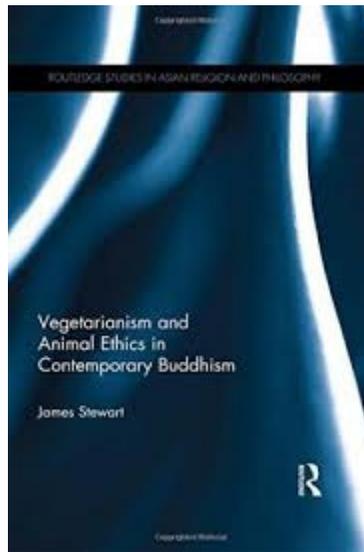


Reviews

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Welcome Insight into Buddhist Vegetarianism in Sri Lanka

James Stewart, *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Contemporary Buddhism*. London: Routledge, 2015. 214 pp. \$145 hc.



Somewhat surprisingly, there has been very little academic discussion of Buddhist vegetarianism. There have been some notable articles on this topic, and it regularly appears in broader discussions of Buddhist Ethics, but James Stewart's *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Buddhism* is the first book that I am aware of to focus solely on the question of vegetarianism in a Buddhist context. Not only is it the first academic discussion of Buddhist vegetarianism, but Stewart also treats the topic well, providing a comprehensive look at the social and religious context of a meat-free diet in contemporary Sri Lanka. Importantly, while Stewart discusses many of the normative, doctrinal questions surrounding meat eating, he focuses his analysis on vegetarianism in contemporary, lived Sri Lankan Buddhism. For as Stewart reveals, vegetarianism in Sri Lanka is not simply a question of Buddhist doctrine, but involves a complex tension between elite doctrine, national politics, and popular perspectives. As such, the book is essential reading for those interested in contemporary Buddhist thought on animal ethics and vegetarianism. It should also interest those who study vegetarianism in a

cross-cultural perspective, though those who have little background in Buddhism should approach the work with caution, for reasons I will detail below.

Stewart opens with a short introduction presenting his subject: those contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhists who advocate for vegetarianism, along with those who critique them. Stewart makes the important observation that a strong majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists are not vegetarian (an observation which, incidentally, applies to almost all Asian Buddhist cultures). He is aware that this fact runs contrary to many western assumptions about Buddhism and non-violence, provocatively suggesting that “Western expectations about ethical vegetarianism in Buddhist countries may be just another example of Western cultural neo-colonialism or Orientalism” (5).

Following this introduction, Stewart begins to set out the ethical contours of the debates surrounding vegetarianism and meat eating. In his first chapter, “The Lion and the Cow,” Stewart argues that Sri Lankan culture presents a pair of contradictory cultural ideals. On the one hand, many Sri Lankans associate themselves with the strength and power of the lion, while at the same time admiring the gentleness and nurturing instincts of the cow. There is a tension, Stewart concludes, between these ideals, so that many Sri Lankans acknowledge that vegetarianism and animal protection are good while also continuing to kill and eat animals. Following closely on this discussion, Stewart’s second chapter looks at the place of meat in Theravada Buddhist texts. Once again, Stewart finds a tension in this material. He argues that the overall tone of these canonical texts suggests that harming animals is wrong, and that vegetarianism, therefore, should be a good thing. Contradicting this overall impression is the simple fact that the Theravada Sūtras repeatedly claim that the Buddha both ate meat himself and allowed his disciples to eat it (as long as it was not specifically slaughtered for their consumption). Therefore, as Stewart notes, contemporary advocates of Buddhist vegetarianism are stuck. While their position seems to align with the Buddha’s emphasis on non-violence and the moral standing of animals, Theravada Sūtras clearly depict the Buddha as a meat-eater.

Having introduced his readers to the issues and debates that surround vegetarianism, Stewart turns his attention to the contemporary vegetarian movement. He opens this discussion in chapter three with an analysis of vegetarianism among lay Buddhist communities. Insightfully, Stewart chooses to focus his analysis on food-offering rituals, noting first that offerings made to representations of the Buddha are usually pure, vegetarian foods. Monks, on the other hand, are often given meat, a fact that Stewart

attributes to a desire among the laity to give the monks what the laity believe they would like, as well as a desire to be seen offering expensive foods like meat.

