

The Sectarian Formation of Tibetan Vegetarianism: Identifying the First Polemic on Meat-eating in Tibetan Literature^{*}

..... This paper aims to explore the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism and illustrate its influence on the practice and spread of vegetarianism in Tibetan history. Much is known about vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet, and several articles have been devoted to its investigation. Yet almost all of these articles tell us relatively little about some important historical aspects of Tibetan vegetarianism, namely: about the popularity of vegetarianism in some Tibetan Buddhist schools and the lack of it in others; about the shift of arguments to pro-vegetarianism during different periods; and about the geographical differences in Tibetan vegetarianism. This paper will provide a fairly comprehensive, but by no means exhaustive, overview of these informative gleanings and demonstrate that these already mentioned aspects have their roots in the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism to some degree.

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Therewith, this paper will argue that the sectarian formation of Tibetan vegetarianism explains a great deal of the historical trajectory of Tibetan vegetarianism, as well as its spatial distribution today.

Unlike in Chinese Buddhism, while vegetarian cuisine never became standard for Tibetan Buddhist monks, it did become a problematic topic, and polemics upon it appeared with some frequency throughout Tibetan history. One of the puzzles of Tibetan Buddhist history, then, is why Tibetan Buddhists argued over vegetarianism with such enthusiasm, a debate that had wide repercussions, yet demonstrated less willingness to practice vegetarianism *per se*. Here, I attempt to provide some clues to answer this question by presenting the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism.

By “sectarian features” I mean that vegetarianism might have been practiced by all the Buddhist schools in Tibet, yet I found that the lack of it in Geluk (dge lugs) tradition is surprisingly evident compared to other Buddhist schools.¹ If vegetarianism had been traditionally practiced by all Tibetan Buddhist schools, then its absence in the Geluk tradition would be an exception. Our knowledge of sectarianism in Tibetan vegetarianism can be filled in with information gleaned from two types of Tibetan texts: texts on the faults of meat, and texts in defense of meat. The latter type especially forms the heart of this paper. Texts on the faults of meat appear in Tibetan literature with some frequency, though I am not aware of any such texts from Geluk scholars. Conversely, I have encountered some meat-defending texts that were composed by Geluk masters.

In order to examine the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism, I will first demonstrate the fact that the practice of vegetarianism among the Geluk was, indeed, rare prior to twentieth century, compared with other the norms in Tibetan Buddhist schools. The exploration of this phenomenon would also serve as an opening remark for the main discussion of this article: the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism, which would then allow us to understand the main arguments on the theme—meat or no meat—over time and across places in Tibet. In addition, this will enable us to visualize what rhetorical strategies Tibetan Buddhists adopted in order

1 The practice of vegetarianism in Geluk is very rare, and its conscious anti-vegetarianism or meat-defending position was fairly consistent until the end of twentieth century. However, the pattern becomes much more complex in contemporary Tibet, where Geluk still holds a meat-defending position while starting to practice vegetarianism in its monastic kitchens, passively synchronized with the recent mainstream — vegetarian — movement in the Kham area. However, there is not enough space in this paper to conduct research on the contemporary aspects of Tibetan vegetarianism, and it will retain relatively more focus on the historical aspects of Tibetan vegetarianism. With regard to the issues around vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet, see the details in Gaerrang (Kabzung), 2016: 1-17; Katia Bufetrille, 2014: 113-128; and Gaerrang (Kabzung), 2011: 31-43.

to argue for and against the idea of vegetarianism. This paper will restrict itself to Tibetan textual resources relating to debates around meat consumption, as well as to the fieldwork that I conducted in three distinctive places in contemporary Tibet, namely: Rebgong (reb gong), Pema (pad ma), and Serda (gser rta) county.

Both Western and Tibetan scholars have done research on the subject of Tibetan vegetarianism over the last six years; some of this research has already been published, and almost all of it has agreed that vegetarianism is a controversial topic among Tibetans and investigated why this is so. This is especially true of Katia Bu fetrille's (2014) article "A Controversy on Vegetarianism", in which she explores how idealized vegetarianism is contradictory to the realities of Tibetan life (especially nomadic lives). Furthermore, Geoffrey Barstow's (2013) unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, *The Food of Sinful Demons: A History of Vegetarianism in Tibet* gives great insight into the historical aspects of Tibetan vegetarianism, particularly with its investigation into the religious calls for vegetarianism and the cultural and environmental factors that prevented such a diet in Tibet. Gaerrang's (2011) article, "The Alternative to Development on the Tibetan Plateau: Preliminary Research on the Anti-Slaughter Movement," also examined some controversial issues around vegetarianism in modern Tibet. While the main focus of his work was the 'anti-slaughter movement' in the Kham areas, the appeal of vegetarianism is deeply associated with the anti-slaughter movement. These three works give us deep insight into the controversial aspects of vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet. Nevertheless, none mention the sectarian features of the issue, which I have found to be one of the most vital factors in understanding the controversy around Tibetan vegetarianism.

Furthermore, recent publications on Tibetan vegetarianism have made plentiful references to pro-vegetarian arguments, yet none have examined any meat-defending texts that are from pre-modern Tibet. Such texts are significant, since they not only give a clear vision of the arguments for and against meat consumption in pre-modern Tibet, but also tell much about the situation in modern Tibet too. I, therefore, decided to conduct the translation of such sources into English.² The following passages will provide a longer, more complex answer, exploring the multiple polemics around both meat-defending and pro-vegetarianism.

