Utopian *ahiṃsā* and the violence inherent in food in early Buddhism

Pāli texts vis-à-vis early Upaniṣads and Aśoka edicts

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The present contribution aims to analyse some early Buddhist tenets in the *Suttanipāta* (verses: 220-221). According to this text, the layman cannot fully practise *ahiṃsā* (non-violence / non-harmfulness) while, in contrast, the monk always protects animals; the layman never being equal to a monk due to the latter's meditative practice. The study will explore how violence is inextricably connected with food through the analysis of some of the stages presented in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*'s Buddhist path of liberation and the foundational myth in the *Aggaññasutta*. These two texts will be confronted with Upaniṣadic evidence to contextualise these ideas in a broad Indian ascetic *milieu*. Finally, we will investigate how the *Suttanipāta*'s principle, according to which the monk always protects animals, has been assimilated and utilised by King Aśoka Maurya, with a particular reference to the Rock Edict 1.

Keywords: Theravāda, *Aggaññasutta*, *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, *Manomaya-kāya*, Meditation, Aśoka, Upaniṣad, Vegetarianism, *Ahiṃsā.*

1. Introduction[1]

It is apparent that the adoption of a vegetarian diet was closely interconnected with the gradual affirmation of the concept of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence / non-harmfulness) in ancient India. As Ludwig Alsdorf ([1962] 2010: 3) sagaciously highlighted, the link between the two is clearly revealed, for example, within a stanza of the *Mānava-Dharmaśastra*:[2]

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I am grateful to Claudia Antonetti and Cinzia Pieruccini for their feedback on the first draft of this paper. I would also like to thank the reviewers for their useful remarks. It goes without saying that all remaining errors are my own responsibility. Generally speaking, all translations from Indian languages are my own unless otherwise noted. I should point out that translations from the *Suttanipāta* and Upaniṣads are respectively mainly by Norman (2001) and Olivelle (1998).

[2] These verses are often quoted in modern scholarship, see for instance Pieruccini (2019: 60; 2023: 248). It is worth noting that David Seyfort Ruegg argued that "the Mahāyānasūtras do not derive their prohibition of meat-eating directly from the

> No one can produce meat without harming living beings.[3]

The above stanza in the *Mānava-Dharmaśastra* highlights, through a cause-effect principle, how meat can only be obtained by killing an animal. Furthermore, the *Mānava-Dharmaśastra* extends this cause-effect principle to all links in the meat production chain, from those who commission the slaughter, to the butchers, the intermediaries, and ultimately the consumers:

> The ones who commissioned, the butchers, the slaughterers, the buyers and sellers, the cooks, the waiters, the diners: These are [all] killers.[4]

The above passage presents a principle of 'Collective Responsibility', according to which all agents involved in any given process are equally responsible for the outcome. This principle occurs in Buddhism within the Mahāyāna *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* among many arguments in favour of the adoption of a vegetarian diet (cf. Schmithausen 2002: 319; Ham 2019: 141). As a principle, 'Collective Responsibility' appears to also be involved in the *Abhidharmakośa*, when the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu suggests that there is Collective Responsibility even for mere participation in war, since the guilt of the individual is extended to the entire group.[5] However, in an earlier form of Buddhism represented by the Pāli texts of the Theravāda tradition, violence is rejected in all its forms,[6] albeit early Buddhists were not vegetarian.[7] Monks could accept meat as food while on almsgiving (Vin I 237-238) and even the Buddha himself was described as eating meat-based dishes.[8] Apparently, a principle such as that of the 'Collective Responsibility' was not current at that time and responsibility was probably regarded as a personal matter. This early stance is in stark contrast with later Buddhist developments, such as

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principle of *avihiṃsā* [= *ahiṃsā*]" (Ruegg 1980: 238; square brackets mine). However, in a more recent work, Ham (2019: 140) highlights how the Mahāyāna *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* does refer to a logic akin to that of the *Mānava-Dharmaśastra* (see also below).

[3] *nākṛtvā prāṇināṃ hiṃsāṃ māṃsam utpadyate kva cit* (Manu 5.48).

[4] *anumantā viśasitā nihantā krayavikrayī | saṃskartā copahartā ca khādakaś ceti ghātakāḥ* (Manu 5.51).

[5] "When there is an army etc. [though] the action is done by one [still] all are like the murderer" (*senādiṣvekakāryatvāt sarve karttṛvadanvitāḥ*; Abhidh-k 4.72). In this regard, see also Keown (2005: 69-83) and Shahar (2008: 20-22).

[6] "The earliest Buddhist texts (as represented by the Pali Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas) thus take an uncompromising stand against violence: violence in all its forms is condemned, while the advantages of such qualities as friendliness and compassion are praised and extolled repeatedly. The one who wishes to put the teachings of the Buddha into practice must renounce all forms of violence" (Gethin 2007: 62).

[7] For an overview, see Harvey (2000: 159-163).

[8] *E.g.* A III 49-51, see also McDermott (1989: 27), Stewart (2010: 124).

those established in Chinese Buddhism and, more broadly, in the Mahāyāna, where the adoption of vegetarianism was an expected feature (Green 2016).

Therefore, in this paper I will try to demonstrate that early Buddhists' approaches to the questions of meat-eating and violence are based on their worldview, one in which the human being, the cosmos, the path of liberation and food, are all interlaced with each other in a coherent picture. In so doing, we should abandon the dichotomy between *ahiṃsā*/vegetarianism to contemplate the relationship between violence and food. In my opinion, the dichotomy of violence/food is a more valuable one when we consider early Buddhism, especially because it likely shaped the final form of some Buddhist teachings. Finally, I will briefly explore some of the ways in which some Buddhist principles have become part of the ideological repertoire of Aśoka Maurya, suggesting a nuanced understanding of his political enterprise.

To start with, I shall consider a short passage from the *Suttanipāta*, one in which a clear and intrinsic difference between the monk and the layman is declared. This passage provides some early Buddhist ideas that are inextricably connected with the Buddhist worldview, which in turn is connected with the ideas circulating in ascetic circles in ancient India.

