

Like a lot of folks, Kristen and I like to watch TV in the evenings after the kids have gone to bed. One thing we watch are survival shows, such as “Survivorman” and “Man vs. Wild.” These are reality programs where a person or small group of people intentionally maroon themselves in difficult environments in order to demonstrate wilderness skills and test their mettle against the elements. Part of the appeal of these programs is seeing whether they’re up to the challenge, and imagining what you might do in their place. I always like to think I’d do a great job at it, but realistically, I’d probably be eaten by a bear. Or even a squirrel.

One thing that these shows demonstrate is the contextual nature of our moral behaviours. For instance, stranded people often have to choose whether they will act just like they would in regular society, or whether they will adjust their actions so that they survive. The biggest example is around eating. Vegetarianism is easy enough to support in Toronto—but alone on the Arctic tundra, not so much. We just watched a program where a group of regular British women were stranded on a desert island, and happened to befriend a couple of wild piglets. When the women failed to find any substantial food after many days, they were faced with the question of whether they would kill and eat their pets. It was very emotional for them, but after they’d resisted as long as they could, pork chops ended up on the menu.

I’m a vegetarian myself, and don’t want to cause other living things to suffer just to feed my belly. But that’s a decision I’m enabled to make because of the comfortable situation in which I live. Pushed to the brink, I would probably be looking around for some barbeque sauce. This is just the fact of human existence, a fact that Shinran Shonin recognized 800 years ago in Japan. While he urged us to be good and moral people as much as possible, he also comforted his followers with the acknowledgement that we are not total masters of our lives, and life can push us do to things we abhor yet are powerless to avoid. In these times, we are

embraced by the boundless compassion of Amida Buddha, which never abandons anyone, no matter what mistakes they make or what difficult choices they come to. I've long appreciated that caring pragmatism of Shinran: do your best, but when you fall short, the Buddha is always there supporting you.

Gassho

Jeff Wilson Sensei