Geoffrey Barstow's already-mentioned Ph.D. dissertation offers a broad and important insight into the historical background of Tibetan vegetarianism, and it is especially dedicated to searching for the strong relationship between vegetarianism and monasticism in Tibet. My discussion is also indebted to Barstow, who suggests that while vegetarianism may have been

2 Throughout this article, except for one portion of the references that I have noted as others' translations, all translations of Tibetan literatures are mine, even if other versions have been previously published. The provenance of these original texts is provided in the bibliography.

more popular among one school or another at any time or place, it has overall been practiced and upheld by representatives of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike Barstow, who discusses the history of Tibetan vegetarianism based upon pro-vegetarian texts and accounts, the focus of my investigation is to explore the polemics around vegetarianism by examining both pro- and anti-vegetarian perspectives and texts. Furthermore, I explore how those different perspectives influenced the development of vegetarianism later in Tibet.

This article, to a large extent, has its roots in reading and analyzing three lengthy meat-defending texts that are from the Geluk school. They are: (1) Khedrup Je's (mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang, 1385–1438) meat-defending text that is contained in his work *The Elimination of the Mistakes and the Three Views* (thub bstan byi dor), which I found is most probably the earliest such text in Tibetan literature; (2) Gedun Drubpa's (dge 'dun grub pa, 1391–1474) text, *The Answers to Namgyal Drak's Questions* (ta'i si tu rnam rgyal grags pa'i dri ba'i lan), where he also provides deep insights into the debates around vegetarianism; and (3) another text that I have recently become aware of, *The Examination of the Allowance and Proscription of Meat and Alcohol Among Buddhists* (Sang srgyas chos lugs pas sha chang sbyod rung mi rung gi don bshad pa) by Alak Dorshi (a lags dor zhi, 1947–), a prominent Geluk scholar from Amdo. On the other hand, in order to confront two opposing ideas on meat eating, I also studied some of the important pro-vegetarian texts, for instance, Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's (ngor chen kun dga' bzang bo, 1382–1444) text on the faults of meat: *A Letter to Benefit Students* (spring yig slob ma la phan pa).

1.1 Khedrup Je's Meat-Defending Text

Compared with other Tibetan Buddhist schools, there is little evidence that the Geluk masters have practiced vegetarianism or hold the vegetarian position as firmly as others; in contrast, several masters have actually legitimized meat-eating among their followers, including figures like Khedrup Je, Gedun Drubpa, and Alak Dorshi, who have composed strong arguments defending meat-eating. Particularly significant are figures like Khedrup Je, one of the earliest lineage heirs of the Geluk School, whose text was the earliest one in defense of meat-eating among the Geluk and probably the earliest in Tibetan literature as a whole. It is, therefore, though lengthy, worth reproducing here. In order to save space, I provide only selected excerpts.

If someone asks what the permitted and forbidden things for monks are, some would say, “Monks should not be eating meat; slaughterers only arise for the sake of meat-sellers and others who supply those who eat meat. If no one ate it, butchers would not appear. Therefore, these so-called meat eaters are very involved in misdeeds. The same bad karma arises as with butchers.”

They should be asked, “In which Vinaya is meat forbidden to monks? If a monk

eats meat, does a fault arise or not arise?" If it doesn't arise, then [saying this] is a corruption of the Vinaya. If it does arise, then does the Vinaya say it is a defeating act? A major fault? An abandoning downfall? A solitary fault? A fault requiring individual confession? A misdeed? Which? In the first case, there are five defeats. In the second case, there are fourteen major faults. In the third case, there are thirty-one abandoning downfalls. In the fourth case, there are ninety-one solitary faults. In the fifth case, there are five faults requiring individual confession. In the sixth case, there are one hundred and thirteen misdeeds. It must be among the 254 trainings!³

On the other hand, someone might say, "It is in the misdeeds of the 'gathered sources.'" In that case, tell us which of the seventeen basic precepts⁴

1.2 Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's Text on the Faults of Meat

We should then ask, who are Khedrup Je's opponents in his text? There is no clear answer within the text itself, and Khedrup Je did not even provide a single name of either the schools or individuals who opposed him. Nonetheless, in order to explore this question, I then reviewed the pro-vegetarian literatures in Tibet prior to Khedrup Je, as well as during his period, and tried to find out whether or not some pro-vegetarian texts explicitly opposed Khedrup Je's position.

There were actually several pro-vegetarian texts during the same period as Khedrup Je, as well as prior to him. Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, for instance, was the founder of the Ngor branch of the Sakya (sa skya) school. He was Khedrup Je's contemporary and wrote a text explicitly criticizing meat-eating—*A Letter to Benefit Students*—of which two thirds discussed the faults of meat-eating. It seems to me that this text gives great insight into the arguments in favor of vegetarianism, and considering that Khedrup Je's defense of meat-eating might be a response to Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's text, it is, therefore, worthwhile to reproduce some portions of the text here.

In the time when one gains the precious human body – the most and only physical form of embodiments of enlightened body, speech and mind – in order to practice Bodhicitta, one ought to practice the correct view of understanding the existence of cause and effect, as well as to perform correct/pure conduct. Yet, some unwise practitioners are unrestrainedly drinking alcohol and eating slaughtered meat [bsad sha],⁶ and even argue that this is permitted by the Vinaya, and in the Vajrayana vehicle. These people are not only involved in misdeeds, but also leading others to such evil deeds. These people must have followed bad teachers, which would become the cause of the collapse of one's practice. Therefore, here I am going to conduct an argument against such ideas in three ways: the faults of drinking alcohol, the faults of eating slaughtered meat, and the proscription of both meat and alcohol in Vajrayana.⁷

This short passage is the opening remark of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's text, where he structures his arguments around the three sets of vows that Tibetan monks take. Two sections are dedicated to a discussion of the faults of meat according to each set of vows, and within other sections, he discusses the faults of both meat and alcohol accordingly. In the following passage of his text, Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo highlights the faults of meat:

6 Meat from an animal that has been intentionally killed, which is distinct from the meat of animals that have died naturally.

