

## Ahiṃsā and Vegetarianism in the History of Buddhism

D. SEYFORTH RUEGG

---

The history of vegetarianism in the Buddhist world has followed a complicated and in some respects perhaps surprising course. Although the idea of Ahiṃsā 'non-harming' is generally proclaimed and respected in Buddhist thought and practice, what might seem to be its logical corollary, namely abstention from eating the flesh of animals killed for their meat, is both relatively rarely discussed in Buddhist literature and far from generally practised in most parts of the Buddhist world. That the idea of vegetarianism was however at least partially thematised in Buddhist thought from an early period is shown by the references in the Vinaya to abstention from meat-eating in certain conditions and also, curiously enough, by the mention of it as one of the ascetic practices that the Buddha's cousin-antagonist Devadatta insisted upon. In view of the considerable complexity of the history of vegetarianism and related questions in the history of Buddhist thought and practice it will not be possible to study it in all its details in the space available for this article.<sup>1</sup>

We have just noted that, by comparison with non-harming (*a[vi]hiṃsā*) which is universally acclaimed as a principle of primary importance for Buddhist thought and practice, and which is in fact counted as one of the fundamental good factors (*kuśaladharmā*) in the classical lists of *dharmas*, vegetarianism plays a surprisingly inconspicuous role. This fact may perhaps be explained at least in part by the circumstance that such an ethical notion has little place in the Vinaya, a collection of texts basically devoted to a somewhat formalistic treatment of the rules and regulations necessary for the functioning and good order of the Community of Monks (*bhikkhusaṅgha*). Indeed, in the Vinaya fish and meat are actually mentioned among the five superior and delicate foods (*paññābhogaṇīya*) which a Bhikkhu who is ill is permitted to eat (*Pāṭimokkha, Pācittiya dhammā* no. 39).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, even for monks in good health the mere act as such of eating meat, which is of course received as alms, is not prohibited by the Vinaya which only lists certain kinds of meat that the monk must never eat; it is for this reason that a monk must never eat meat received from a donor without due consideration and before having ascertained, if need be, its origin in order to establish whether it is of a forbidden kind (*Mahāvagga*, p. 216-220).

The Vinaya does however make one further stipulation of fundamental importance: a monk must never knowingly eat the flesh of an animal killed for him. But provided that the monk has neither seen (*adiṭṭha*) nor heard (*as[s]uta*) that the meat offered to him comes from an animal butchered for him in particular, and if he also has no reason to suppose that it was

(*aparisaṅkita*), the meat (if it is not of a prohibited kind) is considered to be pure in these three respects (*tikoṭiparisuddha*); and the monk may then eat it (*Mahāvagga*, pp. 237-238; *Cullavagga*, p. 197). For his part a donor may procure 'available' meat (*pavattamaṃsa*) without making himself guilty either of intentional (*sañcicca*) killing or of instigating others to kill (*Mahāvagga*, p. 217, 237-238); and when a monk accepts and eats meat procured in this way by a donor, he is not considered to have knowingly taken the meat of an animal killed for him (*Mahāvagga*, p. 237: . . . *jānaṃ uddissakataṃ maṃsaṃ paribhuñjati paṭiccakammaṃ*).<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of the Vinaya, then, basically two factors, one factual and the other mental, are to be considered as decisive: whether the meat of an already butchered animal was available to the donor and whether the monk has knowingly and intentionally eaten the meat of an animal butchered for him. If neither of these two conditions is violated, there is no offence.

