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and the Taking of Life**

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Abbreviations

Note: Abbreviations not found in the following list may be obtained from the link at the top of this page. —*Webmaster*

B.D.	Book of the Discipline
C.H. 1.	Cambridge History of India
Dial.	Dialogues of the Buddha
G.S.	Gradual Sayings
Pāc	Pācittiya
Pss.	Psalms of the Brethren
RV.	Ṛg-veda

Early Buddhism and the Taking of Life

The Indian genius, we are often, and rightly, told, is for religion; and when the religion we now call Buddhism arose in the sixth century B. C. in India, the tradition and exercise of religious thought, speculation and livelihood were strong, and they were protected. Kings were patrons of religion, and the men of religion commanded much respectful attention and enjoyed kindly and honourable treatment alike from kings, ruling chieftains, their ministers and the ordinary people. There abounded, as early Buddhist and Jain texts show, all kinds of ascetics, *tāpasas*, numerous wandering teachers and students, *paribbājakas*, and a diversity of sects, *titthiyas*, many of them brahminical. Among the most famous of all the religious groups were the Jains, whose doctrines were already well developed by the time of the rise of Buddhism.

In India in the sixth century B. C. there was thus much that went by the name of religion; and there was much besides that masqueraded under a religious guise. For example, there was the offering of sacrifices, partly made for temporal gains, and which might involve the taking of life. There were, on the other hand, various other habits and customs which, while no attempt was made to attribute their origin, observance or perpetuation to any religious source, yet also

depended on the taking of life.

Impelled, perhaps by a mixture of motives, two of the greatest religious systems flourishing in these times, Jainism and Buddhism, both made an indelible impression not only on the India of their day but, in the case of Buddhism, on the lands where it has since spread, by the firm stand they took against the prevalence of practices which deprived creatures of life. The object of this paper is to discuss in a general way the attitude adapted by Early Buddhism to a practice which it deplored.

There is no doubt that in the lay-world of the early Buddhist epoch life was frequently, deliberately and knowingly destroyed. Human life was taken in battle by kings and their armies. It was taken again by murderers, who, after all, broadly speaking, do in an unorganized way what armies do in an organized way. Animal life was taken by kings and their attendants when out for the pleasure of hunting. It was taken, although unintentionally, by farmers ploughing and by agriculturists digging. It was taken away by anyone who felled a tree (Vin IV 34.) or destroyed vegetable growth or who trampled down crops and grasses (Vin I 137, 138, IV 296.) or who dug the soil (Vin IV 32—33.). For according to the Indian way of thinking, as this is expressed in the *Pāli* Canon, a certain form of life called “one-facultied,” *ekindriya jīva*, inhabits trees, plants and the soil, and even water may have creatures or “breathers” (*sappāṇaka udaka*), in it. (Vin IV 49, 125.) Again, animal life was taken by hunters and trappers, and by butchers and fishermen for human

consumption and for other human needs. And it was taken by brahmin priests for sacrificial purposes, as was, perhaps, although certainly to a lesser extent, human life. [1] Thus slaughter took place under four major forms: in battle, in agriculture, for eating meat and fish, and for sacrifice.

The emergence in India of the notion of *ahiṃsā*, non-harming or non-injury, is, historically speaking, not clear. Its origin cannot be attributed to a definite date or to any particular teacher, social reformer or law-giver. The problem of the birth of the idea of non-injury is indeed as obscure as that of “leaving the world,” [2] of forsaking home for homelessness. Non-injury, which includes the principle of sparing life, of not taking it, of not depriving man or beast of it, receives much emphasis in the surviving Jain texts; but whether the notion actually sprang up under the Jains or whether they exploited some life-saving tradition already there, we do not know. Although the birth of the notion may be hidden to us, the magnitude of the stress the Jains lay on doing anything so calamitous as taking life has the appearance of a protest, a protest against an existent and more or less widespread slaughter of creatures of which it was impossible to be unaware.

Buddhism also was aware of this state of things, and was very much alive to the diverse purposes for which life was destroyed. If it did not use the word *ahiṃsā* and the verbs connected with it as frequently as the contemporary Jains, it all the same fostered the scruple against the taking of life as much as they did. Other sects which inhabited the Valley of

the Ganges at the same time, while not making such a mark on the thought and custom of the day, nevertheless contributed to this new or revived scruple and upheld it by themselves, practising non-injury under the form of vegetarianism.(M I 80.)

But in spite of teaching, precept and example, the evil persisted for some two-hundred and fifty years at least after the Buddha's lifetime, until it was given, not a mortal, but a severe blow by the Emperor Asoka. His Rock Edict I is a revelation of the terrible slaughter of animals that went on daily so that the royal kitchen could feed hundreds of people and the king's popularity thereby be increased. But Asoka, who became exceedingly sensitive to the taking of animal life, abolished this communal feeding, first of all reducing the number of animals to be slain daily to three, and for use only at the royal table itself, and then decreed on the rock that "even those three living creatures shall not be slain in the future." The Emperor's conviction of the sanctity of animal life culminated in his Pillar Edict V, assigned to the date 234 B. C. This lays down an elaborate code of regulations restricting the slaughter and mutilation of animals throughout the empire. Those regulations were imposed upon all classes of the population without distinction of creed, social customs or religious sentiment." [3] The broad principles of Buddhist teaching on compassion to all that live and breathe here find concrete, detailed and definite expression. Asoka applied this teaching to his times. He lived it and he spread it through

the unusual medium of hard rock and polished pillar.