2. The early Buddhist conceits concerning violence in the *Suttanipāta*

Two *Suttanipāta* verses are of interest here:

> The two of them, with far different dwelling place and way of life, are not equal – the householder supporting a wife and the unselfish one of good vows. *The householder is not fully restrained in respect of the killing of other living creatures; the sage, being restrained, constantly protects living creatures* (220).
> As the crested [peacock] with blue neck never attains the speed of the goose [when] going through the sky, so *a householder does not equal a bhikkhu, a sage [who is] apart, meditating in the wood* (221) (transl. by Norman 2001: 27; emphasis added).[9]

These verses are part of a section of the *Suttanipāta* which is thought by some to be referenced in the Bairāṭ edict of Aśoka (cf. Olivelle 2023: 115-124 and Tieken 2023: 302), which, if true, would testify their existence at least in the middle of the third century BC, but presumably even earlier if they were important enough to be inscribed in stone. The passage discriminates between the monk (also referred

[9] *asamā ubho dūravihāravuttino | gihi dāraposī amamo ca subbato | parapāṇarodhāya gihī asaññato | niccaṃ munī rakkhati pāṇine yato || sikhī yathā nīlagīvo vihaṅgamo | haṃsassa nopeti javaṃ kudācanaṃ | evaṃ gihī nānukaroti bhikkhuno | munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyato ti ||* (Sn 220-221).

to as 'sage,' viz. *muni*) and the layman (referred to as 'householder,' viz. *gihin*). The established distinction seems to be congenital and conveys a sense of a radical difference between the two social roles. In particular, we can infer that: 1) the layman is not able to fully practise non-violence; while in contrast, 2) the monk always protects animals; and, in summary, 3) the layman is not equal to the monk who always meditates. Therefore, in what follows, we will investigate the reasons why a layman is unable to fully embrace a non-violent lifestyle, the radical incomparability between layman and monk and the fact that this is due to the meditative practice of the latter, and, finally, the importance that the idea that monks always protect animals has had in the socio-political history of India. Starting with the first question, which concerns the layman's inability to fully adopt a non-violent behaviour, we should consider some of the issues that Buddhists had in relation to food supplies.

3. Buddhist eating habits

Food is a primary element for the sustenance of the individual, but is also the bearer of cultural traits of any given society. Therefore, how to get food, especially in a systematic manner, is not a trivial question. The most secure way for a person to obtain food in a systematic manner is for them to actively produce their own food. For a Buddhist monk, however, the production of food is always perceived to involve violence. In the case of the production of meat, the violence is self-evident. However, for a Buddhist monk, the act of cultivating the land would be problematic as well. It would be, indeed, virtually impossible for a Buddhist monk to engage in agricultural works without violating religious legislative norms, as is the case for digging the earth, a fundamental action when farming land, which involves disturbing and killing creatures: "If any bhikkhu should dig the earth or have it dug, there is an offence entailing expiation" (transl. by Norman in Pruitt and Norman 2001: 48-49).[10] Although this passage does not directly address agriculture, and its range and scope can be wider than that derived from a plain reading,[11] its implications have been considered significant in assessing the Buddhist approach to such agricultural activities.[12] The underlying idea is that the act of digging earth is

[10] *yo pana bhikkhu pathaviṃ khaṇeyya vā khaṇāpeyya vā, pācittiyaṃ* (Vin IV 32).

[11] For a broader discussion on this *pācittiya* rule, see Aono (2021: 144-147).

[12] Cf. Horner (1945: 436-437). Horner (1945: 454) eventually states that "Warfare and agriculture were, however, entirely ruled out as monastic occupations."

connected with the act of injuring living beings with one sense-faculty (*ekindriya jīva*), namely very tiny microorganisms who live in the earth.[13]

Thus, the production of food would not fit the monastic requirements to live an ethical life. Therefore, the only way to get food would be for them to gather it in some way. Theoretically, food can be gathered in nature, but this may not necessarily be a safe option for systematically obtaining food. Finding food in nature might indeed be quite a random process, which may be influenced by the geographical area, the seasons etc., and it does not seem to be an option that numerous people could adopt at the same time, due to scarcity of available foodstuffs. Therefore, a better option seems to consist of gathering food from other people, who clearly have the same food needs and, with fewer ethical qualms, could be more serenely involved in a systematic production of food. The latter option is the one adopted by monks, as they opted to wander in cities and villages for alms, begging food from laymen. The validity of this method to collect food suggests to us that the principle of 'Collective Responsibility' (see above § 1) was not accepted by early Buddhism. We may even argue that all the karmic results from producing food were only suffered by laypeople and the responsibility was regarded as personal.[14]

Therefore, from the above discussion, we can understand the reason why this *sutta* of the *Suttanipāta* states that the layman is not able to fully practise non-violence: since a layman is involved in the active production of food, they are unable to escape from causing harm to creatures.

Eventually, the Buddhist tradition conceived another way through which individuals could feed themselves, but not a way available to everybody, a way that is reserved for individuals, such as monks, who have embarked on the Buddhist path of liberation. This other way involves the creation of a new subtle body that has different nutritional needs compared to the physical body. This new way of feeding would not in any way cause harm to living beings.

[13] The Buddha's agony of seeing insects and small creatures dead due to the tilling of the soil is expressed poetically in Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (Buddha-c 5.5).

[14] The early Buddhist attitude concerning food and meat-eating is expressed in the well-known *Jīvakasutta* (M 55). According to this text, the monk must accept any food, even of animal origin, as long as he does not have even the slightest suspicion that the animal was killed specifically for him; he must eat what is offered to him without this resulting in desire, attachment, or pleasure; however, the laypeople are guilty of very serious sins if they kill and cook an animal specifically for the Buddha or his disciples.

4. Meditative outcomes in the Buddhist path of liberation: transcending physical limitations

In referencing the 'Buddhist path of liberation,' I mean in this context a stereotypical path which occurs in a variety of versions within both Nikāyas and Āgamas.[15] For the scopes of the present article, I will consider the long exposition of the path as reported in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D 2), which is the *locus classicus* in the Pāli canon for a version of the path that includes the creation of a body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*).[16]

Without going into great detail, we can briefly summarise some key highlights of the path, which include a prototypical monk as the main character. The possibility for a Buddhist path of liberation to come into being is due to the appearance of a Tathāgata (viz. a Buddha) in the world (*tathāgato loke uppajjati*; D I 62). Thus, a householder, having heard the doctrine, gains faith and takes up the life of a Buddhist monk. The new monk cultivates morality, practises self-restraint in various ways and lives a mindful life until he abandons the five hindrances (*pañca-nīvaraṇa*). With this, he attains ever deeper meditative absorption states (*jhāna*) until the fourth level of absorption (*catutthajjhāna*). Now, according to the narrative, the monk is able to develop some meditative powers. At first, the monk is able to direct his mind (*citta*) toward 'knowing and seeing' (*ñāṇa-dassana*), that is to say, he discovers that the body is impermanent and that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is dependent on it. Later, the monk creates from the physical body another body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*) and develops psychophysical powers (*iddhi*) and higher knowledges (*abhiññā*); the latter culminate in the knowledge that all defilements are destroyed and so the monk achieves liberation, the acme of the path.

