

Flesh-eating among Buddhist monks



DOWN TO EARTH SERIES
FLESH-EATING AMONG BUDDHIST MONKS

From Thomas Watters, T.W. Rhys Davis, & Vicenta A. Smith (Eds.). *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, AD 629-645.¹ [2 Vols.] London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1904-1905. Vol. I, (SOCIAL AND LEGAL MATTERS), pp. 53-57.²

The Hīnayānist Brethren were allowed to eat “three pure kinds of flesh,” i.e., the flesh of animals, the slaughter of which had not been seen, or heard, or suspected by them. But the Mahayanists abhorred flesh-eating on the grounds of universal compassion, and the doctrine of karma.

The pilgrim's description proceeds:

There are above ten Buddhist monasteries with above 2000 ecclesiastics of all degrees, all adherents of the Sarvāstivādin school of the “Small Vehicle” system. Since as to the sūtra teachings and vinaya³ regulations they follow India, it is in its literature that students of these subjects study them thoroughly. They are very strict in the observance of the rules of their order but in food they mix (take in a miscellaneous way) the three pure [kinds of flesh] embarrassed by the “gradual teaching.”

One of the large monasteries in this country was that known as the Aranya-vihāra: here Dharmagupta lodged in the year A.D. 585 when on his way to China. The Sarvāstivādin school to which the Brethren in Yenki⁴ belonged was a branch from the ancient Sthavira school.⁵ It had its name from its *assertion* that *all were real*, viz. past, present, future, and intermediate states. Its adherents claimed to represent the original teaching of the Master, as it was delivered, and as settled in Council by the “Elders” (Sthaviras) who had heard it from his lips. So they considered themselves

¹ [The Byzantine-Arab Wars began in 626 AD. Much of the Roman Empire is conquered by Muslim Arabs led by Khalid ibn al-Walid.]

² The name of the celebrated Chinese pilgrim and translator is spelt in English in the following ways (among others):

1. M. Stanislas Julien	Hiouen Thsang
2. Mr. Mayers	Huan Chwang
3. Mr. Wylie	Yuén Chwäng
4. Mr. Beal	Hiuen Tsiang
5. Prof. Legge	Hsüan Chwang
6. Prof. Bunyiu Nanjio	Hhüen Kwän

³ [The Vinaya (Pali and Sanskrit, literally meaning “leading out,” “education,” “discipline”) is the regulatory framework for the sangha or monastic community of Buddhism based on the canonical texts called the Vinaya Pitaka. The teachings of the Gautama Buddha can be divided into two broad categories: Dharma “doctrine” and Vinaya “discipline.”]

⁴ [City of Agni-Fire. Cf. Karasahr or Karashar, also known as [Chinese: 焉耆; pinyin: Yānqí; Wade-Giles Yen-ch'í; Tocharian Ārsi or Arshi; Sanskrit अग्निदेश Agnideśa], was an ancient town on the Silk Road and the capital of Yanqi Hui Autonomous County in the Bayin'gholin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang, in north-western China. The city was located on the branch of the Silk Route that ran along the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert in the Tarim Basin.]

⁵ [One of the early Buddhist schools. Sanskrit: Sthavira nikāya or “Sect of the Elders”; traditional Chinese: 上座部; pinyin: Shàngzuò Bù.]

strictly orthodox, and they were zealous enthusiastic adherents of what they regarded as the simple primitive religion. The Brethren in Yenki followed the teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Indian scriptures, of which they were diligent students. The next part of this paragraph has received bad treatment at the hands of the translators. Julien's⁶ version of it is:

“Les religieux s’acquittent de leurs devoirs et observent les règles de la discipline avec un pureté sévère et un zèle persévérant. Ils se nourrissent de trois sortes d’aliments purs, et s’attachent à la doctrine graduelle.”