It may have been acquaintance of the fact that during the early Buddhist epoch some control was exercised over the unchecked slaughter of animals which emboldened Asoka to restrict their destruction or mutilation on certain days such as on holy days. Although we have little knowledge of any such previous interdictions, Asoka's Pillar Edict would suggest that in some form these had existed before his time and that therefore he was continuing a practice, perhaps expanding it, but not innovating it. A brief reference is found in the *Vinaya* to a "non-slaughter day."

In the story of the lay woman follower *Suppiyā*, it appears that before she cut a piece of flesh from her own thigh for a sick monk to whom she had promised some broth, she had a search for meat made throughout Benares. But she was told that none was to hand, "for today is not a slaughter day," *māghāto ajja* (Vin I 217.). The *Jātaka* mentions the "drum of no-slaughter" being sounded through a town (J-a III, 428, 434.) and as having been heard by kings of old; (J-a III, 428) and it mentions a zemindar who had laid an interdiction upon the slaughter of animals (J-a IV 115).

It is tempting to suppose that some of these no-slaughter days coincided with the *uposatha*, or Observance days, days of the new and the full moons when monks in each "residence" recited their body of *Pātimokkha* rules, and when lay people were meant to abstain from some of their more congenial activities. And for such a coinciding there is

support from a *Jātaka* in which it is said that a man was unable to get meat, not merely because it was a no-slaughter day, but, with greater precision, because it was “an Observance day on which there was no slaughter,” *uposathamāghāta* (J-a vi. 346). This may well have been the case, but yet it throws little light upon any early connection made between such a restriction and special days. For the *Jātaka* prose is comparatively late, and was probably composed nearer to Asoka’s time than to the Buddha’s.

There is plenty of evidence, however, to show that, before Asoka’s reign, the Buddha had protested against the taking of life. His surviving talks, prohibitions and “allowances” (*anujānāmi*) too are addressed mainly to monks. Monks, after all, formed his most malleable, as well as his most vulnerable, material, since they were under the control and discipline of the Order of which he was, as the Canon, particularly the *Vinaya*, shows, the fountainhead. Yet records are not lacking where the Buddha is portrayed as either directly or by implication trying to drive home to lay people, too, his abhorrence of taking life.

In one respect, he was not unsuccessful: he was instrumental in bringing about a decrease in the popularity of great animal sacrifices. But in the three other ways—that is, in warfare, agriculture and the eating of meat, with their attendant trades of hunting, trapping and butchery, it may be said that he met with only limited success.

There is no means of assessing the number of those who

turned to the more humane way of life presented to them by the Buddha. It would however be reasonable to suppose that some of his contemporaries responded to his gifts of persuasion, and, further, inspired by a feeling for *ahiṃsā*, refrained from activities which involved destroying animal or human life. For this has been the case later and in other Buddhist lands.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that even if warfare, agriculture and the consumption of meat diminished somewhat as lay occupations in the Buddha's times, they were by no means abolished nor even largely renounced. And for this, two chief reasons may be adduced: in the first place, kings and people did not want to give up these ways of ministering to their ambitions, livelihood or pleasure; and in the second, since the Buddha was not a temporal ruler, he had no actual power to impose a body of restrictive regulations and penalties on the laity as he had on his monastic followers.

With blood-sacrifice the case was different. The times were ripe for its virtual abolition. It only needed some authoritative lead, some champion, and the support of a strong-minded, convinced and articulate opponent for the perhaps already-dying brahminical customs of animal sacrifice, and of such human sacrifice as there was, to fall into decay. The Buddha entered the arena and, according to passages in the Canon, however infrequent, he spoke with vigour. Of his protests I will mention two: the one serious, the other revealing a delightful sense of humour. Both are

well known. The serious protest is found in verses occurring in the Saṃyutta, Aṅguttara, Suttanipāta and Itivuttaka (S I 76, A II. 42, IV 151, Sn 303, It 21).

The sacrifices called the Horse, the Man,
The Peg-thrown Site, the Drink of Victory,
The Bolts Withdrawn, and all the mighty fuss:
These are not rites, which bring a rich result.
Where diverse goats and sheep and kine are slain.
Never to such a rite as that repair
The noble seers, who walk the perfect way.
But rites where there is no bustle nor no fuss
Are offerings meet, bequests perpetual,
Where never goats and sheep and kine are slain.
To such a sacrifice as this, repair
The noble seers, who walk the perfect way.
These are the rites entailing great results.
These to the celebrant are blest, not cursed.
The oblation runneth o'er; the gods are pleased.

