

Article

Partaking of Life: Buddhism, Meat-Eating, and Sacrificial Discourses of Gratitude in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract: In contemporary Japan, a Buddhist discourse has emerged that links life and food and centers on gratitude. While the connection between animals and gratitude has a long history in Buddhism, here the meaning of repaying a debt of gratitude has shifted from an emphasis on liberating animals to consuming them with gratitude, thereby replacing anti-meat-eating arguments with a sacrificial rationale. This rationale is also apparent in *Partaking of Life*, a children's book written by a Jōdo Shin Buddhist adherent, which has found a receptive audience in Jōdo Shin circles, including the voice-acting troupe Team Ichibanboshi. This article provides a close reading of *Partaking of Life: The Day That Little Mii Becomes Meat*, followed by historical contexts for Buddhist vegetarianism and discrimination against professions that rely on killing animals, particularly as these themes pertain to Jōdo Shin Buddhism. The essay ends on an analysis of Team Ichibanboshi's sermon on *Partaking of Life*.

Keywords: meat-eating; vegetarianism; sacrifice; life; gratitude; discrimination; Jōdo Shin Buddhism; Team Ichibanboshi

1. Introduction

On 19 December 2014, Team Ichibanboshi staged a reading of the children's book *Inochi o itadaku: Miichan ga oniku ni naru hi* (*Partaking of Life: The Day that Little Mii Becomes Meat*; 2009). The Hokkaidō-based voice-acting troupe, consisting of Jōdo Shin Buddhist clerics and temple wives, performed for an audience of 337 high-school freshmen from Sapporo Ryūkoku Gakuen High School at the Nishi Honganji regional head temple in Sapporo. During their reading of *Partaking of Life*, Team Ichibanboshi projected illustrations from the first edition of the book, onto a large screen at the center of the stage, and instrumental music heightened the story's emotional impact. Afterward, Toyota Seishi—Team Ichibanboshi's executive director and the abbot of a Jōdoshin temple in Hidaka, Hokkaidō—gave a dharma talk that exhorted the audience to express their remorse and gratitude for the lives they consume as food (Ryūkoku Sōgō Gakuen Topics 2014).¹ As a post-performance survey revealed, the reading elicited powerful emotions and tears among the audience—and promises to utter with sincerity the words “itadakimasu” (I gratefully partake of this food) and “gochisōsama deshita” (it was a delicious feast) before and after every meal (Rōdokugeki Chīmu Ichibanboshi 2016a; Rōdokugeki Chīmu Ichibanboshi 2016b).

In Japan over the past two decades, a discourse has emerged both in Buddhist and secular contexts that links life (いのち inochi) and food in a complex web fraught with inherent tensions.

¹ Team Ichibanboshi has uploaded similar performances on YouTube. See (7676Amida 2012a; 7676Amida 2012b). For a version with English subtitles based on my translation, see (7676Amida 2017).

Under increasing pressure, due to demographic changes, the various Japanese Buddhist sects, stereotypically associated with funerals and memorial services, have stressed the preciousness of life (including animal lives) to demonstrate their relevance to the world of the living through their engagement with mental health, welfare issues, and sometimes also food education (Nelson 2017, pp. 86–104; Satō 2014). The value of life has also become an important topic in the moral and dietary education curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Included in legislation pertaining to moral education since the late 1950s, “revering life” (生命を尊び *seimei wo tattobi*) became closely linked with environmental concerns, since the late 1980s, an association expanded in the past decade in the aftermath of several major natural disasters (Ikeda and Ōmori 2017; Sakai et al. 2017). After the enactment of the Basic Law of Food Education (食育基本法 *Shokuiku kihon hō*) in 2005, and the revival of dietary education, the topic of “life” also resurfaced in the context of food and diet. Yet, while the moral and dietary education curricula were ostensibly intended to counter social problems such as bullying and suicide and improve eating habits and health among children and adolescents, as Stephanie Assmann has demonstrated, such education has also been driven by neoliberal agendas that have enforced conservative gender norms and notions of national identity (Assmann 2015, 2017). Meanwhile, an increasing number of publications from picture books for young children to paperbacks for middle-school students and adults have stressed that humans must rely on animal lives for food, generally in order to counter discrimination against slaughterhouse workers (Uchida 2009, 2013; Komori 2005; Mori 2006; Sagawa 2009; Motohashi 2011, 2013; Tanikawa 2014; Nakagawa 2016).²

The moral principle at the center of this discourse is gratitude. While the connection between animals and gratitude has a long history in Buddhism, in contemporary Japan, the meaning of repaying a debt of gratitude has shifted from an emphasis on liberating animals to consuming them with gratitude. In other words, as meat-eating has become normative in modern Japan and among the Japanese Buddhist clergy, a sacrificial rationale has replaced anti-meat-eating discourses that have remained a central feature of Buddhist identity in other parts of East Asia. The contemporary Japanese Buddhist discourse of gratitude envisions an interconnected chain of becoming that is sustained by animal lives and culminates in human lives. As animal bodies are consumed and transformed into human bodies, humans have the moral obligation to face this reality and express their gratitude—a rationale also apparent in *Partaking of Life*. Written by a Jōdo Shin adherent, *Partaking of Life*—a children’s book at the uneasy intersection of conservative moral and dietary education and anti-discrimination activism—seeks to instill values, such as frugality, filial piety, self-sacrifice, and gratitude in children. It has found a receptive audience in Jōdo Shin circles because it resonates with traditional Jōdo Shin teachings on meat-eating and animal slaughter and new doctrinal formulations about life and food. In this essay, I first offer a close reading of *Partaking of Life* that demonstrates the sacrificial logic at work in this children’s book, before providing historical contexts for Buddhist vegetarianism and discrimination against professions that rely on taking the lives of animals, particularly as these themes pertain to Jōdo Shin Buddhism. I end on an analysis of Team Ichibanboshi’s sermon on *Partaking of Life*, which typically follows their performances of the book.

2. Partaking of Life

Partaking of Life was authored by Uchida Michiko (b. 1957), a midwife and adherent of Jōdo Shin Buddhism, who has published and lectured widely on the topics of life, sexuality, and food. The book recounts the real-life experiences of Sakamoto Yoshiki (b. 1957), a former slaughterhouse worker and social justice activist whom Uchida encountered while both were giving lectures at a school (Uchida 2013, p. 45). Uchida’s book tells the story of how Mr. Sakamoto earns the respect of his son and finds new meaning in his work at the slaughterhouse, through his encounter with the cow Miichan (Little Mii). After Mr. Sakamoto slaughters the cow, the girl who grew up with Little Mii gratefully

² With the exception of Tanikawa’s book, these works are strongly invested in countering discrimination against slaughterhouse workers.

consumes the cow's flesh while uttering a tearful "itadakimasu" (いただきます). The book revolves around a concept that is purportedly uniquely and quintessentially Japanese—the expression of gratitude through a single word, itadakimasu (I gratefully partake of this food), spoken before every meal. I say purportedly because the expression only became pervasive throughout Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, as Japanese dining habits changed from eating from individualized tray tables to eating together from a low tea table. Around this time, Japanese schools promoted the use of itadakimasu, and students transmitted the practice to their families (Kumakura 1991, pp. 111–12; Ishige 1991, p. 34).

