat, alcohol, and other sinful consumables.

Looking Beyond Tibet

This book is focused on the practice of vegetarianism in Tibet and is squarely grounded in the broad fields of Tibetan and Buddhist studies, as well as several subdisciplines, particularly those surrounding the place of food, animals, and gender in Tibetan or Buddhist contexts. At the same time, however, this work also intersects with several other discussions currently active in and

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beyond academia. I discuss some of these explicitly at various points in this book, but others remain implicit. Over the next few pages I take those implicit issues and briefly make them explicit, pointing to a few of the questions and debates that intersect with the issues raised in this book. By doing so I do not claim that this book will reshape these discussions in particular ways. Instead, I merely wish to suggest areas of inquiry that can be placed profitably in dialogue with the work I have done here, with the hope that future scholars will be able to elaborate on these connections.

The first and perhaps most obvious of these discussions addresses the place of animals in religion, with “religion” here understood as a category of analysis. The study of animals and religion is still quite new as far as academic disciplines go, but is developing quickly. This field is too broad for me to survey fully, but a few recent works bear particular mention. Among these is Katherine Wills Perlo’s *Kinship and Killing: The Animal in World Religions*, published in 2009. Perlo’s goal in this work is to survey the place of animals in various world religions, and her core argument is that religious traditions around the world are pulled between a moral ideal that promotes animal welfare and the perceived need to justify and defend eating meat and other exploitative uses of animals. More specifically, Perlo argues that “conflicting feelings about human-animal relations have produced strategies of resolution, which have contributed to religious and philosophical beliefs.”²¹ Perlo goes on to identify three such strategies of resolution, which she terms aggression, evasion, and defense. Unfortunately, Perlo is hampered by her attempt to identify strategies that cut across all world religions. In her attempt for breadth, she can sometimes miss important aspects of individual traditions (particularly non-Western traditions such as Buddhism).²² This critique aside, however, Perlo’s broader point is well taken. In some ways, in fact, while this present book was not conceived or written as a response to Perlo’s work, the emphasis that I place on the tension between Buddhist ethics and Tibetan cultural norms can be read as sympathetic to the basic tension between religious ideals and cultural practices that she identifies. In this perspective, this present book can be profitably read as an attempt to take this basic insight and analyze it through a detailed analysis of a particular religious tradition.

A second work that bears particular mention here is Aaron S. Gross’s 2014 book, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications*. In this text, arguably the most comprehensive attempt to theorize

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the place of animals in religion to date, Gross suggests that religions inculcate an understanding of humanity that he calls the “humane subject.” This humane subject, Gross argues, is largely constructed through a tension between kindness and ascendancy in humans’ relationships with animals. As Gross puts it, “Humans’ ascendancy over animals (their use as resource, exploitation, domination) and humans’ kindness and kindredness towards animals (shared vulnerability, embodiment, mortality, creatureliness) are pitted against each other to such an extent that one cannot be thought of without the other.”²³ How humans relate to animals thus provides the template on which humans form their identity as humans.

Gross takes Judaism as his point of departure, with particular emphasis on the Jewish community’s response to various scandals at Agriprocessors, a now defunct kosher slaughterhouse. While keeping his work solidly grounded in Judaism, however, Gross also suggests that similar patterns exist in other religions as well. As this present book demonstrates, Tibetan Buddhists did sometimes define themselves in opposition to animals in ways reminiscent of Gross’s humane subject. That said, as I discuss in chapter 3, the basic assumptions about the distinction between humans and animals found in Tibetan Buddhism (and, arguably, Buddhism more broadly) differ dramatically from those found in Gross’s presentation of Judaism. It should not be surprising, therefore, that while Tibetan religion certainly does reflect a tension between human ascendancy over animals and a call to have compassion for those same animals, this is reflected in ways that differ, sometimes dramatically, from Gross’s presentation. Overall, while I do not dwell specifically on the theoretical question of animals and religion, it is my hope that a close reading of this book in conjunction with Gross and Perlo’s works will reveal new distinctions and subtleties in this theoretical question.