The Abhidharma literature also emphasises chiefly the intentional quality of an act (*karman* as *cetanā karma* and *cetayitvā karma*), this emphasis being in accord with the 'psychological ethics' with which the Abhidharma is largely concerned. The act of meat-eating is accordingly not thematised as such. And even though Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* deals with the idea of *avihiṃsā*, meat-eating is only incidentally referred to (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 4.68d). In the basic Mahāyānist Abhidharma treatise, the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, *vihiṃsā* 'harming' is defined not only with respect to the externalised action of killing *per se* but also as a function of the lack of compassion (p. 9); but here also the question of meat-eating is not taken up.<sup>4</sup>

Now it is to be noted that, contrary to what might have been expected of a body of texts dealing with a great variety of philosophical and ethical questions, the older canonical literature of Buddhism comprising the Śrāvakayānist Sūtraṭīka also does not go into the problem of meat-eating and its relation to the universally acclaimed ideal of *avihiṃsā*. On the contrary, just like the Vinaya, it even refers to meat that is pure in the three respects (*tikoṭiparisuddhamāṃsa*; cf. *Majjhimanikāya* I, p. 368, and *Aṅguttaranikāya* IV, p. 187). The Dīghanikāya only specifies that the Buddha abstains from eating raw meat (*āmakamaṃsa*; I, p. 5).<sup>5</sup>

It is especially remarkable that in the older canonical literature of the Triṭīka the thematisation of the question of meat-eating and abstinence from it as an issue of importance appears only among the five ascetic practices proclaimed by Devadatta as basic rules to be observed by all monks.<sup>6</sup> Of course the Buddha is not represented as having rejected these practices; he even authorised their observance by his monks, but only as optional rules of asceticism rather than as binding universal regulations applicable to all Buddhists, or to all members of the Community of Monks (*Cullavagga*, p. 196-197).

The attitude of the Mahāyānists with regard to meat-eating is very different to the extent that it is based on the Mahāyānasūtras that deal with the question. In fact one important group of Mahāyāna texts, the Sūtras teaching the theory of the *tathāgatagarbha* and the Buddha-Nature, condemn it outright.

Thus the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, which without being counted as one of the basic Sūtras on the theory refers to *tathāgatagarbha* several times, has as its eighth chapter a text (perhaps a later addition) devoted to the question of meat-eating (Māmsabhakṣaṇaparivarta). This text mentions the *Hastikakṣya*, the *Mahāmegha*, the (Mahāyānist) *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and the *Āṅgulimāliya*, as well as the *Laṅkāvatāra* itself, as Sūtras which prohibit the eating of meat (8, p. 258). And it is significant that all these Sūtras (with the sole exception of the first) are closely connected with the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, the reason being no doubt that this teaching states that all incarnate sentient beings (*dehīn, sattva*) without exception have the capacity of certainly attaining Buddhahood sooner or later. It appears then that the conclusion was drawn that one must not destroy and eat the bodily receptacle of this spiritual principle.

The intimate connexion between abstinence from meat-eating and the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is explicitly mentioned in the *Āṅgulimāliyasūtra*. There, when answering a question put by Mañjuśrī who asks 'Is it because of the *tathāgatagarbha* that the Buddhas do not eat meat?', the Buddha explains not only that in the infinite round of existences there exists no sentient being (*sattva*) who has not been one's mother, sister, etc., since the world of living being is like a dancer [who assumes multiple roles]<sup>7</sup> and that another's flesh and one's own are accordingly the same, but also that the element (*dhātu*) of the *sattvas* is in fact the *dharmadhātu* itself. (Fol. 300b-301a of the 1Ha'sa edition: 'jam dpal gyis gsol pa/ ci de bžin gšegs pa'i sñiñ po'i slad du sañs rgyas rnamś ša mi gsol lam/ bcom ldan 'das kyis bka' stsal pa/ 'jam dpal/ šin tu de bžin te/ thog ma dañ/ tha ma med pa'i 'khor bar 'khor ba'i tše rabs de dag la semś can thams cad mar ma gyur pa dañ/ sriñ mor ma gyur pa gañ yañ med do//khyir gyur pa'añ phar gyur te/'tsho ba'i jig rten ni bro mkhan bžin no//de bas na bdag gi ša dañ/gžan gyi ša'añ ša gcig pa yin pas/sañs rgyas rnamś ša mi gsol lo//gžan yañ/'jam dpal/semś can thams cad kyi dbyiñs ni chos kyi dbyiñs te/dbyiñs gcig tu gyur pa'i šaza bar 'gyur bas/sañs rgyas rnamś ša mi gsol lo//) Here then we find side by side the idea that all sentient beings are interrelated in the frame of infinite *saṃsāra* and that all flesh is accordingly one, and the idea that the *sattvadhātu* and the *dharmadhātu* are ultimately one. Meat-eating is then to be rejected not only for an ethico-philosophical but also for a metaphysical reason.

