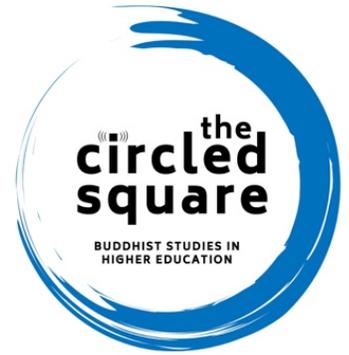


Episode 16: Janet Gyatso, Posthumanism and Animal Ethics in Buddhist Studies

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Speakers:
Sarah Richardson
Jane Gyatso



00:00:04:21 - 00:00:34:15

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist Studies in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson and I teach at the University of Toronto. In this episode I sat down with Janet Gyatso of Harvard University, where she's the Hershey professor of Buddhist Studies, and an associate Dean for faculty and academic affairs. Janet's important and groundbreaking research has concentrated on Tibetan and South Asian cultural and intellectual history, especially medicine, autobiography, and gender.

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Sarah: But in this episode we focused on a topic she's also been teaching with and working more intensely on in recent years. This is posthumanism and animal ethics. Janet was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and we talked with her on January 7th, 2021, one day after the Insurrection on the US Capitol building in Washington. So, if we were a little low sounding, well it was just a deep sadness about the state of the world shining through. Nevertheless, we had a fantastic conversation. We're so excited about this work. So please enjoy listening to my conversation with Janet Gyatso.

00:01:09:29 - 00:01:12:24

Sarah: Hi Janet.

00:01:12:26 - 00:01:14:03

Janet: Hi, nice to be here.

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Sarah: Thank you so much for being here with us today. So my first question is pretty straightforward, where and what do you teach?

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Janet: Ok, so I'm at Harvard Divinity School, I teach in the Divinity School and I teach in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. I'm officially the Hershey professor of Buddhist Studies. So, that's my official post, but I'm an expert in... Well, not an expert. I'm a would-be expert or scholar in a Tibetan studies, so that's been my specialty. But I teach across the board in Buddhism.

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Sarah: Briefly, what was your path or trajectory to becoming interested in Buddhism, first, and then also your path in academia?

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Janet: My path in becoming interested in Buddhism was probably a kind of predisposition to a certain kind of thinking when I was a kid, and when I first encountered Buddhist ideas I found them very, very familiar, and very attractive. Especially ideas, you know, the first Noble Truth, the truth of suffering.

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Janet: I was kind of... I had a tendency to notice that in the world, maybe more than my friends, or my parents, who were a little bit alarmed that I was asking questions about that. But I think when I was in high school I read some... JD Salinger is probably the first place I ever heard of Buddhism, from JD Salinger. But basically, when I was in college at University, Boston University, and I was basically majoring in math, I made some friends who knew about Buddhism and started talking about it and then told me about this Monastery in New Jersey where there was a lot of Tibetan teachers and that you could go down there and listen to public talks.

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Janet: And so I went once with a bunch of friends, we drove down to New Jersey from Boston, and I was very, very captivated by these Tibetan teachers, and I decided to actually leave my program at BU and start studying Tibetan because I was very, you know, determined that I could speak to them directly, as opposed to through a translator. And so I followed one of the teachers out to California soon after that, and I was really studying Buddhist practice and Buddhist doctrine and Tibetan language. But I also did want to go back to school and finish my degree. I was fully intending to be a math major, but I got into Berkeley, ended up instead of majoring in math, by sort of like an accident ended up majoring in religion and went into the Buddhist Studies track in the graduate program at Berkeley, which was just emerging. I never intended to, you know, major in Buddhism at school, it was more of a personal thing, but I just did it.

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Janet: That was like the end of the 60's and the beginning of the 70's, when we didn't think about practical outcome, some things very much. We just went with the flow sort of thing, and so I got into a PhD program in Buddhist Studies at Berkeley.

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Sarah: That's a wonderful story, thank you for sharing that. And then, we're also here today... The focus we wanted to give to this is your interest also in animal ethics and posthumanism. Can you tell us also where that interest began for you?

00:04:55:29 - 00:06:06:00

Janet: Okay, well that interest also begins actually really when I'm young, very very young. People in my family, but me, and maybe more than anyone, have a great love of animals. We just love animals. We love cats in particular but we love dogs, we love every animal. So this is just something that comes totally naturally to me. You know, I should say that once I was in California, I had a lot of interaction with Tibetan teachers, so not only at the University, but I spent time living with one very famous teacher in Seattle, Dezhung Rinpoche, and also the teachers that were in California, Lama Kunga, and Kalu Rinpoche, and then eventually I went on this program to India and also spent time with a lot of Tibetan teachers there. I was very much moved by, you know, the theme of compassion, which was what Tibetan teachers usually stressed, and compassion for animals is definitely a big part of it. So I've always, you know, had a great love and great compassion for animals.