In addition to general questions of the role of animals in religion, this book is also deeply interested in the role of meat eating in the formation of gender identity, particularly masculinity. The connection between meat and masculinity is not news. More than twenty-five years ago, Carol Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* demonstrated a clear link between male attitudes toward meat and toward women.²⁴ Since then, numerous sociological studies have confirmed that meat is deeply tied to masculine identity, to the extent that third parties often see male vegetarians as notably less masculine than their meat-eating brethren.²⁵ Most of these studies have focused on the United States or Europe, but some have looked beyond these frontiers, noting

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connections between eating meat and masculinity in India during the British Empire and in Imperial China.²⁶ As I note in chapter 6 of this book, therefore, the connection that I observe between meat eating and masculinity in Tibet is hardly unique. Rather, the situation in Tibet is a particular instance of a much broader pattern. By discussing the role of meat and masculinity in a new context, I hope to add breadth to this larger discussion. Further, by detailing a new, non-Western perspective on the meat-masculinity connection, I hope to add some complexity and nuance to this discussion that (important outliers notwithstanding) tends to focus on the Euro-American context.

In addition to these academic debates, it is my hope and expectation that this book will have things to say to groups outside the ivory tower, particularly those concerned with human mistreatment of animals. As many readers are aware, there are vibrant, ongoing discussions of animals and human responsibilities toward animals in many different fields and contexts. Too often, however, these discussions of animal rights draw primarily on Western traditions of thought and ethics. Further, when Buddhism or other non-Western traditions are brought into the discussion, their treatment is often shallow or otherwise problematic. By presenting Tibetan Buddhist perspectives in a complex, sympathetic manner, this book seeks to help improve this situation, offering new perspectives to activists and others involved in shaping human/animal interactions. At the same time, I would caution those who read this book primarily for insight into Buddhist perspectives on animals, asking them to note that I speak only of the Tibetan context. Those unfamiliar with Buddhism often take texts from one particular tradition to represent the religion as a whole. And while there is much in this book that Buddhists around the world would recognize, there is also a lot of material that is specifically Tibetan, and this discussion should in no way be taken to represent the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

Finally, I want to particularly highlight ways in which this book intersects with ongoing debates over vegetarianism in the Buddhist world. Concerns over eating meat have become widespread among Buddhists in a variety of communities, as James Stewart's recent book on Buddhist vegetarianism in Sri Lanka amply demonstrates.²⁷ Further, as I discuss extensively in this book's epilogue, there is a vibrant vegetarian movement among Tibetans both inside Tibet and in exile. Similar discussions have also been taking place among converts to Tibetan Buddhism. Even a casual perusal of magazine articles and

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publications on this issue makes clear that many of those involved see this as a new discussion. And yet this is decidedly not the case. As I demonstrate throughout this book, vegetarianism has been a topic of debate in Tibet for at least a thousand years. Similarly, many of the arguments that swirl around meat eating among both contemporary Tibetans and Western Tibetan Buddhists display at best a simplistic understanding of Tibetan ethical thought on this issue. As chapters 2 through 4 of this book demonstrate, Tibetan Buddhist attitudes toward meat are anything but simple, though that complexity often gets lost in contemporary polemics. Therefore, while this book does not actively take a side in the question of whether Tibetan Buddhists should eat meat, I do hope that it will offer information and analysis that will add complexity to these discussions.

Sources

For better or for worse, this book is based almost entirely on textual sources. As of the time of writing, I have consulted roughly 110 Tibetan-language sources, each of which mentions vegetarianism in one way or another. Unfortunately, many of these sources are frustratingly brief. To give just one example of many, the aforementioned *Life of Ngawang Lekpa* mentions only once, in ninety-one pages, that Ngawang Lekpa was a lifelong vegetarian.²⁸ Fortunately, some sources are more substantial, including some texts focused entirely on the question of meat eating and others that incorporate substantial discussions of meat into works focused primarily on other issues. These texts, which discuss vegetarianism in considerable detail, form the backbone of this book.

Whether brief or extended, the sources I draw on for this book come from a wide variety of genres and styles. I have found many references to vegetarianism in biographical and autobiographical works, but these passages tend to be brief. Works that discuss the various religious vows found in Tibet have also been a particularly rich vein. These include commentaries on the monastic vows, discussions of “three-vow” theory, and monastic rule-books. Some of these texts provide substantial discussions of meat, but even those that do not can still help contextualize the diet, particularly in terms of its relationship with other Buddhist practices. Finally, I have drawn on several prayers and ritual texts. These works have been particularly useful

for understanding the role of meat in ritual life. Individually, none of these texts provide a comprehensive picture of vegetarianism in Tibet. Collectively, however, they allow me to reconstruct a picture of vegetarianism that is both broad and deep.