7 Ngor chen kun dga' bzang po, 2010: 315-316.

We read in the Mah parinirv na Sutra: “to offer somebody alcohol, poison, weapons, and slaughtered meat is evil charity.” Some might argue that monks are allowed to eat slaughtered meat under the three circumstances as the Vinaya states. However, this is an exceptional choice, not a definitive teaching of the Buddha. For instance, if a monk is sick, and without eating meat would probably die, then the monk can eat it as a medicine. Other than that, monks shouldn’t be eating [meat that satisfies the conditions of] threefold purity. In the Mah parinirv na Sutra, Kasyapa asked, “In the past, why did the Tathagata [the Buddha] permit the consumption of meat examined in the three ways?” The Buddha replied, “Kasyapa, I allowed the consumption of meat examined in the three ways as a means to gradually eliminate meat eating.” Therefore, we should understand Buddha’s teaching fully.⁸

In this passage, Ngorchon Kunga Zangpo discusses two vital arguments. First, he suggests



Tibetan man told me that for about five generations, his family had been practicing the tradition of only consuming *shisha*. He himself had also been practicing this rule for his whole life. One day, I encountered two Tibetan young men who were selling meat on the town street. When I approached them, they realized that I am a Tibetan, too. So, they explained to me that the meat they were selling was *shisha*, which was from a yak that had been killed by wolves (See Fig. 1).

As can be seen, *shisha* consumption is also practiced in contemporary Tibet. When I became aware that this practice was popular in some Tibetan areas, my suspicion was that it was probably only a contemporary phenomenon. However, thanks to Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's writing, I realized that it was also a pre-modern practice among Tibetan Buddhists, at least since the fifteenth century. This shows how historical sources could illuminate contemporary practices.

1.3 The First Polemic on the "Meat or no Meat" Theme in Tibetan Literature

As can be seen, Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's arguments on the faults of meat were all firmly refuted by Khedrup Je. In addition, Khedrup Je and Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo carried out several intense polemical exchanges over the interpretation of the Hevajra body *mandala*, which were also fueled and intensified by several later arguments.¹⁰ Therefore, my suspicion

¹⁰ On the polemics between Khedrup Je and Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, see: Jorg Heimbel, 2015: 249-289.

is that Khedrup Je's meat-defending text could be a rejoinder to Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo and his lineage heirs. If this is the case, it was probably the first polemic on vegetarianism in the history of Tibetan literature. Therefore, Khedrup Je's arguments are important enough to quote here too:

In addition to certain proscriptions, "*The Foundations of Vinaya*" states that "[monks] are allowed to eat the meat which satisfies the threefold purity. And meat is generally prohibited if it did not attain threefold purity." The threefold are; when [monks] have seen, heard or suspected that the meat was slaughtered for themselves. So if any of these criteria is incomplete, then the meat did not have threefold purity, and vice versa.

In "*The Foundation of Vinaya*" it says, "It is not to be eaten if [monks] are aware that the meat was slaughtered for themselves." In its extensive commentary, it also clarified that "If [monks] have seen, heard or suspected that the patron has slaughtered the animal for specific [monks], then [monks] should not eat the meat. Other than that, it is even allowed to take and eat the meat from slaughter house or butcher shops if it is the permitted meat." Here "permitted meat" means possessing the threefold purity.

Some foolish people argue that all slaughtered meat does not attain the threefold purity and is thus forbidden. These people aren't even aware of one single sentence of the "Extensive Commentary of the Vinaya." If all slaughtered meats are not allowed, then think about why the Vinaya proclaimed that, "It is allowed to take and eat the meat from slaughterhouse or butcher shops if it is the permitted meat."

If some argued that such meat is only for curing sickness, then it [Vinaya] should be clearly stating the word "sick" instead of generally saying "monks", which the Vinaya did not. For the sick, meat would even have been allowed if it hadn't attained threefold purity. In the "*Extensive Commentary of the Vinaya*" it said, "There will be no impure karmic consequence if the consumption of meat is on the ground of curing illness. For instance, it is not to eat if [monks] are aware that the meat is slaughtered for themselves, but there is an exception if it is for curing illness." Therefore, the idea that the regulation of threefold purity is for sick is a lie to fool people.¹¹

Now, it becomes very clear that Khedrup Je was largely disagreeing with Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's arguments. First, he argued that the *Vinaya's* rules on threefold purity is a definitive

11 Rje tsong kha pa sogs, *The Fragment Collected Works of Je Tsongkhapa, Khedrup Je and Gyaltsab Je*, 1999: 332-333.

meaning of the teaching, and demonstrated that the rule is not only for the sick, but for all monks. While Khedrup Je did not analyze the Buddha's accounts in the *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra*, where the Buddha claimed that his allowance on threefold purity is a provisional regulation, aimed at gradually eliminating meat-eating, he did disagree with people who hold such an idea, and argued that if the rules on threefold purity in the *Vinaya* is not a definitive proclamation, then all monastic disciplines in the *Vinaya* should be the same.

