The History of Vegetarianism and Cow-Veneration in India

Ludwig Alsdorf

Translated from German by Bal Patil
Revised by Nichola Hayton

Edited with additional notes, a bibliography and four appendices
by **Willem Bollée**

Routledge Advances in Jaina Studies

THE HISTORY OF VEGETARIANISM AND COW-VENERATION IN INDIA

For the first time, this influential study by Ludwig Alsdorf is made available to an English speaking audience, translated by Bal Patil. It focuses on two of the most pertinent issues in Indian religion, the history of vegetarianism and cow-veneration, and its historical approach remains relevant to this day.

With reference to significant brahminical texts, such as key chapters of the *Book of Manu*, the book centres on the author's analysis of the role of Jainism in the history of vegetarianism. The author explores the history of meat-eating in India and its relationship to religious thought and custom, and searches for solutions to the problem of cattle veneration. Besides a comprehensive translation of the original German manuscript 'Beiträge zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien', four important articles directly related to Alsdorf's work by Kapadia, Heesterman and Schmidt are made available in this new edition.

These additional contributions and careful notes by the editor Willem Bollée add a modern perspective to a study that remains a key reference for students and scholars of Religious Studies, Asian Studies and History.

Ludwig Alsdorf (1904–1978) was one of the most influential Indologists of his generation. He had wide range of interests and worked on Prakrit, Apabhramsha and Pali literature, in particular on Jaina universal history and prosody. His pioneering metrical analyses of ancient Indian literature prepared the ground for great advances in the dating of texts and the reconstruction of the history of Indian philosophy. One of his most influential studies is the present work.

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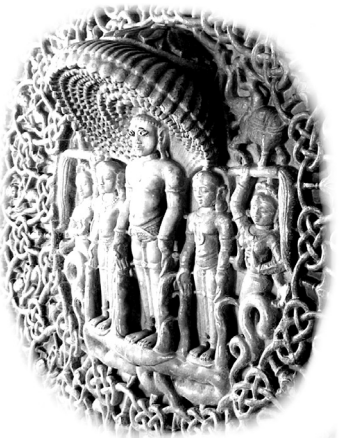

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ABBREVIATIONS

Amg.	Ardhamāgadhī
Āp.	Āpastamba
Baudh.	Baudhāyana
BKBh	Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya
Dasav	Dasaveyāliya
Mbh	Mahābhārata
MW	Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*
PE	Pillar Edict
PSM	Pāia-sadda-mahaṇṇavo
PW	Böhtlingk und Roth, *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*
RE	Rock Edict
Sa.	Sanskrit
Vāj.	Vājasaneya
Vas.	Vasiṣṭha
Yājñ.	Yājñavalkya

INTRODUCTION

The subjects of this essay, sparing living beings, which gradually led to vegetarianism, and the veneration of cattle, which has no direct relation to it, were not new to indologists when Alsdorf took them up, but no one had strictly applied the historical method to them. The fact that new publications with references to his study keep being published, such as Scherfe 1993 §§ 164–168, amply shows its continuous actuality and justifies an English version at a time when the knowledge of German in our discipline is no longer obvious.

Originally *ahiṃsā* – non-violence (to living beings) – had nothing to do with vegetarianism as it was, in Alsdorf's opinion, based on (but not explained by) a 'magico-ritualistic' dread of destroying life, this being part of an all-Indian religious development. In the Vedic period people ate meat of ritually killed animals, specially cattle, because killing to sacrifice was not discredited. Later, *ahiṃsā* more and more limited meat consumption. As early as Kauṭilya, before the Manusmṛti that is, *ahiṃsā* was propagated as an ideal for all people, but at the time of the Manusmṛti brahmanic renouncers still ate meat, for religions are conservative and the mendicants, brahmin as well as Jain and Buddhist, according to Alsdorf are still continuing the nomadic stage of the Indians when they entered the subcontinent.