This is serious and persuasive. Yet the half-humorous way which is chosen to convey the protest made in the Kūṭadanta Suttanta (D I 127ff.) does nothing to militate against its fundamental earnestness. In his Introduction to this Suttanta which, as he points out (Dial. I. 162), consists of a legend obviously invented ad hoc, Rhys Davids wrote: "... having laughed the brahmin ideal of sacrifice out of court ... the author or authors of the Suttanta go on to say what they think a sacrifice ought to be. Far from exalting King-

Wide-Realm's (Mahāvijita) procedure, they put his sacrifice at the very bottom of a long list of sacrifices each better than the other, and leading up to the sweetest and highest of all, which is the attainment of Arahatsip." (Dial. I. 164)

King-Wide-Realm's sacrifice, although it never took place except in the half-serious, half-comic legend told for the sake of its moral, is, as described, typically Vedic in character. There would have been the slaughter of cows, goats, cocks and pigs. As it was, in the legend only ghee, oil, butter, milk, honey and molasses were used, and largesse was distributed in the four quarters. Rhys Davids thinks that the battle over the Vedic form of sacrifice, "was really won by the Buddhists and their allies. And the combined ridicule and earnestness of our *Suttanta* will have had its share in bringing about the victory." (Dial. I. 165)

At all events, it is sufficiently clear that strictures such as these did not fall upon deaf ears. The people were sympathetic, broad-minded and not completely dominated by the priestly superstition. In a word, they provided excellent material on which to work in the matter of suppressing the destruction of animals for quasi-religious purposes, and the growing realization that large-scale sacrifice was both spiritually and economically unsound will have played a decisive part in stamping it out.

This potent stand against a mistaken custom may have been further backed by the feeling, even by the knowledge, that in India, animals had not always been offered up on a

sacrificial altar (*vedi*). There would appear to be a contrast between the religion of the Aryan invaders and the attitude adopted, in particular to the cow, by the cattle-breeding inhabitants of the overrun territory. Horse [4] and cattle sacrifices were characteristic of the Vedic tribes. By their own religion they were enjoined to sacrifice cattle to their gods and to slay them for guests, the actual worship of the cow as such not being found in the Rig-Veda. [5]

But, on the other hand, it would appear as though among the indigenous population a certain reverence for the cow had gone back to a remote antiquity. The *Suttanipāta*, in a very remarkable Sutta, [6] speaks of the brahmins of old as having regarded the cow as their parents, brothers and kin, as their best friend and as the source of all healthful things. So in gratitude they never slaughtered cows (Sn 295-297). But then there came a change. The brahmins became greedy and avaricious. Fired by the huge gifts they obtained from the king by instigating him to offer horses and human beings in sacrifice, their next choice fell upon cows. And Okkāka, the king, doomed hundreds and thousands of cows to be slain. A sense of the injustice and wickedness of this, felt by the teller of this story—

The cows that do no hurt with horn or hoof,
Yes, gentle lamblike cows that fill the pail,
he bade be taken by the horn and slain (Sn 309).

—was shared by others at the time when of old this outrage (*adhamma*) began,

'Tis wrong! 'tis wrong! arose th' united wail
of Brahmas, Indra, titans, demons too,
as cows were butchered for the sacrifice (Sn 310).

as it was by other and still later people presumed to be the
contemporaries of the story-teller:

Thus, thus the wise condemn this ancient guilt,
and folk condemn the sacrificers' crime (Sn 313).

This outstanding Sutta doubtless refers in its thirty-two
verses to some ancient tradition of brahmin degeneracy.
Instead of their former life of zeal and rectitude which
needed no animal sacrifices to abet it, in the lust for wealth,
brahmin priests later procured the sacrifice of horses, men,
and, finally, cows.

But sacrifice in its turn succumbed to the force of public
opinion. Substantiation for such popular disapprobation
may be found in the outcry the people made at the prospect
of the sacrifice of elephants, horses, bulls and other four-
footed creatures, which is recorded in a Jātaka story (J-a No.
403). The evidence provided by Pāli "literature" for the
suppression of great animal sacrifices suggests that, outside
brahminical circles, this practice was not one particularly
cherished by the ordinary people.

This degeneration from harmless rites to blood-sacrifices is
noticed by Buddhaghosa in the Saṃyutta Commentary (S-a
I 144ff.) and by Dhammapāla in the Itivuttaka Commentary

(It-a I 93) in their exegesis on the verses beginning: “The sacrifices called the Horse, the Man,” already quoted. Formerly, so these Commentaries tell us, the *assamedha*, horse-sacrifice, was *sassa-medha*, a corn or crops festival; the *purisa-medha*, human sacrifice, took the form of a six months’ gift of food and wages to great soldiers; the throwing of the peg, *sammā pāsa*, was then called a bond to bind men’s hearts; people addressed one another in affectionate language, *vācapeyya*, the word being later altered to *vājapeyya*, a sacrificial drink, [7] and they were so pleasant that there was no need to bolt the doors of the houses. [8] But, so the commentaries go on, with no doubt the *Suttanipāta* in mind, in the time of the former king, Okkāka (who is there regarded as in part responsible for the brahmin ascendancy), the brahmins upset all this happy arrangement, and the “four bases of popularity” and contentment in the realm took on the aspect of sinister sacrifices and orgies. [9]

In speaking of human sacrifice, *purisamedha*, which, in the verses quoted, is mentioned with *assamedha*, horse sacrifice, and three other rites which did not involve death for the victim, the question should be borne in mind whether it was, in early times, ever more than a symbolic ceremony. No reference to the practice can be established in the Rig-Veda. [10] The Brāhmaṇas do not describe a rite of an actual slaying of men; [11] “there is in the Satapatha and Taittiriya Brāhmaṇas and their Sūtras merely the symbolic offering of men” as is the case in the Yajurveda. [12] Indeed, evidence of

a human sacrifice on the lines of the horse sacrifice appears to be provided only by two of the later Sūtras.