In addition, Khedrup Je also argued that slaughtered meat is suitable as long as it attains the threefold purity. From Khedrup Je's point of view, we can see that he considered the meat from butcher shops to conform to the regulation of threefold purity, and thus, allowable for monks to consume. In comparison, from Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's standpoint, no meat is to be eaten if it requires intentional killing. From Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's point of view, the action of killing animals and eating meat are at the same level of fault, since he thought that killing would mostly not occur if people did not eat meat, which again is strongly disproved by Khedrup Je:

It is true that it has been taught that killing is unsuitable. And, for the sake of consistency with that, one may think that meat does not usually arise without the taking of life. Well, in that case, leather boot soles and leggings would be unsuitable. These also do not usually arise without the taking of life. If you assert that these are also unsuitable, then you have corrupted the rules regarding suitability. There will not be a legitimized school at all. There are many more examples like this.¹²

In this part of his text, Khedrup Je has strongly rejected the idea of equating the faults of killing and meat consumption. While this alone might not indicate Khedrup Je's meat-defending position, it demonstrates that these two activities—killing animals and eating meat—are different, and they at least have different levels of faults. Khedrup Je argues that meat-eating is entirely different from the act of killing, such that according to his point of view, the person who kills an animal is solely responsible for the death of that animal. In contrast, the person who buys or consumes the meat after the death of the animal is not responsible for the karmic outcomes, or at least not responsible at the same level as the slaughterer, since this meat attains threefold purity.

While Barstow states that the idea that eating meat is wholly separate from killing an animal has been current at many points in Tibetan history, he claims that he has yet to find any Tibetan texts that actually promoted this idea.¹³ Given that Khedrup Je differentiated the

12 Rje tsong kha pa sogs, *The Fragment C llected W rks f Je Ts ngkha a, Khedru Je and Gyalts b Je*, 1999: 331-332.

13 Geoffrey Barstow, 2013b: 88.

activity of eating meat and killing animals in the fifteenth century, there is little doubt that such an idea has been promoted for a long time, at least from the fifteenth century.

I perceived that many Tibetans supported this idea during my fieldwork in Amdo, where most informants agreed that meat from butcher shops all met the conditions of threefold purity. Nonetheless, informants from Kham frequently drew a distinction between meat that comes

[fragment] which has been eaten by a tiger, or to eat the flesh of the elephant, horse, or serpent. They are forbidden to eat odd-toed ungulates, fox, monkey, woodpecker, crow, vulture, waterfowl, dog, hawk and owl, and may not eat those birds who eat human corpses, or virtuous/white birds, bats, lizards, mules and insects.” In its [the Vinaya’s] *extensive commentary* it also said that “those meats are not to be eaten if one is aware of it.” So it is clear to understand that such proscriptions indicate that meat can be eaten [by monks] as long as it is outside of this category. Otherwise, if meat needed to be forbidden in general, then why should the Buddha specifically proscribe certain types of meat?¹⁷

In this part of his text, Khedrup Je argues for the avoidance of the categorical proscription of meat consumption in *The Foundation of Vinaya*. He explains that this proscription indicates that the Buddha actually allowed monks to eat meat f[8.2[(ITo e)0.7 (f[80.5dTc8.2[(ITof (t)0.6 (he)0. Vina:at

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Heimbel, who stated that “In general, the dispute (between Khedrup Je and Ngorchon Kunga Zangpo) was not merely polemical exchange written in a cutting tone, but was also conducted from a sectarian standpoint, which shaped the religious realities of fifteenth-century Tibet.”²⁰ Nevertheless, Heimbel did not specifically mention their polemics over vegetarianism, and I argue that these were the origin of the formation of sectarianism in Tibetan vegetarianism.²¹

1.4 Gedun Drubpa’s Meat-Defending Text

As mentioned earlier, Khedrup Je was not the only one of Geluk lineage who defended meat-eating. Gedun Drubpa, another prominent Geluk scholar from the same period as Khedrup Je, also argued that monks could eat meat that had attained threefold purity. Unlike Khedrup Je’s text, which neither mentioned specific names of Tibetan Buddhist schools nor individuals, Gedun Drubpa’s work in defense of meat-eating was a direct response to questions he received from Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo (*rnam rgyal grags pa bzang po*, 1395–1475), a famous Jonang (*jo nang*) scholar, as well as a great doctor who founded the Shang pa (*byang ba*) tradition

non-drinkers, offering untimely food for timely eaters, and offering meat for non-meat eaters, then one would probably become a famed patron, but without merit,” said the Buddha. “Is it a sinful action to offer meat to a non-meat eater?” one asked the Buddha. “It is an evil act, if one offered meat to my followers who have abstained from it. Therefore, please do not offer them meat, and it is not allowed,” said the Buddha.

In *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra* the Buddha was asked, “If vegetarianism is a praised act, would it be an evil act to offer meat to non-meat eaters?” “Exactly, you have understood my idea, and this is the way to practice dharma. From now on, my followers are not to eat meat,” said the Buddha.²³

As we have seen, unlike Khedrup Je, besides the *Vinaya*’s regulations on meat-eating, Gedun Drubpa also provided the accounts from Mahayana sutras like *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra*, and demonstrated that the Buddha’s call to abandon meat was optional. This is probably due to the question by Namgyal Drukpa Zangpo, and he himself also might have intentionally not overlapped with Khedrup Je’s text. However, in this passage, Gedun Drubpa provides the full conversation on meat-eating between the Buddha and his students, showing that if a patron knows that the monk is a non-meat eater, then it is not allowed for them to offer meat to that monk.