For the purpose of this paper, two stages of the process of liberation are of fundamental importance: the act of knowing and seeing (*ñāṇa-dassana*) and the creation of a body made of mind (*manomaya-kāya*). Concerning the first, we can find the following description in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*:

> When the mind is concentrated in this way, purified, cleaned, unblemished, deprived of impurities, malleable, fit for work, steadfast, having attained impassibility, he directs and turns the mind for the sake of knowing and seeing (*ñāṇa-dassana*). He knows thus: "This is my body (*kāya*), which has a form, consists of the four great elements, born of mother and father, *is maintained by rice and junket*, has the inherent quality of impermanence, is subjected to erosion, abrasion, breaking, destruction, and this is my consciousness (*viññāṇa*) which leans on it, is bound to it."[17]

[15] A recent study about the differences among the various versions has been provided by Gethin (2020).

[16] In this regard, see De Notariis (2019a: 52-53).

[17] *so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatūpakkilese mudu-bhūte kammaniye ṭhite ānejjappatte ñāṇa-dassanāya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti. so evaṃ pajānāti: ayaṃ kho me kāyo rūpī cātum-mahā-bhūtiko mātā-pettika-sambhavo* odana-

The above passage tells us how a cultivated mind could be directed and turned toward the physical body (*kāya*). In doing so, it seems that an awareness of the fundamental elements or parts of this body emerges. What is striking is that the text highlights how the physical body is maintained by rice and junket (*odana-kummāsupacaya*). Rice and junket, in this context, could be interpreted as a sort of quintessential solid food. Indeed, in another similar context in the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* (D 9) the physical body is clearly described as something that requires solid food to endure: "O Lord, I postulate a gross *attan* (viz. a physical embodiment)[18] which has a form, consists of the four great elements, *feeds on solid food*."[19] Bearing in mind that one of the main characteristics of the physical body is that it needs solid food, let us consider the following stage in the Buddhist path of liberation: the creation of a body made of mind. Most likely, this new mental body has been created as a sort of reaction and in opposition to the physical body.[20] The textual description of the body made of mind goes as follows:

> He directs and turns the mind (*citta*) in order to create a body made of mind (*manomaya*). He creates from this body another body which has a form, made of mind, with all limbs and [bodily] parts, without defect of any faculty.[21]

As the reader might promptly notice, the passage does not refer to the need, for this body, to take solid food. This new mental body seems, therefore, to have a similar outward appearance as that of the physical body, but the text is silent about the nutritional needs of such a mental body. As things stand, to infer that the body made of mind does not require solid food would be a sort of *argumentum ex silentio*, as it would be only based on the absence of a clear statement. Fortunately for us, however, there is a text that clearly reports the nutritional needs of beings incarnated in such a mental body. The text in question is the famous *Aggaññasutta* (D 27), whose title has been translated by Thomas W. Rhys Davids

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kummāsupacayo *anicc-ucchādana-parimaddana-bhedana-viddhaṃsana-dhammo, idañ ca pana me viññāṇaṃ ettha sitaṃ ettha paṭibaddhan ti* (D I 76).

[18] This interpretation for the term *attan* (= Sanskrit: *ātman*), usually translated as 'self' or 'soul,' is based on De Notariis (2019a). The passage we will analyse below from the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* will bolster the present interpretation.

[19] *oḷārikam kho ahaṃ bhante attānaṃ paccemi rūpiṃ cātummahābhūtikaṃ* kabaliṅkārāhāra-bhakkhan *ti* (D I 186).

[20] This can be argued not only from a conceptual level, but also from a textual level, thanks to the testimony of the Sanskrit version of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (= *Śrāmaṇyaphalasūtra*) survived in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*. Indeed, in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (SBhV II 245), the stage of *ñāṇa-dassana* is assimilated within the stage of the *manomaya-kāya*, thus presenting the new mental body in sharp contrast to the physical one. In this regard, cf. De Notariis (2019a: 73 n. 50).

[21] *manomayaṃ kāyaṃ abhinimmināya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti. so imamhā kāyā aññaṃ kāyaṃ abhinimmināti rūpiṃ manomayaṃ sabbaṅga-paccaṅgiṃ ahīnindriyaṃ* (D I 77).

as 'A Book of Genesis' (Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921: 77). Indeed, the text preserves a foundational myth in which food plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative.[22] Therefore, we find that during a sort of golden age there were beings who had a body made of mind (*manomaya*) and whose food needs were different from those of an ordinary human being:

> There is a time, Vaseṭṭha, when after a long lapse of time, at a certain point, this world contracts. When the world contracts beings are, as a rule, born in the Realm of Radiance. There, they are mind-made, *feeding on joy*, self-luminous, moving through the atmosphere, abiding splendidly, thus they remain for a long and lasting period of time.[23]

Some cosmological ideas are underlying within this account. Treatments on the nature of the cosmos appear fragmentary within the older canonical texts, while a more systematic treatment is provided by the Abhidhamma and post-canonical literature.[24] Generally speaking,[25] the Buddhist cosmos has neither a beginning nor an end, but alternates between periods of expansion and contraction. In the contraction phase, the world is destroyed by fire, water, and wind, yet a part of the cosmos—that is, the hierarchically highest part—is never touched by these destructive cycles. Living beings, before each apocalyptic phase, are somehow warned of the impending end of the world (in particular, of their world), so they apply themselves in the practice of morality, obtaining a rebirth in a higher realm and thus escaping destruction (cf. De Notariis 2019b: 20-21). This appears to be the situation that forms the backdrop of the *Aggañña*sutta's account. The beings are born in the so-called 'Realm of Radiance' (*Ābhassara*), which constitutes a heavenly realm. From the perspective of the parallels existing between the macrocosm and microcosm—*alias*, cosmos and psyche, or in other words, the idea that a particular state of existence parallels a particular state of mind (cf. Gethin 1997)—the Realm of Radiance parallels the attainment of the second meditative absorption (*jhāna*).[26] This is significant, as the second

[22] Studies on the *Aggañña*sutta are quite numerous, but one that specifically focused on the role of food in the *Aggañña*sutta is that of Kong (2016: 40-124).

[23] *hoti kho so, Vaseṭṭha, samayo yaṃ kadāci karahaci dīghassa addhuno accayena ayaṃ loko saṃvaṭṭati. saṃvaṭṭamāne loke yebhuyyena sattā Ābhassara-saṃvaṭṭanikā honti. te tattha honti manomayā* pīti-bhakkhā *sayaṃ-pabhā antalikkha-carā subhaṭṭhāyino, ciraṃ dīghaṃ addhānaṃ tiṭṭhanti* (D III 84).

[24] Cf. Gombrich (1975: 132-133), Gethin (1998: 115).

[25] For a general treatment of the 'Buddhist Apocalypse,' I have considered the systematic account of the post-canonical text called *Visuddhimagga* 'The Path of Purification' (cf. Vism 414-420), which, however, although a work of the fifth century AD, deals with themes and episodes that already appear in similar formulation within the canonical texts. In this regard see the *Sattasuriyasutta* (A IV 100-106) and our *Aggañña*sutta, cf. Collins (2009: 519).