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Janet: I like to communicate with them, talk with them, play with them, whatever. The fact that I'm working on animal ethics right now is the privilege that I have at this certain stage in my career and the fact that I kind of, you know, quote unquote proved myself in Buddhist Studies. You know, getting to the upper ranges of the career span and maybe having worked very hard a couple of Buddhist Studies projects that were very detailed and had a million footnotes, and really tracked down the sources. I wanted to do something a little bit more expressive and creative, and also something that really means a huge amount to me. I decided to try to write out some of my feelings and insights about animals in a book that could somehow help to convince the world that we need to regard animals much higher than we do, and to treat them better. So it's coming out of, you know, I would say my love of animals that I was just born with, but it was very much encouraged by the Buddhist teachings of compassion.

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Sarah: You've alluded to your past work already and so for our listeners who may not know, though they probably do, that's work on biography and autobiography, right, in the Tibetan tradition, and then also on Tibetan medicine. Do you see the theme of animal ethics and posthumanism developing in those kernels as well?

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Janet: It is in the following way, which is pretty clear to me. I mean, in both of my projects, my main projects... So autobiography, and also on medicine, there was an emphasis on what I just simply call "the human", as opposed to "the ideal". So the thing that's interesting about autobiography, especially the ones that I worked on, was that although it was very, you know, visionary and had all kinds of magical things and amazing things happen in it, it also was very honest about failings and realities of the protagonist, that's the famous Jigme Lingpa. I have a attraction to, you know, something I can just simply call the real as opposed to the ideal. I was attracted to autobiography because it gave you a sense of the real person, not the idealized guru, even though he is amazing there as well.

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Janet: And medicine is very much... It was a theme for me... Medicine as an academic subject in Tibetan history was very much influenced by academic style in Buddhism, but at the same time, it's all so different than Buddhism because it's dealing with physical realities of human beings on the ground, its not dealing with enlightenment. In those ways the theme of dealing with the everyday, real, on the ground stuff I think continues into animals, which part of what I'm trying to do is set aside all the mythology and kind of ideology that we have and try to see animals for what they are. That's sort of a theme that does unite my interests.

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Sarah: And what are your favorite courses to teach now? Like when you are given the choice.

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Janet: I did develop two different courses on animals, both of which went extremely well. And I mean just in the sense of that it was very enthusiastically received by the students. But last semester I taught a course on women and gender in Buddhism, and so that wasn't about animals at all. I'm teaching a course about meditation next semester, Buddhist meditation, and we'll see how that goes. I've never done a course that was only on like all the traditions of Buddhist meditation.

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Sarah: But I do also think that in the moment we're in, doing a course about Buddhist meditation is surely a good thing.

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Janet: Well that's what I was thinking. I don't care if you're Buddhist or whatever you are, but everyone needs to know how to do a little bit of stress reduction and mindfulness or something like that.

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Sarah: And I have to say the other thing that I've been sort of shocked by in my own little household here in Toronto, Canada, is that as school shifted online for my own children they now each have mindfulness and meditation as part of their regular daily curriculum in school.

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Janet: Oh really? Good for them!

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Sarah: I mean amazing. They're 7 and 10. Wow, right. It's also sort of stunning to me that this is... I mean, I found that stuff but it wasn't through my formal education in primary school, right. The fact that they are already being given this as their normal curriculum through the Toronto District School Board is...

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Janet: Do they like doing it?

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Sarah: You know it's funny, they consider it kind of boring, really, if you ask them, except they also do it. It's actually really normalized and it started really small, right, so it's like five minutes.

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Janet: Yeah well it's a skill they may find themselves drawing on later on in life and they may be really grateful that they know how to do it and they can build on it.

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Sarah: Totally, exactly, and I had the thought, wow what a different world it'll be when they're all adults and there's a generation of adults that can do this, or are able to at least have some language around what's going on in their...

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Janet: Yeah that's right, absolutely.

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Sarah: Let's talk about your courses on animal ethics and posthumanism, which of the two do you want to talk about first?

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Janet: Oh they're both the same, both courses are about posthumanism and animal ethics, but they're both about... Posthumanism and animal ethics are connected for me.

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Sarah: Okay, so can you explain that to us? Beginning with what is posthumanism?

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Janet: Okay so posthumanism is a movement in humanities, social sciences, and the sciences, I think, to recognize that what we called the anthropocene, which means that era of planet Earth's history that has been deeply and overly influenced by human presence and human activity. So that humans have left and changed the planet in huge, huge, huge, huge ways. And this goes back pretty much throughout the existence of the human species. But its, you know, obviously multiplying and accelerating to the point that it's a disaster on the planet, and climate change and all are very much attributable to humans. Posthumanism is an attempt to ratchet down the centrality of humans, in our thought, in our discourse, in our vision of what's important, and to decenter the human.

