

## Buddhism and animals

Although Buddhism is an animal-friendly religion, some aspects of the tradition are surprisingly negative about animals.



Buddhists believe souls are reborn as animals because of past misdeeds

### **The positive**

- Buddhists try to do no harm (or as little harm as possible) to animals
- Buddhists try to 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 behaviour 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
- a soul 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 kill nor cause another to kill.

## **The negative**

Buddhist behaviour 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.

## **Experimenting on 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
- treat the animals concerned kindly and respectfully

The bad karmic consequences for the experimenter seem to demand a high level of altruistic behaviour in research laboratories.

## **Buddhism and vegetarianism**

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.