[26] Cf. the various reconstructions of the Buddhist cosmology: Gethin (1997: 195; 1998: 116-117), Collins (1998: 298-299), De Notariis (2019a: 66-67).

meditative absorption has joy and happiness born of concentration (*samādhija*; D I 74), whereas the third meditative absorption would have only happiness without joy (*nippītika*; D I 75) (cf. Harvey 2018: 8-9).

Therefore, if we combine the logic of the Buddhist path of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* with the evidence from the *Aggaññasutta*, we can deduce that a monk can, through meditation, develop a new body made of mind, which no longer requires solid food, but can feed on more subtle energies, such as joy.[27]

Theoretically, it might be wondered whether the *Aggaññasutta*, in presenting joy as a potential food, is telling us something that Buddhists really believed in the past or whether the whole account should be interpreted as a sort of fiction, which was regarded as such by its redactors and audience. Richard Gombrich (1992), for instance, read the *Aggaññasutta* as a humorous parody by the Buddha of a Brahmanical creation story, an interpretation that was criticised by Rupert Gethin (2006: 66-67) who argued that it is not implausible that the Buddha could have genuinely believed in the myth of creation within the *Aggaññasutta*. Both positions led to valuable insights for the scholarly understanding of the text. For the sake of the present discussion, it is important to highlight how Pāli literature preserved other examples of nutritious energies and how the logics of their functioning is consistent with the Upaniṣadic thought, allowing us to assume that nutritious energies were part of a shared worldview.

5. Nutritious energies in early Buddhism and Upaniṣadic antecedents

In the *Aggaññasutta*, we have found that joy (*pīti*) can be considered food for some deities embodied in a mind-made body, and this actually seems to be (in a quite literal way) 'food for thought.' We can define joy, in this context, as a sort of 'nutritious energy,' meaning something that performs the same nutritional function as food, but without being food in our typical sense of the term. Buddhist texts in Pāli testify to the existence of nutritious energies which can compensate for food intake. A canonical example is provided by the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (M 36), a text in which we find a description of the strenuous ascetic practices (*dukkara-kārikā*) undertaken by the Buddha when he was still a Bodhisatta, that is a Buddha-to-be. Among these ascetic exercises, the practice of the total renunciation of food also occurs:

[27] "'Feeding on joy (*pītibhakkhā*)' means that the joy carries out the function of food" (*pītiyeva āhārakiccaṃ sādhetī ti pītibhakkhā*; Sv III 865).

> O Aggivessana, I thought this: "What if I would start to stop [eating] food completely?" Then, Aggivessana, the deities approached me and said: "Sir, do not start to stop [eating] food completely; if you, Sir, start to stop [eating] food completely, we will forcefully transfuse divine [nutritive] energy (*ojā*) to you through the pores of your skin, and you will survive thanks to it."[28]

In the above passage we find that the Buddha-to-be is intent on giving up food completely. However, in doing so, he would risk dying through starvation, which is why the deities announced that if he did so they would keep him alive by injecting the nutritive energy called *ojā* through the pores of his skin. The Pāli term *ojā* is equivalent to the Sanskrit *ojas* and, therefore, we can understand it as a kind of energy endowed with substantiality,[29] and one which in Buddhism is clearly connected with food. For instance, we have a canonical example according to which food is not appealing to a man who has just finished eating while the nutritive energy (*ojā*) stays in his body, but that once this has disappeared, he once again finds food appealing (A III 396). In another example, a great tree can absorb from the earth the nutritive energy through its roots (*mūlāni* [...] *uddham ojam abhiharanti*; S II 87). However, *ojā* is not the only term that conveys the idea of 'nutritive energy or essence' in the canonical texts, as we find a case in which the word *rasa* ('essence/flavour') is used to perform the same function:

> Just as, o monks, a seed of either sugarcane, or rice, or grapes is planted in moist soil, whatever nutrients it absorbs from the soil (*paṭhavi-rasa*) and water (*āpo-rasa*), all these lead to sweetness (*madhuratta*), pleasantness and agreeableness (*asecanakattā*).[30]

It might be argued, *prima facie*, that in this context *rasa* only means 'flavour.' However, as we will soon see, the contexts of application for the word *rasa* are many and refer, in general terms, to a nutritious essence that passes from the earth to food (perhaps, the 'essence' conveyed by *rasa* was somehow

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[28] *tassa mayhaṃ Aggivessana etad ahosi: yan nūnāhaṃ sabbaso āhārupacchedāya paṭipajjeyyan ti. atha kho maṃ Aggivessana devatā upasaṅkamitvā etad avocuṃ: mā kho tvaṃ mārisa sabbaso āhārupacchedāya paṭipajji, sace kho tvaṃ mārisa sabbaso āhārupacchedāya paṭipajjissasi tassa te mayaṃ dibbaṃ ojaṃ lomakūpehi ajjhoharissāma, tāya tvaṃ yāpessasī* (M I 245). We find similar evidence in the first section of the *Jātaka* collection called *Nidānakathā* 'Introductory Story,' a prose section which recounts the life of the Buddha, including life episodes prior to the achievement of enlightenment: "The Bodhisatta [thought]: 'I will perform the uttermost strenuous ascetic practices!' He completely relied on only one sesamum seed, a rice grain and so on, he even cut out food entirely, but the gods accumulated [nutritive] energy and infused him with it through the pores of the skin" (*Bodhisatto pi kho koṭippattaṃ dukkarakārikaṃ karissāmī ti ekatilataṇḍulādīhi pi vītināmesi, sabbaso pi āhārūpacchedaṃ akāsi, devatā pi lomakūpehi ojaṃ upasaṃharamānā paṭikkhipi*; Ja I 67).

[29] In this regard, see Gonda (1952).

[30] *seyyathāpi bhikkhave ucchubījaṃ vā sālibījaṃ vā muddikābījaṃ vā allāya paṭhaviyā nikkhittaṃ yañ c' eva paṭhavirasaṃ upādiyati yañ ca āporasaṃ upādiyati sabbaṃ taṃ madhurattāya sātattāya asecanakattāya saṃvattati* (A I 32). For a discussion on this passage, see De Notariis (2023: 94-95).