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Janet: So in the sciences, for example, there's a huge turn to observation of animals. Posthumanism wants to include animals, and it also has another side, which I don't understand as well, which is to include machines. So, people like Donna Haraway recognize that there's not a clear-cut distinction between humans and machines or technology, but, that there's some kind of interconnectedness between all these types of knowing or intelligence. You know, because you have humanism and the European Enlightenment and you have it in Buddhism as well that humans are the privileged species, they're the most important and they're the best. Posthumanism is to call that into question, to learn about what else is going on besides the human, and to take it seriously and value it.

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Janet: One way of thinking about it is the way I think about it, which is, for me, posthumanism is to stop assuming that humans are the most important and the best species on our planet. I actually do not believe that. I'm not sure that I would say humans are the most valuable or even that humans are the most intelligent. It might be true but I don't know. There's so many questions that come up in that. Western philosophy, again, and also many forms of other philosophies in the world, not all, have insisted that humans are far superior to any other sentient being, and that animals are dumb.

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Janet: You know, you've had many intelligent people, like Descartes, and all kinds of other people thinking that animals don't have any consciousness, they don't have any subjectivity, they don't suffer. So we can do whatever we want to them and we can abuse them. Recent research has been rejecting that, as we're finding out more and more like really amazing things about animals, and the more we find out the more these old assumptions have to be reconsidered. But you know, habits die really hard.

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Janet: And if we were really to consider, what animals want and what they would like the world to be like might be almost as important or as important as what humans want, we would have to change things dramatically.

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Sarah: Yeah, its a very radical proposition because we regularly have been told and tell ourselves how important human civilization is and...

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Janet: And how wonderful and how brilliant, even though we have a lot of problems, we also have these wonderful, you know, art and music and philosophy and civilization and technology...

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Sarah: And we're the only ones who can do that, right, is the story that we like so well.

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Janet: That's right, exactly.

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Sarah: And so that definition of posthumanism, decentering the human, is there a particular writer or theorist that you're particularly attracted to who articulates that, and also especially in that difference from the way posthumanism is articulated in terms of artificial intelligence?

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Janet: I'm not sure what the Bible would be on posthumanism, some of the interesting people are Donna Haraway. There is a really good overview of posthumanism... Rosi Braidotti is one of them, Rosi Braidotti. Each chapter is on how posthumanism is playing out in different field, so in anthropology, sociology, you know, the hard sciences, literature, feminism, etc.

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Janet: Dipesh Chakrabarty is somebody at University of Chicago who's a really interesting guy, who's tangentially related to Buddhist Studies, who's been talking about the posthuman now. And also the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh has a book called The Great Derangement, which is an amazing study of how literature has reflected where we are in the anthropocene.

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Janet: There's tons of anthropology. What's that guy at McGill... Its called, How Forests Think...

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Sarah: Oh, Eduardo Kohn?

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Janet: Yeah, Eduardo Kohn. People who look at material culture, and who look at the exchange of material goods, you know, there's so many of them.

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Sarah: I see here that you also use Jane Bennett's Vibrant Matter.

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Janet: Jane Bennett is one of the sort of earlier people in this, yeah.

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Sarah: She's written Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. I tried to do a course, I mean, I did do a course, I didn't just try I actually did it, but it was last year so did that really happen? But it was around matter, and we organized the whole class with different materials each week and tried to understand like clay from clay, and then we wrote at the end or had them write these biographies from the position of an object.

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Janet: Oh really, that's cool.

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Sarah: Yeah telling it as itself, right.

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Janet: I mean people in animal studies, Franz De Waal is one of them, who's done a lot of stuff with chimps. I'm reading a fantastic book right now called Beyond Words, Carl Safina. It's about elephants, wolves, and killer orca whales, and it talks about how they communicate, and their intelligence without using words or language. Fantastic book. There's a great naturalist writer Barry Lopez, who just died recently, and he has a book called Of Wolves and Men... All of his writings.

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Janet: Uh, Robert Macfarlane... All these people who are looking at the planet, like the geological planet are also in the posthumanist camp. You know, anyone who's looking at things, not from the human perspective.

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Sarah: Have you seen on Netflix, My Octopus Teacher?

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Janet: I haven't seen that actually, I should watch that. I have a problem. Sometimes watching these things, I feel so bad. You know, octopuses in particular are so amazing and they're so different than us and I feel so horrible that we would capture them and put them in tanks and just drive them insane, and I just feel so guilty and horrible that I can't bear to even watch this thing.

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Sarah: Well the good news is that that octopus stays in the ocean the whole time.

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Janet: Oh it does?

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Sarah: Yeah, My Octopus Teacher, the guy goes and swims with an octopus like every day for a year, over a year she lives, so it's amazing. Like, he actually develops a relationship with this octopus and he did, I think, a pretty good job of not actually overly humanizing her, like, she's not him, right, at all, but he gains her trust by going to swim every day.

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Janet: Yeah when I taught the class I did a fair amount of readings from animal ethics. Like, I read Peter Singer, you know, the classic work, and I read this woman...

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Sarah: Animal Liberation, Peter Singer?

