

The yak

Consider the yak. I understand you have a busy and complex life juggling the pressing problems of fiscal probity, ergonomics, soft furnishing, personal hygiene and whether or not to start all over again on DVD, but put that aside for a minute and consider the yak.

As you probably already know, the yak's family tree is as matted as its bottom. It is generally agreed among aficionados and enthusiasts that yaks are members of the family Bovidae, though their precise family relationships are open to some rather snobbish discourse.

Herwart Bohlken, a man whose own name, it must be said, raises a few eyebrows, contends that the yak belongs to the genus *Bos* and the subgenus *Poephagus*, with the caveat that responsible, sedate, tame yaks are *Bos (Poephagus) mutus przhival'skii*, whereas wild, clubbing, dirty-little-stop-out yaks should be sneeringly referred to as *Bos (Poephagus) grunniens Linnaeus*. And, to make matters worse, both have the morals of ungulates and mount each other faster than the household cavalry's musical gallop, producing little *bos* who don't know whether they are *mutus* or *grunniens*.

However, this is not the biggest problem to confront your yak. It's the fact that they're generally, as a rule, looked after, herded and attended by Buddhists. Now, you might quite reasonably assume that, in these days of animal rights, being owned by a Buddhist would be the ruminant equivalent of winning the lottery, because the one central edict, the core belief, of Buddhism (apart from talking and smiling at the same time) is not eating meat.

Ah, but life is not that simple – it is ever thus. The land where Buddhists and yak come together in peace and love has very few vegetables (you're ahead of me), and what there are are eaten by the yaks. So the Buddhists have to eat them, which they don't like (the Buddhists or the yaks). Indeed, they are (the Buddhists), in turn, consumed, if that's not too cynical a word, by guilt. So they've looked for a loophole in the rules to alleviate the heavy weight of moral responsibility and dinner, and have found that, strictly speaking, it's not the eating that's the problem, it's the killing.

Frankly, this isn't fooling anyone, but it makes a Buddhist – if not the yaks – feel a little easier. So what they do, and I hope you're sitting down for this, is take the suckling calves away from their mothers until they starve to death. That, on a technicality, counts as an act of fate. If the yak doesn't have a mother, then they put a leather (yak) bag over its head till it suffocates. Again, technically, no blood was spilt, and running out of oxygen can be seen as, if not an act of God, then just bad luck. The traditional yak-herders' prayer is: 'Buddha, can you spare me a kine?'

(There is a moral here for the bunny-huggers and tofu-munchers among you: if two vegetarians live together in harmony, one will always, inevitably, end up eating the other, and an obsession with kindness leads inexorably to extreme cruelty.) Because of the guilt, yak meat is called black food. Yak milk, on the other hand, because it leaves the cow still standing with a faint sense of relief and erect nipples, is considered good, white food.

Buddhists, who love yaks, adore yak milk above all else. They like it neat, straight up, and they like it in tea, but only after it has been turned into butter. Interestingly, yak milk has a much higher fat content than cow's – as much as 60 per cent higher. Buddhists, who love yaks, even go so far as to say that yak milk is better for infants than human mothers' milk, which they claim makes children stupid, and may well explain why we are like we are or, alternatively, why they are like they are.

Yaks are milked in the traditional way by women squatting at the nether end, heads pressed into furry flanks for support. They have buckets, of course, and hooks worn on chains round their waists, which attach to the bucket to safeguard against accidents. These hooks have, over the years, become decorative symbols of femininity, and are often elaborately decorated in silver with coral and precious stones.

At last, we come to the point. It's the Blonde's birthday soon (don't ask, I don't), and it's nigh on impossible to find something to give her because she's already bought everything conceivable – and a few things that are inconceivable – with my money. But I'm pretty sure she doesn't have a Buddhist yak-milker's silver bucket hook (try saying that ten times), and I have a fancy to give her one. It would be an entertaining and attractive talking point.

'Oh, what's that large silver hook dangling on your groin?'

'Ah, funny you should ask ...'