

# Buddhist Perspective on Animal Rights

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## ABSTRACT

*Buddhism is not only concerned about human beings, but for all sentient beings. The human beings are not the only creature which has value according to it. Any being which is made of five aggregates – matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness are called sentient beings. Hence all sentient beings including animals have possibility to become enlightened in one or more births. That's why Buddhism care for animals and abstain from killing or harm. Buddhism also not believe in the existence of God or soul which is unchangeable in nature, but believe in impermanence. Hence the center of the earth is not any God or soul, but all are important equally. These principles including one of five precept of non-harm to sentient being place animals equally important to human beings. Although in Theravada and Tibetan Mahayana people eat meat, but it is general perception that Buddhism are concern about the animals that can be think of the moral value for animals and animal rights.*

**Key words: Buddhism, Animal Rights, Sentient Being, Non-harm, impermanence**

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the definition as Webster dictionary defines animal<sup>i</sup>, “any of a kingdom of living things including many-celled organisms and often many of the single-celled ones (as protozoans) that typically differ from plants in having cells without cellulose walls, in lacking chlorophyll and the capacity for photosynthesis, in requiring more complex food materials (as proteins), in being organized to a greater degree of complexity, and in having the capacity for spontaneous movement and rapid motor responses to stimulation.”

Similarly, Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins defines; the word animal<sup>ii</sup> comes from the Latin animalis, meaning having breath, having soul or living being.

Rights<sup>iii</sup> are legal, social, or ethical principles of freedom or entitlement; that is, rights are the fundamental normative rules about what is allowed of people or owed to people, according to some legal system, social convention, or ethical theory. Rights are also often considered fundamental to civilization, being regarded as established pillars of society and culture.

From the above definitions, we can say that any living being without chlorophyll and ability of movement, breath, having



soul and differ from plants are animals. Here human beings are different only in the having more capacity to use mind and create civilization, culture, ethics and social system. So here distinction of rights between human beings and animals are based on the mental capacity used by him/her to create social systems. Hence may be, not all rights can be given to animals, but they have rights to be live on to this earth with care and respect. Human beings have no rights to kill them only for the uncontrolled desire to quench. But we don't know what is the distinction between what is rights and what is wrong with the treatment of animals by human beings. In this regards, we must discuss about ethics related to animals.

### **WHAT IS ANIMAL ETHICS?**

Animal ethics is a not an easy subject. Rational argument about the right and wrong way to treat animals is made more difficult by the deep love that many of us feel for animals. For philosophers it raises fundamental questions about the basis of moral rights. So is there any statement of animal ethics that whether people on both sides might accept or not.

### **HUMAN AND ANIMAL IDENTITY**

The most difficult part of animal rights and welfare for human beings has been summed up by Colin McGinn: It is important to see that animals are not defined by their relation to us. Most animals, after all, have lived out their spans in sublime indifference to the

habits of those odd chattering bipeds with the removable plumage. Even if we had never existed, they would still be here. We are just as accidental to them as they are to us<sup>iv</sup>.

Most animal rights activists are concerned with preventing cruelty to animals - but should we go further? Does ensuring animal welfare require providing for animal happiness as well as eliminating suffering?

Some controversies in animal ethics are experiments on animals, rearing and killing animals for fur/leather goods, hunting, entertainment, zoos, pet-keeping etc. So using animals only for fun to human beings cannot be justified, if it is against the freedom and natural growth of animals. It is perfectly consistent to defend animal rights or argue that it's morally wrong to mistreat them, even if you actively dislike animals.

### **SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES**

The issues of animal are very important to consider while we talking about animal rights and ethics which includes, why do non-human animals deserve protection, do non-human animals have rights, if they do have rights, why do they have rights, if they do have rights, what does this mean for humanity, which non-human animals have rights, what's the difference between 'animal rights' and 'animal welfare', if non-human animals don't have rights, do



they deserve protection anyway, how should we balance the relative interests of human and non-human animals and the morality of direct action to protect non-human animals.