'flavoured'). The very idea that there could be a substance that can pass from one thing to another may look like an Upaniṣadic trope, as we find in the so-called 'two paths theory' in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (BU 6.2.15-16) and *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (CU 5.10.1-8).[31] In particular, the latter presents a theory of rebirth based on a passage of something (let us say, the essence of the person, viz. the self/soul) from the cremated body up to the sky and, later, a kind of fall or a return (*nivartante*; CU 5.10.5) occurs along the same path. At first, the essence becomes space, from space it becomes wind, from wind to smoke, from smoke to thundercloud, from thundercloud to rain-cloud, from rain-cloud it rains and this produces fruits of the earth, which are food. When one eats it, semen flows into them and so one comes into being again (CU 5.10.5-6). The man is part of a kind of ecological cycle in which food plays a role. A similar account, though different in some details, is found within the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, an Upaniṣad that is later than the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya* but still quite early and probably pre-Buddhist.[32] This text, according to Carlos Lopez, "provides a snapshot into the unique Vedic understanding and fixation with food" (1997: 11). In particular, and compelling to our discussion, we find a clear statement that the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* considers the human physical body as constituted by food, even involving the word *rasa*, which should refer in this context to a kind of 'essence' rather than 'flavour:'

> From this very self (*ātman*) did space come into being; from space, air; from air, fire; from fire, the waters; from the waters, the earth; *from the earth, plants; from plants, food; and from food, man. Now, a man here is formed from the essence of food* [sa vā eṣa puruṣo 'nna-rasa-mayaḥ] (transl. by Olivelle 1998: 301; square brackets mine).[33]

The last part of this passage resembles the last part of the 'two paths theory' found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and *Chāndogyopaniṣad*. Here, the man (*puruṣa*) is made of (*-maya*) the essence (*rasa*) of food (*anna*). In the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, the physical body is the first embodiment in the doctrine of five embodiments, which is often referred to as the *pañcakośa* (or *pañcakoṣa*) 'Five-sheath' doctrine in classical Vedānta.[34] This doctrine exhibits five types of *ātman*, which reside one inside the other like a Russian nesting doll and seem to come forth from the densest element to the subtlest. These five kinds of *ātman* are made (*-maya*) of different substances: food (*anna*); breath (*prāṇa*); mind (*manas*);

[31] In this regard, see Schmithausen (1993-1994), Gombrich (2009: 40-43).

[32] Following Olivelle (1998: 12-13).

[33] *tasmād vā etasmād ātmana ākāśaḥ saṃbhūtaḥ | ākāśād vāyuḥ | vāyor agniḥ | agner āpaḥ | adabhyaḥ pṛthivī |* pṛthivyā oṣadhayaḥ | oṣadhībhyonnam | annāt puruṣaḥ | sa vā eṣa puruṣo 'nnarasamayaḥ | (TU 2.1.1).

[34] See *e.g.* Nakamura (1955: 79) and van Buitenen (1979: 28 n. 2); for a critical discussion see Bhattacharya (1966: 9).

perception (*vijñāna*); and bliss (*ānanda*).[35] The *ātman* made of food, which is the first level of embodiment, is called so because the [human] progeny springs from food (*annād vai prajāḥ prajāyante*; TU 2.2.1), beings are born out of food (*annād bhūtāni jāyante*; TU 2.2.1), and following a kind of etymological explanation, we can see that it is called 'food' because it is eaten and it eats (*adyate 'tti ca bhūtāni | tasmād annaṃ tad ucyate iti*; TU 2.2.1). This means that this *ātman* is not only born out of food but is in fact food itself. Since the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* also presents a *manomaya-ātman* as a level of embodiment superior to the physical body, we are entitled to establish a connection with Buddhism.[36] The parallel with the evidence of Buddhism allows us to better understand the reason why Buddhism described the physical body by highlighting how it is composed of solid food. The *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, indeed, establishes a dichotomy: the physical body versus the mental body. Evidence provided by the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* highlights how thinking in terms of different levels of embodiment was something common in the intellectual environment that Buddhists shared with other religious groups in ancient India.

6. *Taittirīyopaniṣad* and the *Aggaññasutta*

> The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* contains some of the boldest statements regarding food and creation
>
> (Olivelle [1991] 2011: 74)

The evidence from the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* is not only significant in understanding the description of the physical body in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* and the creation of a mental one but is also relevant to properly appreciate some elements occurring in the narrative of the *Aggaññasutta*'s foundational myth.[37] Resuming the narrative, we had reached the point that during a period of contraction of the cosmos all beings were born with a body made of mind in the Realm of Radiance, during a sort of *aurea prima aetas* (first golden age). Later, the text describes the degeneration from this idyllic and primeval condition to the current human state of existence. The world, at that time, was in a sort of primordial condition, everything that existed appeared as an undifferentiated mass:

[35] As already highlighted (De Notariis 2019c: 244 n. 45), the Buddhist late exegetical literature is aware of this Upaniṣadic doctrine (Sv-pṭ I 202).

[36] A wider comparison between Buddhism and Upaniṣads on the concept of *manomaya* has been provided in De Notariis (2019a), and relevant material on the topic occurs in De Notariis (2018; 2019c: 239-245).

[37] This myth has also been discussed by Olivelle ([1991] 2011: 83-85) in a paragraph concerning the cosmic role of food in the ascetic ideology.

> All was just but water, o Vāseṭṭha, at that time, [all was] darkness, dark darkness. The moon and the sun could not be distinguished, nor stars and celestial bodies, nor night and day, nor months and half months, nor seasons and years, female and male [beings]. Beings were but called 'beings.'[38]

This passage, as highlighted by Richard Gombrich (1992: 166), resembles some Vedic cosmogonic accounts, such as that in the *Ṛgveda* in which we find "There was darkness, hidden in darkness, in the beginning. This [world] was a whole indiscriminate stream of flood" (*tama āsīt tamasā gūlham agre 'praketaṃ salilaṃ sarvam ā idam*; ṚV 10.129.3).[39] A connection with the Vedic context has been envisaged by Gombrich even for the continuation of the story in the *Aggaññasutta*: "Then, Vāseṭṭha, after a long lapse of time, at a certain point, essence-earth (*rasa-paṭhavī*) spread over the waters for these beings."[40] Gombrich contemplated a possible connection with *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, speculating that the Sanskrit term *saras*, indicating the 'milk-skin of the waters' in BU 1.2 (resembling the film on boiled milk), has "been garbled with the *rasa-paṭhavī* and so lost" (1992: 167). Gombrich tries to establish this connection, highlighting how the Pāli passage follows in some wordings the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*'s account. In my opinion, though highly interesting, all these speculations might be superfluous if we consider the Pāli *rasa-paṭhavī* as conceptually resembling the *anna-rasa* we have found in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* (TU 2.1.1).[41] In the latter, the *rasa* is clearly conceived as an essence involved in the process of rebirth. In the Pāli passages we have analysed, although *rasa* classically indicates the 'flavour', it seems to retain a conceptual connection with the idea that it is an 'essence' able to move from one thing to another.[42] The flavoured essence of the earth can be absorbed by the vine to produce sweet-tasting grapes (see above the *paṭhavi-rasa* at A I 32). Furthermore, the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* tells us that the physical body is made of the essence of food (*anna-rasa-maya*). Going backwards in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*'s narrative logic, food derives from plants, which are from the earth and the earth originates from the waters. Gombrich, when considering the comparison of the *Aggaññasutta* with *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, writes that "even those sceptical about verbal assonances will not deny the

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[38] *ekodakībhūtaṃ kho pana Vāseṭṭha tena samayena hoti andhakāro andhakāratimisā. na candimasuryā paññayanti, na nakkhattāni tārakarūpani paññayanti, na rattindivā paññayanti, na māsaddha-māsā paññayanti, na utusaṃvaccharā paññayanti, na itthipumā paññayanti. sattā sattā tv eva saṅkhyaṃ gacchanti* (D III 85).