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Janet: Yeah, and Christine Korsgaard, who's a philosopher at Harvard, who wrote this book on... She takes Kantian ethics and she shifts it to take into account animals. Alice Crary, is a philosopher... So these are kind of analytic philosophers, and I've been reading phenomenology as well, like people who... Not Merleau-Ponty, exactly, but people who based their work on Merleau-Ponty and apply it to animals. So as you were already hinting, one of the problems and the critiques of this kind of work that other philosophers bring up is that we anthropomorphize when we talk about animals. There's this famous essay by Thomas Nagel, who claims, you know, I can try to imagine what it's like to be a bat, but I'll never have access to that because I'm a human. Saying that anything that I would think, must be touched by my being a human.

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Janet: And I think that there's a real flaw in that logic, because it assumes that everything about me is human, and I don't think that's true. What is human is the way we define what human is. There is a lot about me that's animal. There's a lot about me that's matter, you know, there's a lot about me that's bacteria and it's not the case that the category of human governs everything that I do. And again, the whole definition of what the category of human is up for grabs, and everybody defines it differently. And I think that we have a lot of access to animals' feelings, just as we have access to each others' as humans. You know, you can also say I'll never know what it's like to be you, and you're a human and you're a female and you're in my field and so we have a lot in common, we're both academics, etc. But I still don't know what it's like to be you and I don't understand everything that you were going to say to me. I can get it wrong and it'll be coloured by my projections, but I think there's kinds of disciplines close to observation and slow looking, where you can allow the thing to speak to you, as opposed to you projecting your ideas on to the other, allowing the other to speak to you, and one cultivates those skills. And its very, very possible.

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Sarah: So on that, allowing the other to speak to you, how do you do this with students? First of all, it sounds really hard, right? Like it's a hard sell in a culture and in this society, in these bodies where we are really good at telling ourselves how important we are and how important the human stuff is. So how do you do it? How do you hook students and bring them into being with animals in the classroom and thinking with animals?

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Janet: I thought about this and the fact of the matter is that the internet is full of fantastic footage that various non-professionals have captured, and professionals have captured in the wild, or in people's homes, or all kinds of contexts. So I have a huge array of videos, some of them quite short which show all kinds of stuff, and these were the source of joy and pleasure and we would have so much fun, just simply watching. One of my favorite ones, just to give you some examples, are like, there's a thing which I never knew about 'cuz I'm a city girl, and I grew up in the city and I've always lived pretty much in a city, that when cows are raised in very cold climates, the cow farmers brings all the cows in during the winter 'cuz its really really cold, and they spend the coldest months in the barn.

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Janet: And when they are let out in the spring, it's known to be this wonderful event and lots of people from the area will come to watch, because when the farmers let the cows out of the barn the cows like take one or two steps, there's like sixty cows coming out of the barn, and as soon as they realize that they're outside they start jumping in the air and dancing and running around. And what's also hilarious is that calves who have just been born, who never have been outside immediately recognize that there's

grass here, there's blue sky, like it's really beautiful. You can see them celebrating and you can see the joy in their body. I mean, it's not possible to watch that without smiling and actually tears coming to your eyes, basically. You can see dogs playing with each other, you can see a lot of inter-species stuff like dogs forming friendships with like a deer who comes to somebody's yard and they start playing ball with the people's dog, and they play together.

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Janet: There's this amazing video where these people saw like a kitten on their backyard and they saw that the kitten was being fed by some crow and the crow was like going around catching worms and giving it to this kitten because the kitten was starving, and then they became the best of friends and the kitten and the crow would fight and play and roll around, and the kitten would keep its claws in, can you believe this? And there's so many other amazing kinds of things. So I would always have like three or four videos. We would watch them over and over again. We would analyze, first of all, why it made us so happy to watch these things. For some reason these things give joy to us. That's one of my questions, why does it give so much joy to watch? Why do humans love animals so much? I mean humans do horrible things to animals, but they also, most humans, and most children, children adore animals.

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Janet: Why? Why do we love animals often more than humans? And then we would try to isolate... So we would do lots of research on those videos and like stop the video and say, oh, you see the way the dog has lifted his tail here and it's indicating this kind of thing... So that actually was, I would say, the real animating factor, that and the other thing were my own stories, of me and my cats, and I have plenty of those, or something that happened to me, you know, when I saw this or that animal, or somebody who I know who had some kind of encounter. And I think part of it is, I myself get very excited about these things. The other part of it is that the students who take the class are kind of already converted, most of them. They already love animals too, but they appreciate the opportunity to explore what it is about animals they love and what their love consists in, and how they got it, how to cultivate it more, and how it might affect our practices in the future.

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Sarah: Where has that led in your classes? Where do you and your students feel by the end? Have there been ideas that come out of this from them or from you about what we should be doing better?

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Janet: Yeah, well there's so many ideas and the question is how to implement them. So that's a huge, huge question. First of all the kids in my class, I got people from the law school who are working on animal law. I got undergraduates doing biology and learning how to create laboratory created meat. You know, for example for experiments, which is a quickly developing area where they're realizing first of all, that experimentation on animals actually doesn't prove too much for humans anyway, and they can create artificial livers, and hearts to do experiments on instead of using actual animals. People who are involved in the sanctuary movement or green agriculture, vegans and stuff like that, you know. Because I teach mostly masters students who have a certain professional goal, but actually the undergrads were also great in this.