## **DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANIMAL RIGHTS AND WELFARE**

The difference between animal rights and animal welfare has been summed up like, animal rights supporters believe that it is morally wrong to use or exploit animals in any way and that human beings should not do so. Animal welfare supporters believe that it can be morally acceptable for human beings to use or exploit animals, as long as: the suffering of the animals is either eliminated or reduced to the minimum and there is no practicable way of achieving the same end without using animals.

For people who think like this, the suffering to animals is at the heart of the issue, and reducing the suffering reduces the wrong that is done. Supporters of animal rights don't think that doing wrong things humanely makes them any less wrong.

## **WHY ANIMALS HAVE RIGHTS?**

Many animal lovers think animals don't just deserve protection in a paternalistic way. They say that animals have rights that must be respected. Rights are much more important than interests, because rights impose a burden on others that the other parties must accept. If animals do

have rights then there are certain things that human beings should not do to animals, because doing them would violate the animal's rights.

This applies regardless of the cost to human beings. If humanity must suffer some disadvantage as the consequence of respecting animal rights, then that's the way it has to be. Nobody thinks that all animals should have rights - the question is where to draw the line. One elegant phrase suggests that animal rights should be restricted to those animals that "have a biography, not merely biology."

This means that only the higher animals would have rights - those animals that are conscious, can remember, and can form intentions and plan and act for the future. Although we already know many animals have senses of humor!

## **HUMAN RIGHTS AND ANIMAL RIGHTS**

No-one suggests that animals should have all the same rights as human beings. There are many rights that are entirely irrelevant to animals, such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, the right to vote, the right to an education and so on. Accepting that non-human animals have rights requires human beings to accept that:

1. non-human animals are conscious beings not machines or objects



2. non-human animals have interests of their own
3. human beings should respect the interests of non-human animals
4. human beings should not exploit non-human animals
5. human beings should not treat non-human animals as objects
6. human beings should not kill non-human animals
7. unless non-human animals have the right not to be killed, any other rights are pointless since they can be circumvented by killing the animal

Accepting that non-human animals have rights restricts human beings, and may even cause people to die who might otherwise have lived. For example, it means that human beings can't use non-human animals in medical experiments - even if this restriction will lead to the death of many human beings from a disease for which a cure might be discovered through animal experimentation.

Eating animals poses two moral problems. One, Is it wrong in principle to raise and kill animals so that human beings can eat meat and fish and second, does it stop being wrong if the processes involved are carried out humanely? Eating animals is also criticized on health and ecological

grounds, but this article only deals with wrongs to the animals involved.

If we accept that animals have rights, raising and killing animals for food is morally wrong. An animal raised for food is being used by others rather than being respected for itself. In philosopher's terms it is being treated as a means to human ends and not as an end in itself. This is a clear violation of the animal's rights. No matter how humanely an animal is treated in the process, raising and killing it for food remains morally wrong.

But, this is using 'rights' in a rather technical philosophical sense. When people talk about animal rights colloquially, they are usually talking about animal interests. Even the most humane forms of rearing and killing animals for food always violates the animal's most basic interest - to continue living. Modern agriculture often violates other key animal interests as well.

For example:

1. to live in natural (or at least, decent) conditions
2. to make free choices
3. to be free from fear and pain
4. to live healthy lives without needing medical intervention
5. to eat a natural diet



6. to enjoy the normal social/family/community life of its species

Many human beings don't believe animals have rights, but do think that animals have important interests that should not be violated. But some of these people enjoy eating meat and fish, and so face a conflict between animal and human interests: the trivial human interest in eating meat versus the basic animal interest in staying alive.

The human interest is classed as *trivial* because human beings don't need to eat meat in order to live. The animal interest in staying alive is classed as *basic*, because if the animal is killed then all its other interests are frustrated as well.