That said, there are some obvious issues with my reliance on textual material. Most prominently, these texts represent the voices of those who could read and write. In other words, they represent the religious elite.²⁹ It is sometimes possible to read between the lines to discern more popular attitudes toward meat, and this analysis can help offset the inherently elite bias of most of these works. Fundamentally, however, these texts represent the voices of those who were not only literate, but who also believed that their opinions were worth writing down. Further, we cannot even be certain that these texts accurately represent the opinions of their elite authors. They were written with an audience in mind, and the opinions represented in them were calibrated accordingly.³⁰ It is entirely possible, even likely, that some authors sought to present themselves or their lineage in a good light by emphasizing practices (like vegetarianism) that they did not necessarily follow in real life.

It is also worth noting that I have found few texts that actively support meat eating. I have looked, but such materials remain elusive. The closest such work that I am aware of can be found in Khedrup Jé's *Concise Presentation of the Three Vows*.³¹ In this text (which, despite its title, is hardly "concise"), this seminal Geluk master presents an extended discussion of meat eating. As part of this discussion, Khedrup Jé refutes several arguments others use to support vegetarianism, giving voice to a position that otherwise remains largely implied. In other places, however, Khedrup Jé is strongly critical of meat, and his text can hardly be seen, on balance, as supportive of meat eating. Beyond this somewhat ambivalent text, I have found no other pre-communist literature that argues for meat in any length. My assumption is that since meat eating remained the norm across Tibet, few authors felt the need to justify the practice in writing. Or perhaps such texts exist, and I have simply not found them. In order to understand the logic that supported meat consumption, therefore, I have had to rely on those pro-vegetarianism texts that present their opponents' arguments. Fortunately, this is a common practice, and it has been fairly easy to reconstruct the positions that vegetarians were arguing against. In the absence of pro-meat works, however, these reconstructions must remain somewhat conjectural.

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Because of these issues with textual material, I have sought to locate and incorporate other types of sources, including art historical, architectural, and archeological material. Unfortunately, I have found little that is legitimately relevant. A few *tangka* paintings of lamas feature implements suggesting concern for animals, such as a water strainer. Others provide a visual representation of textual accounts, as in the depiction of the Crushing Hell found in chapter 3. Beyond simply adding a visual element to this work, however, these depictions do little to expand or alter the accounts found in textual works.

Finally, this book has been informed by my fieldwork in Tibet, primarily in Kham, conducted over repeated visits from 2007 onward. Because of restrictions on research in Tibetan regions of China following the 2008 unrest, I was unable to spend long periods of time at individual monasteries.³² Nor was I able to conduct surveys or other quantitative analyses. I was, however, able to visit dozens of monasteries across the region and to conduct more than a hundred interviews. This fieldwork forms the core of my analysis of the contemporary vegetarian movement, found in this book's epilogue. Most of this book, however, is concerned with vegetarianism in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion, and only two of the Tibetans I have spoken with were old enough to remember that time. Given the massive political and social shifts of the last sixty years, it is clear that my fieldwork among contemporary Tibetans cannot represent Tibetan practices during that earlier time. Therefore, while I have sometimes used contemporary ethnographic data to inform or illustrate my analysis of older textual material, I have tried to do so sparingly and carefully. In the end, this book is based almost entirely on textual sources, with all the advantages and difficulties this entails.

Outline of the Book

The remainder of this book is divided into two broad sections. The first, consisting of chapters 1 through 4, examines the place of vegetarianism within Tibetan religiosity. In these chapters, I try to create as complex a portrait of religious attitudes toward vegetarianism as I can, complete with a recognition that the arguments used to criticize meat are multifaceted and that their use varies by time and place. This project opens, in chapter 1, with a brief history of the diet in Tibet over the last thousand years. I chart a few of the

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many individuals who adopted such a diet, the context within which it was adopted and promoted, and some of the major shifts in rhetoric surrounding it. This story, depicting the development of vegetarianism in more or less chronological order, provides the background and context for the more analytical chapters that follow.

That analysis begins in chapters 2, 3, and 4, each of which looks at the place of meat according to one of the three sets of vows taken by devout Tibetans: monastic vows, the compassionate vow of bodhisattvas, and tantric commitments. Each of these perspectives is associated with one of the three Buddhist paths or vehicles and emphasizes a different aspect of the Buddhist tradition. Each also provides a distinct perspective on the question of eating meat. In this book I have chosen to adhere to this three-vow structure, with one chapter dedicated to each set of vows.