However, one thing that is clear from this account is that the Buddha did prohibit patrons and laymen from offering meat to his vegetarian students. This indicates that there must have been other monks who actually ate meat in the Buddha’s time. In addition, Gedun Drubpa also provided several fragmented stories from the *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra*, where Buddha clearly proscribed meat consumption, yet Gedun Drubpa firmly argued that these accounts could not prove that the Buddha proscribed meat-eating entirely for monks:

In the *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra* the Buddha said, “Meat is like the flesh of the mother’s son, so how could I permit meat-eating [to monks]”. But this does not mean that shravakas are not allowed to eat meat, for if it did, then they wouldn’t even be able to eat what they have been given by patrons.²⁴

This short passage gives a clear insight into the early Indian Buddhist time, where monks were not allowed to cook for themselves and could not even carry salt with them, and their survival relied merely on the support of patrons and laymen. Therefore, monks needed to

²³ Dge 'dun grub pa, 2013: 304-305.

²⁴ Dge 'dun grub pa, 2013: 236.

live on charity. In this case, monks needed to eat whatever was put in their begging bowls. If monks were particular about their diets, then it would have been difficult for the community to support them. Hence, Gedun Drubpa illustrated the conflict between the fact that monks had to eat whatever they had been given by patrons and the Buddha's decision on the proscription of eating meat.

There is no doubt that in the *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra* the Buddha claimed that his regulation on threefold purity was a provisional teaching, an expedient mean to help people in their move towards full vegetarianism. Therefore, this account has led to a considerable debate among Tibetan commentators about the exact meaning of the story. Gedun Drubpa, for instance, gives his own interpretation of the reference from the *Mahā arinirvāna Sūtra*:

In addition, in the *Mahā arinirvāna Sutra* it says, "Meat eating is a way to induce great compassion, and it is compatible with practicing great compassion." This also does not mean shravakas were not allowed to eat meat. "Kasyapa, I allow the consumption of meat examined in the three ways as a means to gradually eliminate meat-eating. In short, this was taught so that meat-eating might be brought to an end," said the Buddha. This also did not mean that shravakas were not allowed to eat meat. If this were the case, the teachings of the Buddha would collapse sooner or later, because among the three vehicles, the Buddha hadn't proscribed shravakas from having selfish applications (i.e., meat-eating).

Therefore, the ultimate teaching of those sutras (i.e., the *Mahā arinirvāna Sutra*) is to prohibit Bodhisattvas from eating meat with desire, because consuming meat with desire to its taste would debase one's great compassionate idea. For example, the Buddha said, "In order to reject desire, I even changed the color of my robes into the worst ones, so how I could attach to the taste of meat? On the ground of these causes, Bodhisattvas, therefore, are not to eat meat." There are many other examples, but considering that masters have already argued previously, I will not repeat them here again."²⁵

In this part of his text, Gedun Drubpa again firmly opposes the idea that the regulation of threefold purity was a provisional teaching. He also argued that the consumption of meat under the threefold purity is a definitive rule for monks. Having said that, on the other hand, like Khedrup Je, Gedun Drubpa does also think that eating meat while being attached to its taste is unsuitable for a Mahayana practitioner. Both Khedrup Je and Gedun Drubpa highlighted the idea that eating meat out of desire is unsuitable for Mahayana practitioners, but did not

25 Dge 'dun grub pa, 2013: 240.

proscribe meat entirely for their disciples.

In addition, Gedun Drubpa wrote, “considering that masters have already argued previously, I will not repeat them here again.” Who are these “masters” that Gedun Drubpa refers to? This question leads me to think that there must be other scholars who have also defended meat-eating, apart from Khedrup Je, prior to Gedun Drubpa. However, thus far, apart from Khedrup Je’s work I could not find any meat-defending texts composed by Tibetan scholars prior to Gedun Drubpa, and it is uncertain if such texts do exist. He could have been referring to Indian masters.

Thus, the next question will be whether or not such arguments have also appeared in Indian Buddhism. During a Buddhist workshop in Krakow, Poland in 2015, Prof. Dorje Wangchuk told me that his teacher Prof. Lambert Schmithausen was preparing a book on the history of Buddhist vegetarianism, and he was aware of evidence for the defense of meat-eating in the work of Bhavivēka (leṅkaśāstra, c. 500–570). This is a very important clue; therefore, my suspicion is that those early references that defended meat-eating in Geluk tradition would have been influenced by Indian masters like Bhavivēka or others. In addition, Kieschnick also stated in a citation in his article “Buddhist Vegetarianism in China” that Lambert Schmithausen was preparing a book-length study of Buddhist vegetarianism that draws on a wide variety of sources, including Sanskrit, Pali, and Chinese.²⁶ Yet unfortunately, this book still remains unpublished thus far.

I have also encountered a reference on meat eating by Bhavivēka from his work *The Blaze of Reasoning* (*rtog ge 'bar ba*), where he argued that “for *śrāvaka* (*nyan th s kyī theg pa*), it was clearly pointed out that the consumption of threefold purity would not be misdeed. In addition, the food [meat] from begging also meets the criteria.”²⁷ Other than this, I have not found any reference in defense of meat-eating in Indian Buddhism thus far. Nevertheless, it still remains to be seen whether or not Geluk scholar’s meat-defending position was influenced by Bhavivēka.