The words of the original are Chie-hsing-lü-i-chie-ch'ing-chih-li-jan-shih-tsa-san-ching-chih-yü-chien-chiao-i. It is not easy to conjecture why *chie-hsing* should be here rendered “s’acquittent de leurs devoirs.”⁷ The term is part of the clause which tells us that the Brethren were careful observers of the Vinaya commands to do and abstain from doing. Then the translation, leaves out the important words *jan* meaning “but” and *tsa* meaning “to mix,” and it renders *chih-yü*, “to stick in” or “be detained in” by “s’attachent surtout à.” Then Julien did not know what was meant by the “trois sortes d’aliments purs,” so he gives us in a note an account of certain five “aliments purs” derived from another treatise. What the pilgrim tells us here is plain and simple. The Buddhist Brethren in the monasteries of Yenki were pure and strict in keeping all the laws and regulations of their order according to their own Vinaya. But in food they took, along with what was orthodox, the three kinds of pure flesh, being still held in the “gradual teaching.” The student will be helped in understanding this passage if he turns to the account of the next country, Kuchih, and to the pilgrim’s experience in that country as set forth in the Life, and to the account of the Swan Monastery in *Chuan IX* of the Records (Julien III, p. 60) and *Chuan III*, of the Life (*ibid.*, I p. 162).

The explanation of the *san-ching* or “three pure kinds of flesh” is briefly as follows. In the time of Buddha there was in Vaisāli a wealthy general named Sīha who was a convert to Buddhism. He became a liberal supporter of the Brethren and kept them constantly supplied with good flesh food. When it was noised abroad that the bhikshus were in the habit of eating such food specially provided for them the Tirthikas⁸ made the practice a matter of angry reproach. Then the abstemious ascetic Brethren, learning this, reported the circumstances to the Master, who thereupon called the Brethren together. When they were assembled, he announced to them the law that they were not to eat the flesh of any animal which they had seen put to death for them, or about which they had been told that it had been killed for them, or about which they had reason to suspect that it had been slain for them. But he permitted to the Brethren as “pure” (that is, lawful) food the flesh of animals the slaughter of which had not been seen by the bhikshus, not heard of by them, and not suspected

⁶ [Stanislas Aignan Julien, 1797–1873, one of the most academically respected sinologists in French history, who served as the Chairman of Chinese at the Collège de France for over forty years. See *Histoire de la Vie de Hiouen-Tsang*, Paris 1856.]

⁷ [Fulfil their duties.]

⁸ [“Tirthikas are the Brāhmanical Sectarrians ‘beyond’ the Himalayas called ‘infidels’ by the Buddhists in the sacred land, Tibet, and *vice versa*.” *Voice of the Silence*, Glossary endnote 74 to frag. II vs. 171 p. 39]

by them to have been on their account,⁹ In the Pali and Ssū-fēn Vinaya it was after a breakfast given by Siha¹⁰ to the Buddha and some of the Brethren, for which the carcass of a large ox was procured, that the Nirgranthas¹¹ reviled the bhikshus and Buddha instituted this new rule declaring fish and flesh “pure” in the three conditions.¹² The animal food now permitted to the bhikshus came to be known as the “three pures” or “three pure kinds of flesh,” and it was tersely described as “unseen, unheard, unsuspected,” or as the Chinese translations sometimes have it “not seen not heard not suspected to be on my account.” Then two more kinds of animal food were declared lawful for the Brethren, viz. the flesh of animals which had died a natural death, and that of animals which had been killed by a bird of prey or other savage creature. So there came to be five classes or descriptions of flesh which the professed Buddhist was at liberty to use as food.¹³ Then the “unseen, unheard, unsuspected” came to be treated as one class, and this together with the “natural death” and “bird killed” made a *san-ching*. It is evidently in this latter sense that the term is used in these Records.