Nowadays, about a century after the term became pervasive, some are worried that the utterance of itadakimasu has become an empty formality and may even be on the decline as many young urbanites purchase their meals at convenience stores and restaurants and consume them in solitude. For instance, as a recent commentary on the new mealtime verses adopted in 2009 by the Nishi Honganji branch of Shin Buddhism states:

[W]e do not hear the expression 'itadakimasu' as often anymore in contemporary Japan. For example, it may only be a small minority of people, but there seem to be those who think that since they paid money for their food, they don't need to say 'itadakimasu' and put their hands together in reverence. Perhaps we are also apt to utter 'itadakimasu' only out of habit. How many truly utter it with a sense of gratitude and remorse? (Kyōgaku Dendō Sentā 2009, pp. 6–7)³

If the utterance of itadakimasu has lost its meaning as an expression of sincere gratitude, the new Shin meal verses are designed to evoke feelings of gratitude and remorse in those that utter them, by highlighting that food depends on the sacrifice of plant and animal lives, and involves the valuable labor of the people who produced the ingredients.

Such arguments also surface in other contemporary Japanese Buddhist schools. For example, the Gion Hōjōe in Kyoto, a ritual animal release sponsored by the Tendai temple Sekisanzen'in, is marketed as an opportunity to express one's gratitude for the plants and animals consumed as food. During the animal release, 2000 fry are released in the Shirakawa, a small river in the Gion district. Until recently, the event used to feature a dharma talk by the Tendai cleric Kayaki Kanshō (b. 1946), currently the vice-abbot of Zenkōji's Daikanjin in Nagano, in which Kayaki bemoaned the waste of food in modern Japanese society and exhorted his audiences to be grateful for the animals and plants they consume. The 2010 Thanksgiving Festival for Food and Animals in Gifu, renamed Thanksgiving Festival for Food and Lives in 2013, featured a dharma talk by Hori Chisen, a Nichiren cleric of regional renown. Abbot Hori's talk stressed the importance of being grateful for plant- and animal-based foods and the people who labored to produce them. Since then, the festival has become an annual event that promotes local culture and agricultural products. Visitors can sample food for free, purchase local produce, and enjoy song and dance performances. In addition, the festival usually includes a workshop led by area educators or intellectuals, in order to raise awareness that food requires taking animal and plant lives (Ambros 2017, pp. 15–18).

The work of the Sōtō cleric and educator Satō Tatsuzen (b. 1948) most explicitly articulates common anxieties about social problems and proposes Buddhist food education as a solution in the larger context of the 2005 Basic Law of Food Education. In an essay titled, "Bukkyō hoiku to shokuiku ni tsuite: 'inochi' o taisetsu ni suru kokoro o sodateru tame ni" (Buddhist Childcare and Food Education: In Order to Raise Hearts that Value 'Life'), he writes:

Our food consists of animal-based products and plant-based products. That means that in order to survive we take the lives of animals and plants. It follows that treating food with disrespect is connected to treating 'life' with disrespect. While shouldering this fate, our ancestors subsisted with utmost effort. I feel that this is symbolized by saying 'itadakimasu' and putting your hands together before a meal.... In order for us to live, in other words to preserve our 'lives', we must sacrifice the 'lives' of animals and plants every day. That is

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

the fate we bear. We live by sacrificing the ‘lives’ of animals and plants (Satō 2014, pp. 168, 173).

In order to counter a variety of social ills he relates to overabundance, solitary eating habits, and a globalized food supply chain, Satō Tatsuzen weaves together a nostalgic invocation of the previous generations’ struggles for survival, the inescapable human fate of relying on the sacrifice of animal and plant lives, and the need for expressing one’s gratitude through the utterance of “itadakimasu”.

Uchida’s *Partaking of Life* engenders similar feelings. Its sacrificial narrative and nostalgic appeal to Japanese identity (encapsulated in the virtue of avoiding waste), elicit strong emotions of tearful remorse and gratitude in the overwhelming majority of Japanese readers—as attested by the book’s reviews on amazon.co.jp and other online sites.⁴ As Eiko Maruko Siniawer (Siniawer 2014) has demonstrated, the virtue of avoiding wastefulness has become a popular trope that has shaped Japanese identity in the first decades of the new millennium as the country has been grappling with overabundance and economic stagnation. The 2009 edition of *Partaking of Life* clearly articulates these concerns in an appended essay titled, “Itadakimasu to iu koto” (The concept of itadakimasu) by agricultural and environmental economist Satō Gōshi (b. 1973):

In this period of overabundance of food, it is difficult to convey how precious food is. It is difficult to teach that food should not be taken for granted. Food is already being taken for granted. In Japan, over 20 million tons of food are wasted per year. That equates to the yearly food intake of 33 million people in developing countries at 1800 calories per day per person. In such a time, how does one convey the preciousness of food? I think one can only do this through [the concept of] “life.” We live by eating food. To live is to eat. All food is life. Meat, fish, vegetables, and rice, all are life forms that tried to leave behind offspring. To live as a human is to partake of life. It is to kill. Our lives are sustained by many lives. When we realize this, we grasp the preciousness of food. We understand that food should not be taken for granted (Uchida 2009, pp. 57–58).⁵

In other words, readers are exhorted to face their deep entanglement with the living, breathing nonhuman world, in order to learn how to be grateful for their food.

Since its publication in 2009, *Partaking of Life* has become a bestseller. A regional publisher in Fukuoka, Uchida’s hometown, issued the first edition as a small-format children’s book with simple line drawings by Moroe Kazumi (b. 1974). About 100,000 copies had sold by 2013. In response to a homemaker who had volunteered at a school to read the book to the students but found the small illustrations unsuitable for a classroom setting, the publisher issued a set of large colorful cardstock sheets with new illustrations, in 2011. A large-format edition of the book by the large publishing house Kōdansha and a DVD edition also appeared in 2013. The last three publications featured illustrations by the manga artist Uoto Osamu (b. 1957), who has published several manga series related to food. By 2014, the first edition was already in its thirteenth print run and the second edition in its eleventh.

Given Japan’s historic stigmatization of slaughter, it is remarkable that a story about the production of meat has captured a national audience. An earlier generation of Japan scholars, particularly those embracing the paradigms of Japanese uniqueness, argued that the mainstream Japanese self was constructed around rice as the quintessential Japanese food and that meat was the emblem of the Other, particularly the West. Even though meat-eating, which had become more widespread since the Meiji period (1868–1912), has been fully incorporated into the modern Japanese

⁴ By the end of 2018, these included 323 overwhelmingly positive reviews on bookmeter.com, 181 reviews on rakuten.com for the 2009 and 2013 editions, and 2011 large cardstock version for public readings. The 122 reviews for all editions on amazon.co.jp were also overwhelmingly positive: 98 percent for the 2009 edition, 75 percent for the 2013 edition, 100 percent for the 2011 large cardstock version, and 100 percent for the 2013 DVD version.

⁵ Co-authors Uchida and Satō also expressed concerns that wasteful picky eating was on the rise because regular family meals had become rare (Uchida and Satō 2007, pp. 108–10, 177–82).

diet, meat processing has remained stigmatized (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Scholars have also argued that in contrast to the West and the rest of Asia, Japan's ritual culture has at its center ex post facto commemoration rather than sacrifice, precisely because rice farming rather than animal husbandry have been tied to Japan's national identity (Nakamura 2001; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993).

Partaking of Life runs counter to these claims. It is a sacrificial narrative in which the grateful consumption of meat constitutes a form of atonement for the violence perpetrated on the animal victim. At the same time, the story uplifts the butcher by erasing the stigma of his profession and revealing him as a compassionate person who sacrifices himself for the greater good of society, just like the bovines he slaughters. It is a powerful endorsement of meat-eating that seeks to instill children with gratitude for their food, and discourages the wastefulness of picky eating. While the book echoes conservative Japanese values such as collectivity and normative moral behavior, meat rather than rice serves as the quintessential food that must not be wasted and constitutes the basis for a shared Japanese identity, including previously marginalized slaughterhouse workers.

