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Āma,gandha Sutta

The “Raw-meat Stench” Discourse | Sn 2.2 (Sn 239-252)

Theme: We are not always what we eat

Translated by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Āmagandha the ascetic

1.1 The background story is given in the **Param’at̥ṭha,jotikā 2**, the Commentary to the Sutta Nipāta (SnA 1:278-283). Before the appearance of Gotama Buddha, the brahmin Āmagandha became an ascetic and lived in the Himalayas with five hundred disciples. They ate neither meat nor fish. As a result of a deficiency of salt, vinegar and other minerals, they succumbed to jaundice (*paṇḍu,roga*). To heal themselves, they came down once a year from their hermitage in search of salt and vinegar. The villagers nearby received them with great honour and served them well for four months.

1.2 One day, the Buddha and his monks visited the same village, and the villagers, after listening to his discourse, became his followers. That year when Āmagandha and his disciples came to the village, the villagers did not show their enthusiasm as before.

Āmagandha was excited on discovering that the Buddha had arisen in the world and wished to know if he partook of *āmagandha* (by which he meant meat and fish). Hearing that the Buddha did not forbid the taking of meat and fish, Āmagandha was greatly disappointed.

But his desire to hear the Buddha brought him to see the Buddha at Jetavana. There the Buddha explained to him that *āmagandha* was not really meat or fish, but that it referred to bad actions, and that those who wished to avoid it, should abstain from bad deeds of every kind.

1.3 During the time of **Kassapa Buddha**,¹ an ascetic named Tissa put the same question to Kassapa. Tissa later became Kassapa’s chief disciple. In relating their dialogue, the Buddha expounded the Āmagandha Sutta to Āmagandha. Convinced and converted, Āmagandha and his followers joined the order and a few days later became arhats. (SnA 1:280-283)

2 Meaning of āmagandha

2.1 The purpose of this Sutta is to show that *āmagandha* (literally, “foul smell, odour of raw flesh, cadaverous stench” (VA 96; DA 2:665; SnA 286; Mvst 1:75)—a word used among ascetics to designate food prepared with meat or fish—does not consist of merely eating of meat (*maṁsa,bhojana*),² but rather in mental defilements (*kilesa*) and unwholesome states (*akusalā dhammā*). Stealing, lying, deception, adultery, lasciviousness, annihilationism, etc, are said to be *āmagandha*, for they give one, as it were, a bad spiritual odour or the stench of bad deeds (Mvst 3:214).² Hence, I have rendered *āmagandha* as “**the raw and rank**,” which can be taken literally as well as figuratively.

2.2 The Anuruddha Sutta (A 3.126) uses the word *āmagandha* as a metaphor, interpreting it as ill-will.³

The Sutta Nipāta Commentary lists different groups of *āmagandha* (SnA 286-291):

- (1) 10 kinds: the habitual unwholesome action of killing, etc (Sn 242);
- (2) 6 kinds: lack of restraint in sense-pleasures, lust after tastes, wrong livelihood, annihilationism, bad conduct of the body (moral inconsistency), difficult to understand (Sn 243);
- (3) 8 kinds: miserable, etc (Sn 244);
- (4) 9 kinds: anger, etc [“conceit and arrogance” (*mānâtīmāna*) count as one] (Sn 245);
- (5) 6 kinds: habitually bad, etc (Sn 246);
- (6) 6 kinds: unrestrained towards living beings, etc (Sn 247);
- (7) 3 kinds: passion, hate, delusion (Sn 248).

¹ On **Kassapa Buddha**, see SD 49.3 (2).

² Cf Dh 54 (“the aroma of the virtuous”).

³ A 3.126/1:280; AA 2:378; cf A 3:387.

2.3 The Mahā Govinda Sutta (D 19) contains another passage on *āmagandha* (D 19.46-56/2:242-249; DA 665) in connection with the Buddha’s remark on *nirāmagandha*, “free of the raw and rank or free of the foul,” where he explains that being yoked to the different vices (*kodha*, anger, etc) makes one *anirāmagandha*, “not free of the foul.”⁴

2.4 The Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist literature, therefore, take *āmagandha* (n) or *anirāmagandha* (adj) and its opposite *nirāmagandha* (adj) in the metaphorical sense to refer respectively to the morally impure (*kilesa*, *akusala*, *dhamma*) and to the morally pure (Sn 717). **The Mahāvastu**, however, also uses *āmagandha* in its literal sense.⁵

2.5 The Āmagandha Sutta states that ascetic practices and religious observances in themselves cannot purify one who has not crossed over doubts (*avitiṇṇa*, *kaṅkhami*, Sn 249). Based on this point, it has been argued that, for a Buddhist, meat-eating in itself is not ethically wrong provided the meat obtained is pure on the three points (*tikoṭi*, *parisuddha*).⁶ The Sutta, however, gives the harming of life (*pāṇātipāta*) as an example of *āmagandha*, together with “killing, cutting and binding” (*vadha*, *cheda*, *bandhana*, Sn 242a). After a refutation of a literal and material use of the term (as in Sn 240), its true moral meaning is explained in full at Sn 242-248.