This does not mean, however, that on occasion a man may not have been slain for some sacrificial purpose. In the Takkāriya Jātaka (J-a IV 246), one brahmin proposes the slaughter of another so as to make an oblation with his flesh and blood when a new gateway for a town was to be built. Rouse, in his translation of this Jātaka (J-a Transl. IV 155), has an interesting note on the persistence of traditions about human sacrifice at the founding of a building and so on, so as “to propitiate the spirits disturbed by the digging.” He refers to the rumours current at the time of many young children being immured in the foundations in the Hooghly Bridge at Calcutta (present Kolkatta). Keith, in discussing the later Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, alludes to the building of an altar for the sacred fire. He says, “In one sense no doubt this was an ancient and simple rite, accompanied as so often by the slaying of a man in order to secure the abiding character of the structure.” (C.H.I. Vol. I, p.142) Even if there were some tradition, as the *Pāli* Canon and commentaries may suggest, for a full-scale human sacrifice similar to the horse sacrifice, evidence is lacking for any actual slaying of a human victim or victims. The more casual, and far less costly, sacrifice of another man on occasions, when buildings were being erected, appears to be better attested. There is no ground for believing, however, that it was customary to offer human beings on such occasions. There are more grounds for believing that in early Buddhist times

any form of human sacrifice was much less common than animal sacrifice. Yet however progressive and enlightened was the bulk of the population, there was always a backward element to contend with, the element which, for example, made oblations (*balikamma*) of deer and swine to *yakkhas* (J-a IV 115).

It would, moreover, seem as if animal sacrifice had been superimposed, partly as a royal and priestly undertaking, on an older tradition of harmlessness, breaking it, cutting into it, it is true, but not crushing it into oblivion. The survival, the memory, of this tradition, denying to animal sacrifice the status of an unbroken custom, must be regarded as a further reason why any difficulties which the early Buddhists may have met in fighting for the abolition of the sacrifice of horses, and cattle in particular, were by no means insuperable.

The early Buddhist attitude toward warfare, agriculture, and meat-eating was more mixed than was its attitude to blood-sacrifices. It made no whole-hearted condemnation of these three practices, although they all entail the taking of life. But it did what it could to lessen their incidence and popularity. The most fertile field for reform was the monastic Order. Monks were forbidden to have more than the minimum to do with armies (Vin IV 104—108, Pāc.48-50), on pain of committing offences which would need confession as their expiation; and no one who was a soldier, subsumed under the heading “in a king’s pay,” was allowed to “go forth” (Vin I 74) from home into homelessness, that

is, to take the first step to becoming a monk.

Further, monks were forbidden to dig the soil or to get another to do so (Vin IV 33, Pāc. 10), a rule which, presumably, could have been companioned by another to cover ploughing. But because monks were entirely supported by the laity, and because, apparently, they had not attempted to plough, there was no occasion to formulate such a prohibition. But a different set of considerations was entailed in regard to eating meat, the result of which was that monks were allowed to eat meat and fish provided that it was “pure” in three respects, which means a monk had neither seen, heard nor suspected that it had been killed on purpose for him (Vin I 238, II. 197, III 171, m I.369); and, further, provided that it was not the flesh of certain animals which it was made unallowable to eat (Vin I 219 f.).

I will say a little more about these three practices in turn and will begin with warfare. But I have written about the early Buddhist views on this subject elsewhere. **[13]** I will here only point out that the Buddha is represented neither as having glossed over nor as having passed by its existence without a word of censure. On the contrary, he faced the fact of fighting openly and frankly, and in three main ways.

In the first place, there are verses, attributed to him, depicting the utter futility and inconclusiveness of war (S I 85), and more verses contrasting the use of force with the exercise of *dhamma* (Dhp 256, 257), conscience—what ought to be done because it is right. Yet, although the love of

fighting is deeply embedded in the human heart, there were apparently some people in the times to which the *Vinaya* purports to refer who regretted that they had to have anything to do with an army (Vin IV 104, 105, 107). It was their karma which drove them to this means of livelihood, and in a vicious circle this means of livelihood set up a new bad karma for them. Many classes of people, as the *Suttanipāta* enumerates, including the farmer, *kassaka*, the fighting man, *yodhājīva*, and the sacrificer *yājaka*, are what they are because of their deeds, *kammanā* (Sn 650-652).