3. Restoring Social Justice: Mr. Sakamoto Does Awesome Work

Partaking of Life consists of two parts: part one introduces and redeems Mr. Sakamoto, while part two deals with his face-to-face encounter with Little Mii. The first part of *Partaking of Life* humanizes Mr. Sakamoto as a reluctant slaughterhouse worker who sacrifices himself for the greater good of society. The narrative hints at, but does not overtly articulate, the stigma associated with animal slaughter. As I will explain below, such work was usually performed by outcasts in premodern Japan. Even though outcast status was legally abolished in the modern period, discrimination has remained pervasive. The story begins with Mr. Sakamoto, who resents his work at the slaughterhouse even though he knows that his labor benefits society as a whole:

Mr. Sakamoto works at the meat center. His work consists of releasing the lives of cattle and turning them into meat. Mr. Sakamoto has always resented his work. If there weren't anybody who released the lives of the cows, nobody would be able to eat meat. So he knows he is doing important work. Still, when his eyes meet those of the cows, he resents his work. He does his job thinking, "At some point, I'll quit; at some point, I'll quit." (Uchida 2013, p. 2; see also Uchida 2009, pp. 2–5)

Mr. Sakamoto is portrayed as working at a modern "meat center" (食肉センター *shokuniku sentā*) rather than at a slaughterhouse (屠殺場 *tosatsujō*). "Meat center" is a contemporary, euphemistic term used to designate meat-processing facilities in Japan. In the 2013 edition, he does not "kill" cattle (as the 2009 edition has it), but he "releases their lives." As a note in the 2013 edition explains, slaughterhouse workers like the real-life Sakamoto never say "to kill" but speak of "releasing life (inochi o toku いのちを解く)" (Uchida 2013, front page). Yet, Mr. Sakamoto feels uncomfortable, perhaps ashamed, when he meets the gaze of the cows he slaughters. As John Berger and Jacques Derrida argue, looking at animals and seeing them return the human gaze triggers self-awareness, recognition, and potentially shame because humans feel exposed before them (Berger 1980; Derrida 2008). The 2013 edition conveys this confrontation with the cows' gaze to the reader, through its illustrations, which show several key scenes in which the humans and bovines are gazing into each other's eyes or a cow looks straight at the reader. As he meets the bovine gaze, Mr. Sakamoto seems to realize that he is as much a victim of society's desire for meat as the cows he slaughters. He dreams of quitting his job but somehow perseveres.

Mr. Sakamoto's occupation becomes public knowledge and the source of embarrassment for his son, Shinobu, when Mr. Sakamoto visits his son's social studies class in the third grade of elementary school. The children's parents have been invited to introduce the students to various types of work. Shinobu, whose name literally means "endurance," perhaps a veiled allusion to the familial stigma that lies hidden under the surface, introduces his father in a soft voice: "He works at a meat market. At an ordinary meat market." Shinobu uses "meat market" (肉屋 *nikuya*) rather than "meat center," let alone "slaughterhouse" or "meat processor" (解体業 *kaitaigyō*), in order to veil from his classmates that his father does not just sell meat but actually slaughters cattle for a living. His father

had been worried that Shinobu would not know much about his father's work since they had never talked about it. He is disappointed and hurt although he probably understands the reasons for Shinobu's reluctance (Uchida 2013, pp. 6–9; Uchida 2009, pp. 6–13).

That afternoon, Mr. Sakamoto is in for a surprise when his son returns from school glowing with pride and tells him: "If you did not do your job, we all could not eat meat." It turns out that Shinobu's teacher had reprimanded him for calling his father's workplace an "ordinary meat market." Shinobu had explained to the teacher that he felt aversion toward his father's bloody work: "But it's uncool! I saw him once. He was covered in blood. It's uncool!" In other words, even Shinobu considered his father's work violent and unclean. The teacher retorted that if his father did not do his job, "the teacher, you, the principal, and the company president, we all wouldn't be able to eat meat" and declared, "That's an amazing job!" In this way, the teacher manages to convey the societal benefits of Mr. Sakamoto's labor and steers Shinobu toward respecting his father and his work. Shinobu has successfully internalized the lesson as he repeats excitedly to his father, "Dad, your job is amazing!" Thus, redeemed and valorized by his son (and the teacher), Mr. Sakamoto resolves to continue working his job for a while longer (Uchida 2013, pp. 11–14; Uchida 2009, pp. 16–21).

4. Sacrifice: Turning Little Mii into Meat

The narrative then turns to a transformative episode that constitutes the core of the story. As the real-life Sakamoto Yoshiki explains in the afterword to the 2013 edition,

Before [my encounter with Miichan], I considered meat processing only a job that turned animals delivered to us into meat. As far as the animals were concerned, I did not think they were cute, nor did I feel sorry for them. I only saw them as big and ferocious. I only thought about slaughtering them and turning them into meat as quickly as possible (Uchida 2013, p. 44).

Sakamoto had distanced himself emotionally from the animals. To him, they were nameless objects that he perceived only as a potential threat rather than living beings with whom he could empathize. His encounter with Little Mii—an individual, named bovine—changed his attitude.

Mr. Sakamoto's encounter with Little Mii is a tale about sacrifice and redemption. Kimberly Patton succinctly describes common features of sacrifice:

Animals are seen as active subjects from start to finish in the sacrificial process, glorified mediators between realms, whose cooperation is essential to the efficacy of the ritual, whose forgiveness is often sought from kinship groups to avert vengeance. Animal victims' feelings can be appeased in elaborate speeches denying the ultimacy of death. Often, as in the case of human sacrifice, a luminous fate in the afterlife for the victims is guaranteed by their immolation on earth (Patton 2006, p. 393).

According to Patton, classic sacrifice is predicated on viewing animals as active and willing participants in their destruction. Human participants must seek forgiveness for the violence they perpetrate and propitiate the victim with the promise of an auspicious afterlife. In addition, as Patton points out, the victim needs to be without blemishes. She writes, "The more perfect the animal (or human being, for that matter), the less it belongs to this death-dealing, corrugated mortal world, and the more susceptible it is to election as a sacrificial offering." (Patton 2006, p. 394)

Uchida's narrative incorporates these classic elements of sacrifice. One day, after Mr. Sakamoto has finished that day's work, he witnesses a truck delivering a cow destined for slaughter the following day. He only reacts in a perfunctory manner thinking, "That must be a cow for tomorrow," as if the cow only existed for and at the moment of slaughter. To his surprise, a ten-year-old girl emerges from the passenger side and climbs onto the back of the truck to join the cow. Since Mr. Sakamoto cannot fathom a gentle, emotional bond between humans and bovines, he immediately assumes, "That's dangerous!" When the girl does not immediately reappear, he becomes worried

and decides to investigate (Uchida 2013, p. 19; Uchida 2009, pp. 24–26).⁶ He witnesses human–bovine intimacy as the little girl frantically strokes the cow’s belly and utters her apology:

Little Mii, I’m sorry! Little Mii, I’m sorry! Grandpa says that if Little Mii does not become meat, we won’t be able to celebrate the New Year. If we don’t sell Little Mii, we all can’t make a living. I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Little Mii! (Uchida 2013, pp. 20–21; Uchida 2009, pp. 28–29)

The girl’s grandfather is also apologetic about sending Little Mii to slaughter. He explains:

Mr. Sakamoto, Little Mii grew up with this girl. We wanted to keep her forever. But, if we don’t sell this cow, we won’t be able to give this girl her New Year’s gift or a Christmas present. I entrust her to you tomorrow (Uchida 2013, p. 23; Uchida 2009, p. 30).