3 Meat-eating and the meatless diet

3.0 Even though the Buddha does not prohibit the taking of meat (as far as the Pali tradition goes), many practising Buddhists today are vegetarian, or at least vegetarian at certain times (such as new moon and full moon days). Most of such vegetarians or part-time vegetarian Buddhists, significantly, are of the Mahayana tradition. While the Theravāda Buddhists fall back on the Pāli Canon and Commentaries, those professing the Mahāyāna invoke the Buddha’s teaching of compassion and respect for life. These “horns” of dilemma are here summarized according to the Theravada and the Mahāyāna viewpoints.

3.1 THE THERAVĀDA STAND. Nine important references can be culled from the Pali texts classified under three headings—historical (1-3), disciplinary (4-7) and doctrinal (8-9):

3.1.1 The general Sīha episode. On converting to Buddhism, the erstwhile Jain general Sīha offered the Buddha and his monks a meal comprising meat (bought from the market) but the jealous Jains rumoured that the Buddha had caused a large animal to be slaughtered for the occasion. The Buddha then promulgated a Vinaya rule on the “three points of purity” (*tikoṭi*, *parisuddha*) regarding meat-eating by order members, that is, meat is allowable for order members only when they have not seen, heard or suspected that the meat has been specially prepared for them.⁷

3.1.2 Devadatta’s five points (*pañca*, *vatthuni*). In his plot to discredit the Buddha and take over the leadership of the sangha from the aged Buddha, Devadatta proposed the five ascetic rules, one of which was a meatless diet (knowing very well that the Buddha would reject them—which he did). (V 2:197, 3:172)⁸

3.1.3 The Buddha’s last meal. **The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 2:127 f) says that Cunda the blacksmith offered the Buddha’s last meal, a dish of *sūkara*, *maddava*, which has been variously interpreted as:

- (a) meat of well-bred pig neither too young nor too old (DA 2:568);
- (b) tender succulent pork on sale in the market (UA 400 quoting the Mahā Aṭṭhakathā);
- (c) bamboo shoot which has been trampled by pigs (UA 400);
- (d) the “snake’s hood” mushroom (*ahi-c-chattaka*, *ibid*);
- (e) a kind of sauce or flavouring (*rasāyana* or *ras’āyatana*, UA 400); and
- (f) truffles (D:R 2:137.1).⁹

⁴ Cf Mvst 3:214 (where it is fig used as “the stench of immorality”; opp: “odour of sanctity.”)

⁵ Mvst 1:75; cf Saddharma-pundarika S 96.16.

⁶ See below (3)(A)1 The General Sīha episode.

⁷ V 1:237 f, 2:197; M 1:368; A 4:187 f; SnA 286; cf V 3:172 & **Tel’ovāda J** (J 246).

⁸ See **Anaṅgaṇa S** (M 5) @ SD 37.3 (3.3.1).

⁹ Cf CAF Rhys Davids, *A Manual of Buddhism*, London, 1932:260 where she observes that “*maddava* is nowhere else associated with meat” and prefers the term “truffles”; EJ Thomas 1949:149 where he remarks that “the word is not the obvious *sūkara*, *mamsa*, ‘pig flesh,’ which we would expect if this was meant.” See Miln:R 1:244n; D:R 2:137n.

3.1.4 The 10 kinds of prohibited meat, namely, those of human being, elephant, horse, dog, snake, lion, tiger, leopard, bear and hyena (V 1:218 ff). Human flesh is prohibited on obvious humane grounds: Buddhism is against cannibalism. Elephants and horses were the rajah's emblems and means of defence. Dog and snake meat are regarded as loathsome, while the other animals are fierce jungle creatures which could sense and attack those who had taken such meat. It is argued that if these kinds of meat are prohibited, then there would be others that are not, meaning that some of them would be allowable.

3.1.5 Pācittiya 35 includes meat and fish in the list of sumptuous foods allowed by the Buddha (V 4:88). Again here, the rule of "available meat" applies [3.1.7]. The Tamil classic, Tirukkural, records that Valluvar, who some scholars believe to be a Jain, as criticizing the Buddhists for accepting the same of meat, with a contemporary ring to it: "If the world did not purchase and consume meat, no one would slaughter and offer meat for sale."¹⁰

This is of course based on the modern economic idea of "supply and demand." The reality is that the number of Buddhists who do take meat today would somehow have significant impact of the meat demand. However, this may be an issue in a avowedly "Buddhist" country like Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Thailand. Interestingly, in such countries, the slaughterers and butchers were, as a rule, non-Buddhists.