While Namgyal Drukpa Zangpo queried Gedun Drubpa regarding the regulation of meat consumption in the monastic rules, the evidence as to whether or not he himself was pro-vegetarian is very thin. By reviewing Namgyal Drukpa Zangpo’s biographical sources, thus far, aside from his query on meat-eating to Gedun Drubpa, I did not find any evidence that he is either vegetarian or pro-vegetarian. Having said that, there are some clues that still lead me to believe that Namgyal Drukpa Zangpo is a vegetarian, or at least a pro-vegetarian.

Firstly, Namgyal Drukpa Zangpo was the lineage student of Dolpopa, the founder of the

26 John Kieschnick, 2005: 208.

27 I have yet to locate the origin of this reference: this is a citation from Sakya scholar Gorampa’s (1429–1489) *Commentary on the Distinctive Features of the Three Vows* by Sakya Pandita (1182–1251), which was compiled in a recent edited volume by Geoffrey Barstow, 2016: 76-77.

Jonang school and a lifelong vegetarian who composed a text to criticize meat eating, the *Words on Proscription of Meat and Alcohol* (*sha chang bkag ba'i lung 'dren*).²⁸ Accordingly, I suspect that Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo would have likely been influenced by Dolpopa's vegetarianism. Secondly, given that Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo queried the rule of meat-eating to Gedun Drubpa, we can anticipate that meat was a problematic issue for him in terms of practicing monastic discipline. Alternatively, he might not have agreed with Khedrup Je's aforementioned text and the Geluk school's meat-defending position; otherwise, there would have been little necessity for him to question others about this issue. Therefore, even though the evidence for his position of pro-vegetarianism is thin, I still claim that Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo was a pro-vegetarian to some degree.

Interestingly, Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo was a well-known Tibetan doctor, and meat is considered to be one of the most important aspects of the diet according to Tibetan medicine. As Barstow stated, both Tibetan popular opinion and medical theory link the consumption of meat with the development of strength.²⁹ I, therefore, cannot help but wonder how Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo would have been able to cope with this inevitable conflict between the idea of vegetarianism and the value of meat according to Tibetan medicine. Nevertheless, there has been at least one example of being a doctor as well as being a vegetarian. Yuthog Yundan Gongpo (*gyu thog yon tan mgon po*—n.d.), for instance, one of the most well-known doctors of Tibetan medicine, is described in his biography as having rejected a gift of meat offered to him by others. In doing so, Yuthog Yundan Gongpo confirmed that he himself was a vegetarian.³⁰ This account at least tells us that there have been some Tibetan doctors who were vegetarians. Therefore, it might also be the case that Namgyal Drakpa Zangpo maintained his pro-vegetarian position while practicing Tibetan medicine.

After Khedrup Je and Gedun Drubpa, there were still some other prominent Geluk masters who held similar ideas through the 17th and 18th centuries. For instance, the fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyaltsso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617–1682) criticized the vegetarian:

“Some people choose to become a vegetarian for one or two years, and consider the abstention of meat consumption to be monastic discipline. Such actions merely let foolish people admire, please do not follow such stupid deeds.”³¹

This, again, showed a Geluk master's anti-vegetarian position. In addition, the fifth

28 Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, 2011: 290-308.

29 Geoffrey Barstow, 2013a: 167.

30 Jo po lhun grub bkra shis, 1982: 172.

31 Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtso, 2009: 32.

Dalai Lama frequently expressed his concern over monastic discipline. In his history book, the *S ng f the Cuk* (*deb ther d yid kyi rgyal m 'i glud byangs*), when Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso praised someone as being a great Buddhist practitioner, he then described them further by emphasizing the person's abstention from women and alcohol.³² This showed that the ffth Dalai Lama attached importance to the abstention from women and alcohol in terms of monastic discipline, but not the abstention from meat. In comparison to the ffth Dalai Lama's abstinence from women and alcohol, the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje (karma rol pa'i rdo rje, 1340–1383), the holder of one of the highest religious positions in the Kagyu system, not only refrained from alcohol, but also emphasized the avoidance of meat. According to Go Lotsawa's ('gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481) depiction of the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje in the *Blue Annals* (*deb ther sngon po*), "He guarded his monastic commitments with great subtlety, not allowing even a hair's breadth of meat or alcohol into his presence."³³ It is, therefore, clear that the ffth Dalai Lama and Rolpe Dorje's abstinence from certain activities and objects were strongly connected with their monasticism. Yet, both enshrined different objections in their monastic rules, with the former emphasizing abstention from alcohol and woman and the latter insisting on the inappropriateness of meat and alcohol. We, thus, see from these two accounts that for the ffth Dalai Lama, the consumption of meat might not be a problematic action; at least, it was not as sinful as encountering alcohol and or women. Conversely, for Rolpe Dorje, meat-eating was a problematic issue that contravened his monastic discipline. These accounts also suggest to us the fact that there were different levels of interest that the Kagyu and Geluk luminaries placed on the practice of vegetarianism.

1.5 Alak Dorshi's Meat-Defending Text

Apart from Khedrup Je and Gedun Drubpa's aforementioned meat-defending texts, which are composed by Geluk masters, I am aware any of only rare lengthy meat-defending texts in Tibetan literature until recently. Alak Dorshi (a lags dor zhi, 1947–), a prominent Geluk scholar from Amdo, currently a retired professor at Northwest University for Nationalities, China, composed a short online article in 2014: "The Examination of Allowance and Proscription of Meat and Alcohol among Buddhists" (Sangs rgyas chos lugs pas sha chang sbyod rung mi rung gi don bshad pa). A quarter of this article is dedicated to arguing the allowance of meat consumption to Tibetan Buddhists, and the rest of it discusses alcohol, cigarettes, and animal-releasing (tse thar, fang sheng).