Then we have the “gradual teaching” which to Yuan-chuang’s mind was intimately connected with the heresy of sanctioning flesh-food. Here we have a reference to an old division of the Buddha’s personal teachings into “gradual (or progressive),” *chien* and “instantaneous,” *tun*.¹⁴ Of these the former, according to the Mahāyānists, contained all those scriptures which gave the Buddha’s early teaching, and also the rules and regulations which formed the Vinaya. The Buddha suited his sermons and precepts to the moral and spiritual attainments and requirements of his audience. Those who were low in the scale he led on gradually by the setting forth of simple truths, by parable and lesson, and by mild restrictions as to life and conduct. At a later period of his ministry he taught higher truths, and inculcated a stricter purity and more thorough self-denial. Thus in the matter of flesh-food he sanctioned the use of it as an ordinary article of food by his own example and implied permission. Afterwards when he found that some of his disciples gave offence by begging for beef and mutton, and asking to have animals killed for them, and eating as daily food flesh which should only be taken in exceptional circumstances he introduced restrictions and prohibitions. But the “Instantaneous Teaching,” which took no note of circumstances and environments, revealed sublime spiritual truths to be comprehended and accepted at once by higher minds, taught for these a morality absolute and universal, and instituted rules for his professed disciples to be of eternal, unchanging obligation.

⁹ Shih-sung-lu, ch. 26 (No. 1115): Sēng-ki-lii, ch. 32 (No. 1119).

¹⁰ [Or Lion, a rich and influential general.]

¹¹ [Digambaras, also known as munis or sādhus, are monks in the Digambara tradition of Jainism, and occupants of the highest limb of the four-fold sangha. They are also called Nirgranthas, i.e., “without any bonds.” Digambara monks have 28 primary attributes which includes observance of the five supreme vows of ahimsa (non-injury), truth, non-thieving, celibacy, and non-possession.]

¹² Vin. Mah., V, 31: Ssū-fēn-lu, ch. 42 (No. 1117).

¹³ Shou-lēng-yen-ching-hui-chie, ch. 12 (Nos. 446 & 1624): Lung-shu-ching-t’u-wēn, ch. 9. The number of kinds of “pure flesh” was afterwards increased to nine, these five being included.

¹⁴ Hua-yen-yi-shēng-chiao-yi-fēn-chi-chang (No. 1591): Ssū-chiao-yi (No. 1569). In the Chung-a-han-ching (No. 542) ch. 9, Buddha’s dharma and vinaya are described as *gradual*.

The “Gradual Teaching” is practically coextensive with the Hīnayāna system, and the Buddha describes his teaching and Vinaya as *gradual*, growing and developing like the mango fruit according to some scriptures. The “Instantaneous Teaching” is the Mahāyāna system as found in those scriptures of the Buddhists which are outside of the Hīnayānist Tripiṭaka. This distinction, derived from a passage in the Lankāvatāra sūtra, is ascribed to Dharmapāla. The Nirvana sūtras are quoted as specimens of the Gradual Teaching and the Avatamsaka sūtras are given as examples of the Tun-chiao or “Instantaneous Teaching.”

Our pilgrim being an adherent of the Mahāyānist system refused to admit the validity of the “three-fold pure” flesh-food indulgence which the excellent Hīnayānist Brethren of Yen’i followed. The Buddhist Scriptures to which Yuan-chuang adhered prohibit absolutely the use of flesh of any kind as food by the “sons of Buddha.”¹⁵ This prohibition is based on the grounds of universal compassion, and the doctrine of karma. Mahāyānism teaches that the eating of an animal’s flesh retards the spiritual growth of the Brother who eats it, and entails evil consequences in future existences. Some Mahāyānists were strict in abstaining, not only from all kinds of flesh food, but also from milk and its products. In this they agreed, as we shall see, with the sectarians who were followers of Devadatta. There have also, however, been Mahāyānists who allowed the use of animal food of certain kinds, and we find wild geese, calves, and deer called *san-ching-shih* or “Three pure (lawful) articles of food.” It was a common occurrence for a Hīnayānist to be converted and “advance” to Mahāyānism, but the Yen’i Brethren were still *detained* or *embarrassed* in the “Gradual Teaching” of the Hīnayāna. The word for *detained* is *chih*, which means to be fretted, or delayed, as a stream by an obstacle in its course. Then it denotes the mental suspense caused by doubts and difficulties, and the check given by these to spiritual progress; it is often associated with the word for *doubt*.



¹⁵ Fan-wang-ching, ch. 2 (No. 1087); Ta-pan-nie-p’an-ching, ch. 4 (No. 114); Ju-lēng-ka-ching, ch. 8 (No. 176); Shou-lēng-yen-ching-hui-chie, 1, c.