Strictly, the food rules apply only to the monastics but not to the laity. The laity are, of course, bound by the spirit of the precepts to avoid killing and to save lives. Understandably, conscientious Buddhists generally find it religiously less problematic to be vegetarian, or at least to avoid meat periodically, or take very little meat, only special occasions such as invited meals.

3.1.6 Rejection of raw meat. In the Vinaya and the Lesser Precepts (*cūḷa, sīla*) of the "moralities" (*sīla*) passage of the first 13 suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, and elsewhere in the Nikāyas,¹¹ the Buddha says that raw meat (*āmaka, māṃsa*, V 1:203; D 1:5) is not allowable for monastics, implying that only proper offerings of cooked meat are allowable.

The **Mahāvastu**, too, records a ruling against eating (raw?) meat (Senart 1897 3:265,14), where a newly ordained monk is told: "You have to abstain from red meat," *māṃsa, śoṇitaṃ te... parityajitavyaṃ*.¹² Otherwise, **Waldschmidt** notes that in the older texts there is no trace of any ruling against partaking of meat (1939:105).

The **Vinaya**, however, allows the taking of raw meat in case of "affliction by a non-human" (*anujānāmi bhikkhave amanussik'ābādhe āmaka, māṃsaṃ āmaka, lohitaṃ*), that is, a "possession by an evil spirit" or dissociative possession (V 1:203,1).¹³ Nevertheless, it should be understood here that rules regarding how such meat or raw blood is obtained apply, that is, they should not be specially prepared for the monastic [see (1) here].

3.1.7 "Available meat" (*pavatta, māṃsa*), ie meat which has already been prepared and the animal not intentionally (*sañcicca*) killed or caused to be killed for one, ie indicated meat (*uddissa, kata, māṃsa*) (V 1:27, 237 f). The understanding here is that such meat, bereft of life, is simply an aggregate of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind), keeping to the teaching of **the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas** (D 22; M 10), that says:

Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk reviews¹⁴ this body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements:¹⁵

¹⁰ Tiruvaḷḷuvar, tr Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, 2000. *Tirukkuraḷ = Tirukural: Ethical masterpiece of the Tamil people*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2000 §256.

¹¹ Eg D 2,45/1:64,22; M 27,13(14)/1:180,10.

¹² Basak 1968:158,33 has *māṃsa, śoṇitaṃ*.

¹³ For parallels in other Vinayas, see Frauwallner 1956:93. See also Zysk 1991:87.

¹⁴ "Reviews," *paccavekkhati*, see SD 13 Intro (3.9b).

¹⁵ In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the 4 elements dissolve in the death-process thus: earth dissolves into water, water into fire, fire into air, air into space; the consciousness dissolves in 4 further stages (white flash, red flash, black flash, clear light). See Lati Rinbochay & Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1979:13-57; Terry Clifford, *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry: The Diamond Healing*, York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984:108-114; Kalu Rimpoche, *Luminous Mind: The Way of*

“There are in this body

- (1) the earth-element,
- (2) the water-element,
- (3) the fire-element,
- (4) the air-element.”¹⁶

Just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at the cross-roads with the carcass divided into portions, so, too, a monk reviews this body. However it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements:

“There are in this body (the four elements).”

(M 10.12/1:57 f) @ SD 13.3

This teaching, however, should not be misconstrued as a fiat for amorality of meat-eating, which is in fact the atomist view of Pakudha Kaccayāna.¹⁷ It merely says that the physical body is composed of the four elements, and advocates a reflection on it as being composite, and as such, is impermanent, and so on.¹⁸ [3.4.3]

3.1.8 The Abhidharma tradition, according to some of its exponents, emphasizes the intention of the act (*cetanā*), ie it is more concerned with “psychological” ethics rather than the socioeconomics. A popular argument amongst meat-eating used by Abhidharma proponents is that **the “mind” that kills the animal is different from the one that eats it**—one can therefore partake of meat of the animal as long as one has not killed or caused to be prepared especially for one!

This last argument is of course not flawless—not to say it borders on dogmatism and casuistry. For, by the laws of causal relationship (*paccaya*) and dependent origination (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), one thing leads to another and everything is connected in one way or other. Though the unwholesome roots of greed and hate may be absent in this situation, delusion still exists. After all, a simple economic sense would make one understand that the demand creates the supply!

However, we should note, too, that this is an *economic* argument, and neither a historical nor a scriptural one. The point is that a universal non-meat diet can only be possible when *all* the religions and *all* members of the community of society agree to it. Only then, it is possible to take the argument that not taking meat effectively saves lives. Of course, such a non-meat life-style is still possible on a communal scale, such as the Mahāyāna community exemplifies.