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Janet: But the number of things to be done is enormous. The worst thing of all is factory farming, for meat and for skin. I didn't show any of those videos. I can't bear to see them, but the way that animals are treated and they live their whole life is just the most horrifying sad, tragic, hell-like thing. My

contribution, I feel, is primarily cultivating the sentiments, giving the language, giving the kind of prestige that talking about the value of animal feelings is not a stupid thing to do, or it's not a weak-kneed thing to do, and just hoping that that will seep into the culture more and more. But I know that that's not the only solution at all.

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Janet: I'm writing a book on this also, and the book is really hard to write and I'm trying to face this problem. Like sheep farmers, there's this one guy, The Hardy Shepherd, he wrote a book and he's in Ireland, I think, and he's got this wonderful centuries-old practice, and the sheep live by themselves in the mountains most of the year, and then they shear them twice a year, and the sheep are very happy, but in the end they sell them to the slaughter house. And they love the sheep, they know the sheep, they love the sheep, but they still can do it. And there's plenty of people who love animals but who eat meat. And I'm not a full vegetarian yet, I haven't been able to, and so it doesn't guarantee that if you love animals that you will never slaughter an animal again. But certainly we can limit certain kinds of things. Like for example, buying anything with fur, and that's one thing we could get rid of like this. We can get rid of zoos, we can get rid of circuses, we can institute practices, you know, more laws, which are happening...

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Janet: We can also educate people, this is another thing, on how to raise their pets better, like a lot of people do not know how to raise a cat or a dog. They chain the dog up, and the cat never goes outside and they just infantilize it. There's ways to keep your pets happy. And also all kinds of sports, like the snow sledding whatever things that go all over the landscape and mess up all kinds of, you know, environments and animals' shelters and all sorts of stuff. You know, do we deserve to have thrills at every moment in our lives, or do we restrain ourselves, really recognize we're not the only important people, and you don't get to trample all over everything else and all go on some safari, you know, with 50 tourists who are walking all over the place, especially hunting for god sakes and stuff like that. There are so many things that we do that are impinging that we can stop.

00:31:18:23 - 00:31:36:06

Sarah: Going back a little bit to the teaching with this, so dealing with these videos with your students, also with videos where you don't have a lot of control over how they've been produced or who made them or whatever, do you guys have to talk about, like questions of animal manipulation, or like representation, those kind of issues?

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Janet: Sure but I try to use things that are really less manipulated, and less sort of staged. There exists, a huge, huge amount of either footage that people who have left cameras, you know, in the wild or like, for example, there's this amazingly wonderful footage of like a whole bunch of dolphins, like maybe 30 dolphins and this is from a helicopter, flying above them. You can see they're having fun, they line up in this huge line and they wait for a wave, and then they all simultaneously jump over the wave. They're not impinging, they're not hunting, they're having fun, but they're doing this on their own. So this has not been manufactured by humans. And animals recognize humans. There's this one thing of footage where some people are in some speed boat out on the ocean or something, and they have like a ball that they're playing on their boat and they drop it in the water and a beluga whale pops up, gets the ball and throws it to the people on the thing. And then the guy throws it back to the whale and they're having this... The beluga whale never saw a human being before. They immediately understand this person likes to play like we do, and they start a game with them.

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Janet: I mean the a range of animal behavior... We're just at the tip of the iceberg in terms of the complexity of animal behavior and kinds of intelligence.

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Sarah: What surprising outcomes have there been and has there been anything in these classes that you feel has failed? Like something that didn't work, either as an assignment or as a discussion topic?

00:33:15:29 - 00:33:19:09

Janet: Well, trying to work Buddhism in was hard.

00:33:19:11 - 00:33:24:09

Sarah: Right, okay, tell me more. Why?

00:33:24:11 - 00:34:03:09

Janet: Not the compassion part, that's easy, but I was trying to use Buddhist epistemology about types of seeing, types of perception, and also Buddhist meditation theory on ways of training yourself. But I was trying to use Buddhist principles as ways of describing animal behavior, and that was hard to get across. They didn't follow me. And that was also because the large majority of the students in the class did not have a background in Buddhist Studies, but even those who did were not seeing the parallels, and I think I just needed to spend a whole bunch more time on it.

00:34:04:06 - 00:35:10:03

Janet: You know, one of the things I learned in graduate school and I'm going to be teaching in this class on meditation is the whole difference between Shamatha and Vipashyana, or calming, concentration meditation, and insight. Insight happens in a flash, calming practice has to be done over and over again, is like a repetitive, you know, habituation of certain bodily habits, and that distinction is very provocative to me and I'm using it in the chapter that I'm writing and I also try to use it in class to talk about two ways of training ourselves to be more attentive to animals. But taking the Buddhist principle and translating it into ways of looking, or ways of observing animals, or even the way the animals themselves figure stuff out has been... I probably wasn't as clear and I probably hadn't thought it through enough.