The grandfather articulates his family’s precarious situation in terms that young children would understand—there is no money for presents during the prime gift-giving season of the year. Thus, Little Mii must be sold (Uchida 2013, p. 23; Uchida 2009, p. 30).

The grandfather’s explanation only hints at the truth behind Little Mii’s slaughter—Little Mii is a spent dairy cow. The fact that she is a dairy cow is particularly apparent in the 2013 edition, in which she is depicted as a female Holstein, the most common dairy-cow breed in Japan.⁷ The illustrator’s choice to portray Little Mii as a Holstein is deliberate, as the other cattle in the book are Japanese Browns. The latter breed is one of the four beef-cattle breeds classified as Japanese cattle (和牛 *wagyū*) and is particularly common to Kumamoto Prefecture, where *Partaking of Life* is set (Motoyama et al. 2016). In contrast to the Japanese Brown, which yields the high-end marbled meat that Japanese beef is famous for, a spent Holstein’s meat is not a luxurious delicacy. At nearly ten years of age (six to seven years older than the typical dairy cow in Japan), Little Mii has become unproductive and a liability for her human family.⁸ Thus she is sent to slaughter, a typical fate for spent dairy cows. As an aging cow that has given birth to multiple calves (none of which she was allowed to keep), her flesh is expected to yield the lowest grade of meat. Yet even though her existence as a dairy cow is spent, her meat must not be wasted.

What Little Mii lacks in the quality of her flesh, she makes up for in the perfection of her character and in the affective relationships she has with the family that raised her. The grandfather is clearly remorseful that he is forced to give up this cow that shares a quasi-familial bond with his granddaughter. Being accorded quasi-familial status, docile Little Mii becomes the ultimate sacrificial victim who will give her life to save the family that has reared her. She is a mother figure who sacrifices herself for her human family and attains the attributes of a perfect victim, despite being a spent dairy cow. The link between motherhood and sacrifice is an emotionally potent trope in modern Japan. According to what critics have termed “the motherhood myth,” “good” mothers are expected to sacrifice themselves for their children and find fulfillment in self-effacing roles as mothers and homemakers (Sasagawa 2006, p. 131; Aono and Kashiwagi 2011, p. 517). Ironically, Uchida’s narrative does not articulate that as a dairy cow, Little Mii would not have been able to rear her own bovine offspring in order for her human family to benefit from the milk she produced.

Little Mii’s maternal sacrifice finds a parallel in Mr. Sakamoto’s own sacrifice through his work. Loyalty to the workplace at the expense of health and happiness is, after all, the masculine counterpart to the feminine myth of motherhood in post-war Japan (Adams 2012). Mr. Sakamoto’s first reaction is avoidance. Unsettled by the human–bovine intimacy he has witnessed, Mr. Sakamoto is forced to recognize Little Mii as an individual being for whom a human can have strong affection. Mr. Sakamoto wishes that he had not seen the exchange between the girl and Little Mii: “It would

⁶ The 2009 edition has “A cow that was to be killed tomorrow was on the back of the truck,” while the 2013 edition has “A cow that was to be turned into meat was on the back of the truck.” Again, the 2009 edition emphasizes the act of killing while the 2013 edition employs language closer to that used by slaughterhouse workers in Japan that tends to deemphasize the act of killing.

⁷ For an overview of Holsteins and dairy farming in Japan, see (Japan Dairy Council 2013).

⁸ The mean productive life of Holstein cattle in Japan is 3 years and 5 months (Terawaki et al. 2006).

have been better if I had not seen this.” (Uchida 2013, p. 21; Uchida 2009, p. 29) The real-life Sakamoto explains in the book’s afterword:

When I saw Little Mii’s happy face as the girl stroked Little Mii from her neck to her belly, I knew for the first time that there are cows that are this well tempered. I went home thinking: “I do not want to take [the life] of this particular cow.” (Uchida 2013, p. 44)

In Uchida’s retelling, after Mr. Sakamoto hears the grandfather’s explanation, he resolves to quit his job, or at least, to take the following day off from work, so that he will not have to slaughter this individual cow. At home, he conveys his qualms to his son. Shinobu initially does not reply but eventually tries to convince his father not to skip work as the two share a quintessential father-son bonding moment with each other during their nightly bath—another tactile scene of intimacy that closely parallels the little girl’s plaintive goodbye to Little Mii. While Shinobu washes his father’s back, he says: “Dad, I think it’s better if you do it. If a heartless person does it, the cow will suffer. Please do it, Dad!” As Shinobu and the reader know, Mr. Sakamoto is not a heartless person but someone who will prioritize the needs of others. Shinobu continues to plead with his father the next morning, eventually succeeding in obtaining his father’s grudging consent to go to work (Uchida 2013, pp. 23–27; Uchida 2009, pp. 31–37). Though reluctant, Mr. Sakamoto is portrayed as a consenting sacrificial victim as much as Little Mii.

According to the standard narratives of ritual sacrifice, for Little Mii to serve as a sacrificial victim, she has to assent to her own destruction, and it is up to Mr. Sakamoto to win her consent—just as he gave his own to his son. After he arrives at work, Mr. Sakamoto decides to visit Little Mii in the stable. Though the cow initially takes a threatening pose just like the other bovine, Mr. Sakamoto summons his courage and gets Little Mii to relax and sniff his hands. As Mr. Sakamoto strokes Little Mii’s belly, he apologizes to her: “Little Mii, I’m sorry. If Little Mii doesn’t become meat, they won’t be able to make it. I’m sorry.” As if accepting his apology, Little Mii nuzzles her head against Mr. Sakamoto, who continues, “Little Mii, hold still. If you move, I’ll miss the vital spot, and you’ll suffer needlessly. Hold still. Hold still.” Mr. Sakamoto, who previously only touched cattle in order to kill, has been transformed. For the first time, his touch is gentle and caressing; likewise, Little Mii responds with affection (Uchida 2013, pp. 29–31; Uchida 2009, pp. 38–42). The real-life Sakamoto notes in the afterword: “At that moment, this was the first time that I thought of a cow as cute (可愛 ♪ kawaii). And I understood the meaning of my work.” (Uchida 2013, p. 44) The term *kawaii* is generally translated as “cute” but sometimes also connotes “pitiable”, implying the gentle, painful affection that Sakamoto felt for the cow.