3.1.9 Āmagandha. As mentioned above [2], both the Āmagandha Sutta (Sn 2.2) and **the Mahā Govinda Sutta** (D 2:242 ff) state that a meatless diet is not regarded as a mark of the holy life and the term *āmagandha* is taken metaphorically. One should not read too much into such discourses as they do *not* prove that the Buddha was a meat eater or that he favoured meat-eating or that he was against vegetarianism. The main idea of the discourses is that one’s diet is no measure of one’s spirituality.

If one should still insist that Āmagandha Sutta “proves” that it is all right to take meat, then how would one reconcile the Buddha’s admonition in **the Dhammika Sutta**:

*Pāṇam na hane, na ca ghātayeyya
na cānujaññā hanatam paresam*

Let one not destroy life, nor cause to kill,
Nor indeed approve of killing by others.

(Sn 394)

3.2 THE MAHĀYĀNA VIEW. The Mahāyāna tradition is commonly understood as rejecting the nine points presented above, and invoking the Buddha’s sanction for the abrogation of the “lesser and minor rules” (V 2:287 = D 2:154) and taking a more liberal view of the monastic rules. The Mahāyanists as such

the Buddha, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997:53-56; Margaret Coberly, *Sacred Passage: How to provide fearless, compassionate care for the dying*, Boston & London: Shambhala, 2002:79-98.

¹⁶ “Earth” (*paṭhavī*) or extension, “water” (*āpo*) or cohesion, “fire” (*tejo*) or temperature, “air” (*vāyo*) or motion. These are the ancient Indian names for the four “great elements” (*mahā,bhūta*) or qualities present in varying proportions in all matter, that is, the various states of matter.

¹⁷ See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,24-25/1:56 f), SD 8.10.

¹⁸ See Ariyaseko 1998:85 f.

often grow their own vegetables and prepare their own meals. Traditional Mahayanists, however, tend to deny that the Buddha ever took meat; indeed he is said to have categorically condemned meat-eating.

Among the reasons given for the vegetarian tradition in Mahāyāna are the following:

(1) The Tathāgata,garbha doctrine, that is, the ethical and philosophical reason. Scholars are certain now that the practice of vegetarianism amongst the Mahayana Buddhists is not derived from a primitive pre-Aryan source or as a result of the influence of the *śannyasi* (Hindu ascetics), but rather in connection with the Tathāgata,garbha doctrine which essentially defines that all life have the Buddha-seed and are therefore interconnected and essentially one. **The Laṅkāvatāra Sutta** expounds this doctrine and Ch 8 (said to be a late addition though) deals with the evils of meat-eating.

(2) Rebirth, that is, the metaphysical reason. As an extension of the Tathāgata,garbha doctrine, **the Aṅgulimālaya Sutta**, records the dialogue between Mañjuśrī and the Buddha. In answer to Mañjuśrī who asks, “Is it because of the Tathāgata,garbha that the Buddhas do not eat meat?” the Buddha explains not only that in the infinite rounds of existences there exist no sentient being who has not been one’s mother, sister, etc, since the world of living beings is like a dancer (who assumes multiple roles; cf Lnk 220), and that another’s flesh and one’s own are accordingly the same, but also that the element (*dhātu*) of the beings is in fact the Dharmadhātu itself (Lhasa ed fol 300b-301a).¹⁹

(3) Lovingkindness & compassion. The Mahāyāna stresses on great benevolence (*mahā maitri*) and compassion (*kripa* or *karuṇā*). Though the term *ahiṃsa* is not prominently used here, its effect is implied, for in both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, we find many discourses (eg **Kūṭadanta Sutta**, D 1:127 ff; **Ujjaya Sutta**, A 2:41) and references against the causing of harm to living beings (eg D 3:235; M 3:214; A 3:203, 275, 301 f; Dh 129 130; Vbh 285).

According to Mahāyānist proponents, the explanation that “a monk must eat what has been offered to him” is taken as a convenient excuse. If pious lay people know that monks disapproved of food involving the slaughter of innocent animals, which of them would even dream of offering meat-food to the monks? Furthermore, a monk can still *choose* not to eat everything that has been offered to him!

(4) Right livelihood. Even in the Pali Canon, the Buddha discourages his disciples from earning a living by exploiting lives or the environment, that is, dealing in weapons, dealing in living beings (trapping and selling animals, hunting, fishing, slavery), dealing in meat (rearing animals for meat, slaughtering, butchering), trade in intoxicants (including drugs) and trade in poisons (A 3:107). The Mahayanists argue: how could someone like the Buddha, who has given these instructions, have taken meat?²⁰

3.3 MAHĀYĀNA RATIONALE. The following points may serve to support the Mahayana stand on vegetarianism (or vegetarianism in general):

(1) Evolution. It is sometimes argued that early man—the defenceless naked ape—was a vegetarian. In the course of evolution, he **turned to meat eating** for three main reasons:

- (a) through observing and imitating the eating habit of carnivores and birds of prey;
- (b) he discovered the leftovers of animal carcass;
- (c) meat had a greater concentration of protein than plant-food; and
- (d) the discovery of fire which allowed him to cook meat (which he otherwise had great difficulty biting and chewing, and perhaps digesting poorly too).