The greater part of the treatise is dedicated to an analysis of the three strata of the juridical literature, viz. Dharmasūtras, Dharmaśāstras (beginning with Manu) and contemporary texts such as Yājñavalkya and relevant parts of the Mahābhārata (stories of Tulādhāra and Vicakhnu; connection between vegetarianism and Vaiṣṇavism), and finally the independent commentaries to the old texts and the Kṛtyakalpataru and other Nibandhas. Alsdorf stresses the contradiction in the juxtaposition of old and new in Manu (after the example of the levirate). In an excursion the relation between

Vasiṣṭha and Manu is dealt with. Summarizing he states that there is little ground for Bühler's assumption of a lost Mānava-Dharmasūtra as a source of Manu, and that Vasiṣṭha comes between the older Dharmasūtras and the Manusmṛti. The essential difference between brahmanism and the reformatory religions is that in the latter the new ideal of *ahiṃsā* did not clash with the great hindrance of the traditional sacrificial cult and other customs at which animals were killed.

This is illustrated in the Uttarajjhāyā 12 and 25 by the ancient story of the Jain monk asking at a brahmanical sacrifice for alms which is refused. In the following discussion the monk does not protest against the killing of the victim, but against mystified ritual practices in a language not understood by the common people, and brahmanical arrogance. The word *ahiṃsā* hardly plays a role in the ancient text. The opposition of the Jains to the brahmanical sacrifice was, at least in the beginning, only part of their opposition against brahmanic religion and haughtiness. Jainism (Jinism) and Buddhism participate in a pan-Indian spiritual movement which is to be taken into account for the interpretation of the famous historical testimonies for the ancient Indian vegetarianism in Aśoka's inscriptions.

In the emperor Aśoka's edicts, too, *ahiṃsā* is evidenced as non-Buddhist. Aśoka participates in a common Indian movement of thought and is a religiously tolerant monarch; his Buddhism only favours his *ahiṃsā*.

A summary of views on *ahiṃsā* was given in the English Abstracts of the Tenth World Sanskrit Conference in Bangalore (1997: 374–76) by H.W. Bodewitz, who takes *ahiṃsā* to originally be an alternative to Vedic sacrificial ritual. Some later publications have been inserted into the Bibliography of the present translation of Alsdorf's text.

The last quarter of Alsdorf's essay is dedicated to the problem of cattle veneration to which he does not know a solution. He ascribes it, first reluctantly – and aware of the fact that for Indologists 'it is a most convenient catchall and a dignified academic way of saying "I don't know"' (Doniger O'Flaherty 1980: 244) – to the Indus Valley Civilisation, but then, after discovering cattle bones, gave up the idea again, whereas Professor Doniger seems to seek a solution in a psychoanalytical direction.

Regarding the appendices to Alsdorf's treatise, it was thought to be of interest to add J.C. Heesterman's review of it, as well as H.-P. Schmidt's articles 'The Origin of Ahiṃsā' and 'Ahiṃsā and Rebirth', with the kind permission of the authors and their publishers.

Heesterman objects to Alsdorf's taking the contradictions in texts such as Manu as chronological successions and would rather parallel the monk, who can only lead a sinless life thanks to the layman's killing his food and water, to the *yajamāna*, the person who pays for and profits from the sacrifice, enabled to partake of the meat by the Vedic priest who kills the victim. Thus the cycle of life and death can only be broken by renouncers who avoid death by *ahiṃsā*. This would explain the juxtaposition of contradictions and also point to the problem of the origin of *ahiṃsā*.

As to this problem, Schmidt in his first paper 'Origin of ahiṃsā' (1962, reprinted here) thinks Alsdorf 'lost sight of the difference between ahiṃsā and vegetarianism' (last para but one of p. 626) and would himself imagine the latter to be a popularized version of the former doctrine. To that end he is searching 'for the specific motives on which the rule of ahiṃsā for the brahmanic renouncer is based' (last para of ch. I). He then establishes that in Vedic texts *ahiṃsā* is not expected of the common man, but a brahmin 'following the *ahiṃsikā vṛtti* accepts only food ... killed by others' (last para but one of p. 635) and a Vedic student has to keep the vow of *ahiṃsā* which is a means of penance. Thus the idea of *ahiṃsā* may have 'originated among world renouncers, was adopted by the Brāhmaṇas and finally considered to be a rule for the whole society' (first para of ch. III) for which the brahmins were the social example.