In Uchida’s narrative, Mr. Sakamoto maintains his soothing attitude at the moment of slaughter, a scene most explicitly evoking a sacrificial rite: “Hold still! Little Mii, hold still!” Giving her consent, Little Mii does not move. Instead, tears stream from her eyes, suggesting that she comprehends and mourns her imminent destruction. Like the reluctant Mr. Sakamoto, who does not wish to slaughter the cow but does so nonetheless out of a sense of obligation to his family and compassion for the cow, Little Mii submits mournfully to her slaughter. Unlike other cows that “sense something and shake their heads, so that one ends up missing the vital spot” and that “go berserk even after they fall over,” Little Mii collapses with calm acceptance when Mr. Sakamoto holds a “tool like a pistol” against her head and stuns her (Uchida 2013, pp. 32–37; Uchida 2009, pp. 44–45).⁹

While this description is exceptionally blunt by the standards of children’s literature, the actual acts of killing and dismemberment, the most violent elements of slaughter, are left unspoken. The 2013 edition of *Partaking of Life* only provides an illustration of rainbow-colored drops of tears rising toward the sky, hinting at Little Mii’s sublimation. The 2009 edition shows a picture of the little girl holding out a flower in front of a living Little Mii, which likewise steers the reader’s gaze away from the slaughter to an imagined happy existence (Uchida 2013, p. 37; Uchida 2009, pp. 46–47). The avoidance of dwelling on the actual act of killing is also a common feature of classic sacrifice,

⁹ Again the 2009 edition emphasizes the act of killing: “That time to kill and dismember the cow had come.” In contrast, the 2013 edition uses phrasing that recognizes Little Mii’s subjectivity and reflects the language used by slaughterhouse workers: “That time to release Little Mii’s life had come”.

suggesting that the inherent violence was considered an unpleasant necessity but not the most meaningful aspect for the ritual. In her study of Graeco-Roman sacrifice, Ingrid Sæviid Gilhus notes that depictions of sacrifice rarely portrayed the actual act of killing. Staged as festive celebrations, the moment of slaughter was a necessary but unappealing element of the ritual. In Gilhus's words, "It had to be concealed precisely because it was unpleasant." The untidy, bloody reality of the killing ran counter to the formal, ordered proceedings of the sacrificial rite. Therefore, "reluctance to depict the killing might imply that even if this act of violence was absolutely necessary, it was not necessarily deeply meaningful." (Gilhus 2006, p. 118) Similarly, as Roel Sterckx explains, although sacrifice played an important role in sustaining the social order in ancient China, the actual butchering of animals was considered low-status, ritually defiling work that a cultured gentleman should not perform himself or even witness directly; therefore, he should avoid the abattoir (Sterckx 2011, p. 56; Sterckx 2002, p. 77).

It is in the depiction of the moment of killing and the subsequent slaughter, or rather the lack thereof, that Uchida's book reveals itself as a story about rather than by a slaughterhouse worker. As noted above, the 2009 edition uses the verb *korosu* 殺す (to kill) in several key scenes whereas the 2013 edition substitutes the expression *inochi o toku* いのちを解く (literally, "to release life") and explains:

In this book, *toku* means to kill pigs and cattle. Mr. Sakamoto Yoshiki and the people around him who are involved in the meat processing industry actually use this expression (Uchida 2013, front page).

This explanatory note suggests that the author Uchida's use of "to kill," a term loaded with negative nuances of violence and transgression, in the first edition must have met with resistance from actual slaughterhouse workers such as Sakamoto, and was subsequently changed in the second edition. Nevertheless, Uchida assumes that the slaughterhouse workers' expression needs an explanation for the benefit of the general reader; therefore, she ends up re-inscribing the act of killing onto "releasing life" by defining it before beginning her narrative.

It is striking that in other publications in which slaughterhouse workers speak for themselves, they also avoid the term "to kill," which emphasizes the moment of death as terminal and destructive, and instead depict their work as a generative craft. They are far more likely to dwell on the process of slaughter than Uchida. For instance, in his *Ushi o hofuru* 牛を屠る (Slaughtering cows; 2009), Sagawa Mitsuharu explains that slaughterhouse workers like him do not use the technical term "tosatsujō" 屠殺場 (literally, "the place for slaughter and killing"), nor do they think of themselves as killing the animals. Instead, they focus on the step-by-step process of slaughtering—cutting the throat, skinning, removing the intestines, and turning the animal into blocks of meat. He also notes that he and his fellow slaughterhouse workers do not regard the body of the butchered cow as a corpse, which would be cold to the touch but as a body that radiates the heat of life during slaughter (Sagawa 2009, pp. 90–91).

Likewise, in an interview reproduced in Motohashi Seiichi's *Uchi wa seinikuten* うちが精肉店 (Our Family Has a Butchershop; 2013), butcher Kitade Shinji, whose family has been in this business for many generations, similarly stresses that the act of taking a cow's life is but a small step in the much more complex process of slaughtering:

It's a brief moment. Taking the life (いのちをいただく *inochi wo itadaku*) of a cow is a brief moment. After that, slaughtering (屠畜 *tochiku*) is about dealing with all steps skillfully. 'Taking a life' is a brief moment. It takes a while before the cow becomes meat. And then it takes a while longer before the meat is eaten. Before the cow enters the slaughterhouse, it belongs to the sphere of animal husbandry. From the moment of slaughter, it belongs to the sphere of meat production. In the moment when its life is taken, the cow transforms from a living being into food (Motohashi 2013, p. 34).

Motohashi also notes that the Kitade family does not refer to their work as *tosatsu* 屠殺 (literally, "slaughter and kill") (Motohashi 2013, p. 36). Rather than dwelling on the act of killing, slaughterhouse workers such as Sawada and Kitade focus on the generative transformation from a

living creature into food, through the skill of the butcher. They speak with pride in their craft rather than with a sense of guilt or shame.

By contrast, instead of portraying the actual slaughter, the narrative of *Partaking of Life* shifts to the communal feast on the victim's flesh. In classic sacrifice, even though the victim is technically offered to a higher power, the meat, or at least a portion of the meat, is typically consumed by humans in order to cement social relationships. As Gilhus explains, Graeco-Roman sacrifice traditionally ended in a "sacred meal, which was the closing act of the sacrificial process." (Gilhus 2006, p. 115) According to Sterckx, the communal sacrificial feast served to cement social relationships in ancient China. He writes:

The sacrificial meat exchange is one of the clearest manifestations of how the ritualized food exchange in early China operated at the heart of social and political relationships. The acceptance or refusal to accept sacrificial meats functioned as symbolical reaffirmation or rejection of interpersonal and interstate allegiances (Sterckx 2011, p. 28).

Thus the consumption of sacrificial meat was regarded as obligatory, and a rejection would have been seen as tantamount to rejecting social relationships.

Likewise, in *Partaking of Life*, Little Mii's human family must consume her flesh in order to express gratitude to the victim, validate the labor of the butcher, and show filial piety toward the grandfather who reared the cow. This duty is particularly incumbent upon the girl who grew up with Little Mii. Indeed, on a later day, the girl's grandfather comes to thank Mr. Sakamoto for slaughtering Little Mii. The grandfather tells Mr. Sakamoto that his family consumed a small piece of Little Mii's meat:

Thank you, Mr. Sakamoto. Yesterday, we received a little of the meat and all of us ate it. My granddaughter cried and wouldn't eat. When I said, "Thanks to Little Mii, I can give gifts to everyone. Eat! Give thanks to Little Mii and eat! Poor Little Mii [if you don't]! Eat!" my granddaughter cried and said, "Little Mii! I partake with gratitude (itadakimasu)!" She said, "Yummy! Yummy!" and ate. Thank you! (Uchida 2013, pp. 38–41; Uchida 2009, pp. 48–52)

Little Mii's sacrifice for her family must be repaid with the grateful consumption of her flesh—even if (or precisely because) her low-grade meat is not actually all that luxurious or tasty. Refusing to eat her meat would mean that they did not fully acknowledge her sacrifice. Allowing her meat to go to waste would render her sacrifice meaningless. The scene is particularly dramatic in the 2013 edition, which depicts the little girl's mournful face turning into a tearful but delighted smile as she expresses how delicious the meat is (Uchida 2013, pp. 40–41).