It is also interesting to note that the human jaw is not as a rule suitable for eating raw meat. Human teeth serve better as grinder of plant food than as tearer and cutter of flesh. The discovery of fire and cooking of course made the difference giving us the impression that we have been natural meat eaters all the way. On the contrary, man, by nature, is more likely to be a vegetarian. Man became a meat-eater through his own conditioning of his diet. In other words, he *can* certainly be a vegetarian if he chooses to!

(2) History. In his 5th Rock Edict, the Indian emperor **Asoka** prohibited the killing of certain animals, and in his 1st Pillar Edict he ordered only three animals be allowed for the emperor’s table. In due course,

¹⁹ Cf: “It is not easy, O monks, to find a being who has not formerly been one’s mother...father...brother...sister...son...daughter during this long, long time.” (S 2:189 ff)

²⁰ For more details on right livelihood, see SD 10.16 (5). See also Kapleau 1982:31

this encouraged a vegetarian way of life in India, which has perhaps the world's most developed vegetarian cuisine.²¹

John Blofeld in a short article (dated 3rd Aug 1960) remarked that “Hindu India (except Bengal and Kashmir) is entirely vegetarian” (Foreword to Yen Kiat’s *Mahāyāna Vinaya*, Bangkok, 1961). Yet, he further argues, ancient books show that vegetarianism was unknown to India until the period when Buddhism swept over the country. Hindu scholars themselves admit that the practice was received from Buddhism, and there seems to be sufficient proof that Indian Buddhists in former days were strictly vegetarian, as Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists are today.

In China, **the emperor Wu of Liang** (Liángwǔdì 梁武帝, 464-549) proclaimed the abolition of liquor and meat in his kingdom (511 CE). He put an end to the killing and injuring of animals, prohibited the use of fish nets, and in 517 issued a decree prohibiting his subjects from killing any living being on the days of religious service dedicated to the ancestors (Ency Bsm 1:291ef). Emperor Wu’s devotion, understandably, was not so much out of deep faith in Buddhism as it was the desire to exert full control of the Buddhist monastics, who were wealthy as well as influential, and he also needed Buddhism to legitimize his position.²²

(3) Economic conditions. When Buddhism arrives in a new country, its exponents have the task of winning the faith of the people. Almsfood may not be so easily available. The Buddhist missionaries have therefore to be self-reliant and adapt themselves to their new environment. One of the most convenient and logical way, without breaking the Precept against taking life, is to be vegetarian.

In modern times, animals are seldom specially killed for individuals. Yet it is clear that all of us are indeed responsible for their death, as the butchers supply meat according to our demand for it. It is therefore illogical and against the grain of the Dharma for any Buddhist to claim, under contemporary conditions, that one can eat meat as one is unaware that the slaughtering takes place for them.

Conditions in ancient times when Buddhist devotees offered meat to the monks—assuming that they did, even then very probably on a small scale—were different from those of today. In ancient times, when a farmer killed a single animal for the use of his family, usually only the *remainder or a part of the dish* was offered to the monastics. If there were only a handful of monks and nuns, their abstaining from meat would not save many lives, but where there were thousands of monks and nuns, it is obvious that they added considerably to the demands upon the slaughterers and butchers.

3.4 CONCLUSION

3.4.1 Historical developments. A careful survey of the early Mahāyāna sutras and texts will show that none of them took any strict stand on a meatless diet for monastics. Even **the (Mahāyāna) Mahā-parinirvāṇa Mahā-sūtra**,²³ according to which the Buddha enjoins a vegetarian diet (since to consume meat will be obstructive to the cultivation of lovingkindness),²⁴ refers to the rule on the 3 allowable conditions of consuming meat, a rule also found in the Mūla, sarvāstivāda Vinaya (Dutt 1984a:236,17) and in T1458.²⁵

Historically, such texts mark the watershed between the early Buddhist stand on allowable meat and the 3 points of purity, and the later traditional Mahāyāna practice of vegetarianism. As often is the case in Mahāyāna Buddhism (and of course Theravāda Buddhism, too)²⁶ their patronage by the power of the land, as a rule, significantly shaped some of their later realities.

²¹ Ency Brit Macro 7:944de.

²² See eg Tom de Rauw & Ann Heirman, “Monks for hire: Liang Wudi’s use of household monks (*jiāsēng* 家僧),” *The Medieval History Journal* 14,1 2011:45-69.