Again, it is interesting to notice that public opinion (Vin IV 164), and the opinion of the pious monks (Vin I 88) as well as that ascribed to the Buddha (A V 128-129), was against monks talking *tiracchānakathā*, **[14]** low, inferior talk concerned with mundane matters, and that two out of its twenty-seven specified forms are talk about armies and talk about fights. Such talk is said to be neither connected with the goal nor to tend to the highest form of godly life (S V 420). In substituting ten topics of conversation, the Buddha is made to say to the listening monks that if they would indulge in these they would outshine in brilliance the moon and sun—not to mention the wanderers, followers of other sects who, as other records show, were prone to indulge in *tiracchānakathā* (A V 129).

In the second place, it adds greatly to the Buddha's fame as a leader of humanitarian thought and practice that he was able to eliminate warfare as an occupation for his monastic followers who, after all, formed a considerable proportion of

the population. In this respect Eastern monasticism differs strikingly from Western, where monks not only regarded themselves as soldiers of Christ but saw nothing wrong or incongruous in resorting to arms. Fighting was automatically closed to Buddhist monks by their third *Pārājika* rule: if they deprived a human being of life or incited him to commit suicide or instigated another person to murder him, they committed an offence of the utmost gravity, for which the penalty was expulsion from the Order. They were further debarred from fighting by other rules, which made it an offence, although of a lesser kind, knowingly to take animal life (Vin IV 33, 35, 49, 125). And since two of the four “wings” of an army consisted of elephants and horses, these were in as much danger as the infantry (*patti*) of being targets of destruction in battle.

The third way in which the Buddha faced the fact of fighting was, however strange this may seem, by expressing a certain admiration for the soldier. Although metaphors from warfare are less frequent in Buddhist than in Christian literature, [15] there are several similes which are military in nature, their point usually being to encourage monks to be steadfast in endeavour as soldiers are steadfast in battle and to wage spiritual battles as they wage armed ones.

Discipline was the aim for both. On the other hand, unstable monks are likened to the (five kinds of) warriors who lose heart: as the latter falter at various (preliminary) stages of the battle so the former falter if they are unable to steer quite clear of women (A III 89, 100). Thus soldiers, even cowardly

ones, have their uses as pegs on which to hang various aspects of Buddhist teaching for monks.

And the same may be said of the soldier's various battle adjuncts: the warrior-elephant and horse. The former especially is used in metaphor. But it is interesting to find that the ways in which a monk is compared to a battle-elephant represent as a rule quite initial stages in his spiritual training. For example, when monks are compared to elephants who falter when going forth to battle because each of their five senses is afflicted by disagreeable sensations—a metaphor which resembles that of the soldiers who lose heart almost before the battle begins—it is to show that such monks are not yet immune to the lure of the five senses (A III 157). Again, as the elephant, entering battle, destroys all parts of the fourfold army and endures the blows of weapons, so should a monk destroy all sensual thinking and endure physical discomfort (A II. 116). Both these metaphors point to stages where a monk is not far advanced in his training.

A verse from the Theragāthā (Th 194) further suggests that only the early stages of the training were envisaged where warrior-elephant similes are used. This verse is ascribed to the former soldier, Soṇa, Poṭṭiriya's son. [16] After having gone forth, he remained so sluggish and did not apply his mind to meditation that the Buddha had to admonish him. Thereupon, reflecting upon his shortcomings and working for insight (Th-a II 62), he uttered this verse:

“If in the fight my warrior-elephant
Advanced, 'twere better, fallen from his back,
Dead on the field and trampled I should lie,
Than beaten live a captive to the foe.”

This is a verse which comes well from a former soldier; and it may be only accidental that Sona compares his own almost desperate state after he had turned monk with his imagined desperate state in battle due to being dislodged from his elephant. But, on the other hand, this comparison may be deliberate since in other similes battle-elephants are apt to be connected with weak or elementary attainments in the life of religion.

Agriculture does not involve the taking of human life, but in the process of ploughing and digging small animals and insects may be destroyed. Now, in regard to taking life, Early Buddhism drew two distinctions. In the first place, there was a distinction between taking it deliberately and taking it unintentionally. Thus, if monks took human or animal life in the latter way there was no offence for them (Vin III 79ff., IV 33, 35, 49, 125). But if they took it knowingly and intentionally there was, as I have already indicated, the most serious penalty in the case of human life, and a penalty also, though less severe, in the case of animal life. For, in the second place, Early Buddhism recognized a distinction between men and animals. But since this was in degree rather than in kind, it therefore held it as a principle of right behaviour for monks that they should destroy neither the

one nor the other.

Agriculture certainly opened the door to the danger of taking life. A farmer could hardly avoid killing or maiming small creatures. Yet, because he did not destroy them of set purpose, the evil of taking life was not the point of the Buddha's famous ploughing talk with the farmer Bhāradvajā (S I 172, Sn 76-80). The point was that *his* kind of ploughing—that of the mind and spirit—was richer in result than the farmer's ploughing of the land, and it was meant to show how much finer were the activities of those who were able to devote themselves to a spiritual instead of a mundane way of life.