To show that Mr. Sakamoto has discovered new meaning in his work, the book ends with the words, "Mr. Sakamoto thought that he would continue his work a little while longer," and both editions contain illustrations that depict Mr. Sakamoto and a cow from behind, walking side by side, into the distance. The 2013 version sets the scene in an idyllic, paradisiacal meadow under a blue sky dotted with puffy, cotton-top clouds, with mountains on the horizon. In neither version is Mr. Sakamoto shown leading the cow by a harness or a tether (Uchida 2013, pp. 42–43; Uchida 2009, pp. 54–56). The cow accompanies him freely, suggesting that Mr. Sakamoto will continue to win the consent of future cows that he will slaughter. Mr. Sakamoto and the bovine are facing the future together, alongside each other. Neither Mr. Sakamoto (nor the reader for that matter) has to meet the bovine gaze in shame any longer.

As the real-life Sakamoto explains, after his encounter with Little Mii, he came to think differently about his work, namely that the purpose of his work is to ensure that the cattle he slaughters die peaceful deaths and, thus, have a happy existence in the beyond:

My work in fact consists of trying to make sure that these little ones (この子たち kono kotachi) are put a bit at ease and can go to heaven (天国 tengoku) (Uchida 2013, p. 44).

Here Sakamoto is using language that has become commonplace when speaking of pet death in contemporary Japan. Cats and dogs are often referred to as "little ones" (literally, "children") and are said to go to heaven after death. This pet heaven is often depicted as a beautiful meadow beneath a

rainbow, conflating the notions of heaven and the Rainbow Bridge (Ambros 2012, pp. 171–83). The image of Mr. Sakamoto walking alongside a cow in a beautiful meadow suggests the same. Mr. Sakamoto's work consists of dispatching willing cows toward a pleasant afterlife.

It is easy to dismiss Little Mii's story as idealistic, wishful thinking or a nostalgic evocation of a better past. Most contemporary dairy farms in Japan—concentrated in Hokkaidō—are no longer family farms but have become large-scale industrial operations in which dairy cows rarely roam in pastures, and instead spend their lives confined in CAFOs (Hansen 2014). In response to food safety concerns such as a bovine spongiform encephalopathy scare in 2001, small-scale slaughterhouses including the one where Sakamoto used to work—and the one depicted in Motohashi's *Uchi wa seinikuten*—have been closing and are being replaced by large, heavily mechanized processing facilities that make intimate, hands-on encounters like that of Mr. Sakamoto and Little Mii, highly unlikely (Uchida 2013, p. 44; Motohashi 2013, p. 4; Yamanouchi and Yoshikawa 2007, pp. 4–5). As Motohashi explains:

Nowadays, in modernized slaughterhouses for cows and pigs, people use their hands as little as possible. It's like a mechanized factory. By firmly enforcing rules of hygiene, the life and death of living beings is veiled in return. And we lose the sense that we ourselves are living beings (Motohashi 2013, p. 36).

Even Uchida's narrative hints at the reality that Little Mii's peaceful demise is an anomaly, noting that other cows usually “sense something and shake their heads, so that one ends up missing the vital spot” and that they “go berserk even after they fall over.” (Uchida 2013, p. 36; Uchida 2009, p. 45) In other words, cows do not tend to submit to slaughter willingly.

I would like to suggest, however, that the key to understanding why the story is so powerful is that Little Mii's death is presented as a sacrificial ritual. As J.Z. Smith argues in his essay “Bare Facts of Ritual”:

Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things (Smith 1980, p. 125).

Little Mii's death represents the ideal slaughter. It shows readers how slaughter ought to be done even though it is apparent that this is not how it is commonly done, especially nowadays. Like the hunting ritual analyzed by Smith, Little Mii's story “gains its force where incongruity is perceived” (Smith 1980, p. 125).

5. Meat-Eating, Slaughter, and Buddhism

That a contemporary Buddhist performance troupe comprised of clerics and temple wives would promote witnessing animal slaughter and meat-eating might appear incongruent as Buddhism has generally problematized both slaughter and the consumption of meat, even in cultural contexts where meat-eating was not entirely taboo for Buddhist monastics. Monastic codes only allow the consumption of so-called “pure meat” and prohibit any meat that has been specifically killed for the monastic community—if monastics know, suspect, or have heard from a reliable source that an animal has been killed for their consumption, the meat is considered unclean. If these three conditions do not apply, the meat is considered clean and is permitted. In other words, only the persons involved in the actual killing are culpable, and categorically abstaining from meat is considered too extreme. In accordance with these rules, Buddhist monastics in South and Southeast Asia and in Tibet have traditionally not been required to refrain from eating meat (though in Tibet some clerics have also promoted vegetarianism, particularly in the contemporary period) (Kieschnick 2005, pp. 187–89; Schmithausen 2005, pp. 188–89; Gaerang 2015; Gayley 2017; Barstow 2017).

Several Mahāyāna scriptures, however, took a stricter view of meat-eating than the earlier monastic regulations. These scriptures asserted that any meat-eating was unwholesome, defiling, dehumanizing, unbecoming of a bodhisattva, smelled repulsive, inspired negative mental states such as fear, destroyed compassion, led to excessive indulgence, and was cannibalistic of sorts, since the

animal and the human consuming its meat, might have been kin in a former life. These texts implicated not only the butcher who killed the animal to produce meat but also the person who consumed it (Kieschnick 2005, pp. 189–91; Schmithausen 2005, pp. 190–93).

The Mahāyāna rhetoric against meat-eating had a strong impact on Buddhism in China where the observance of a vegetarian diet already carried social meaning before the arrival of Buddhism. In pre-Buddhist China, meat-eating and animal sacrifice were pervasive, but there were also specific ritual occasions that demanded the observance of a vegetarian diet, such as the practice of purification before sacrificial rituals or the observance of mourning to demonstrate the virtues of filial piety and benevolence. Furthermore, the voluntary adoption of a vegetarian diet served as a public demonstration of frugality (Pu 2014, pp. 59–66). Such pre-existing cultural practices provided templates for Chinese Buddhist vegetarianism, known variously as qingzhai 清齋 (J. shōsai; literally, eating purely), zhaishi 齋食 (J. saijiki; abstentious food), sushi 素食 (J. sojiki; plain food), and shushi 蔬食 (J. sojiki; vegetable food).

Scholars have generally assumed that Buddhist vegetarianism in China became normative only after the sixth century. Eric Greene, however, has recently argued that vegetarianism may have been a distinctive element of Chinese Buddhist monastic practice, at least from the third century C.E. onward (Greene 2016). It might be difficult to prove with absolute certainty whether, in this early period, abstaining from meat was an expected practice for all Chinese Buddhist monastics or only expected of especially saintly and virtuous monks, whereas meat-eating was common among ordinary monastics. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, after the fifth-century introduction of precept literature that permitted the consumption of pure meat, the tensions between the monastic regulations and Mahāyāna scriptures on whether meat was categorically prohibited, eventually led the Liang Emperor Wu (r. 502–549), an ardent lay Buddhist who abstained from meat, to sponsor a debate to settle the issue. While the debate could not resolve the contradictions, the emperor issued several edicts and declared that karmic retribution would befall those who consumed meat. In the centuries that followed, meat-eating was cemented as a strict taboo for Buddhist monastics. Vegetarianism eventually also spread among the pious Buddhist laity in China; however, the demands of public office complicated the observance of a vegetarian diet by laymen who were required to participate in banquets that included meat. This led to the development of imitation meat for use in vegetarian dishes (Kieschnick 2005, pp. 193–205).