From the Bhṛgu-legend Schmidt deduces that the ritualists were animists who put plants and animals on a par with man and animals and thus wanted to eliminate the evil consequences of killing and hurting them. The verb 'to kill' is replaced by 'to appease'. Schmidt then emphasizes the similarity of the Vedic and Jain animistic Weltanschauung, and the connection of *ahiṃsā* and belief in reincarnation. Absolute renunciation may lead to final release from transmigration, but 'the ethical motivation of non-violence is secondary: the original motive was fear resulting from the breakdown of magico-ritualistic world-conception' (last sentence of p. 655).

In Schmidt's second appendix here he continues his study of *ahiṃsā* and reincarnation, the ideas the three Indian religions share and which thus in his view may also have a common source. Salvation from transmigration is only possible for renouncers, those that is, who strictly practise *ahiṃsā*, as against the loose *ahiṃsā* of the laity (which Śvetâmbaras of course disagree with). Schmidt further argues with Wezler who thinks magico-ritual fear of destroying life in any form is not the only ground of *ahiṃsā*, but does not suggest other causes.

At the author's request the last paragraph of ch. VII, and ch. VIII were put at the end of ch. VI. In it he once more rejects the view of Alsdorf and Chapple who looked for the origin of *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism in the Indus civilization in favour of a development inside the Vedic culture. For Schmidt vegetarianism has become the cornerstone of *ahiṃsā*, because one can abstain from meat but not from vegetal food.

The article now ends with a refutation of Heesterman' theses, first, that the obsessive concern about ritual undoing of the injury (to victims) points to the impending collapse of the violent sacrifice. The replacement of the Ṛgvedic decapitation by strangulation does in Schmidt's opinion not mean a progressive decline of violence, but another attitude towards blood which is offered to the demons and therefore must stay outside the place of sacrifice. Schmidt also rejects Heesterman's opinion 'that the typical fusion of ahiṃsā and vegetarianism arose from brahminical ritual thought, while Buddhists and Jains originally had no particular use for vegetarianism' (second para of p. 227). On the contrary, the Jains have become the strictest vegetarians whereas not all believers in the brahmanical revelation (*śruti*) are vegetarians, nor even all brahmins.

It is of course only fair to also give the Jains a chance to explain their view on vegetarianism and thus Kapadia's article 'Prohibition of Flesh-eating in Jainism' of 1933, because it contains a letter of Jacobi, which was inserted as representative of many others such as Upadhye or Malvania, the titles of some of whose articles can be found in the bibliography.

The publication in the Routledge series required many notes and the addition of this Introduction; misprints have been silently corrected. References to Indian texts follow the way of quotation in Monier Williams' *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* and *Schubring's Doctrine of the Jainas*.

Tantus labor non sit cassus.

The editor

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF VEGETARIANISM AND COW-VENERATION IN INDIA

[3] *Two commandments which, also to the Hindus themselves, belong to the most characteristic features of Hinduism and rightly form the foundation of their religion, are: *ahiṃsā*, which literally means 'non-violence' (English in the original [WB]) and signifies the practical extension of 'you shall not kill' to the animal world; and the other, apparently inherent in the first, but factually to be treated as distinct, is the veneration of or, as the Indians prefer to say, 'the protection of cows'. To the modern observer both appear to be deeply embedded in the Indian soul. Both played a central role in the life and teaching of Mahātmā Gandhi, appearing as the well-known 'renunciation of violence', i.e. non-violence raised from the magical-ritual sphere to a mystic-ethical plane. Both have almost incalculable economic consequences which can only be alluded to in passing here. One may smile about the fact that around Cambay in Gujarat, the peasant folk disregard the official rules for getting rid of the strays, which are rampant; on the contrary, every household donates a *roti* on a daily basis for these useless curs. A minister of agriculture, however, was in no mood for smiling when he lamented in the press a few years ago that the Kathiawar peasants refused to kill the locusts and would rather transport them by cart to the next village and set them free there.

