Nourishing the Dhamma

Vegetarianism and Animal Nonviolence in Theravāda Buddhism

with a special focus on Sinhala Buddhism

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Abstract:

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Pāli canonical texts routinely report the Buddha as saying that a good Buddhist must never kill another living creature. Such statements are, in many cases, explicitly applied to the case of animals. Not only do such claims imply animal protectionism, but they also imply vegetarianism: if animals are not to be killed, then it seems to follow trivially that they cannot be eaten either. Yet this seemingly trivial move from the non-killing of animals to the non-eating of them is explicitly avoided in the Pāli canonical texts.

This project investigates the prima facie case for vegetarianism, both in the Pāli canonical texts and in the Theravāda tradition more widely — a living tradition that is, in certain crucial ways, based upon that textual tradition. The textual component of this investigation is largely confined to an examination of Pāli canonical texts. In respect to the lived Theravāda tradition, the project specifically engages Sinhala Buddhism as practised in Sri Lanka. The latter investigation is made possible by fieldwork conducted at various times throughout 2011 and early 2012 in the Colombo and Kēgalle areas.

In the first half of the thesis, I argue that, within the Pāli canon, a conflict arises around the issue of vegetarianism. Although the canon implies vegetarianism based upon its first principles, this vegetarianism is explicitly denied. I suggest that this denial could be explained as a historical anomaly brought about by certain prudential and circumstantial factors. The non-endorsement of vegetarianism, therefore, may not represent the Buddha’s considered and final ethical view on this matter.

The second half of the thesis is primarily ethnographic in character. I argue in this section that the same conflict that we find in the textual tradition is repeated in the contemporary lived tradition. Lay informants maintained a pro-attitude to vegetarianism and generally concluded that a good Buddhist ought to be a vegetarian. Monastic informants, however, were far more circumspect about the issue and tended to remain agnostic as to whether vegetarianism was morally acceptable.

I conclude by arguing that Theravāda Buddhism, as represented by my sample of Sinhala informants and the textual tradition that operates in the background, generally favours vegetarianism, but a wide range of largely circumstantial factors results in the stymying of the expression of this vegetarianism. This unusual tension should not necessarily be taken as a defect in Buddhism — rather, Theravāda Buddhism is highly sensitive to context and
encourages the negotiation of moral problems in a flexible and open-ended way. The results of this study therefore tell us something useful about Buddhist Ethics more generally.
Statements and Declaration

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Statement of ethical conduct:

The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

James Stewart _____________________
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### Key to Text Notation

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<th>Text Notation</th>
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<td>AN</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atth</td>
<td>Atthaśālinī of Buddhaghosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BV</td>
<td>Buddhavaṃsa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dn</td>
<td>Dīgha Nikāya</td>
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<td>Iti</td>
<td>Itivuttaka</td>
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<td>Jat</td>
<td>Jātaka tales</td>
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<td>Mil</td>
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<td>Mn</td>
<td>Majjhima Nikāya</td>
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<td>Mv</td>
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<td>S</td>
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Note on languages:

I have not indicated specifically where I use Pāli words and where I use Sinhala words because I believe that it is clear based on the context. Chapters 1–3 are concerned primarily with the Pāli language, because I mainly examine canonical textual sources here. Chapters 3-6 utilise Sinhala more heavily, because they are anthropological in character, and I often refer to transcripts of interviews conducted in Sinhala. In terms of transliteration I have tried to follow the conventions set out by writers on Sinhala Buddhism. I have, as best I can, used Gombrich and Obeyesekere as a model for transliteration. Consequently, I retained the use of diacritics.

It should be noted that there are no consistent conventions amongst all writers on Sinhala Buddhism – for example, Kapferer does not use diacritics. When I was not sure, I followed the transliteration practices set out in the Dematapitiya dictionary. As for Pāli, I followed the conventional transliteration practices modelled by Bhikkhu Bodhi in his translations.

The Sinhala translations are a combined effort between myself and my co-investigator Kumudu Stewart - the written Sinhala was translated exclusively by myself, while the interviews were translated cooperatively. Naturally I take sole responsibility for any errors in these translations. The Pāli translations, however, are from various sources. Where possible I have used Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translations, but sometimes I have also used the Pali Text Society translations. In cases where the PTS translations were especially anarchonistic (and this does happen from time to time) I have made some changes to the translations but I have made a note of when this was necessary.
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