

Buddhist Narrative Re-Weavings of Animal Liberation

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When I was 23 years old, I decided to foster a dog. I rode the subway up to a Petco on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and picked up a small brindle dachshund-terrier mix that had just been rescued from the kill list of a Los Angeles shelter. The adoption agency was unable to tell me his name amidst the chaos of about 20 other barking dogs, but given his black, grey, and brown speckled coat, I gave him the name Peppino, an Italian derivative of the word pepper. Peppino was five years old and had human-like eyes that made him look like he was always sad. He was quiet, with a sweet and loyal demeanor that swayed me within 48 hours to apply for adoption and become his forever dog-mom.

Peppino and I did everything together. He slept in my bed, came to work with me, and ate the scraps from my meals. I knew I was beginning to see another, brighter side of him when he would stand on his hind legs and jump into the air with excitement when he wanted a treat or toy. The intimate friendship we developed persuaded me to reconsider my eating habits and switch to a vegetarian diet. I had considered vegetarianism before but thought it was impractical at best and at worst an obstacle to connecting to my Italian-Filipino heritage. But when Peppino came into my life, and I became familiar with the complexities of his inner emotional workings, I couldn't reconcile how I could eat one animal, and say that Peppino, a dog, was my best friend.

A year after Peppino's adoption, I took my formal Buddhist precepts and was forced to seriously consider the first precept "to not kill." What did it practically mean to not cause harm? How was I promoting or

hindering life? When the Buddha talked about the end of suffering, did he mean only for humans? What does liberation look like for all beings?

I had to look at the inherent contradictions that were present both in my life and in the Buddhist tradition. Most meditation-based convert Buddhist communities promote an understanding of the Buddha's teachings that focus on individual psychological dynamics and alleviating human suffering. However, through further study and contemplation of my own personal karma and the Four Noble Truths of Suffering, I discovered that it was my moral imperative to reconsider how I perpetuated so many forms of harm that went beyond the human species.

The Three Poisons of Animal Production

Reconciling the extremities of suffering across species requires an assessment of how suffering comes into existence. The Four Noble Truths indicate that suffering is caused by *tanha*, desire or thirst. However, a more nuanced and helpful understanding of desire can be understood through the three root poisons: passion, aggression, and ignorance. The three root poisons are unwholesome intentions or seeds that underlie any feeling, thought, or action. Buddhist practice involves assessing how the three poisons manifest personally through one's mind and behaviors. Although the three poisons have differing qualities, they all propel the energy of craving that feeds suffering in that they are unsatisfactory means to avoid discomfort and promote pleasure.

Through the development of my relationship with Peppino, I was slowly awakening to my own manifestations of the three poisons. I made excuses for the things that I craved: buying leather shoes, and eating eggs and dairy. I felt angry that making ethical choices was so inconvenient. I chose to look the other way when I had the opportunity to learn more about the systems that made animal agriculture possible. However, I realized that the three poisons were not only personal afflictions but that they functioned on a much larger scale. Animal agriculture is fed by a systemization of delusion and aggression through factory farming, and a culture of global consumerism.

Anthropologist and multi-species ethnographer Debra Rose Bird speaks to this systematic ignorance in regards to the predominant way that animal products are produced in factory farms. Bred, grown, and slaughtered in large warehouses away from the public eye, most consumers have no idea where their food comes from. She further notes that companies use "words to help disguise accountability" (Bird, 27). Through greenwashing labels like "cage-free" and "free range" good intentioned consumers participate and perpetuate a system that purposely deceives and manipulates them into believing that they're making more humane purchases.

Political scientist Timothy Pachirat documents the firsthand systematization of violence in the industrialized killing of farm animals in his book *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. After going undercover in a modern industrial slaughterhouse for five months, Pachirat writes of his experience being a part of the machine that helped slaughter 2,500 cattle every day. Pachirat disturbingly illustrates how violence is organized into highly efficient processes and hidden away, not only from the end consumer, but from the workers carrying out different functions within the slaughterhouse themselves.