Regarding the issue of meat consumption among Buddhists, Alak Dorshi strongly criticizes those religious leaders who demand that Tibetans abstain from meat (without

32 Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtso, 1981: 128-129, 139.

33 'gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal, 1985: 592.

naming any specific individuals), and argues that if being vegetarian were a criterion for being a Buddhist, then Buddhism would have never spread to Tibet.³⁴ By 2016, this article had already been viewed by nearly 40,000 people on We-Chat. Considering its length, I provide its summary here:

Food is the first and indispensable condition for human life, while religious faith is the third condition for human beings. Thus, people tend to fulfill their food demand prior to religious belief. What people eat is determined by different environmental factors; those one who live in jungles hunt for a living, those who live near seas or rivers, fish for a living, those who live on grasslands herd for a living, and those who live on flat ground farm for living, and so on. Thus, if Buddha asked everyone to be a vegetarian, then Buddhism would not have been able to spread. Some say one cannot practice compassion if he or she eats meat; if one says those who eat meat lose their ability to practice compassion, then what about those non-Vegetarian-Buddhist masters who fulfilled Bodhicitta?³⁵

Alak Dorshi's discussions are based on a wide range of arguments. First, he explains the difficulty of being a vegetarian in a severe environment like the Tibetan plateau. He then turns his arguments to monastic discipline, referring to the *Vinaya's* allowance of threefold purity, and states that the Buddha has adopted these monastic rules for good reason and would not have demanded the same rules for different people and communities. He also refutes the idea that eating meat while practicing compassion is incompatible by giving some examples of non-vegetarian Buddhist masters. In addition, Alak Dorshi also argues that abstaining from meat is harmful for physical health. In arguing so, he refers to a story from Milarepa's biography:

Once Marpa Lotsawa (mar pa lo tsA ba, 1012–1097) provided Milarepa (mi la ras pa, 1040–1123) three boxes with pieces of advice, and asked Milarepa to open them accordingly when obstacles occurred during the practice of meditation. There was a time when Milarepa's physical strength declined and made him unable to keep practicing meditation. He then opened the first box that had been offered by Marpa Lotsawa, where he found a piece of advice: when your body condition becomes weak and vulnerable, you should consume meat and alcohol to regain the physical strength, which will allow you to keep practicing.³⁶

34 Dor zhi gdong drug snyems blo, 2014.

35 Dor zhi gdong drug snyems blo, 2014.

36 Dor zhi gdong drug snyems blo, 2014.

This story tells us that Milarepa's consumption of meat was to regain his physical strength. As can be seen, apart from religious arguments, Alak Dorshi also includes some secular arguments, such as the relationship between meat-eating and physical strength, indicating that vegetarianism is no longer limited to monastic contexts, it is also becoming a controversial topic—more broadly, and with more complexity—among Tibetan lay society.

All these clues clearly illustrate the consistent meat-defending or anti-vegetarian position by Geluk tradition. In addition, they therefore make the sectarian features of Tibetan vegetarianism become more evident. There have been debates on vegetarianism in Tibetan history since the fifteenth century, yet the meat-defending side has been composed entirely of Geluk masters, both in pre-modern and modern Tibet. There is also a chance that other schools may have done the same, yet the broad trends in Geluk seem well-established; at least this is the case in the history of Tibetan literature. Thus, I argue that Tibetan vegetarianism is, indeed, characterized by sectarian features from the fifteenth century.

Since the rise of Geluk tradition and its consistent stance in defense of meat-eating, vegetarianism in Tibet has been entrenched in sectarian distinctions. The arguments in defense of meat-eating put forward by Geluk masters have been the core factor in the absence of vegetarianism among those of the Geluk school. In addition, these arguments may have also limited the practices of vegetarianism among other schools to some degree. In the following passages, I, therefore, will suggest some particular phenomena that have occurred as consequences of the sectarian formation of Tibetan vegetarianism.

2.1 The Lack of Vegetarianism from the Mid-fifteenth to the Late-eighteenth Century

Interestingly, while vegetarianism experienced a fairly steady level of interest from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, there was a sharp decline in vegetarianism from the mid-fifteenth to late-eighteenth century in Tibet. In particular, I have only rarely found accounts of individuals who practiced vegetarianism or supported the idea in the two centuries after Khedrup Je and Gedun Droppa in Tibetan literature. Even if some sources still remain undiscovered, the lack of evidence strongly suggests that vegetarianism, did, indeed, become much less common during this period. Therefore, the next question would be why vegetarianism experienced different levels of interest in certain periods in Tibet. Specifically, why did vegetarianism become less popular from the mid-fifteenth to the late-eighteenth century? Barstow argued that it was simply because the practice of vegetarianism experienced

a lower level of popularity than it had previously enjoyed.³⁷ It seems unlikely, however, to be coincidental that the texts in defense of meat-eating appeared in the fifteenth century and were followed by a decline in vegetarianism starting just after the mid-fifteenth century.

The Geluk school, as the holder of Geluk canonical texts, must have been greatly influenced by Khedrup Je and Gedun Drubpa's texts. Furthermore, their meat-defending ideas might have influenced other Tibetan Buddhist schools too. In addition, it is also important to note that the Geluk school, the latest Tibetan Buddhist school to flourish, emerged as the dominant religious school of Tibetan Buddhism by the seventeenth century, but seems to have not practiced vegetarianism as enthusiastically as other schools. It is important to consider the strong religious and political power which the Geluk gained during this period (the mid-fifteenth to late-eighteenth century), especially during the period of the fifth Dalai Lama, as well as the fact that many monasteries converted to Geluk traditions during his time. Additionally, in contrast, the lack of pro-vegetarian accounts in Tibet during this period strongly suggest that as the dominant religious school, the Geluk's consistent meat-defending position would have restricted the practice of vegetarianism among other religious schools too.