It is therefore probable that vegetarianism became established in Buddhism, at least in the practice of very many Mahāyānists, neither in the wake of some generalised tendency supposed to derive from a primitive pre-Aryan source (as was suggested by L. Alsdorf)<sup>8</sup> nor as the result of the

increasing influence of sects of 'heretical' Renouncers (*saṃnyāsin*, inclusive of the Buddhists and Jainas, as suggested by L. Dumont),<sup>9</sup> but rather in close connexion with a specific religious and philosophical teaching: the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine.

The existence in some Mahāyānasūtras, and in particular in the *Laṅkāvatāra*, of a close link between the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine and abstention from meat-eating does not seem to have been duly taken into consideration by D. T. Suzuki when he claimed that the Māṃsabhakṣaṇaparivarta of the *Laṅkāvatāra* 'has no organic connection with the text proper'.<sup>10</sup> The many references in this Sūtra to the *tathāgatagarbha* amply justify the inclusion in it of a section condemning the practice.

It is to be observed, however, that the *Laṅkāvatāra* does not explicitly base its rejection on the *tathāgatagarbha* theory, and that its condemnation of meat-eating is of a more general and comprehensive nature. Thus the Sūtra refers to the great benevolence (*mahāmaītrī*) and compassion (*kṛpā*) of the Bodhisattvas; and it even goes so far as to allude to the example of other sects (*anyatīrthaka*),<sup>11</sup> as well as to emphasise the notion of purity (*śuci*).<sup>12</sup>

It is furthermore quite significant that the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* protests against the idea that the Śrāvaka (i.e. the follower of the old canon with its Vinaya) was authorised to eat the meat of animals which he had not himself killed or had killed by somebody else and which he did not know to have been butchered for him in particular (p. 253-255). For, according to this Sūtra, the Śrāvakas as well as the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas condemn the eating of meat (p. 258). A similar opinion is expressed by the Mahāyānist *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (IHa.sa edition, vol. ña, fol. 74b-75a). The *Laṅkāvatāra* also criticises the idea that meat is a permitted medicinal substance that may be used by a monk who is ill.<sup>13</sup> These criticisms are evidently directed against the position of the Vinaya outlined above, though the Sūtra does not explicitly mention the Vinayapiṭaka as such.

In the light of this fact it is not surprising to find that when certain Mahāyānist groups came to accept their own code of discipline, represented by the Mahāyānist *\*Brahmajālasūtra*, a prohibition against meat-eating was included in it as one of forty-eight secondary injunctions.

As a consequence of the developments sketched above, the Mahāyānist Buddhist communities finally adopted one of two parallel but quite distinct positions. Those who, though Mahāyānists on the philosophical level, continued to use exclusively the Śrāvakayānist Vinaya — for example those of Tibet and the other areas of Central Asia which follow Tibet and use the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya only — did not as a rule completely give up meat-eating.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, those Buddhists who in addition to being Mahāyānists philosophically also adopted a specifically Mahāyānist disciplinary code like the *\*Brahmajālasūtra* — for example the Chinese Buddhists — largely gave up meat-eating; and since this aspect of the

Mahāyānist code of ethics applied to laymen as well as to monks, this prohibition came to be observed also by laymen.<sup>15</sup> In this way a kind of cleavage developed in the practice of the Mahāyānist world with respect to meat-eating, although the theory set forth in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and in the other Sūtras teaching the *tathāgatagarbha* was of course common to all Mahāyānists. And as a result the practice of part of the Mahāyānist world coincided with that of most Śrāvākayānists, whereas the practice of other Mahāyānists was very different since it was determined by the teachings of the Mahāyāna Sūtras mentioned above and by the code of discipline based on these teachings.