This choice offers many advantages and some significant disadvantages. First, while the question of meat is important in each perspective, the way it is understood differs, often dramatically. Approaching these perspectives separately allows me to explore these differences fully, while also remaining alert for areas of continuity and overlap. Second, many Tibetan authors, particularly those who address meat at length, organize their own discussions according to these three perspectives. By following suit, I am able to structure this work in a way that echoes the sources themselves. At the same time, however, this structure tends to flatten historical, geographical, and sectarian differences. As chapter 1 demonstrates, vegetarianism was understood and practiced differently at different times and in different places. I have tried to maintain an awareness of this fact, but it is inevitable that my focus on the three vows tends to obscure these differences. Distinguishing the vows in this way also disguises the fact that individuals usually practiced all three sets of vows simultaneously. Thus, while each set of vows brings a distinct perspective to the question of meat eating, the group also needs to be seen as a whole, capable of offering consistent guidance to real world problems.

In chapter 2 I begin this analysis with a look at the place of meat within a monastic context. I open by looking at canonical sources that discuss meat and monasticism, particularly the Vinaya's presentation of the rule of three-fold purity. The chapter then notes that, despite the seeming permissiveness of the Vinaya, vegetarianism has long been associated with monasticism in Tibet and was often linked to upholding the monastic code with particu-

lar purity. To understand this seeming contradiction, I analyze the various ways that Tibetan lamas sympathetic to vegetarianism critiqued more popular accounts of threefold purity and other Vinaya regulations regarding meat. In doing so, I note that while vegetarianism was not explicitly mandated by the Vinaya, it did align with the larger renunciatory ethos carried by monasticism in Tibet. In the end, I argue that it was this association between the rejection of meat and the rejection of nonreligious social life that caused vegetarianism to be so strongly associated with monasticism, despite the explicit permissions found in the Vinaya.

Fundamentally, however, concerns over eating meat were not driven primarily by a parsing of Vinaya rules. Instead, the core issue was the apparent incompatibility of meat eating with the compassionate orientation expected by Tibetan Buddhist religiosity. Chapter 3, therefore, turns to a detailed discussion of the role of compassion in Tibetan discussions of vegetarianism, particularly as codified in the bodhisattva vow. Animals were widely considered to have feelings akin to those of humans, and killing them was assumed to cause intense suffering. For many Tibetan writers, engaging in such killing was obviously opposed to the ideal of compassion, often seen as the central tenet of Buddhist practice. Importantly, discussions of the different sets of vows generally view the bodhisattva vow as superior to the Vinaya commitments. Thus, in situations where the different vows conflict, an individual should follow the bodhisattva vow. In the case of meat, this means that even if a particular author accepted that meat was allowed by the monastic code, they could (and did) invoke the superiority of the bodhisattva vow to argue that monks should not eat meat.

If monastic vows are superseded by the bodhisattva vow, however, the latter is superseded by the tantric commitments, analyzed in chapter 4. These commitments complicate the situation concerning vegetarianism because they are almost universally interpreted to *require* the consumption of meat. More specifically, these vows require practitioners to consume the five meats—human, dog, horse, cow, and elephant—during tantric feast offerings.³³ Some Tibetans seem to have interpreted this requirement to mean that it was acceptable to eat meat on a regular basis as well. Not surprisingly, those lamas sympathetic to vegetarianism vigorously opposed such interpretations, arguing that the tantric commitments only required the consumption of the five meats, and those only within the ritual itself. Within

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this specific context, these lamas argued, the tantric vows supersede the bodhisattva vow and meat should be consumed. Outside of this context, however, the bodhisattva vow still applies, and meat should be avoided.

In the end, no matter which of these three perspectives is being examined, meat is largely (if not quite exclusively) condemned. Indeed, despite my best efforts, I have found few sources willing to argue *for* meat from a religious perspective, and none that do so without reservation. This does not mean that meat did not have vocal supporters, but those supporters rarely argued in religious terms, preferring to cite issues of health or economic interest. Looking at the issue from a religious perspective, the overall impression one gets from the available material is that meat is at best a necessary evil, and at worst completely incompatible with religious practice.