The systematization of ignorance is further fed by a culture of consumerism that disproportionately places the responsibility on the consumer. Under this guise, animal rights movements are also swept into a culture that emphasizes personal dietary and lifestyle choices rather than public reform. Government subsidies and bailouts allow the meat and dairy industry to be profitable regardless of public demand. I am reminded of images at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic of dairy farmers pouring surplus milk

onto the ground. The narrative that was painted was that dairy farmers were suffering due to closures in the food industry. But what was purposely left out was that large scale commercial dairy farmers always produce more than they can sell. The Farm Bill that was passed after the Great Depression pays for product to help dairy and meat farmers survive regardless of the amount of dairy-products that are consumed (Folsom, 2006).

The Affective Karma of Animal Encounters

Buddhist teachings on karma in conversation with affect theory may offer a window into reconsidering ways to position pro-animal rights campaigns. Karma describes the law of cause and effect in Buddhist cosmology. The basic premise of karma is that if one plants seeds, one will reap fruit. Common misconceptions about karma are that this process is linear and it functions as some form of retribution. Like the three root poisons, karma functions for every feeling, thought, and action, and can be understood as an energy that underlies all phenomena. The effects of karma also accrue strength with habitual, repeated behavior. For example, if one begins to regularly exercise, the karmic fruit of feeling healthier and stronger will arise. The process of getting up every day to go for a run or do a yoga class will also feel easier given the preexisting karmic seeds planted. That also goes to say if you pull a muscle accidentally while working out, that too is part of the karmic process. Again, there is no quality of retribution, but rather a series of causes and conditions that have allowed phenomena to arise and transpire.

The systematization of ignorance and consumerism in animal agriculture is a result of karmic cultural conditioning. It is both a humbling reminder of how our perceived reality comes into being and how it can be a part of the solution to the destructive human-animal distinction. While it is clear that the mass degradation of the environment, horrific factory farm conditions, and promotion of meat and dairy is a product of many unwholesome seeds of greed, aggression, and ignorance, I am interested in how a combined understanding of karmic conditioning and affect theory can help change the embodied reactionary impulses of the public to help dissolve the human-animal divide.

Affect theory describes the sensual, felt, experienced matters in which our bodies encounter the world around us. Donovan Schaefer, interdisciplinary religious studies scholar, indicates that affect theory challenges liberal humanism and anthropocentrism in that it complicates and troubles human sense of sovereignty and subjectivity. In its own way, affect theory is describing a form of karmic ripening of embodied compulsory feeling and behavior. Affect places emphasis and power on how much feelings can play a role in shaping culture and behavior. Ann Pellegrini in her work, "Signaling through the Flames" draws on this connection when describing the relationship between religion, politics, and affect: "The ability to win over converts or spark spiritual rededication does not rise and fall on fact checking or biblical hermeneutics. It is a matter rather of affective congruences... The participant is invested (or reinvested) in a deeper structure of religious feeling that can tie together disparate, even contradictory, experiences, bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts" (Pellegrini, 2007).

The key question is: how can pro-animal rights movements and scholars play on affective congruences for the benefit of non-human animals? How can pro-animal movements create a feeling, embodied karmic ripening in favor of non-human animals on a cultural scale? The organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) amongst other animal rights groups have in part used affect in their campaigns; their ads largely elicit an emotional embodied response of horror and disdain. However, eliciting negative emotions has its limits. In the same way that sharing statistics of how many species have gone extinct over the past 50 years, propelling care and concern for animals by showing how horrific their circumstances can leave people feeling helpless, distraught, or even with secondary traumatic stress.

As human-animals interacting with non-human animals, we must not downplay the affective power of a physical encounter. I am reminded of the first time I visited a farm sanctuary, a place for rescued farm animals to live the remainder of their lives in peace with care, without the chance of ever reaching slaughter. It was the first time in my life that I spent quality time with pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, and cows. I was humored by the way the sheep followed me around the grounds, nuzzling into my legs for a scratch. I was enamored by the way the pigs sighed in relief, dozing off, caked in mud. I was astonished by the enormity of a male cow, his large eyes staring directly at me, and him placing his forehead against mine as if we were old friends. I left the sanctuary so moved, I felt like this was perhaps what was missing in large scale pro-animal rights campaigns all along: an embodied reaction of respect, awe, and joy.