But agriculture had been practised from time immemorial. Moreover, it was, in the India of the Buddha's days, as it had been for centuries previously, not only the economic mainspring of the people and by far the greatest industry, but its results were vital to the life, health and prosperity of the entire population. So vividly had this been realized even in remotest antiquity, and in lands far apart, that ceremony and ritual were then connected with the chief agricultural operations of the year. However, it looks as though any ancient festival to celebrate the ripening of the grain had given place, by the Buddha's times, to the practical and careful attention which, by common consent, was bestowed upon the growing crops, but which had nothing ritual about it. The dying out, if this were indeed the case, either of this festival or of that held at sowing time, in no way impaired the popular determination to keep the land productive.

Crops were regarded as supremely valuable by the lay contemporaries of the early Buddhist monks, and agriculture was ranked in the *Vinaya*, which was intended principally, and one might say almost exclusively, for the use of monks, as one of the three “high works” or activities (Vin IV 6). It was not therefore an occupation which would yield easily or extensively to the Buddha’s deprecations of it.

He realized that while people remained in the world, no radical alteration could be made in many of their activities. It was only when any member of the laity felt the call to come apart and decided to renounce the world and become a monk that prohibitions, made partly for the sake of protecting living creatures and partly for the sake of the monks’ moral welfare, could be enforced and made fruitful. The monk-world had a different code from the lay-world, for it was one of as complete non-harming as it was possible to achieve. But in the completeness of this there was a curious anomaly connected with some of the foods that a monk might eat.

The eating of neither fish nor meat was banned for monks and, if not positively encouraged, was likewise not positively discouraged. Indeed, fish and meat formed two out of the five permissible “soft foods,” the other three being different cereals (E.g. at Vin IV 83). It looks as if, because the laity was neither stopped from growing grain, which, after all, did not involve the intentional taking of life, nor from occupations which made the eating of meat

possible, that the monks were similarly allowed to partake of cereals, fish and meat. But we have seen that in the case of the last two, certain restrictions were imposed: meat and fish had to be “pure” in the three respects, and meat had to be “the meat of those (animals) whose meat is allowable.” (Vin IV 88)

Gifts to the Order were made allowable, *kappakata*, by the donor uttering some phrase to the effect that he was giving, for, with a few minor exceptions, it was an offence to take anything not given (Pārājikā 2). But, especially in times of scarcity, monks had a right to ask, and in fact incurred an offence of wrongdoing if they did not, whether the meat that was being given to them was that of certain animals: an elephant, horse, dog, serpent, lion, tiger, leopard, bear or hyena (Vin III 58), for the meat of these animals came to be disallowed. But the reasons for this ban do not in the least imply that for monks or laity meat-eating was thought to be wrong in itself. Elephants and horses are attributes of royalty; dogs and serpents are revolting and disgusting, while to eat any of the wild animals mentioned, including again the serpent, might involve the monks in personal danger.

Many other passages show, although almost incidentally, that the eating of meat was thought of as customary, and monks are recorded to have done so often enough to give meat the appearance of having been a fairly constant article of their diet. There was the monk to whom Suppiyā promised broth, already referred to, and to whom she sent a

piece of her own thigh, having prepared it, *sampādetvā*. There was the nun Uppalavaṇṇā who got as a gift some meat from a cow killed by a robber chief which, after she had prepared it, *sampādetvā*, she wished to present to the Buddha (Vin III 208). And there were the monks who were allowed to take and eat the kills of wild animals, which of course would be other animals (Vin III 58); and they had these cooked, *pacāpetvā*, before eating them. Only in the case of a strange non-human disease were monks allowed the remedy of the raw flesh and blood of pigs (Vin I 202-3). These are instances taken only at random.

While injunctions survive showing which animals' flesh was forbidden, there are none specifying which was allowed. Thus, in the absence of any definite rulings, we have to piece together our knowledge of those early times from any source that seems helpful or suggestive. We have just seen that if monks ate beef or the kills of wild animals or, in certain circumstances, the raw flesh of pigs, no objection was made. Similes, which depict the cattle-butcher and his apprentice displaying piecemeal at the cross-roads the carcass of the ox they have slain (D II 294, M I 58), hacking at the innards (M I 244, S IV 56, A III 380), or flinging a bare bone to a famished dog who has made his way to the slaughter house (M I 364), all indicate the cattle-butcher to have been a well-known part of the existing social fabric, ministering to the needs of those who had no objection to eating beef. There is too the simile which compares the life of man, insignificant, trifling and full of ill

and trouble, to the cow about to be slaughtered, and who, with every step she takes while being driven to the shambles, comes nearer to her death-destruction (A IV 138).

References to sheep, although often to their wool and the purposes which this served (E. g. Vin III 225-27, 233, 234), point to these animals as forming a useful part of the animal population of India then as now. And from further reference to the cattle-butcher, the sheep-butcher, the pork-butcher, the deer-hunter and the fowler (Vin III 104ff. = S II. 254ff.), and also to the fishermen, all selling their wares (Ibid. and A III 301ff.), it would seem beyond all doubt that the laity ate the flesh of cows, sheep, pigs, deer and game-birds as well as fish. Such are the animals which (not including fish) perhaps yielded "the meat of those whose meat is allowable," and hence might be eaten by the monks if offered them, so long as the other necessary conditions were fulfilled.