[39] Cf. also Collins (1993: 357), who also draws attention to BU 1.2 and we may add that a cosmogony, which conceived water as a primeval element, is also AU 1.1.2. Parallelisms between ṚV 10.129 and the *Aggaññasutta* have also been discussed by Lindtner (1997-1998: 217-224).

[40] *atha kho tesaṃ Vāseṭṭha sattānaṃ kadāci karahaci dīghassa addhuno accayena rasapaṭhavī udakasmiṃ samatāni* (D III 85).

[41] On the position of *rasa* in the compound, see Collins 1993: 357-358. The compound *rasa-paṭhavī* is sometimes replaced with *paṭhavī-rasa* and in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* food (*anna*) derives from plants (*oṣadhi*), which in turn derive from the earth (*pṛthivī*).

[42] Cf. Visigalli (2016: 820), in which the double meaning of *rasa* in the *Aggaññasutta* is highlighted.

affinity of the content" (1992: 167). On the basis of the evidence of the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, we are entitled to apply the same reasoning to the comparison of the *Aggañña*sutta with the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*. Perhaps, the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* could be even more significant for a proper appreciation of the Vedic background underlying the *Aggañña*sutta. Indeed, the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* links the solid food with the physical body and in the *Aggañña*sutta the mind-made beings develop craving (*taṇhā*; D III 85) and start to acquire a coarser body when they taste the essence-earth (*tesaṃ sattānaṃ kharattañ c'eva kāyasmiṃ okkami*; D III 86). Later, the *rasa-paṭhavī* disappears and a fungus (*bhūmi-pappaṭaka*; D III 87) appears, followed by the appearance of a creeper (*badālatā*; D III 87), which in turn is replaced by the appearance of rice growing without cultivation (*akaṭṭhapāko sāli*; D III 88). The act of eating this utopian rice caused the emergence of sexual attributes[43] and the consequent onset of passion led the beings to indulge in sexual activities. All this, in turn, led these beings to build houses, to hide their impure actions from the sight of others. Later, some beings, lazy in nature, had the idea to not source food when needed, but instead to accumulate it at home. This act led to a degeneration of rice and the utopian rice that grew without needing to be cultivated transformed into today's rice, which needs to be cultivated to grow. From the cultivation of rice arose the need to establish boundaries, areas of cultivable land, so that everyone could grow and enjoy their own rice. In other words, private property was born.[44] The violation of the private property of others was the cause of the rise of violence in society and the need to establish regulation. To stem the rampant violence, beings elected the best among them to govern and from this arose the warrior caste (*khattiya*) and kingship (D III 88-93).

Thus, according to the foundational myth of the *Aggañña*sutta, violence is inherently connected with food as it came into being from the cultivation and accumulation of rice. Beings acquire a physical body due to their progressive involvement in solid food consumption. Overall, the *Aggañña*sutta describes how beings fall from a paradisiacal state in which, with a body made of mind, they feed on joy, to a state in which they feed on solid food and acquire a coarse body. This entire process does not only explain why humans are embodied in a physical body, but also provides an aetiological account of how violence originated in this world and how humans have tried to contain it. Therefore, it is of some significance that the Buddhist path of liberation in the *Sāmañña*phalasutta presents us a reverse path, one in which a practitioner, starting from a coarse body, eventually reaches a mind-made body.

[43] The connection between the arising of genitals and food has been well analysed by Kong (2016: 59-68).

[44] It can be of some relevance to establish a stronger connection between the *Aggañña*sutta and the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* to note that, according to Erdosy, "Private ownership of land was recognised for the first time in a passage in the Taittiriya Samhita (2.2.1), which details the necessary rituals in case of a dispute between neighbours concerning fields" (Erdosy 1988: 93-94).

This is possible, notably, through meditation. This, implicitly, suggests that meditation is the only way to escape from the inherent violence of this world and, as meditation is basically a monastic activity (cf. Gethin 2019: 185), only the monk can reach a state in which it is possible to fully escape from violence. Hence, turning to our *Suttanipāta* verses, the above discussion provides an explanation that would justify the Buddhist tenet according to which "a householder does not equal a bhikkhu, a sage [who is] apart, *meditating* in the wood" (Sn 221).

So far, we have seen how food-related questions are involved in the attempt to analyse the reasons why a layman is not able to fully practise non-violence and why the layman still cannot equate to the monk who always meditates. Finally, we will see how the *Suttanipāta*'s principle, according to which the monk always protects animals, has been assimilated and mirrored by the king Aśoka Maurya, who governed over the largest empire of India in ancient history.

7. Aśoka's *imitatio dei* as an *instrumentum regni*

> In the various definitions of dharma, as also elsewhere in his writings,
> Ashoka presents the virtue of ahimsa—not killing living beings,
> not causing hurt and injury—as the bedrock of his moral philosophy.
> (Olivelle 2023: 162)

As has been well highlighted by recent scholarship, in understanding Aśoka we have two main sources—his inscriptions and many narratives—the latter often addressed as 'legendary' (cf. Olivelle 2023: XVII-XXXI; Ferrara 2024: 98-99). In what follows, I will only focus on the inscriptions, these being our earliest records of the king and, presumably, issued by his own will. The inscriptions could, indeed, provide an early glance into some of the actual dynamics of the Aśoka's government.

Aśoka in the Minor Rock Edict 1 (MRE 1) describes himself as an *upāsaka*, a Buddhist layman. However, Aśoka is certainly not the average Buddhist devout. If in the *Suttanipāta* we have a clear statement according to which a layman cannot equate to a monk, in the Aśoka's edict of Bairāṭ we find the king instructing the monks on the Buddhist texts to listen and to reflect on them (among which, as already noted, is a text containing the *Suttanipāta*'s verses that we are considering). This is quite a paradox, as usually it is monks who are expected to instruct laypeople. Furthermore, Aśoka in the so-called 'Schism Edict' seems to indicate to the monks how to settle their internal disputes.[45] These two elements alone would be enough to make us question how Aśoka conceived himself and in what way

[45] In this regard, see Olivelle (2012: 178-179).