²³ On this title, see Habata 2007:xliii-li.

²⁴ See T374/T12.386a15: 食肉者, 斷大慈種 *shí ròu zhě, duàn dà cí zhòng*.

²⁵ T1458 @ T24.570a15. For a study of this rule in the light of different Vinayas, see Prasad 1979 & Heirman 2006: 60.

²⁶ On secular influences on Theravāda developments, see eg Neil DeVolta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, Washington, 2007.

In India, for example, the vegetarian tradition became entrenched with the policies and works of Asoka (304-232 BCE).²⁷ In China, vegetarianism became widespread on account of the efforts of pious Buddhist emperor Wu of Liang²⁸ [3.3(2)]. Furthermore, vegetarianism was entrenched in Chinese Buddhism with the rise of settled and well-organized monasteries that have their own kitchens and refectories, and monastics themselves often being good cooks. In such circumstances, it is only natural and proper that they keep to a vegetarian lifestyle. Furthermore, Chinese Buddhism served as the basis for east Asian Buddhism, so that vegetarianism is also the rule in Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese Buddhism. In other words, Mahāyāna vegetarianism is more of a historical, social and cultural phenomenon.

3.4.2 Moderate eating. The Mahayanists simply refuse to believe that the Buddha took meat but the Theravadins argue otherwise basing their conviction on various references to meat-eating in the Pali Canon. It is indeed difficult to prove or disprove those Pali references but they are too many and too coherent to be summarily brushed away. However, one should not use this as an excuse for one's indulgence either! For the Buddha also constantly spoke of "moderate eating" (*bhojane mattaññutā*).²⁹

It is probable, considering all the nine Pali references given above, that the Buddha and the early monks ate *very little* meat and, even if they did, it was only incidental (*pavatta, māṃsa*). Xuanzang records in his travels that the early Hinayanist monks in China were allowed meat of animals that died of natural death and of animals killed by predators (Watters, London 1904, 1:53-56). The early Indian monks probably did the same.

3.4.3 Local practice. In the 1980s, the Community of Dharmafarers, a pioneer group of lay Buddhist workers started by the Malaysian monk, Piyasilo, kept to a **lacto-ovo ("milk-egg") vegetarian diet** for the following reasons:

- (1) The principle of the first precept regarding the value of life.
- (2) In his Dharma talks, Piyasilo was often questioned as to why Theravada monks took meat despite the Buddha's clear stand on the value of life.
- (3) We can live quite healthily and comfortably enough without meat.
- (4) During his monkhood, Piyasilo encountered some "monks" who became visibly upset when they did not get meat for their meals!³⁰

The rule of thumb for healthy food is that which helps and heals the body, giving it the effort and comfort for spiritual practice, especially meditation. At least, we should keep to the five precepts in our eating habits, and that this should keep us healthy. On the other hand, in difficult situations (where vegetarian food is not available or simply unaffordable), then we should eat what is available (such as "available meal," *pavatta, māṃsa*) [3.1(7)] in moderation.

3.4.4 We are not always what we eat. One of the key words in early Buddhism regarding wholesome eating is "**moderation**" (*mattaññutā*) [3.4.1]. In the **Mahā Sīha, nāda Sutta** (M 12), the Bodhisattva experiences that a body deprived of proper food will not be able to progress spiritually.³¹ Another key word in the practice of sensible eating, especially when vegetarian food is unavailable or difficult to obtain, is to moderately eat "**available meat**" (*pavatta, māṃsa*), which, according to the **Jīvaka Sutta** (M 55) refers to meat that is pure in three ways, that is, we have not seen, heard or suspected that it has been prepared especially for us. In short, we do not ask for such a food.³²

²⁷ See esp his 1st rock edict and 5th pillar edict: see "[The Edicts of King Asoka](#)".

²⁸ See **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.1 (1.2.4).

²⁹ S 2:218; A 1:113; Nm 2:482. See **How Pasenadi overcome his gluttony**, SD 37.13 (2).

³⁰ On practical vegetarianism, see eg M Polunin, ed. *The Health and Fitness Handbook*, London, 1981:116 f.

³¹ M 12,52-56/1:80 f (SD 49.1).