The most conspicuous and economically far-reaching effect of *ahiṃsā* is, however, the widely practised renunciation of meat, fish

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* The pages of the German original are inserted in square brackets. References in the text pertain to these pages. Editor's notes are indicated by (WB).

and frequently eggs. By no means are all Hindus vegetarians,[1] indeed not even a majority are, but vegetarianism established by the religion of such a significant and influential section of people as in India has scarcely any parallel elsewhere in the world. We can again refer to Gandhi here. The extraordinary significance which vegetarianism had for him will have strongly impressed every reader of his autobiography, which appeared a few months ago, finally also in German.[2] **[4]** In addition to that, the sanctity of cattle (by no means only the cow!) precludes even most non-vegetarians from the consumption of beef, and this considering the fact that the prohibition of cattle killing has plainly made India, the country most abounding with cattle in the world. Millions of cattle which are no longer of service at all are robbing the others of their fodder: it is scientifically verifiable that the available supply of nourishment does not suffice for the rest of cows.[3] This chronic crisis of nutrition could probably alone be solved if the cattle population of India were halved. It is the sacredness of the cattle which presents one of the toughest problems to the Indian economy.

The frequent question about the origin or source of so characteristic and vital a feature of the Indian culture as *ahiṃsā* and 'cow-veneration' has not been answered satisfactorily to this day. From the start, we should well exclude rationalistic responses such as the prohibition of cattle killing as a wise protection of an absolutely essential agricultural aid from destruction in times of famine, or vegetarianism as a climatic measure of hygienic precaution. On the other hand, the question of the origin of the veneration is even more taxing in view of the fact that in Indian antiquity the situation was quite different from today: the Aryans, whose immigration during the middle of the second millennium BCE is the crucial event in Indian history, are presented in their ancient literature as meat-eaters, who certainly did not shrink from slaughtering and consuming their numerous cattle.

It is beyond the scope of the present investigation to conclusively answer the question, nor is it possible or intended to write a complete history of *ahiṃsā* and cattle protection based on a collection

1 About 1990, G.-D. Sontheimer reckoned 70% of Hindus to be non-vegetarians (private communication (hereafter p.c.) to WB).

2 Gandhi 1960.

3 Alsdorf 1955: 132 – This is not the case any more, see e.g. Harris quoted in Chapple 1993: 137 (p.c. from Chapple) (WB).

of material widely scattered throughout the entire literature.[4] It will merely be attempted to trace through observations, especially in the 'legal texts', the gradual emergence and assertion of vegetarianism and cattle-protection, and thus, perhaps, to approach an answer to our question. Two methodical remarks must be made in advance.

Firstly, it should once more be stated clearly that vegetarianism and a cattle-taboo must be distinguished despite all relatedness: millions of Hindus, **[5]** it is true, eat fish, chicken and goats, but on no account beef.[5] The ban on cattle-killing prevails also in places where, perhaps in the service of the goddess Kālī, or in religious festivals especially in Nepal, streams of goat- and buffalo blood flow, and any tourist to India has experienced that even in English-run hotels they are served chicken or what is called mutton (which in reality is goat) at every meal, but very rarely beef. The cattle-taboo is, therefore, to be treated as distinct from vegetarianism, or in addition to it.

Secondly, Indian vegetarianism is unequivocally based on *ahiṃsā*; this is clearly expressed in a stanza of the most famous and authoritative of the so-called Indian legal texts, the Manu-smṛti:

'One cannot obtain meat without injuring living beings, but the killing of living beings does not lead to heaven; therefore, one must do without meat.'[6]

Yet so logical a conclusion: no flesh without animal slaughter, therefore, no *ahiṃsā* without renunciation of meat consumption – appears inevitable only to us and to the majority of *modern* Indians. By no means, however, is it drawn everywhere even today, as a quote from T. Hagen's book on Nepal, one of many examples, illustrates[7]: 'For the Sherpas the [Buddhist] religion prohibits the killing of animals, but they love meat nevertheless. Therefore butchers are invited to come from Tibet every year in order to slaughter a few yaks.'

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4 Much has been compiled in Om Prakash 1961.

5 Some, especially brahmins, are said to eat beef stealthily because it is cheaper than goatmeat bought by many people (p.c. Sontheimer to WB).

6 5, 48: *nâkṛtvā prāṇināṃ hiṃsāṃ māṃsam utpadyate kvacit / na ca prāṇi-vadhaḥ svargyas, tasmān māṃsaṃ vivarjayet*. A Mahābhārata stanza expresses the same thing more drastically (13, 115, 26): 'For flesh is certainly not produced from grass, wood or stone! Flesh comes from the killing of creatures, therefore it is a sin to eat it' (*na hi māṃsaṃ tṛṇāt kāṣṭhād upalād vâpi jāyate / hatvā jantuṃ tato māṃsaṃ, tasmād doṣas tu bhakṣaṇe*). – See also, e.g. Zimmerman 1987: ch. VII 'Vegetarianism and Nonviolence' (WB).