Now ethical question arises, should the trivial human interest in eating meat be satisfied at the expense of the animal interest in staying alive? The rights argument is based only on not violating rights. It disregards the consequences of eating animals. The argument goes like this:

1. Higher non-human animals have rights
2. The most basic right is the right to be treated as an end in oneself, not as a means to someone else's ends
3. Raising and killing animals for food uses them as a means to

human gratification, it does not treat them respectfully as ends in themselves

4. Eating animals is therefore wrong
5. There is no important human need to be considered in this case
6. Philosophers who respect rights and accept that animals have rights should be vegetarians

The problem like, surely one person not eating animals will have no effect on whether animals are raised and killed for food - so there's no point in being a vegetarian. The pointlessness of a single person removing meat from their diet is irrelevant to the rights argument for being a vegetarian - if something is wrong, a moral person should not do it.

## UTILITARIAN ARGUMENT

This sort of argument is based entirely on the results of an action (or the total result of a lot of similar actions). It is only concerned with the consequences of eating animals. The argument goes like this:

1. We should act so as to increase the amount of goodness in the world
2. Raising and killing animals for food is cruel and so reduces the





total amount of goodness in the world

3. If everyone was a vegetarian, there would be no demand for meat
4. If there were no demand for meat no one would raise and kill animals for food
5. Therefore if everyone was a vegetarian, the total amount of goodness in the world would be higher
6. Therefore everyone should be a vegetarian

We may want to ask ourselves whether it matters that individual consumers don't themselves commit the wrongful acts of raising and killing the animals.

If it is true that the world would be a better place if everyone was a vegetarian, does it follow that any particular individual should be a vegetarian? Virtue ethics regard the motivation and character of a person as crucial to whether an act is good or bad.

A morally good act is one that a virtuous person would carry out, and a morally bad act is one that they wouldn't. Virtuous people live lives that demonstrate virtue. They are generous, kind and compassionate.

According to Buddhaghosa, translated by Edward Conze:

In the five precepts, "taking life" means to murder anything that lives. It refers to the striking and killing of living beings.<sup>v</sup>

People who participate in a system that treats animals cruelly, and that kills animals to provide trivial pleasures to human beings, are behaving selfishly, and not as a virtuous person would.

Since their behavior is not virtuous, their behavior is morally wrong, whether or not it has any effect on whether people continue to raise and kill animals for food.

One must refuse (even symbolic) support of essentially cruel practices, if a comparably costly alternative that is not tied to essentially cruel practices is readily available<sup>vi</sup>.

## MORAL STATUS OF ANIMALS

The idea that non-human animals have significant moral status is comparatively modern. It owes much to the work of philosopher Peter Singer and his 1975 book 'Animal Liberation'. Animal lovers would say that all animals deserve moral consideration. This doesn't help resolve cases where the moral interests of different animals are in conflict.

Philosophers have made valiant attempts to offer a systematic answer to this question. But all their attempts are subjective and have a human bias, they



involve human values in the way they approach the subject and also involve human value judgments in applying them to particular cases.

### **SOME IDEA THAT MAY HELP**

Organisms can be arranged in a moral hierarchy in which the lowest group deserves no moral consideration at all, and the top group deserves more moral consideration than the second group. Few ideas are as below:

1. Sentient organisms that are not self-aware and don't have any idea of continuing to exist in the future
2. Sentient organisms that are aware of their own existence and would prefer to continue to exist
3. Inanimate objects and insentient organism
4. It's helpful to look at the three categories in more detail.

Sentient organisms that are aware of their own existence and would prefer to continue to exist deserve full moral consideration because, they experience pain and pleasure, they are aware of their own existence and context, they prefer to experience pleasurable lives and they prefer to stay alive.

This group includes most human beings and the higher animals. Using this

criterion leads to a conclusion that would shock most people. Sentient organisms that are not self-aware and don't have any idea of continuing to exist in the future deserve some moral consideration because:

1. They can feel pain and pleasure
2. They prefer to avoid pain
3. They prefer to experience pleasure
4. It is wrong to cause pain to members of this group
5. Killing and replacing individuals in this group is not significant
6. Because one individual is not significantly different from another

### **INSENTIENT AND SENTIENT ORGANISMS**

These deserve no moral consideration because it doesn't make sense to talk of treating them badly or well. This is because, they can't feel and nothing can matter to them.

Sentient organisms are creatures that have subjective experiences. Some writers argue that "only organisms that have subjective experiences deserve moral consideration."