Eventually, the Buddhist practice of vegetarianism became widespread across East Asia. The avoidance of meat-eating has remained an important marker of Buddhist identity in mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Korea, to this day (Kieschnick 2005, p. 186). In Japan, the avoidance of meat was linked to asceticism, abstinence, and ritual purity, but had a mixed history among the Buddhist clergy and the laity. The Yōrō Code of 757 prohibited meat-eating for the Buddhist clergy, along with alcohol and pungent herbs. However, Buddhist clerics were often accused of violating this prohibition (Jaffe 2005, p. 256). While the concept of a vegetarian fare existed in Japan since the ancient period, it became more prevalent in the Zen schools, which were introduced from China in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Later, the arrival of Ōbaku Zen under the Zen master Yinyuan Longqi (J. Ingen Ryūki; 1592–1673) introduced Chinese-style vegetarian cuisine called fucha ryōri 普茶料理, which was served to the laity and at vegetarian feasts for the monastic community and was distinctive for its use of fragrant vegetable oils, in contrast to other, simpler Japanese Buddhist styles of vegetarian cuisine known as shōjin ryōri 精進料理 (translatable as “abstinence cuisine”) (Mizushima 1988, p. 16; Marra 2011).¹⁰ By contrast, Jōdo Shin Buddhism maintained a lenient position on meat-eating, because of its founder Shinran’s emphasis on the evildoer, especially hunters and fishermen, as the central focus of Amida Buddha’s redeeming grace. Unlike monastics of other premodern Buddhist schools, Jōdo Shin clerics were openly married and consumed meat (game, fowl, and fish) (Nakamura 2010).

¹⁰ Shōjin ryōri, in particular, was closely linked to ascetic ideals actualized in abstinence from luxurious food items. Therefore, in 1654, the Rinzaï monk Kyōrei criticized the food served at Ōbaku temples as being too rich and being served too many times a day in violation of the precepts (Baroni 2000, pp. 125–26).

Meat and fish eating among the laity was common in Japan, despite the pervasiveness of Buddhist ideals and notions of ritual impurity. Whereas the consumption of beef was largely taboo, fish, fowl, and game remained common food items. In the medieval period, hunting continued and, despite temporary prohibitions, was justified by a Shinto-Buddhist combinatory rationale, particularly within the Suwa cult. The recitation of a mantric formula known as the Suwa no mon 諏訪の文 promised the animals a better rebirth and salvation, by means of their flesh nourishing humans and transforming into human bodies, which allowed hunters to expiate their karmic burden (Grumbach 2005). A humorous illustration of the tensions between vegetarian and carnivorous diets, the late medieval tale *Shōjin gyorui monogatari* (Tale of vegetarian fare and fishes), depicts a war between vegetables and animals on the occasion of the ritual release of animals at the Hachiman Shrine. The vegetarian army consists of soybean products, various vegetables, seaweed, and fruit, while the army of fish includes fish, shellfish, fowl, and game, but no large domestic animals, such as cattle or horses (Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1979, pp. 263–91). With a few regional exceptions in Western Japan, the consumption of large domestic animals was largely taboo, since their flesh was associated with greater ritual pollution than game and fish. They were also considered crucial as draft and transport animals, functions that ruled out their consumption. These taboos against beef, continued through the early modern period (Shimizu 2010).

Long resolved in Chinese Buddhism, the debate about meat-eating resurfaced in Japan, during the Edo period (1603–1868). From the mid-seventeenth century, the Ming-Qing dynasty Buddhist ideas promoting vegetarianism and refraining from killing, spread through the influence of the newly established Ōbaku Zen school. At the same time, the Jōdo Shin school, known for its rejection of the Buddhist precepts, gradually became integrated in the Japanese Buddhist mainstream and had to justify its peculiar attitudes toward eating meat and taking wives. For instance, while the Ōbaku Zen cleric Tetsugen Dōkō 鐵眼道光 (1630–1682) took a very strict position on the observance of the Buddhist precepts, including meat-eating (fish and fowl), Shin Buddhist clerics such as Chikū 智空 (1634–1718), whose denomination held more relaxed views of the monastic precepts, harnessed orthodox monastic law codes to argue that meat-eating was permissible for the Buddhist clergy, as long as they were not implicated in the killing. The debate begun by Chikū remained vibrant throughout the Edo period but was eventually resolved in the Meiji era (1868–1912), as meat-eating (including beef and pork) became widespread (Jaffe 2005; Nakamura 2010; Baroni 2006, pp. 98–100, 176).

Increasing contact with the West led to radical changes in the Japanese diet, from the late nineteenth century onward. Meat-eating (beef and pork) became a potent symbol of a strong modern nation, a view also adopted by modern Japanese Buddhism. In contemporary Japan, vegetarianism has remained the norm only for Buddhist clerics training at seminaries (Jaffe 2005). For the laity, Buddhist vegetarian cuisine has been marketed as high-end gourmet food and pilgrimage fare at some Buddhist temples, in popular tourist spots, but observing a vegetarian fare as a regular devotional practice is rare.¹¹ While in the modern period vegetarian cuisine was sometimes constructed as quintessentially Japanese, as opposed to a meat-based Western diet (Tokuno 2016), it is actually not served on a regular basis at the average Buddhist temple, or in lay households in Japan.

Even though meat-eating has become normalized in modern Japan, discrimination against slaughterhouse workers remains a contentious issue and is closely linked with discrimination against burakumin 部落民 (literally, “hamlet folk”). Burakumin is a modern category that is based on several factors, including ancestry, residence, and occupation—particularly those related to leather and meat production, construction work, and unskilled labor (Cangia 2013, p. 20). In contemporary Japan, about 1.5 to 2.5 percent of the population is burakumin, and most live in Western and Southwestern Japan. Smaller communities are found in the northwestern Kantō region and in the Nagoya area. Very few are found in Northeastern Honshū and none in Hokkaidō (Main 2010, p. 138; Brooks 1977, pp. 105–7).

¹¹ Yamaguchi Mitsuko distinguishes four basic styles of vegetarian fare: Rinzaï Zen (exemplified by Daitokuji); Sōtō Zen (exemplified by Eihei-ji); Mt. Kōya; and Ōbaku Zen (Yamaguchi 1968, p. 91). This distinction is also echoed by (Mizushima 1988), who mentions the different styles of Zen vegetarian fare but excludes Mt. Kōya.

The category of outcasts has been fluid over the course of Japanese history. The legal system of ancient Japan distinguished between “good people” (良民 *ryōmin*) and five groups of “lowly people” (賤民 *senmin*), which included slaves, as well as tomb guardians. Scholars note, however, that there is little indication that these groups were associated with ritual pollution, a concern that became increasingly prevalent only from the mid to late Heian period (794–1185) onward. Around this time, as various kinds of artisans and entertainers organized themselves into guilds to guard their special privileges, occupational groups such as shrine menials (犬神人 *inujinin*; literally, “dog shrine menials”) and so-called “riverbed dwellers” (河原者 *kawaramono*) were given duties intended to deal with ritual impurities, such as the construction and maintenance of gardens and wells, the demolition of ritually polluted buildings, the removal of waste from city streets and religious precincts, and the handling of human corpses and animal carcasses. In addition, discharged prisoners (放免 *hōmen*) conducted low-level policing functions and served as prison guards and executioners. From the late medieval period onward, these special groups who were the precursors of early modern outcast status groups, were gradually associated with the inherent ritual pollution (Amino 2012, pp. 171–97; Botsman 2005, pp. 50–51).

