

Roshi Philip Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist View of Animal Slaughter and Meat Eating*.
(Rochester, New York: The Zen Center), 1981, pp. 106.

Did the Buddha die of eating a piece of putrid pork or from a poisonous mushroom? According to Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha permitted eating meat unless one had reason to believe that the animal was slaughtered expressly for one's meal. According to this tradition, the Buddha would not refuse meat if it were offered, and died from eating tainted pork. But this teaching is contradicted by Mahayana Buddhism, which holds that eating meat is a direct violation of the cardinal precept of Buddhism, *ahimsa* or harmlessness to living things.

In this book, Roshi Kapleau presents a variety of arguments to support the Mahayana position. One important line of argument is textual. Kapleau tries to show that the Buddha could not have said the things attributed to him in the Pali texts. The ambiguous key word in the debate

about the fatal food is "sukara-mad-dava" which Kapleau claims can mean either "what pigs eat", "pig's delight", "soft pork", or "food trampled by pigs." Theravada resolves the ambiguity in favor of the "soft pork" interpretation, while Mahayana prefers the "pig's delight" sense which signifies a kind of truffle. Kapleau bolsters his position by pointing out that there are several Pali compound names for plants which have "sukara" (pig) as the first element, such as "sukara-kanda" (pig-bulb) and "sukareshta" (sought-out by pigs). As one who is not an expert on Pali, I have no right to an opinion on this matter; to me the situation seems irretrievably ambiguous. However, it does seem important that the word that unmistakably denotes pork, "sukaramamsa", is *not* used to describe Gotama's fatal repast.

Three other points support Kapleau's interpretation. First, there is the fact that the trades of butcher, hunter or fisherman were prohibited by early Buddhism. Second, there is the precept of *ahimsa* which seems to be a more general principle than the Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", which has always been given a very narrow interpretation. Third, the doctrine that it is acceptable to eat animals so long as one has not reason to believe that they were killed especially for one's own dinner seems so hypocritical I fail to see how the Buddha could have advanced it. But we have seen equally great men defend things just as illogical before, and more than once.

But, after all, what does it matter if the Buddha died from pork or mushroom? At one point Kapleau says:

"Buddhism is not a religion of dumb acquiescence or blind belief. In one of his most salient utterances the Buddha urged his followers not to believe solely in the written words of some wise man, or in the mere authority of one's teachers or priests, but to accept as true whatever agrees with one's own reason and experience, after thorough investigation, and whatever helps oneself and other living beings (p. 39)"

A logician might view this statement as paradoxical, in that we are abjured to reject mere authority on the authority of the Buddha himself, but the principle seems sound in any case.

In general, the book is marked by a lack of intellectual sophistication which will be counted a virtue by some, a defect by others. The level of argumentation often does not meet

the standards of a professional philosopher. For example, on page 15, Kapleau says it is "safe to assume" that most of the 7 to 10 million who are vegetarians in this country are such for humane reasons as opposed to health reasons. But no evidence is given; apparently he does not think it is needed. I do.

The book has a certain "fundamentalist" air about it, and sometimes seems to rely on *argumentum ad authoritarium*. Many of the better points are taken directly from Peter Singer and have a strongly derivative flavor. Some of the arguments seem quite dubious to anyone trained in the Western tradition of scientific thought. Consider the following:

"How is it possible to swallow the carcasses of these slain creatures, permeated as they are with the violent energy of the pain and terror experienced by them at the time of their slaughter, and not have hatred, aggression, and violence stimulated in oneself and others (p. 16)"

I, for one, am frankly dubious that any such simple causal relationship exists between diet and violent behavior. It sounds as if it would be an easy hypothesis to test empirically. If anyone has ever demonstrated such a causal relationship, I don't know about it. Kapleau cites no supporting evidence, though he makes an attempt to explain away the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian, which he admits is the skeleton in the closet of this argument, by pointing out that those who actually did the torturing were flesh eaters.

Then too, Kapleau assumes a reincarnation theory to argue against eating animals. Thus for him, to eat a cow is cannibalism in a very real sense, since that cow may have been

a human in the past or may become one in the future, and since cow-nature and human-nature are the same nature. This argument will carry weight with a confirmed Buddhist, but it makes little impression on those who regard reincarnation as problematical at best.

Moreover, the book lacks biological sophistication. On page 50, we are told that "whales" are an "endangered species". Whales are an order, and within that order there are many species, only some of which are endangered. To say that whales are endangered is somewhat like saying that birds are endangered. Some of them certainly are. The fact that some species of whales are endangered

provides a good reason for not killing those, but for other species we must find different reasons.

In conclusion, I have pointed out that Kapleau's work lacks sophistication. But we need to remember that the word "sophisticated" is uncomfortably close to "sophistical." Kapleau is deeply concerned about the suffering of animals and our debased treatment of them. I certainly agree with his aims and conclusions. His book is unique in that it is the only one available that tries to apply the arguments of Peter Singer within the Buddhist context. Buddhists and those interested in Buddhism will find it well worth reading, and I hope they will take its message to heart.

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