00:35:10:05 - 00:35:59:12

Janet: I have at least two primary purposes that I'm after. One of them, for humans to learn how to see how interesting animals are. So not look at them as like a dumb cow standing in the middle of the field, but see what's going on with the cow and start to see the micro changes in the cow. But the other one is for humans to learn from the way animals are, to actually enhance their own experience in their lives. So in other words, to pick up and develop, maybe skills that we already have, because we are animals as well. We've backgrounded them, we don't pay attention to them, we don't cultivate them, we cultivate the cognitive, you know, rational parts of ourselves.

00:35:59:14 - 00:36:17:21

Janet: So we're both emulating certain dimensions of animal life and we're also learning how to look at animals as an object. And that's also a distinction I don't think that I made clearly enough or I really thought through what exactly I'm trying to do with that.

00:36:17:23 - 00:36:53:18

Sarah: But that's really tough to do to, I mean, we're teaching in universities where, I mean, the practice of university classes is also about cultivating intellectual rigor, critical thinking, and language. We're so invested in this skillset and the cultivation of those practices too that it's a radical suggestion to talk about and then maybe possibly do, like embodiment, or, you know, what am I if I'm not just this brain thing, but also valued for my, like, my material properties...

00:36:53:20 - 00:37:52:06

Janet: Well, you know, its continuous with what's been called feminist pedagogy. So, even the effort... Like forget about animals, but the effort in feminist pedagogy to break down the authoritarian distinction between the teacher and the students to cultivate in the classroom a kind of joy and also of sharing, so laughter in the classroom... It's not like we're getting up and acting like animals. But we are going diagonally or sort of horizontally as opposed to vertically, which we're already doing in academia to a certain extent, and I think feminist pedagogy is one of the really interesting places where it's been developed even more. We don't only use our rational minds, we never only use our rational minds, we always are embodied, it's only the question of what we can foreground and be aware of, and so on.

00:37:52:08 - 00:38:28:03

Janet: So any kind of mixing that up is going to help you along the way. And as I was saying before, just empowering people to tell a story of what happened this morning with your cat in your apartment, and making that an okay thing to be happening at Harvard Divinity School is already... It's going to stick with them, you know, because people come in there with the sense of, oh I'm not allowed to talk about this kind of thing. You know people have the idea still that you're not allowed to use the first person. Like when you write, you're not allowed to use the first person in academic writing. That's still around. Ridiculous.

00:38:28:05 - 00:38:33:03

Sarah: I actually had class around, like, please only use the first person. I don't want anything else.

00:38:33:05 - 00:38:44:06

Janet: That's right. But that's just one step. One of my principles for this class is like, I'm not expecting perfection. I'm not expecting to get all the way there. Just a couple of steps, that's a lot already.

00:38:44:08 - 00:38:50:21

Sarah: One of the few good things I've heard from many people about online, is that there are many more pets in the classroom?

00:38:50:23 - 00:38:52:03

Janet: Yes that's right.

00:38:52:05 - 00:38:55:24

Sarah: So how has the switch to online been for you?

00:38:55:26 - 00:39:31:15

Janet: It hasn't been too bad because I don't have really large classes. So, my experience is you can fit 25 faces on a zoom page. So if the class is 25 or less, you got you and everyone there. I establish eye contact with the students... Not eye contact because there's a problem with that, but I can read body

language of students on Zoom, you know, so I try as much as possible. As a teacher, I have worked my whole life to break down my position of authority and to lift up theirs.

00:39:31:17 - 00:40:02:18

Janet: I can always tell when I'm in the classroom in person, but I can tell on Zoom too, I can tell when someone has a question and they're about to raise their hand but they haven't raised their hand yet. This actually has a name in Buddhist philosophy, called . You can tell when someone's about to move but they haven't done it but you can see it kind of coming. So I call on students, I say, I know that you have a question. I'd say about 75% of the time I'm right, 25% of the time I'm wrong and the student says no, I'm not thinking anything I don't have a question.

00:40:06:03 - 00:40:13:06

Janet: It's not easy though, and you have to work a lot harder than when you actually have their bodies in the room.

00:40:13:08 - 00:40:19:12

Sarah: And then you have student's actually with their cameras on, cuz this is one of our challenges anyways, my challenge here is I have very few students who turn their cameras on.

00:40:19:14 - 00:40:25:00

Janet: Can't you make it a requirement?

00:40:25:02 - 00:40:45:06

Sarah: Well, no because then I would be otherwise disadvantaging them here, right? Like there's a lot of reasons that our students may not be able to have their cameras on in terms of accessibility, or they're in a violent household, or they're just, you know, there could be other people or other things going on.

00:40:45:08 - 00:40:45:27

Janet: But there's backgrounds, you can have background where you don't see...