Now unpacking the thought we can say, only organisms that value one experience more than another deserve moral consideration. Such organisms must have



'interests', because only organisms with 'interests' are able to value one experience more than another experience. These organisms have an 'interest' in avoiding painful experiences and an 'interest' in seeking out pleasurable experiences.

So, organisms must be able to experience pain or pleasure if they are to value their experiences. Such organisms are described as "having subjective experiences" Both snail and plants are considered insentient organisms don't have subjective experiences.

Organisms that don't have subjective experiences don't experience events as good or bad, and so, in moral terms, it doesn't matter what happens to them. The organisms and things that don't have subjective experiences and so don't deserve moral consideration are, non-living things, plants, very simple organisms, insects and mollusks. All other animals - human and non-human - deserve moral consideration.

### **SELF-AWARE ORGANISMS**

Sentient organisms (see above) can be divided into two groups: those that are merely conscious, those that are aware of themselves as, beings that are alive, beings that have been alive in the past and beings that would prefer to stay alive.

The first group experience pain and pleasure but don't think about themselves in any meaningful way.

This kind of being is, in a sense, impersonal ... in killing it; one does it no personal wrong, although one does reduce the quantity of happiness in the universe. But this wrong, if it is wrong, can be counterbalanced by bringing into existence a similar being which will live an equally happy life.<sup>vii</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Buddhism believes no one is the centre of this universe, but believe consciousness are reborn as animals because of past misdeeds. Although Buddhism is an animal-friendly religion, some aspects of the tradition are surprisingly negative about animals. Buddhism requires us to treat animals kindly and not try to do harm (or as little harm as possible) to animals, show loving-kindness to all beings, including animals, the doctrine of right livelihood teaches Buddhists to avoid any work connected with the killing of animals, the doctrine of karma teaches that any wrong behavior will have to be paid for in a future life - so cruel acts to animals should be avoided. Buddhists treat the lives of human and non-human animals with equal respect. Buddhists see human and non-human animals as closely related, both have Buddha-nature, both have the possibility of becoming perfectly enlightened and a consciousness may be reborn either in a human body or in the body of a non-





human animal. Buddhists believe that is wrong to hurt or kill animals, because all beings are afraid of injury and death.

All living things fear being beaten with clubs.

All living things fear being put to death.

Putting oneself in the place of the other,

Let no one neither kill nor cause another to kill.<sup>viii</sup>

Buddhist behavior towards and thinking about animals is not always positive. The doctrine of karma implies that souls are reborn as animals because of past misdeeds. Being reborn as an animal is a serious spiritual setback. Because non-human animals can't engage in conscious acts of self-improvement they can't improve their karmic status, and their souls must continue to be reborn as animals until their bad karma is exhausted. Only when they are reborn as human beings can they resume the quest for nirvana.

This bad karma, and the animal's inability to do much to improve it, led Buddhists in the past to think that non-human animals were inferior to human beings and so were entitled to fewer rights than human beings.

Early Buddhists (but not the Buddha himself) used the idea that animals were spiritually inferior as a justification for the exploitation and mistreatment of animals.

Buddhists say that this is morally wrong if the animal concerned might come to any harm. However, Buddhists also acknowledge the value that animal experiments may have for human health.

So perhaps a Buddhist approach to experiments on animals might require the experimenter to, accept the karma of carrying out the experiment, the experimenter will acquire bad karma through experimenting on an animal, experiment only for a good purpose, experiment only on animals where there is no alternative, design the experiment to do as little harm as possible, avoid killing the animal unless it is absolutely necessary and treat the animals concerned kindly and respectfully.

Not all Buddhists are vegetarian and the Buddha does not seem to have issued an overall prohibition on meat-eating. The Mahayana tradition was (and is) more strictly vegetarian than other Buddhist traditions.

The early Buddhist monastic code banned monks from eating meat if the animal had been killed specifically to feed them, but otherwise instructed them to eat anything they were given.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/animal>

<sup>ii</sup> Cresswell, Julia (2010). *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. 'having the breath of life', from anima 'air, breath, life'



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- vii Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1979
- viii *Dhammapada* 129