7 Hagen 1960: 76.

The same 'moral principle', according to which it suffices not to do the killing oneself while one can unscrupulously profit from the killing done by others, held good originally and for a long time in ancient India. This is shown by an inquiry into the two great reform religions, Buddhism and Jainism, arising in the sixth century BCE.[8] They have both played a role in the history of *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism, a role which has usually been largely misunderstood.

It is right that both particularly stress *ahiṃsā*. Nevertheless it is, to begin with, absolutely certain that the Buddha was not a vegetarian and did not forbid meat-eating to his monks either. As to this, it is quite irrelevant whether eating the *sūkara-maddava* **[6]** which, according to the canonical report[9] causes the Master's death, was 'juicy pork' (which appears fairly certain) or whatever else for there is no doubt that the Master and his disciples, as the texts report, ate also meat on numerous occasions when they were invited to the houses of the laity.

The monks in Burma, who follow and guard the ancient injunctions and teachings with particular purity and austerity, nowadays also accept meat as alms from the laity without more ado and consume the same.[10] They are thus in full accord with the oldest code of the rules of the Order, the Vinayapiṭaka of the Pali canon. In it, meat-eating by the monks and the Buddha is often mentioned and everywhere presumed,[11] and meat and fish, along with rice boiled in milk, groats and barley flour, form the solemn and oft-repeated list of the 'five (basic) foodstuffs'.[12] Not only that, but vegetarianism is explicitly discarded or declared unnecessary under certain conditions.

It is related in Cullavagga 7, 3, 14f. (Vin II 197, 4ff.), how the wicked Devadatta planned to bring about a schism by proposing to

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8 Probably rather in the fifth century, see Dundas 2002: 24 (WB).

9 Franke 1913: 222 note 4, and Waldschmidt 1939: 63ff.

10 According to the information passed on by word of mouth by leading Burmese monks, but a quotation from Tinker 1957:171 may be added: 'For instance, Buddhism abhors the taking of life and, with its ancient Hindu associations, particularly objects to the killing of cows for meat. Within recent years a vegetarian movement has gained ground among leading exponents of Buddhism in which Ū Nu is particularly prominent. The Prime Minister has disavowed any intention by those in power to prohibit the killing of animals for food, nevertheless this practice is definitely becoming increasingly restricted . . . In Lower Burma the sale of beef has ceased entirely, owing to restrictions.'

11 Cf. the indexes to Horner 1949–66 under 'meat' and 'flesh'.

12 *bhojanīyaṃ nāma pañca bhojanāni: odano kummāso sattu maccho maṃsaṃ.*

the Buddha five intensifications of the rules of the Order: the monks must live for life only in the forest and not go into the villages, live only on alms and not accept invitations, wear only rags from rubbish-heaps and not let themselves be presented with clothes, live only under trees and not under a roof, and finally, eat neither flesh nor fish; infringements of these injunctions would have to be counted as transgression.[13] The rejection of these proposals, which **[7]** Devadatta expected, then followed quite promptly. The Buddha left it to the monks, whether to dwell in the forest or in the vicinity of a village, whether to beg for alms or to accept invitations, whether to wear rags or to accept donations of clothes, and he permitted an eight months' stay (outside the rainy season that is!) under a tree. As to the last proposal, however, he declared: 'Fish and meat are pure under three conditions: when (the monk) has not seen, nor heard and has no suspicion (that the animal was killed on purpose for him).'[14]

The bracketed supplement follows inter alia from a story narrated in the Mahāvagga (76, 31, 12–14; Vin I 237, 24ff.). The general Sīha in Vesāli has obtained a lot of meat for the Buddha and his monks, who had accepted his invitation to a meal. While this is being consumed, the Jains run through the streets and shout:

> Today the general Sīha killed a big animal and prepared therefrom a meal for the ascetic Gautama. The ascetic Gautama eats this meat although he knows that it was especially killed for him (*uddissa kataṃ*), that the killing was (done) for his sake (*paṭicca-kammaṃ*).[15]