Thus, my assumption is that vegetarianism experienced this lower level of promotion during the period of the mid-fifteenth to eighteenth century due to the increased influence of the Geluk school and their defense of meat-eating as a part of their program of promoting monastic discipline by recourse to canonical texts. I therefore cast doubt on Barstow's argument and argue instead that the lack of vegetarianism during the period of the mid-fifteenth to eighteenth century was partly a result of the consistent meat-defending position by the Geluk masters. While this conclusion is also tenuous, it is worth mentioning here.

2.2 Shift of Arguments on Pro-vegetarianism

Along with this lacuna, there was a dramatic shift in the arguments for vegetarianism when it was revived in eighteenth century Tibet. Along with its early appearance in the eleventh century, vegetarianism gained considerable attention from Buddhist masters from different schools, but it never seemed to rise beyond minority status.³⁸ In addition, by the eighteenth century, the arguments for and against vegetarianism were significantly centralized on the regulation of monastic disciplines that monks ought to apply; likewise, the debates were also limited to monasteries rather than lay communities.

In contrast, from the eighteenth century, pro-vegetarianism arguments seemed to have started emphasizing the suffering that animals experienced. This is especially true in the case of Jigme Linpa, Shabkar, and Dza Patrul (rdza dpal sprul, 1808–1887),³⁹ who were strongly

37 Geoffrey Barstow, 2013a: 50.

38 Geoffrey Barstow, 2013a.

39 Geoffrey Barstow, 2013a: 51-73.

dedicated to the practice of vegetarianism and composed articles related to the faults of meat-eating. Barstow argued convincingly that arguments regarding vegetarianism emphasized monastic rules by the late-eighteenth century, but he did not investigate why the emphasis shifted afterwards. It is probable that due to previous meat-defending and anti-vegetarian texts that strongly argued for the allowance of threefold purity, later pro-vegetarians might have felt the need to find another way to promote vegetarianism. However, it is more possible that this could be an intentional strategy aiming to spread vegetarianism among the laity. By this I mean that masters like Jigme Linpa and Shabkar might have realized that arguing for vegetarianism through monastic rules was no longer a viable way to encourage lay people to choose a vegetarian diet. Instead, they highlighted the conflict between the practice of compassion and the suffering that animals underwent by using vivid language. Overall, the shift in argument during this period is a milestone that stimulated the increasing participation of the laity in the practice of vegetarianism in Tibet.

2.3 Geographical Features of Tibetan Vegetarianism

There is not enough space to discuss the geographical features of Tibetan vegetarianism in this article, but it too can help us to understand the question of why vegetarianism experienced different levels of interest at different times and in different places in Tibet. Thus, it is worth providing a brief discussion here. Regarding the geographical features of Tibetan vegetarianism, we can start by noting that at present, vegetarianism in Kham is more active than it is in Amdo. Previously mentioned articles on Tibetan vegetarianism have also mainly investigated the vegetarianism in the contemporary Kham areas.

“Why does vegetarianism remain unpopular in Amdo compared to Kham?” When I asked this question to one of my informants, Tenzin (bstan 'dzin), a Geshe from the Geluk School, he replied, “It is because Amdo is dominated by the Geluk tradition.” I did not quite understand the answer until I found the meat-defending texts from the Geluk school. This conversation also led me to think about the geographical features of Tibetan vegetarianism.

Given that Geluk is the dominant school in Amdo, we can anticipate that if the texts in defense of meat-eating had never existed, then the geographical difference of vegetarianism between Amdo and Kham might not have appeared, or at least it might not be so evident. Therefore, my tentative argument is that the geographical features of Tibetan vegetarianism are an inevitable outcome of the aforementioned pattern—the large emphasis that the Geluk place on the legitimization of meat in their tradition—which sheds a clear light on why vegetarianism remains less popular in Amdo as a Geluk dominated area. Vegetarianism in Geluk regions is very rare, yet the pattern becomes much more complex in contemporary Tibet, where the Geluk still hold the meat-defending position but are starting to practice vegetarianism in monastic kitchens, which is passively synchronized with the recent mainstream vegetarian movement from Kham areas.

Vegetarianism has been a controversial topic for Tibetans over numerous centuries, at least from the fifteenth century, when Geluk masters like Khedrup Je started arguing in defense of meat-eating in certain circumstances. Since then, vegetarianism has been entrenched in sectarian divisions. This has also had an enormous impact on the spread of vegetarianism later in Tibet, namely with regard to the decline of vegetarianism during the period from the mid-fifteenth to late-eighteenth century; the shift in arguments towards pro-vegetarianism from the eighteenth century; the simultaneous shift from an emphasis on monastic discipline to lay compassion; and a geographical distinction between Amdo and Kham in terms of the distribution of vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet. The aforementioned historical evolution has its roots in the sectarianism of Tibetan vegetarianism to some degree. This paper has explored the impediment of the Geluk's meat-defending position on the distribution of vegetarianism from several dimensions. Thus, the sectarian nature of vegetarianism in Tibet explains a great deal about the historical trajectory of debates and practices surrounding vegetarianism, as well as their spatial distribution today.

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