00:40:45:29 - 00:41:08:27

Sarah: Virtual backgrounds, yeah. I'm trying to incentivize and invite it but the number of time's its happened is still pretty low. I mean I have a lot of students say, like I can hear them, often they'll turn their sound on but not their cameras and they'll say I'm not camera ready. I'll say I know the feeling I'm not either!

00:41:08:29 - 00:41:31:12

Janet: That would make a huge difference, that would make a difference. And I think it's... I know I've heard of people who are lecturing to a lot of black boxes and that's really, really hard. I can't lecture without seeing their reaction. I need to see their faces, and make sure that we're on the same page like constantly. So if like I was in your position I would plead and beg with them.

00:41:32:12 - 00:41:34:27

Sarah: I'm gonna figure out how to plead more effectively.

00:41:34:29 - 00:42:30:15

Janet: You know, really tell them I can't talk if I can't see your face, you have to realize that I don't know... I'm nervous! You know, I can tell by the slightest move that you are hearing me or not hearing

me, or you like what I'm saying, or you don't. If I don't have that feedback I can't talk. It's like going to a music performance where you need to give the musicians feedback, you know, either clap or shake your head. They thrive on that. And the most important thing you need to know is that I'm not fully confident. I know that that's hard for you to understand. But it's true, and one day some of you will be in front of a classroom and you'll know what I'm talking about. You guys think that I know everything and you know nothing. But I actually want to learn from you! Can you believe that? It's true.

00:42:31:15 - 00:43:17:18

Sarah: It's so hard though for our students, right? I mean, it was hard for us too at some point, right? But I think it's very hard for our students to switch... I think many of my students are still switching from a high school experience to university experience, so they're coming to my classes expecting to get like a download of information, like there's content you will provide and that's the course content and all that I need is to replicate it to a passable level on a test and that's the goal. And of course, it's not what I want. Like I desperately want them to show me where they are so that I could possibly meet them halfway because otherwise the content makes no sense, I worry. Sometimes it truly makes no sense I'm sure. But it's a real challenge.

00:43:17:20 - 00:43:22:06

Sarah: Yeah, but surely the experience of grad students vs undergrad students is vastly different that way too?

00:43:22:08 - 00:43:35:09

Janet: Yeah, I mean I am at Harvard, I have to admit, so it's different. But I often find that the undergrads are the best students, they're the most curious and the most lively, and it's the grad students who are more protective and so on.

00:43:35:11 - 00:43:44:06

Sarah: Right because they're being habituated into disciplines.

00:43:44:08 - 00:43:49:09

Janet: Yes right, exactly, and they're trying to show their expertise and they don't want to admit that they don't know things and stuff.

00:43:49:11 - 00:43:49:26

Sarah: Yeah.

00:43:49:28 - 00:44:28:09

Janet: But also, we did a thing where part of their class work is to meet in small groups by themselves and discuss things, and then one person from the group has to speak to the larger class. So I make them speak a lot. So they get used to it, and then when they do speak, you know the way you receive it, you say, oh wow I never thought of that, which often is true. So get them used to, this is a back-and-forth. It's not me throwing information at you and you need to really readjust yourself. You have to say this to them.

00:44:29:27 - 00:44:48:24

Sarah: So Buddhist Studies... Do you think that Buddhist Studies... I mean first of all I guess we can ask what is Buddhist Studies too and have a little talk about that, but do you think Buddhist Studies has an important intervention to make? Could make important interventions in a broader kind of ethics?

00:44:48:26 - 00:46:06:12

Janet: Buddhist Studies has been very conservative, and they want you to study what happened, and what so-and-so said, rather than how do I transform this into something that's relevant to contemporary issues. But I think there's a lot there that even historically parallels issues. I mean, for example, in my women in Buddhism class, I claim that you can see a lot of feminist sentiments in the early Buddhist writings, you know, early pre-modern stuff. It's a question of how you recognize that. You know, Buddhism is a civilization, a world civilization just like any other. It's got huge resources in ethics, in philosophy, issues around justice, you know, issues around self-cultivation, psychology. There's ways to handle that that satisfy the kind of old guard in Buddhist Studies, so that you're not just making stuff up whole cloth based on what you want Buddhism to be saying, versus really trying to figure out contextually what this meant at the time, and imaginatively seeing what the stakes were then, and it's not so hard to connect that to contemporary issues.

00:46:06:24 - 00:46:38:06

Sarah: We've been talking a lot about ways to confront racism in the classroom and in higher ed more generally, and what are your thoughts on that, and on racial bias, especially ways we can productively counteract racial bias in the classroom? And then also related to it, do you think... Like we were talking about speciesism earlier, right? Like this focus on the elevation of the human species above all others as the center of everything. Is there a way to connect for our students issues of speciesism and issues of racism?