While affect theory recognizes that concrete information such as graphs and statistics are also affective, I am interested in exploring how pro-animal groups, religious leaders, and scholars can build on the type of positive affective congruences that occur when a human encounters a non-human animal in physical life. Ultimately, how do we prevent pro-animal movements from becoming what Manuel A. Vasquez, scholar of religion and society, indicates can be a “suffocating textualism that approaches religion as essentially systems of symbols, beliefs, narratives, and cosmologies, ignoring other important material dimensions of religious life” (Vasquez, 2011)? Rather than inciting eco-grief and despair, how can we call more people into a movement with energy that celebrates the joy of the more-than-human world?

Given karma’s teachings on wholesome and unwholesome seeds, **how can pro-animal groups plant wholesome seeds that put into effect embodied feelings for humans to promote more liberatory animal life? How can pro-animal rights activists, theologians, and scholars create the causes and conditions that allow the physical, feeling body to enact its own wisdom in connection to other forms of sentience?** I am interested in building a foundation for seeds that goes beyond the sentimental but one that is based in genuine care and action. It must not rely on shocking individuals with passing news of another species extinction in hopes that it will transform one’s life, but rather create the causes and conditions in which embodied concern arises out of a direct connection and intimacy with non-human animals.

No-Self and Commensalism

The intimacy and connection that arises through physical and temporal encounters with non-human animals can also arise through an embodied experience and understanding of the Buddhist teachings of no-self. No-self refers to the idea that there is no lasting, permanent self. Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and deep ecologist, has written extensively on an interpretation of the teaching: “world as a self, self as lover.” Taking into the account the teachings of no-self, Macy expands its understanding to include the ecological world. However, what’s important to note is that since humans do not independently exist, Macy indicates to care for oneself means caring for the entirety of the world.

In addition to Joanna Macy’s conception of a larger ecological self, I am interested in exploring what the implications of no-self are in relation to Bénédicte Boisseron, scholar of Afroamerican and African Studies’, proposal for humans to “purposely not reclaim one’s humanity” as normative understandings of who is human are not only gendered and racialized but are also based on an human-animal continuum. Boisseron believes that “humanity” as it is currently understood does not benefit humans, and rather reinforces a “scale of being” across marginalized humans and species (Boisseron, 90-91).

I am also interested in how Boisseron’s proposal for a culture of commensalism can be a practical reorientation towards a culture of no-self (Ibid, 104). Boisseron defines commensalism as “a philosophy built on the act of sharing without being owed and taking without being indebted” (Ibid, 92). If one views

themselves as synonymous with other life, what is there to owe one another? A no-self commensalist worldview in and of itself deconstructs a sense of ownership and legal contracts which Boisseron indicates is “man’s way of staying human” (Ibid, 104). How can we create processes and structures that help embody a Buddhist understanding of no-self into the systems that currently perpetuate the human-animal divide?

I believe Buddhist teachings on the three root poisons, karma, and no-self offer ways to foster positive narratives and embodied understandings of human interconnection with non-human life. The three root poisons offer a framework to assess and address the way suffering manifests across species. Karma in conversation with affect theory offers a window into how pro-animal rights groups and leaders can create positive affective congruences for humans in favor of the more-than-human-world in an existing culture of ignorance, aggression, and consumerism. And lastly, no-self and commensalism can offer a way of further deconstructing the animal-human divide. Through purposeful narrative re-weavings, Buddhist theological frameworks in conversation with existing pro-animal understandings offer new ways for humans to engage in the aim of reducing animal suffering, creating liberation for all creaturely life.

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About the author

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Adriana was drawn to the Compassion Consortium for her field education experience to bridge and supplement her human-centered chaplaincy training to include the more-than-human world. She is most excited about developing her theological thinking in company and collaboration with other eco-animal centered spiritually oriented humans.

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