And yet, despite this consistent condemnation of meat eating, vegetarianism remained rare. The second section of this book asks why. Here, I turn my attention away from religious arguments to examine those aspects of Tibetan culture that opposed vegetarianism. Chapter 5 begins this process by examining perceptions of the role of meat in human health. Many Tibetans assumed, with the support of Tibetan medical tradition, that meat was necessary for human health to flourish. Concerns over health, in fact, are by far the most frequent critique of vegetarianism. Without meat, the body's energies would become unbalanced and the body would become weak and feeble. Even adamant vegetarians sometimes made allowances for people who were old, infirm, or whose bodies were otherwise incapable of relinquishing meat. In a few instances, a lack of meat was even blamed for the premature death of vegetarian lamas. For all of these reasons, meat was often seen as a necessary evil, morally questionable but required nonetheless.

Not all Tibetans saw meat as a necessary evil, however. For many, it was understood simply as a good, morally neutral (or even positive) part of the diet. In chapter 6 I examine the circumstances in which meat, widely derided by religious practitioners, could still be seen in a positive light. In particular, I highlight two perspectives in which meat was seen as a good thing, both of which were in tension with the religious perspective discussed previously. The first of these focused on economic gain and saw meat as a wholly appropriate way to enjoy and display one's success on this front. The second of these alternate perspectives prioritized an idealized vision of heroic masculinity. In this perspective, eating meat was both necessary for the development of physical strength and a symbolic expression of dominance over

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animals (in itself a profoundly masculine virtue in Tibet). As this discussion makes clear, Buddhism was not the only ideal shaping Tibetan culture. And in these alternate ideals, meat was no longer seen as a necessary evil, but a valorized, positive element of cultural identity. In the end, I present meat eating in pre-communist Tibet as a contested space, pulled between multiple competing ideals and demands. More specifically, I argue that vegetarianism was located at the nexus of a three-way tension between religious ideals, perceived medical need, and alternate perspectives that ignored (or diminished) religious ideals and saw meat simply as a good thing, part of a well-lived life.

Though they may not have articulated them in precisely the way I have, Tibetan religious leaders were well aware of these tensions surrounding meat, and chapter 7 examines the various ways they tried to balance the competing religious and cultural ideals that swirled around vegetarianism. Only a few lamas demanded strict vegetarianism among their students. Much more common was the adoption of one or more strategies that sought to promote vegetarianism while also acknowledging the practical and cultural difficulties of a vegetarian diet. For some, this meant a graduated system with different practices for different social categories. Lamas, for instance, might be called on to adopt full vegetarianism, while ordinary monks and laypeople might be allowed to eat meat, perhaps after performing purificatory rituals. Other lamas advocated eating only the meat of animals that had died a natural death, seeking to derive the health benefits of meat without bearing responsibility for the death of the animal. Still others seem to have regarded the whole issue as insoluble, acknowledging meat as wrong but feeling that it simply could not be relinquished. This analysis gives insight into not only the ways Tibetan social and cultural norms sometimes conflicted, but also the strategies used by some lamas to actively address these tensions.

The main body of this book, focused on vegetarianism in the pre-communist period, concludes with chapter 7. In an extended epilogue, however, I turn my attention to the contemporary vegetarian movement. Over the past decade, vegetarianism has spread swiftly across the Tibetan plateau, far eclipsing its previous popularity. To understand this remarkable shift, I return to the tensions that surrounded vegetarianism in the pre-communist period. These tensions, which served to check the rise of vegetarianism throughout that period, have changed remarkably since Chinese communist forces asserted their authority in the early 1950s. In particular, increased

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awareness of Western medicine has dramatically eroded the idea that meat is necessary for human health, enabling large numbers of people to draw on traditional religious arguments against meat and adopt vegetarianism without concern for health ramifications. The vegetarian movement, therefore, is best understood not as a new form of Tibetan culture, but as a shift in the balance between the tensions that have always surrounded the question of meat eating in Tibet.

At the same time, however, vegetarianism has become intertwined with questions of cultural identity and resistance against the central state. For some, it is an expression of Tibet's Buddhist identity, practiced in resistance to state-mandated neoliberal economic policy. On the other hand, those who locate Tibetan cultural identity primarily in nomadic and other forms of lay life sometimes see vegetarianism, which negatively affects the nomadic economy, as a threat to Tibetan culture. Thus, the contemporary vegetarian movement has emerged as more than simply a question of individual morality and is part of an emerging dialogue over the identity of Tibetan culture more broadly. By understanding the historical tensions that surrounded the diet in the pre-communist period, we can better understand these contemporary debates.