It is to be noted finally that the Mahāyānasūtras do not derive their prohibition of meat-eating directly from the principle of *avihiṃsā*, so that to this extent at least they do not differ from the rest of the Buddhist tradition which does not hold vegetarianism to be a necessary corollary of the accepted principle of non-harming.

King Piyadasi (Aśoka) several times alluded in different edicts to to *avihi(ṃ)sā* and to the non-killing (*anālabha*) of living beings. His fifth pillar edict thus makes it known that the King has promulgated a prohibition against killing certain animals. In particular, we find in his first rock edict a reference to the fact that in the King's kitchens only three animals are being killed for the King's table, and that soon none shall be killed; but the principle of *avihiṃsā* is interestingly not mentioned in this edict. (On the contrary, a link between *vadha*, *bandha*, *hiṃsā* and the supplying of meat is explicitly mentioned in the Kauṭaliya *Arthaśāstra*, 2.26.)

To sum up, it appears that vegetarianism is connected in Mahāyānist thought less with *avihiṃsā* than with *karuṇā* and *maitrī* in general, and more in particular, at least in one important body of Sūtras, with the *tathāgatagarbha* theory.

The difference in practice with respect to meat-eating within the Mahāyānist world between China and Tibet might at first sight appear to be due to climatic and economic factors rather than to any cause internal to Buddhism. However, although such external factors clearly cannot be excluded *a priori*, an essentially no less important factor seems to lie in the circumstance noted above that, whereas in China a specifically Mahāyānist code came to be observed, in Tibet the accepted Vinaya has been exclusively that of the Śrāvākayānist Mūlasarvāstivādins. And such an explanation of the difference is supported by the consideration that in South and South-East Asia, where climatic and economic factors cannot have imposed meat-eating by making vegetarianism difficult to observe as in Tibet, but where the Vinaya was Śrāvākayānist just as in Tibet, vegetarianism has not been the general rule either amongst monks or laymen. Vegetarianism is then generally observed in those parts of the Buddhist world where the Mahāyāna was not only accepted as a philosophy but where its teachings on the subject

were reinforced by a distinct Mahāyānist code of conduct, that of the \**Brahmajālasūtra* (*Fan-wang ching*).

We can only speculate on the question whether a philosophically Mahāyānist community like that of Tibet and Mongolia which continued to use only a Śrāvakayānist Vinaya would have adopted vegetarianism had the geographical conditions been more favourable. (Of course, as already noted, it is to be remembered that in Tibet monks and laymen did sometimes observe vegetarianism for certain periods of time.) Theoretically the role of the Vinaya should no doubt not have been absolutely decisive in this matter. Indeed, that either the fact of having a Mahāyānist code included in the canon or geographical conditions cannot alone be the determining factor would seem to be shown by the case of Japan, whose Buddhism is not only Mahāyānist but is derived from China, but where abstinence from the eating of all flesh is not widely observed.