³² M 55,5/1:369 (SD 43.5). Christ, in the Bible, makes a supportive stand here: "It is not what goes into the mouth that makes a person unclean. It is what comes out of the mouth that makes a person unclean" (Matt 15.11), which he explains as: "Don't you know that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and then is expelled as waste? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and it is those things that make a person unclean. It is out of the heart that evil thoughts come, as well as murder, adultery, sexual immorality, stealing, false

In conclusion, it should be said that a non-meat diet is not in itself a spiritual practice, but which entails many other wholesome qualities. The Buddhist training is the avoidance of taking life or causing pain to others (including oneself). We should create the conditions wherein a healthy non-meat or vegetarian life-style wherever or whenever possible. It is not a perfect world, even growing plants entails harming some kinds of living beings. As such, we have to consider growing and harvesting our food in a manner that respect living beings.³³

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The Āmagandha Discourse

Sn 2.2

The ascetic Tissa:

- 1 Millet, tear grass seed, panicum,
Leafy vegetable, storage root, and creeper fruit—
Good people who take them, justly obtained,
Do not speak falsehood for the sake of sense-pleasures. [239]
- 2 Eating what is well-made, well-done,
Given by others, piously adorned, exquisite, [43]
Enjoying a meal of boiled rice,
That person, O Kassapa, partakes of the raw and rank [tainted fare].³⁴ [240]
- 3 “Āmagandha is not proper for me!”
So, indeed, you say, O kinsman of Brahma,
While enjoying a meal of boiled rice
Well-dressed with bird’s meat.
I ask you regarding this matter, O Kassapa.³⁵
What, to you, is the flavour of the raw and rank? [241]

Kassapa Buddha:

- 4 Harming living beings, killing, cutting and binding,
Stealing, lying, deception and fraud,³⁶
Useless studies,³⁷ fraternizing with the wives of others—
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat. [242]
- 5 Those persons here, totally unrestrained regarding sense-pleasures,³⁸

testimony, and slander. These are the things that make a person unclean. But eating with unwashed hands doesn’t make a person unclean.” (Matt 15.17-20, International Standard Version, 2008)

³³ On the future of food, see SD 10.16 (5.2.2.8).

³⁴ **2d (Sn 240d)** The amplified tr is from K R Norman, 1992.

³⁵ **3e (Sn 241e)** || V 1:36; J 1:83 6:221.

³⁶ **4b (Sn 242)** || J 6:11.

³⁷ **4c (Sn 242c) useless studies**, Ee *ajjhena kujjam*; Sb *ajjhena, kuttam*. PED: a hypocrite, a pharisee. Comy: Ee *nirat-thakânattha, janaka, gantha, pariyāpuṇanam*, the study of texts that is without benefit and from which arises no benefit; Be *niratthaka aneka, gantha, pariyāpuṇana*, the study of various texts that is without benefit (SnA 286).

³⁸ **5a (Sn 243)** || Sn 247; A 2:6, 19.

Greedy for flavours, mixed with the impure,³⁹

Holding the view that nothing exists, inconsistent, obscurantist⁴⁰—
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.

[243]

6 Whosoever are crude,⁴¹ cruel, back-biting,
Harming friends,⁴² heartless, arrogant,
Grasping by nature,⁴³ and do not give to anyone—
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.

[244]

7 Anger, intoxication [with pride], obstinacy, hostility, [44]
Deceit, envy, and self-glorification,
Arrogance, and intimacy with the bad—
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.⁴⁴

[245]

8 Whoever are habitually bad, repudiating debts, slandering,⁴⁵
Untrue in dealings, dissembling⁴⁶ here,
The lowest of people who commit bad here—⁴⁷
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.

[246]

9 Those people here, totally unrestrained towards living beings,
Taking the property of others, intent on oppression,
Bad by nature, cruel in deed, harsh in speech,⁴⁸ regardless of others—⁴⁹
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.

[247]

10 Those beings who are very greedy, harmfully hostile,⁵⁰
Always bent on bad: having departed, they go to darkness,
Falling headlong into hell—⁵¹
This is the raw and rank, not the taking of meat.

[248]

³⁹ **5b (Sn 243b)** “Mixed with the impure,” *asūcika, missitā*, ie obtained through wrong livelihood. (SnA 286).

⁴⁰ **5c (Sn 243c) obscurantist**, *du-r-annayā* [du + anvayo, lit “one who is difficult to follow”], indocile, intractable (*du, viññāpayā*, SnA 287). Cf n13d below.

⁴¹ **6a.1 (Sn 244a) crude**, *lukhasā*; Be Ee Pe *dāruṇā*; Sb *dāruṇa*. Comy: ruthless and unruly. CPD has *lukhatā* (2:118-e): unpleasantness, wretchedness, poorness, misery (PugA 229). Comy: gloomy and self-mortifying. Both are derived from *lukha* (rough, coarse, unpleasant; bad (usu of dress or food); mediocre; opp: *pañīta* (exquisite, excellent) (V 1:212; S 2:153; A 4:10; J 1:228); *lukha, puggala*, a miserable, offensive character; opp: *siniddha, puggala*, lovable person (Vism 132; VbhA 282).

⁴² **6b (Sn 244b) harming friends**, *mitta-d, duno*, cf S 1:225. Comy: *mitta, dūbhakā*, deceiving, treacherous, harmful (cf fem *-dūbhikā*, J 2:297), Ba *mitta, dussaka* (SnA 287). Cf *mitta, dubbhika, mitta, dubbhi*. See PED: Du (3).