There is a verse in the Theragāthā (Th 454) which speaks of snaring a monkey by means of some sticky stuff, *lepa*, glue or pitch. The process is explained in the Saṃyutta (S V 148f.), where finally the hunter, having caught the monkey, spits him then and there and prepares him for eating, *avasajjeti*, over charcoal embers. We hear of a monk keeping a female monkey (Vin III 21.), and of another monkey which was confined in captivity (Th 125f.). But there is no evidence that monkeys ever formed any part of a monk's diet. They were probably only eaten by such low people as hunters.

Although the eating of meat by laity and monks alike is tacitly condoned, the bloody trades, which bring animals to destruction for this purpose, by no means escape condemnation. Verses ascribed to the nun Puṇṇā (Th 241-2) speak of sheep-butchers, pork-butchers, fishermen and trappers, together with executioners and thieves, as evil-doers who cannot be freed from their evil deeds by the rite of ablution. [17] For then all aquatic creatures would go to heaven, which is clearly absurd. She is speaking to a brahmin who believes in the efficacy of purification by water, but her verses plainly show the conviction that butchers, fishermen and trappers are doers of wrong. The *Aṅguttara*, in knitting beings to their deeds (A V 288; and cf. M I 387ff., III 203), posits one of two bourns and uprisings for those who make onslaught on creatures (restraint from which is the first of the moral habits or *sīlas*), who are hunters, bloody-handed, given over to killing and slaying: either downright woe in hell, or rebirth in the womb of an animal. Again, horribly painful consequences in afterlives are ascribed to those who in this life had been butchers, hunters and trappers (Vin III 203). But similar painful consequences for their cruel deeds here are also ascribed to animal-tamers, slanderers, frauds, adulterers and fortune-tellers. It is therefore impossible to say that slayers of animals, although considered as wrong-doers and liable to very uncomfortable rebirth, were worse thought of than the other wrong-doers here named.

But monks did not, or should not themselves, actually take

animal life. They did not act as butchers; they did not fish, hunt or trap. All their food was provided for them by the laity. Yet, unlike those recluses and brahmins who are recorded to have lived on jujube fruits, sesame, beans or uncooked rice (M I 80), they were able to receive gifts of fish and meat, provided they observed the restrictions and safeguards of not receiving more food than their one begging bowl would hold (Cf. Sekhiyas 28, 30, 32), of not eating more than once a day (Vin IV 85), of establishing that the fish and meat was “pure,” and that it was not the meat of certain prohibited animals.

But the broad principle remained whereby monks aroused no criticism or contumely if they ate meat. A variety of causes have led to this leniency where we might have expected a greater stringency. For example, a difference was made between oneself killing and oneself eating what another person had killed. Moreover, the Buddha advocated an adequate diet for his monks, and was as opposed to fasting and bodily mortification as he was to greed and luxury, for he saw in these no trite way to achieve the highest goal, *paramattha*. Since cereals, in particular rice, with some meat, fish, fruit and dairy products formed the staple foods of the population, these were most likely to have been bestowed by them upon monks. Monks, therefore, since none of these foods was prohibited to them, obtained sufficient “to keep themselves going” and did not go short of almsfood. And, in addition, by accepting an offering of food, by not rejecting it, they would neither have

appeared rude to the donor nor would they have spoiled his chance to acquire merit by his gift. To have rejected an offering of food would moreover have opened the door to picking and choosing, not only between what went into the begging bowl, [18] but between the houses visited on the almsround (Cf. Sekhiyas 33). This in its turn would have prevented some of the laity from setting up merit, and it would have given a handle to greedy and gluttonous monks to indulge their tastes and preferences (Vin IV 88).

Again, it is possible that the habits of other sects were taken into consideration. There were, on the one hand, the Jains, ultra-scrupulous in their avoidance of taking life; and no doubt the bovine ascetics ate (M I 387) or affected to eat only grass (M-a III 100). There was, on the other hand, the important class of Naked Ascetics, called *Ājivikas*, who apparently were not strict vegetarians (M I 338) but abstained from fish and meat now and again with a view to “schooling their bodies,” or “making to become by bodily means,” *kāyabhāvana*, rather than from humanitarian reasons or because they saw in such a diet anything intrinsically wrong.

Yet perhaps the reason, which weighed most heavily in condoning the eating of fish and meat, was the strong conviction that it was not material things that made or marred a man. Early Buddhism did not agree with the supposition that purity comes through food (M. I 80). Purification comes, it held, by restraint over such bodily, mental and moral conduct as could defile a man, and with

the possession of moral habit (A I 221). It did not consider it to be in his outward signs: his wearing his hair matted in the braids of an ascetic, his birth or his clan, which made a man a true Brahmin (Dhp 393, and cf 141). It was not these things, nor his abstinence from fish and meat, which cleansed a man who had not crossed over doubt (Sn 249). For it was not the eating of meat, *na hi māṃsabhojanam*, which sullied him and was his defilement, *āmagandha*, but any one out of a long array of wrongs which he might perpetrate by conduct, thought or speech (Sn 241-217). He was neither defiled nor purified by what he ate, nor was he cleansed by fasting (Dhp 141).