In attempting to evaluate the formalistic and indeed casuistical approach of the old Vinaya it is necessary to keep in mind the very particular purpose of this body of texts, which was neither philosophical nor even ethical. And it has to be remembered furthermore that as an almsman the Bhikkhu was not only dependent on the offerings he received on his begging rounds, but that as a person to be honoured (*dakkhiṇeyya*) and a 'field of merit' (*puñña-kkhetta*) he was morally bound to accept any alms offered in good faith by a pious donor and that if he failed to do so he was interfering with the karmic fruit and just reward that the donor was entitled to expect. Finally, since in Buddhist thought it is the intention with which an act is accomplished that determines its moral and karmic quality, the Bhikkhu's accepting and eating meat in the conditions specified above cannot be dismissed as necessarily a mere subterfuge allowing him to circumvent some share of responsibility in a series of acts involving *vihimsā* at an earlier stage. Nevertheless, when in the course of development of Buddhist thought the karmic process and the ethical dimension came to be seen in a wider and also less formalistic fashion, the eating of meat was severely criticised, and a number of important Mahāyānist texts prohibited it on ethical and philosophical grounds. In this development the *tathāgatagarbha* theory played a very important role.

POST SCRIPTUM. – Since this article was sent for publication at the end of 1974 an article on Aśoka's attitude toward capital punishment has been published by K. R. Norman in *JRAS* 1975, pp. 16-22.

As for the passage quoted above from the *Āṅgulimāliyasūtra*, a paraphrase of it is found in the Sogdian text on meat-eating published by E. Benveniste, *Mission Pelliot en Asie Centrale, Série in-quarto III: Textes sogdiens* (Paris, 1940), pp. 4-58. There we read: (pp. 6-7): 'C'est pourquoi les hommes comprennent qu'en tout être il y a la semence de Buddha (pwt'n'k tmy); il ne faut pas tuer, il ne faut pas manger de viande. L'homme qui pense

à la buddhatā doit aimer tous les êtres autant qu'une mère éprouve de compassion pour son fils unique . . .' – In P. Demiéville's translation of the Chinese version of the Aṅgulimāliyasūtra in Appendix II (*op. cit.*, p. 192) as well as in Benveniste's translation of the Sogdian (p. 44; cf. p. 181), the interpretation of *dhātu* by 'domaine' is not satisfactory because in the *tathāgatagarbha* literature *dhātu* has rather the meaning of '(spiritual) element'.

### APPENDIX: *āmagandha*

The *Āmagandhasutta* of the *Suttanipāta* (239-252) – a text regarded by commentarial tradition as a dialogue between the former Buddha Kassapa and the Brahman Tissa which was recited by the present Buddha when a certain Brahman named *Āmagandha* (!) questioned him as to whether he ate *macchamaṃsa* – is an interesting document on flesh-eating and its relationship to harming and the defilements. The purpose of this text is to show that *āmagandha* (literally 'smell of raw flesh, stench; foul-smelling substance') does not consist in the mere act of eating meat (*maṃsabhajana*), but rather in moral defilements (*kilesa*) and the unwholesome factors. Stealing, falsehood, deception, adultery, lasciviousness, nihilism, etc. are thus all said to be *āmagandha*, for it is such defilements that put one as it were in bad spiritual odour. Verse 249 adds significantly that ascetic and religious observances are in themselves unable to purify a person who has not freed himself from (the *nīvaraṇa* of) doubt (*avīṇṇakāṅkha*). – On the basis of this Sutta it has been argued that, for the Buddhist, flesh-eating *per se* is not ethically coloured (provided of course that one has not seen, heard or suspected that an animal has been killed for one, as the *Paramatthajotikā* p. 286 explains). The Sutta (242) does, however, explicitly mention *pānātipāta* 'destruction of life' as an example of *āmagandha*, as well as *vadha* (beating, according to the commentary), *cheda* (cutting off of a limb), and fettering (*bandhana* [preparatory to killing?]); and the Aṅguttaranikāya (I, p. 280) explains *āmagandha* as *vyāpāda* 'injury'.<sup>16</sup>

In the Buddhist literature in Pali and Sanskrit, then, *āmagandha* (n., or *anirāmagandha*, adj.) and its opposite *nirāmagandha* (adj.) came to be used regularly in a figurative sense to refer respectively to the morally impure (*kilesa*, *akusala-dhamma*) and to the morally pure (cf. *Suttanipāta* 717). As a result of this transvaluation *āmagandha* figures in this metaphorical sense e.g. in DN II, pp. 241-249 and *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* 625, as well as in *Mahāvastu* III, p. 214 (a work which also uses the word in its literal meaning in I, p. 75; cf. *Saddharmapuṇḍarika*, p. 96.16).