⁴³ **6c (Sn 244c) grasping by nature**, *adāna, sīlā*, lit: ungenerous by nature. Comy: *ādāna, sīla*, disposed to grasping.

⁴⁴ **7 (Sn 245)** || D 2:243.

⁴⁵ **8a (Sn 246a) repudiating debts, slandering**, Be Ee Pe *ina, ghāta, sūcakā*; Sb *inaghā ca sūcakā*. As tatpuruṣha (determinative compound): “who repudiates (their) debts”; our tr as dvandva (copulative cpd) in accordance with SnA 289. See CPD 2:274f.

⁴⁶ **8b (Sn 246b) dissembling**, *paṭirūpikā*, ie hiding one’s true feelings with ill intent.

⁴⁷ **8c (Sn 246c)** || J 5:69.

⁴⁸ **9c.2 (Sn 247c) regardless of others**, *anādarā*: disrespectful, regardless, indifferent, making no account (CPD).

⁴⁹ **9c.1 (Sn 247c)** || A 4:93; J 2:349.

⁵⁰ **10a (Sn 248a) harmfully hostile**, *viruddhātīpatino*. Comy: “constantly offending living beings, grasping them with desire, being hostile with hate, not seeing the perils of delusion,” in other words, breaking the 5 precepts.

⁵¹ **10c (Sn 248c)** || S 1:48; J 1:233 4:103 6:100; DhA 1:447. “*patanti sattā nirayaṃ avamsirā*,” lit: beings fall with heads down into hell. The subject *sattā* is tr with the demonstr in line a.

The true recluse

- 11 Neither meat nor fish, nor fasting,
Nor nakedness, nor a shaven head, matted hair nor dirt,⁵²
Nor donning rough garments of animal skin, nor tending the sacred fire,
Nor even the many penances done in the world for eternal life,
Nor mantras and offerings, nor sacrifices and seasonal feasts,
Will purify a mortal who has not crossed beyond spiritual doubt.⁵³ [249] [45]
- 12 Guarded over the sense-avenues,⁵⁴ subduing the senses,⁵⁵ let one wander,
Firm in the Dharma, delighting in uprightness and gentleness.⁵⁶
Gone beyond the bonds [of the senses], having left behind all suffering,⁵⁷
The [self-reliant] wise do not cling to what is seen or heard.⁵⁸ [250]

Āmagandha's going-forth

- 13 Thus the Blessed One repeatedly taught this matter.
The brahmin [Tissa], accomplished in the (Vedic) Mantras, understood it.
With various colourful verses, the sage, free from the raw and rank,⁵⁹
Unattached, difficult to fathom,⁶⁰ proclaimed it. [251]
- 14 Having heard the Buddha's well-spoken word,⁶¹
Free from the raw and rank, pushing away all suffering,⁶²
With a humble heart, he saluted the Tathagata [who has attained to suchness].
There and then he [joyfully] decided to go forth. [252]

— evaṃ —

⁵² **11b (Sn 249b)** || Dh 141.

⁵³ **11f (Sn 249f)** || Dh 141.

⁵⁴ **12a.1 (Sn 250a)** || Sn 971. “Guarded in the sense-avenues,” *sotesu gutto*. Ee SnA *sotesu* (pref); Sb *yo tesu*. “the sense-avenues,” alt tr “guarded over the sense-doors” or “guarded in the sense-apertures” (Sn:N), *sotesu* < *sota*, alt tr: the sense-organs. See Sn:P n20:4b.2 for other meanings of *sota*.

⁵⁵ **12a.3 (Sn 250a) subduing the senses**, Ee *vijit'indriyo* (pref); Sb *vidit'indriyo*, knowing the senses.

⁵⁶ **12b (Sn 250b)** || Sn 327; J 4:303 5:17 33.

⁵⁷ **12c (Sn 250c)** || Dh 237.

⁵⁸ **12d (Sn 250d)** || Sn 778.

⁵⁹ **13c (Sn 251c)** || J 3:245 349 4:470.

⁶⁰ **13d (Sn 251d) difficult to fathom**, *du-r-anmayo* [*du* + *anvaya*, conformity, following] difficult to trace, follow or find (S 1:19; Dh 92 93; Tha 92; J 2:86 4:65 6:571); impossible to be led into external views based on craving and wrong view (*netum asakkuṇeyyattā*; not to be guided (by others) (*du-n-neyyo*, SnA 293). Here (Sn 251) the sense is positive. Cf n5c above where the sense is negative.

⁶¹ **14a (Sn 252a)** || Tha 26.

⁶² **14b (Sn 252b)** || V 2:148 164; D 3:196; A 3:41 43; J 1:94; Ap1 145; DA 1:304.

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