he wanted to present himself to the public. Based on these two pieces of evidence, Aśoka does not relate to the monks from a subordinate position, but at least from an equal, if not a superior one. If we consider who actually addresses the monks with an attitude of superiority in the Buddhist texts, then we will notice that it is usually the Buddha who behaves like this. In his edicts, Aśoka recommends that the people adhere to the *dhaṃma*, a sort of ethical-religious law, one that, simultaneously, recommends an ethical behaviour and promises a soteriological reward. So strong was the commitment of the king that, according to the Rock Edict 8 (RE 8), he transformed 'pleasure tours' (*vihāra-yātā*),[46] which involved many pleasant activities (including hunting), into '*dhaṃma* tours' (*dhaṃma-yātā*), through which the king used to visit people of his countries to instruct and question them about his *dhaṃma*. The fact that the king himself travelled around the country to ensure the correct reception of his *dhaṃma* is not only surprising but is also arguably a symbolic statement. The fact that this conduct resembles that of the Buddha and early Buddhism can hardly go unnoticed. The very act of touring mirrors the itinerant inclination of early Buddhists and of the Buddha himself (as represented in Pāli sources). Similarly, questioning and instructing people about the *Dhamma* is precisely what the Buddha does in almost every account in which he is the protagonist. This has already been noted by Patrick Olivelle (2012: 178-179; 2023: 113), who also speaks in terms of Aśoka's "strategic ambivalence" (2023: 128) in communicating with monks and nuns through a modality that deliberately mirrors a Buddha's own instruction. Similarly, the symbols of power adopted by the king intentionally overlap with Buddhist symbols (Olivelle 2023: 92-94). Aśoka's attitude can also be conceived as a sort of *imitatio dei* (imitation of God); a royal attempt to appropriate and overlap with the religious sphere. Therefore, the policies of animal protection[47] and respect for life that emerge from Aśoka's edicts can be interpreted as a political move, perhaps necessary, to conform the figure of the sovereign to that of the ideal, typical ruler.[48] In this light, considering the statement of the two *Suttanipāta* verses discussed, perhaps already in existence at the time of Aśoka and known by him (see above § 2), the king tries to behave like a monk, who "constantly protects living creatures." By behaving like monks and protecting living creatures, Aśoka could, on a symbolical level, become their peer. From this situation, it is but a short step to become the *primus inter pares* (first among equals), one who has the right to preach his own

[46] See, for instance, the Girnar version in Hultzsch (1925: 14-15).

[47] For instance, in the Rock Edict 2 (RE 2) Aśoka establishes medical treatments for both humans and animals.

[48] A similar standpoint has been expressed by Piotr Balcerowicz, who writes that "[i]t may therefore seem justified to consider that Aśoka's appeal to nonharmfulness was rather pragmatic and declarative than genuinely moral, and various provisions introduced by him had a political, military, or economic rationale behind" (Balcerowicz 2022: 364).

doctrine (*dhaṃma*).[49] Therefore, we might wonder whether Aśoka 'was convinced' to take care of living beings or whether he intentionally adopted these ethical policies in order to legitimise himself. Recently, Timothy Lubin wrote about Aśoka, proposing that "[h]is Buddhist catechizing had instilled in him the view that killing animals was to be avoided, even for use in the royal kitchen" (2013: 35). A statement like this tacitly implies a kind of passive acceptance or an actual moral commitment.[50] Here, Lubin is referring to Aśoka's very famous Rock Edict 1 (RE 1), in which the king tells of how he worked to reduce the number of animals killed for the royal kitchens, yet still two peacocks and one deer/antelope/gazelle (*dvo morā eko mago*) are killed, albeit he goes on to promise that in the future he will stop even this type of killing:

> In the past, in the kitchen of the King Priyadasin, Beloved of the Gods, many hundreds of thousands of living beings were killed daily to prepare hotpot. But now, when this writing about the *dhaṃma* has been engraved, only three living beings were killed to prepare hotpot, two peacocks and one game animal, and the game animal not even consistently. And these three living beings will not be killed in the future either.[51]

The term *mago*, found in the Girnar version of RE 1, is equivalent to the Sanskrit *mṛga* and Pāli *miga* and can have a variety of meanings—deer, antelope, and gazelle being the most common—and, generally speaking, *mago*/*mṛga*/*miga* indicate game as a whole (cf. Pieruccini 2017-2018: 287-288), which fits the context of Aśoka's edict well.[52]

Contra Lubin, we might understand Aśoka's reduction of meat consumption as a necessary act of one who aimed to balance the image of the king as the protector of living beings with 1) the necessity to display royal power, maintaining the consumption of symbolically significant animals as they were consumed by other foreign rulers, such as the Great King of Persia; and 2) the willingness to please the actual desires of the population, who were probably very fond of this meat.

Concerning the first point, we can note how, according to Greek sources, at the table of the Great King of Persia game animals, such as deer and gazelle, were consumed. This is attested, for instance, by

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[49] As noted by Olivelle (2012: 173; 2023: 257-265), the Aśoka's *dhaṃma* can be compared with the modern concept of 'civil religion.'

[50] The fact that Aśoka's *ahiṃsā* may have been borrowed from Buddhism is a fact that Olivelle also mentions, what I will focus on are the reasons that pushed Aśoka to adopt it.

[51] (F) *purā mahānas*[*amhi*] *Devānaṃpriyasa Priy*[*a*]*dasino rāño anudivasaṃ bahūni prāṇa-sata-sahasrāni ārabhisu sūpāthāya* (G) *se aja yadā ayaṃ dha*[*ṃ*]*ma-lip*[*ī*] *likhitā tī eva prānā ārabhare sūpāthāya dvo morā eko mago so pi mago na dhruvo* (H) *ete pi trī prāṇā pachhā na ārabhisare* (Hultzsch 1925: 1-2).

[52] 'Game animal' is, indeed, the translation adopted by Olivelle (2023: 282) while Tieken (2023: 437) prefers 'deer.'

Polyaenus' *Stratagems* (4.3.32), in which gazelle are clearly mentioned.[53] Polyaenus' evidence is often discussed along with a fragment of Heraclides of Cyme preserved by Athenaeus. The latter is relevant to our discussion for at least two reasons. First, Athenaeus, just like Polyaenus, testifies that an enormous number of animals were killed daily for the royal table. Second, together with game animals, large fowls were consumed as well. It is worth citing the English translation made by Pierre Briant of the passage I am referring to (Athenaeus 4.145e):

> One thousand animals are slaughtered daily for the king; these comprise horses, camels, oxen, asses, deer, and most of the smaller animals; many birds also are consumed, including Arabian ostriches—and the creature is large—geese, and cocks ([1996] 2002: 289).