In chapter four, Stewart turns his attention to monastic vegetarianism, beginning with the observation that monks rarely turn down meat. Stewart attributes the fact that almost all monastics eat meat to their thorough grounding in Theravada Buddhist texts, which, we may recall, generally allow meat as long as the animal was not killed specifically for that monk. This leads to one of Stewart's most interesting observations: in contemporary Sri Lanka, vegetarianism is predominantly a lay, rather than a monastic movement. This is notable because it is precisely the inverse of the situation in much of the rest of the Buddhist world. In China, for instance, Buddhist monks are usually expected to be vegetarian, while only devout laity adopt such a diet. Similarly, Tibetan Buddhist vegetarianism has always been predominantly a monastic phenomenon. The fact that Sri Lankan vegetarianism is predominantly lay is, to the best of my knowledge, unique in the Buddhist world (though I would be very interested to know if similar patterns hold in other Theravada countries). In explaining this fact, Stewart looks to the phenomenon of "protestant Buddhism," a movement which he suggests has empowered the laity to analyze and interpret Buddhism for themselves, though they do not necessarily have the depth of scriptural understanding achieved by monks.

In my reading, chapters three and four constitute the heart of Stewart's analysis. In the remainder of the book, he fleshes out this portrait by looking at a variety of specific aspects of the contemporary vegetarian and animal welfare movement. He begins this process in chapter five by analyzing the cow protection movement. As noted earlier, the cow is a prominent symbol in Sri Lanka, associated with gentleness and maternal kindness. In Stewart's presentation, these perceived qualities have contributed to a widespread movement seeking to protect cows from slaughter. In chapter six, Stewart turns his attention to the perceived role of meat in human health. He notes that several traditional doctors have advised that without meat, their medicines would not function. On the other hand, excessive consumption of meat is seen as bad for one's health, and is associated with western excess. The proto-nationalist overtones that Stewart observes here are fully discussed in chapter seven, which looks at the anti-halal movement. Here Stewart's analysis takes a darker turn, noting the ways in which attempts to ban halal slaughter (ostensibly on ethical grounds) have become associated with xenophobic anti-Muslim sentiment. As Stewart puts it, "The halal abolition movement represents the dark side of the seemingly innocuous movement to better the lives of cows and other animals in Sri Lanka" (196).

Overall, *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Buddhism* makes a number of salient contributions to both Buddhist Studies and the cross-cultural study of vegetarianism. In the first place, Stewart makes clear that while it is a minority diet, Buddhist-inspired vegetarianism absolutely does exist in Sri Lanka. This may seem like a minor point, but simply pointing out this fact (and backing it up with admirably thick description) is a significant contribution. Secondly, Stewart's observations about the tension between monastic and lay vegetarianism are both insightful and interesting. Future scholars would do well to heed his observations here, and not assume that vegetarianism must always be a monastic phenomenon. Finally, Stewart's observation about how animal welfare activities are implicated in contemporary nationalistic rhetoric provides a useful caution. As admirable as many of us may feel that animal welfare activism is, we must also pay attention to ways in which those discourses can be co-opted by other movements.

This book is, of course, not without flaws. At times, Stewart's analysis can feel thin, excessively anecdotal. To give one example, on page 81 Stewart claims that most of his informants viewed vegetarianism positively, while only a few were actively opposed. It would be nice, however, to be given a better sense of how many informants he is speaking about, and how he found them. These concerns, however, do not take away from the value of the book as a whole, and overall I have few complaints with the body of this book.

A more serious concern is the title itself. By titling his book *Vegetarianism and Animal Ethics in Buddhism* — with no reference to Sri Lanka — Stewart seems to be suggesting that he is speaking for the Buddhist tradition in its entirety. And yet, as Stewart himself notes in his introduction, this is not the case. He is speaking about vegetarianism in contemporary Sri Lanka, with only a handful of references to the rest of the Buddhist world. Further, while some of his observations may dovetail with forms of Buddhism practiced in other times and places, many of them do not. I have already noted that the tension Stewart depicts between lay and monastic vegetarianism differs dramatically from the situation found elsewhere in the Buddhist world. Another example can be found in Stewart's discussion of the canonical, textual perspective on meat eating. Stewart does a good job of presenting Theravada canonical positions on meat, but his findings do not at all accord with the concerns found in either Tibetan or Chinese canonical materials, both of which draw on Mahāyāna scriptures not found in the Theravada canon. Several Mahāyāna texts, for instance, explicitly claim that the Buddha was vegetarian, directly contradicting the claims made in the Theravada material Stewart discusses. My fear here is that some readers who do not have strong

backgrounds in Buddhist Studies may read this book as if it speaks to the concerns of the entire Buddhist tradition, particularly given the dearth of other studies of Buddhist vegetarianism. So while I hope that Stewart's book is read by many whose primary interest is in non-Buddhist forms of animal ethics, I also hope that such readers will bear in mind that Stewart is depicting only one Buddhist tradition among many.