00:46:39:06 - 00:47:26:09

Janet: Yeah, so those are really two different questions. Taking the last one first, at the American Academy of Religion, there is a new group, Animals and Religion, it has been around now for a few years, and they have been emphasizing the historical relationship between racism and speciesism, in that human beings have treated other human beings like animals, or considered them to be animals and that's the legacy of slavery in the South, but it's also all kinds of other, you know, Irish in North America were compared to animals, and basically any kind of human group that you hate you compare them to an animal.

00:47:26:11 - 00:48:36:27

Janet: For me, and I tried to make this point and I got into trouble... Because I wanted to say that that's really different than the goal of animal studies. In my opinion, the goal of animal studies at least in part is to break down the distinction between humans and animals, and to see the porousness or the, you know, the fungibility of that divide. But in the critique of racist history in the United States or anywhere, I'm sorry, not just the United States, anywhere in the world, it's just the opposite. You want to reinforce the divide between animals and humans, because you want to say that humans of every race are human, completely, and making one type of human being an animal is violating your responsibility to treat all humans with dignity as humans.

00:48:38:00 - 00:49:37:00

Janet: And its trading on the idea that animals are debased and less important. So if someone were to accuse me of being racist because I was treating a person of another race like my cats, it wouldn't be a problem because I am a slave to my cats. They're not my slave, I'm their slave, you know, I do whatever they tell me to do and I like coddle them and feed them and give them... So the problem of racism and animals is that A) there's a presumption that animals are gross and lower beings, and then humans treated other human beings like those gross and horrible people. So there's a connection between

human attitudes towards animals and human attitudes towards races, for sure. But I think that the fight against racism has to be fought on different grounds than the fight against speciesisms against animals

00:49:39:12 - 00:50:07:03

Sarah: So we're all sort of getting up, in whatever form, we're getting up right now on Zoom, occasionally in front of people in a room, and we're inherently given a bunch of power in doing that. And then there's also a bunch of power dynamics established, baked in already, between the people in our room. So, what can we do to problematize those and not let the unspoken dominate?

00:50:07:05 - 00:50:55:18

Janet: I think there's at least two things. One is in the syllabus, like what you're reading and how you construct the class, and the other is in your pedagogy. So in the syllabus there's a strong push, first of all, to have a diversity of authors, like the identity of who you're reading, and the perspectives that you are representing on a particular topic. That's not always possible depending on the topic, but to the degree that it is possible, you know, that's a kind of new norm, is to try to have diversity in terms of who is writing your sources and also, secondly, the kind of work that they do. So are they privileging the elite or are they privileging, are they looking at other dimensions of marginalized people in terms of the way that they study a topic.

00:50:55:20 - 00:51:45:12

Janet: You know, in Buddhist Studies it's hard to figure out how exactly to do that. It's not very, we don't have a lot of sociological study of different voices. I mean, you know, in like a feminist class you do. So, when you're looking at, you know, the history of women in Buddhism you are doing that, you know, you're looking, you're relying on research that's focused on women's voices, lets say, rather than the elite male voices, but we don't have that racially, very much. It's not thematized, you know, between Tibetans and Indians. Yeah they're different races or, you know, or Indians and Chinese are different races, but nobody has looked at that as an issue of racism per se, or very little.

00:51:45:14 - 00:52:33:12

Janet: But then the other thing of course is your pedagogy. So one thing is the subjects that you teach and how you relate the topics to the problem of racism and I do think there's ways that Buddhist thought and Buddhist ideas do encourage breaking down to the self-other divide for example, and all those kinds of things. The second thing is your pedagogy in terms of how you address microaggressions in the classroom, how you make everybody feel included, how you avoid some students dominating, which tend to be white males, basically, and get the other students talking and get them to feel empowered to speak.

00:52:33:14 - 00:53:49:27

Janet: And that's not always so easy, especially addressing microaggressions. When somebody says something and you don't let it pass, you go, woah woah, what did you just say? And get people to talk about what somebody just said and what it could have implied and what's the etiquette of using language in the classroom when you're talking about things. You know, that's a challenge for everybody. I'm in the process of writing up a set of guidelines for teachers, on what I just said, with some students. I find that the students have really good ideas and they are more sensitive than we are. You know, because when I was in a classroom I never would have thought to even think about this, you know, that I have a right to object, and these guys have and they noticed a lot of stuff that I probably do that they take offense at. So talking to students about this is actually a really, really useful way to kind of change your some of your practices.

00:53:49:29 - 00:54:02:09

Sarah: Well thank you so much for speaking with me today, Janet. It was a real honor and a pleasure and a privilege to hear about your teaching with posthumanism and Buddhist Studies, so thanks so much.

00:54:02:11 - 00:54:05:09

Janet: Okay, thanks very much for asking me to do it.

00:54:08:24 - 00:54:36:06

Sarah: You can find more information about Janet and her work on her website. We'll post a link in the show notes. Remember that notes and full transcript can be found on our website, teachingbuddhism.net. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast, through Apple or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. We would especially like to hear from you about what you think about today's episode. So please get in touch with us however you prefer. Send us an email, or message on Facebook, where we're The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto.

00:54:36:08 - 00:54:54:21

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