If we compare this evidence with the Aśoka RE 1, we can note that there are some elements in common. In both accounts thousands of animals were slaughtered for the royal table, albeit Aśoka claims that this was done in the past but not anymore. Furthermore, Athenaeus mentions the deer, which is a possible translation for *mago/mṛga/miga* (an umbrella term for 'game animals') and the large fowls. These parallels between the Greek sources and the Aśoka edict are particularly relevant if we consider the international relations that Aśoka had with coeval kings. This has been well highlighted by Patrick Olivelle (2023: 49-54) and, therefore, we are entitled to wonder about the existence of hidden international tropes behind Aśoka's model of royalty, which Aśoka must have taken into account, and to which he reacts, showing that he does not give up those dishes so dear to the Persian kings and known by Greeks.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, we cannot exclude that Aśoka wanted, for some reason, to please the actual desires of a population very fond of such kinds of meat. In particular, it seems that in a central area of India (*majjhimadesa*),[54] people were fond of peacock's meat—as testified, for instance, by the Pāli commentarial literature:

[53] For an English translation, see Briant ([1996] 2002: 286-287). Cf. also Briant (1989: 39-40), Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1995: 294-295), Amigues (2003: 4-9), Henkelman (2010: 685-686), Ermidoro (2015: 102). I wish to thank Claudia Antonetti for directing me to these valuable sources.

[54] On the *majjhimadesa*, see Roy (2014: 32).

> Those living in borders find even the earthworms pleasurable, while for people residing in the middle country they are considered extremely disgusting. For the latter, meats such as the peacock's is pleasurable, whereas for others these [meats] are viewed as extremely disgusting.[55]

In short, we can legitimately assume that Aśoka was not free from the practical needs of government, whether he had to respond to international standards of kingship or whether he did not want to go against widespread tastes and customs. A similar and compelling case has been discussed by James McHugh (2021: 241-242),[56] who recently problematised that Aśoka's moral precepts do not include abstention from intoxicating drinks, which were much appreciated in India.

We can legitimately ask ourselves in what terms we can speak of ideology at the service of power. Obviously, we cannot investigate Aśoka's innermost feelings and determine with certainty whether his respect for living beings arose from a sincere feeling or not. However, what we can note is that through his actions, he appeased all sides, showing both a moral commitment to higher ideals and a tolerance for worldly needs. Furthermore, by protecting living beings, he symbolically appropriated the function of the monk, participating actively rather than passively in religious discourse, as a layperson who places himself on the same level as monastic institutions, and then almost surpasses them. It is claimed he behaved in ways that resembled that of the Buddha of the Pāli canon and, funnily enough, like him he did not impose a full vegetarian diet. Therefore, although Aśoka's adoption of non-violence could be a move of symbolic appropriation of a religious function, we may argue, on the basis of our analysis of RE 1, that this was nonetheless mitigated by international standards of kingship and indigenous food tastes. Thus, Aśoka presents himself as a ruler who is able to balance his political decisions, taking into account both a local audience and an international panorama. Perhaps even more remarkably, food becomes part of the political and not just the religious discourse, in a situation where politics and religion merge and morality becomes both a symbol and a slave to power, where the watchword seems to be 'legitimacy.'

8. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we have seen how discussing the concept of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence / non-harmfulness) in ancient India involves digressions about violence, food, meditation, and political

[55] *paccantavāsīnaṃ hi gaṇḍ' uppādā pi iṭṭhā honti kantā manāpā: majjhimadesavāsīnaṃ atijegucchā. tesañ ca moramaṃsādīni iṭṭhāni honti, itaresaṃ tāni atijegucchāni* (Spk I 150, cf. Sv III 720, Vibh-a 10). Cf. also Mookerji (1928: 62), who refers to this account without providing the precise reference.

[56] On this issue, see also Olivelle (2023: 184-185).

concerns. The ancient verses of the *Suttanipāta* (220-221) present us with some tenets current in early Buddhism that were connected with Upaniṣadic ideas and that perhaps had an impact on the most influential king of ancient India: Aśoka.

What has emerged is that laypeople are unable to adopt a totally non-violent regime because of their involvement in the systematic production of food, the impossibility for them to fully apply ethical values turning out to be a social necessity. Therefore, the layman cannot equate to the monk. This is not only due to his social role in the production of food, but also to the fact that the monk is the only one able to emancipate himself from the need to feed himself with solid food, through obtaining a new level of embodiment that does not require solid food. One abandons a solid food diet not through renunciation, but through obtaining a new existential state, which is not really new, as it was something that belonged to us in a remote past.

In an intellectual environment in which a regime of total non-violence could be the prerogative of monks alone, we see the emergence of King Aśoka, a lay Buddhist who aspires to equate to monks, *de facto* calling into question the division between laypeople and monks, and especially the superiority of the latter. With my analysis, I have tried to challenge the view that would see Aśoka sincerely involved in a mass awareness campaign for the respect for life.[57] We are entitled to ask ourselves how it is possible, from a psychological point of view, that the same person who is guilty of the war in Kalinga, which was a massacre that, as Olivelle (2023: 27) reminds us, by today's standards would be defined as genocide, later becomes a sincere promoter of peace. Examples of genocides in the recent past and, alas, in the present, show us that their perpetrators have never repented in ways even comparatively similar to Aśoka. Therefore, the adoption of non-violence by Aśoka as an *instrumentum regni*, that is, as an ideological tool at the service of the crown, can be an interpretative line that is not only valid, but also provides us with a particular nuance, that is, the paradoxical adoption of non-violence by the power which is, by definition, the only one legitimised to use violence.

> [W]e must say that the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory.
>
> (Weber 2004: 33)

[57] On the modalities through which the stereotyped image of Aśoka flowed into the collective imaginary, see Squarcini (2019).

References

Primary sources and abbreviations

All Pāli citations are from Pali Text Society (PTS) editions, unless otherwise noted.

A	*Aṅguttaranikāya* (PTS)
Abhid-k	*Abhidharmakośa* (Pradhan 1967)
AU	*Aitareyopaniṣad* (Olivelle 1998)
BU	*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (Olivelle 1998)
Buddha-c	*Buddhacarita* (Johnston 1936)
CU	*Chāndogyopaniṣad* (Olivelle 1998)
D	*Dīghanikāya* (PTS)
Ja	*Jātaka* (PTS)
M	*Majjhimanikāya* (PTS)
Manu	*Mānava-Dharmaśastra* (*Manusmṛti*) (Olivelle 2005)
MRE	Minor Rock Edict
RE	Rock Edict
ṚV	*Ṛgveda* (Aufrecht 1877)
S	*Saṃyuttanikāya* (PTS)
SBhV	*Saṅghabhedavastu* (Gnoli 1977-1978)
Sn	*Suttanipāta* (PTS)
Spk	*Sāratthappakāsinī* (*Saṃyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*) (PTS)
Sv	*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (*Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*) (PTS)
Sv-pṭ	*Purāṇaṭīkā* on *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (*Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā-ṭīkā*) (PTS)
TU	*Taittirīyopaniṣad* (Olivelle 1998)
Vibh-a	*Sammohavinodanī* (*Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā*) (PTS)
Vin	*Vinaya* (PTS)
Vism	*Visuddhimagga* (PTS)

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