
Kapleau, Roshi P.


This was not published by the Zen Center and is not scholarly or peer-reviewed. Librarian said that it was.

The book discusses the issue of the first precept of Buddhism, “of not killing, or harmlessness to living beings” (Kapleau 1981: 19) and its contradiction to meat eating practices. As Kapleau states, besides the discernible thought expressed, the first precept can also be interpreted in a different aspect such that it teaches "there is no single being that has not been our mother, our father, …or daughter- its ascent and descent ladder of cause and effect through countless rebirths --how then can one who approaches all living things as though they were himself eat the flesh of something that is of the same nature as himself eat the flesh of something that is of the same nature as himself and not be guilty of cannibalism of a sort?" (Kapleau 1981: 20). To simply put, an animal today can very well be the divine one himself, the Buddha, tomorrow.

The chapter discusses the diverse food eating habits of Buddhist monks. Buddhism united under the enlightened one exists in diverse forms: Theravada and Mahayana, thus various views and exercises differ in each chronicle. As portrayed in the book, the recounts of Theravada Buddhism forbids the devouring of the flesh of elephants, dogs, lions, tigers bears, and hyenas. Furthermore, one must also restrain from eating the meats that he sees, hears or has grounds to suspect was killed for the sole purpose of being consumed by him. Mahayana sutras however unmistakably condemn meat eating. As depicted in the book by Kapleau, extracts from Lankavatara narrates the following “Meat eating I have not permitted to anyone” (Kapleau 1981: 33). Another extract from Surangama sutra declare the following: “The reason for practicing dhanya and seeking to attain Samadhi is to escape from the suffering of life, but seeking to escape from suffering ourselves, why should we inflict it upon others?” (Kapleau 1981: 33). Furthermore the book also puts emphasis on the practice of not drinking the milk of a cow till ten days after it has given birth for taking its milk would mean keeping its calf hungry. Such acts show both moral and religious reasons for their eating practices. This clearly dictates the strong sentiments towards animal slaughter for the act of eating in Mahayana Buddhism; it can only be seen as pure selfishness and cruelty toward another living being and nothing less.

Although the chapter was informative, surprise overtook me as certain biased views were emphasized greatly. Kapleau, a Mahayana Buddhist monk shows greater compassion and portrayed the eating habits of Mahayana Buddhists as being greater while considering the eating habits of another adaption of the same religion as being taboo. Another interesting aspect was the fact of Theravada Buddhists restraining from the consumption of animals that are similar to them as lions, dogs, and etc. As one can see what may be an accepted act in one religion may very well be condemned in another. Such acts of taboo are visible in all religions.