In conclusion, it need only be said that no clear picture of the world in which early Buddhist monasticism flourished can be obtained if the feature of life-taking is ignored. Nor can a clear picture of this monasticism be obtained if its attempts to crush the desire to destroy life are left out of the account. There was a strong movement to remedy, even to eradicate, what was regarded by several leaders of contemporary religious thought as an undesirable practice. The remedy was a life-sparing scruple. To the birth of this there is no historical clue. We only know that it was strong under Jainism, fostered by Early Buddhism, observed by some contemporary sects, and that it then culminated under Asoka.

Early Buddhism's advocacy of non-injury cannot, I think, be attributed to any one cause, for there were monks, laity, brahmins and other sects as well as the animals to consider.

And no doubt a mixture of motives operated. Such championship may have seen in non-harming a way to increase the moral welfare of the monks; it may have been part of a disinterested social reform movement; it may have been, as in the case of the sacrifice, polemical in nature, anti-brahminical; and it may have been due to the presumption that animals have as much right to their lives, and to compassion, as have human beings.

Whatever the motives that led Early Buddhism to stand firm in the cause of non-injury, the results are in the main sufficiently clear. Some control was imposed over monks in the matter of eating meat, but they were not made to give it up. Warfare and agriculture were, however, entirely ruled out as monastic occupations. Sacrifice, as ordinarily understood, seems never to have been practised by monks, for they had no gods to whom to make offerings: "Only within burneth the fire I kindle." [19] Therefore, their discipline does not comment on outward sacrifice, one way or the other. The laity, on the other hand, continued eating meat, continued in warfare and agriculture, although the killing of animals for human consumption was probably restricted, at all events on certain days, before Asoka's reign. Agriculture could not be so strongly condemned as warfare, since in its operations creatures are not killed deliberately. The surprise is that more opportunities were not taken to roundly condemn fighting. It is likely that no way to its eradication was seen, that no tide was turning in this direction as it was to abolish blood-sacrifices. The

suppression of the great, organized sacrifices had popular support: the ordinary people knew that they were the losers and not the gainers through them. But any effective blow dealt to their trades, industries and occupations would have spelt a blow to their livelihood. Householders therefore continued to eat meat, practise warfare and engage in agriculture, and to indulge in many pleasures of the senses, which, because of their different way of life, came to be denied to monks.

Notes

1. A. B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, p. 347, and C. H. I, vol. I, p. 106.
2. This latter problem is discussed by Mrs. Rhys Davids in Ch. II of *Poems of Cloister and Jungle*.
3. Vincent Smith, *Asoka*, 3rd Edition, 1920, p. 57
4. RV. I 162, 163 were used at horse-sacrifices in Vedic ritual.
5. A. B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, p.191.
6. Sn, Brāhmanadhammikasutta (No. 7 in Cūlavagga).
7. On *vājapaya*, or Drink of Strength, see A. B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, p 339; and for mention of the *assamedha* and the “Vājapeya (soma sacrifice) associated with secular Brahmanism” as being “two forms of sacrifice having a political significance,” See B. C. Law, *India as described in Early Texts of Buddhism and Jainism*, p. 205.
8. Cf, Megasthenes, Fragm. XXVII (McCrindle, *Ancient India*, p.70): “Their houses and property they generally leave unguarded.”
9. Cf. G.S. II 50, n. 1, to which I am indebted.
10. A. B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and*

Upanishads, p.347; and C.H. I. Vol. I, p. 106, 136.

11. Keith, *Religion*, p. 347.
12. A.B. Keith, C.H.I. Vol. I, pp. 123, 136.
13. *Ceylon Daily News*, Vesak Number, 1939; and (briefly) B. D. II, Intr. p. xxxii.
14. Also mentioned at D I 7, 178, III 54; M I 513, II, I, 23. In all these passages, except D I 7, wanderers are spoken of as talking *tiracchānakathā*.
15. Pss., p. 114, n. 1. But see T. R. Glover, *The Disciple*, 1942, who, in his chapter on "The Soldier," points out that in Paul's *Epistles* the soldier and the athlete are "sometimes confused by English readers."
16. Th and Vin evince some discrepancies. This is one, for Vin I 74 forbids monks to allow anyone in the king's pay to go forth. Again, Vin I 79 decrees that monks shall not let a youth under fifteen years of age go forth. But six "boy-theras" are mentioned in Th, all of them recorded in the Commentary, to have "gone forth" when seven years old, including Sīvali, who lay in his mother's womb for seven years before being born, but who "went forth" on the seventh day after this event (Th A, I 147).
17. Cf. M I 39 for (heretical) notion of purification by water.
18. Cf. Sekhiyas 34-36 where, however (in 34, 35), monks choose what they most fancy from what is in the bowl.
19. S I 169. Cf. A.K. Coomarasamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*,

p. 56, for this being the internal *agnihotra* of the
Brahmanical Aranyaka

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