### NOTES

- 1 On this subject in general see E. W. Hopkins, *JAOS* 27 (1906), pp. 455-464; P. Demiéville, *Bull. Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 1920, pp. 165-167; L. de La Vallée Poussin, *L'Abhidharmakośa*, 4, p. 145-146; A. Waley, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 1 (1931-2), p. 343-354.
- 2 Cf. J. Jaworski, *Rocznik Oriental.* 5 (1928), p. 96; 7 (1930), p. 61.
- 3 Cf. L. Alsdorf, *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien*, Ak. der Wiss. u. d. Lit. (Mainz 1961), p. 53.
- 4 Asaṅga, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, ed. P. Pradhan, p. 9. Cf. W. Rahula, *Le compendium de la super-doctrine (Philosophie)* (Paris 1971), p. 12.
- 5 It is hardly necessary to recall that, according to one well-known interpretation of the Pali *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*, the meal which the Buddha received from the smith Cunda shortly before his Parinirvāṇa – and which has been regarded as the cause of his fatal indisposition – included an excellent dish of pork. – For a discussion of this passage see E. Waldschmidt, *Beiträge zur Textgeschichte des Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Nachrichten der Göttinger Gesellsch. der Wiss. zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Kl., Bd. II Nr. 3, 1939), p. 76; A. Baret, *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de L. Renou* (Paris 1968), pp. 61-71, and *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha* II/1 (Paris 1970),

- p. 265 f., who concludes that the materials available do not establish the interpretation that the Buddha partook of a meal of pork as a result of which he became ill and died. The Pali word *sūkaramaddava* is in fact of uncertain meaning and the parallel in a Chinese version does not confirm the interpretation of *sūkara* as 'pork', so that the passage has so far defied attempts at a definitive interpretation.
- 6 Concerning Devadatta's insistence on adherence to vegetarianism and other strict rules of asceticism, it is significant that in the canonical *Udāna* (§1.5, p. 3) he figures as a Brahman. In India vegetarianism is of course characteristic of the classical concept of the Brahman as well as of the Renouncer (*saṃnyāsīn*).
  - 7 For this comparison with a dancer compare *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* 6, p. 220, quoted in our translation of Bu'ston's anthology of texts on the *tathāgataḡarbha* doctrine (*Le traité du tathāgataḡarbha de Bu'ston Rin chen grub*, Paris 1973, p. 91).
  - 8 L. Alsdorf, *op. cit.*
  - 9 L. Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus* (Paris 1966), pp. 191-192; cf. pp. 246-247.
  - 10 D. T. Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra*, p. 368; cf. his *The Lankavatara Sutra*, pp. xiii, 211.
  - 11 Compare the idea of Devadatta as a Brahman referred to above.
  - 12 Compare the criticism of this motive in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 6, p. 135.
  - 13 Compare Śāntideva's discussion in *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 6, p. 135.
  - 14 Abstinence from meat is of course observed on occasion in Tibet by individuals for shorter or longer periods of time in consonance with a particular vow, and also by the community on certain holy festivals.
  - 15 Cf. J. J. M. de Groot, *Le code du Mahāyāna en Chine* (Amsterdam 1893); A. Waley, *loc. cit.*, p. 349.
  - 16 On some other aspects of this question see I. B. Horner, *Early Buddhism and the Taking of Life*, in *B. C. Law Volume*, Part I (ed. D. R. Bhandarkar, K. A. Nilakantha Sastri et al.) Calcutta 1945, pp. 436-456, reprinted slightly abridged in *The Wheel Publication* No. 164, Kandy 1967.