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13 *sādhu, bhante, bhikkhū yāvajīvaṃ āraññakā assu, yo gām'-antaṃ osareyya, vajjaṃ naṃ phuseyya; yāva jīvaṃ piṇḍa-pātikā assu, yo nimantanaṃ sādiyeyya, vajjaṃ naṃ phuseyya; yāvajīvaṃ paṃsu-kūlikā assu, yo gahapati-cīvaraṃ sādiyeyya, vajjaṃ naṃ phuseyya; yāvajīvaṃ rukkha-mūlikā assu, yo channaṃ upagaccheyya, vajjaṃ naṃ phuseyya; yāvajīvaṃ maccha-maṃsaṃ na khādeyyuṃ, yo maccha-maṃsaṃ khādeyya, vajjaṃ naṃ phuseyyā ti.* – This would presuppose that many laypeople would inhabit the jungle (WB).

14 *tikoṭi-parisuddhaṃ maccha-maṃsaṃ: a-diṭṭhaṃ a-ssutaṃ a-parisankitaṃ ti.*

15 *ajja Sīhena senā-patinā thūlaṃ pasuṃ vadhitvā samaṇassa Gotamassa bhattaṃ kataṃ, taṃ samaṇo Gotamo jānaṃ uddissa kataṃ maṃsaṃ paribhuñjati paṭicca-kammaṃ* (Horner: '... the recluse Gotama makes use of this meat, knowing that it was killed on purpose (for him), that the deed was (done) for his sake'). The expressions *uddissa kataṃ* and *paṭicca-kammaṃ*, of which the first, as we shall see, has a parallel with the Jains,

The general, to whom these reproaches are reported, rejects the same as a calumny and protests that he would not even for his life's sake deliberately deprive any living being of its life.[16]

In fact, he neither slaughtered the same nor let it be slaughtered, but had only sent out a servant with the customary formula: 'Go, my dear, and see, if there is meat.'[17] At the end of the meal the Buddha announces to his monks:

> One should, monks, not eat meat when one knows that it has been killed especially for him (*uddissa kataṃ*) . . . I permit you, monks, fish and **[8]** meat, which are pure in a three-fold respect: (when namely the monk) has not seen, nor heard, nor cherished a suspicion . . .[18]

For the Buddha and his monks, therefore, abstinence from meat and fish belonged to the nonsensical, and hence objectionable tightening and overstraining of the monastic rules.[19] The essential condition for eating meat is, however, that the consumer has neither killed the animal himself, nor had it killed especially for him, so that the responsibility for the killing does neither directly nor indirectly fall upon him. We shall see that a similar condition, but even more strictly conceived and hedged in, also holds good for the Jains.

Today the Jains, laymen as well as monks, are the strictest of all vegetarians, and *ahiṃsā* represents to them as the highest command of their religion (*ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ*): they extend it even to vermin; I have myself witnessed how a poisonous centipede (*kankhajūrā*), which had bitten a monk, was put in a brass pot and set free in a field. That Jain monks may have ever partaken of meat is inconceivable and unacceptable to modern orthodox Jains.[20]

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in connection with 'flesh' could be euphemisms; as to this we can render them only with 'killed particularly for . . . ' and 'killed for his sake'.

16 *na ca mayaṃ jīvita-hetu pi sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvitā voropeyyāma.* – This seems an odd utterance for a general (WB).

17 *gaccha, bhaṇe, pavatta-maṃsaṃ jānāhi!* (Horner: 'Go, good fellow, find out if there is meat to hand').

18 *na, bhikkhave, jānaṃ uddissa kataṃ maṃsaṃ paribhuñjitabbaṃ . . . anujānāmi, bhikkhave, tikoṭi-parisuddhaṃ maccha-maṃsaṃ: a-diṭṭhaṃ a-ssutaṃ a-parisankitaṃ.* – Seyfort Ruegg 1980:240 refers with the wrong page number (53) to this passage in Alsdorf (WB).

19 As regards the later battle against meat-eating in some Mahāyāna books cf. Waldschmidt 1939: 80ff.

20 See Kapadia's article further down (WB).