In the highly stratified status-system of the Edo period, a variety of discriminatory terms referred to outcast populations such as *hinin* 非人 (literally, “non-human”) and *eta* 穢多 (literally, “many defilements”), reflecting the dehumanizing attitudes against outcasts and their association with ritual pollution. Outcasts tended to be either itinerants or settled in segregated marginal spaces, and many lived in poverty. Most importantly, they had monopolies on a range of occupations—from beggars, performers, prostitutes, and diviners to tanners, butchers, executioners, and undertakers—that, on the one hand, reaffirmed their marginal status and, on the other, provided their livelihood (Cangia 2013, pp. 20–21). As Daniel Botsman has pointed out, paradoxically the pressing needs of the warrior class to procure leather for military gear and their employment of outcasts to mete out violent punishments, led to an expansion of the outcast monopolies, during the late medieval and early modern period. Nevertheless, the associated stigma was heightened, as outcasts were vilified as scapegoats, in order to mask the inherent violence of the warrior class (Botsman 2005, pp. 51–57).

As every person was required to become registered at a Buddhist temple during the Edo period, outcasts, whose populations were concentrated in areas where Shin Buddhism was heavily represented, gravitated toward the Shin Buddhist denominations. Eventually about 85 percent of outcasts belonged to the Shin temples. They were mostly parishioners of low-status outcast temples run by clerics, whom the Shin denominations regarded as outcasts themselves, even if they did not fall into the outcast status group, according to the authorities. Outcast Shin temples and the religious practices, therein, were largely identical to non-outcast temples; however, in certain aspects, outcasts faced discrimination. In the Nishi Honganji branch of Shin Buddhism, outcast adherents were denied ordinations conducted at the sectarian headquarters and equal access to a monastic education, faced restrictions when making pilgrimages to the sectarian headquarters, and had to pay extra fees for religious accouterments and services rendered by the headquarters. Higashi Honganji’s outcast adherents faced similar restrictions against ordinations at the headquarters. However, discriminatory posthumous names that marked the bearer as an outcast, were used less frequently in the Shin denominations, than in other Buddhist sects. They occurred mostly in mixed outcast and non-outcast parishes, but not at the outcast temples (Amstutz 2010, pp. 80–93).

In probing the reasons why Shin Buddhism attracted so many outcasts, scholars have not only noted the overlapping geographic distribution of Shin communities, but also the accommodating nature of Shin Buddhist doctrine (especially as propounded by Shinran) toward outcasts. Shinran’s writings, for instance, described butchers as recipients of Amida’s grace, and Shinran and his early successors were also said to have had ties to outcast communities. Moreover, Shin doctrine tended to place less emphasis on karmic retribution and ritual pollution than the doctrines of other Buddhist denominations at the time, although these concepts later entered Shin discourse during the Edo period through contact with popular Buddhist publications and interactions with other Buddhist sects (Amstutz 2010, pp. 64–65, 92–96).

Even though the Meiji authorities officially abolished the status system in 1871 and took legal measures to integrate former outcasts into the general population as “new commoners” (新平民 *shinheimin*), discrimination remained rife. Furthermore, the concomitant loss of monopolies led to new economic pressures on buraku communities (Cangià 2013, p. 21; Botsman 2005, pp. 57–58). From the 1920s onward, burakumin have been highly engaged in social advocacy of a Marxist bend, particularly through the pre-WWII Suiheisha (Levelers’ Society), which reemerged after the war as Buraku Kaihō Dōmei (Buraku Liberation League). Since the overwhelming majority of burakumin were adherents of the Shin Buddhist sects, buraku activists also targeted the Shin Buddhist denominations. Nevertheless, some prominent activists were Shin Buddhist clerics themselves (Main 2010, pp. 138, 140).¹²

On the one hand, the majority of buraku activists considered Shin Buddhist institutions unjust, corrupt sources of discrimination and oppression, and rejected sectarian reconciliation efforts, because sectarian leaders dealing with buraku issues reified the assumption that burakumin were inherently evil and needed to repent. On the other hand, many in the buraku community regarded Shinran’s doctrine as a source of inspiration, and some even sought to raise their standing within clerical hierarchies. For instance, activists such as Saikō Mankichi (1895–1970), a Nishi Honganji cleric and founder of the Suiheisha, regarded Shinran as a model of solidarity (Main 2010, pp. 146–47). In other words, the relationship between the Shin Buddhist denominations and outcasts has been highly complex and deeply intertwined. This complex entanglement is also palpable in *Partaking of Life* and its reception in Shin Buddhist circles.

6. Team Ichibanboshi’s Commentary on *Partaking of Life*

In addition to contemporary doctrinal positions on life and food, traditional Jōdo Shin attitudes toward meat-eating and toward professions that kill animals for food, might explain why a Jōdo Shin voice-acting troupe, Team Ichibanboshi, and broader Jōdo Shin circles embraced the story of Little Mii turning into meat. Just as traditional Jōdo Shin Buddhism permitted meat-eating and embraced butchers, hunters, and fishermen as special targets of Amida’s saving grace, so a contemporary Jōdo Shin voice-acting troupe upholds the slaughterhouse worker who turns Little Mii into meat as a paragon of virtue. And just as traditional Shin doctrine suggests that most people are evildoers, Team Ichibanboshi seeks to convey to their audience that they are all implicated in the slaughter by virtue of their consumption of animals. At the same time, the troupe aims to inspire gratitude for life—one’s own and the lives of others—by stirring the emotions of their audiences. Indeed, the troupe’s performances of *Partaking of Life* often leave audiences in tears, especially when they hear the story for the first time.

Team Ichibanboshi usually begins its performance with the words: “On the other side of the dining table, there is life. Can you image it? The fact that the meat and vegetables on the table had precious lives....” (7676Amida 2012a; 7676Amida 2012b) This is the primary lesson that the troupe seeks to instill in its audience. It was also reiterated in the dharma talk that followed the reading. Reverend Toyota, Team Ichibanboshi’s executive director, explained that rather than being preoccupied with the taste of food or personal culinary preferences, people should realize that they consume animals that used to be alive and are now transformed into human bodies:

I wonder what you think about as you eat your three meals a day. I would guess that you have all kinds of thoughts such as “it’s tasty” or “I don’t really like it,” but you probably don’t have a sense that you are eating lives that were very much alive as pigs, cows, or fish until a few hours or days ago. Make no mistake about it: The truth is that these lives that were very much alive until a short while ago become our flesh and blood and form our bodies (7676Amida 2012b).

¹² In the late twentieth century, the Sōtō Zen sect likewise tried to tackle sectarian discrimination against *burakumin*, particularly the practice of discriminatory posthumous names (see Bodiford 1996).

That is to say that the consumption of meat is not problematic per se, as animal flesh transforms into human flesh. Problems arise when picky eaters consume meat and are more concerned about its taste than the fact that it came from living beings.

In the contemporary world, Toyota contended, the only people who were aware that they were living beings are those who come face to face with these animals because they raised and butchered them. These people were more aware, and thus occupied higher moral ground, than the ordinary person:

As we have just heard, there are people like Mr. Sakamoto whose job it is to take the lives of these animals. And there are those who carefully raise animals for us just like the grandfather who carefully raised Little Mii. They live day-to-day facing the lives of animals. When they part with these lives, they suffer and feel sad. They do their work every day thinking, 'I'm sorry that I have to take your lives.' (7676Amida 2012b)

Toyota presented people like the dairy farmer grandfather and Mr. Sakamoto as role models illustrating the virtues of remorse, gratitude, and compassion. He did not, however, directly venture into social justice issues concerning slaughterhouse workers. For the Nishi Honganji denomination on the mainland, especially in Western Japan, longstanding reconciliation efforts with buraku communities have been an important concern, but for Team Ichibanboshi, which is based in Hokkaidō and most of whose members are Hokkaidō natives, buraku discrimination was a tangential issue. As Team Ichibanboshi members explained when queried on this point, there were after all no buraku communities in Hokkaidō. By contrast, there are plenty of dairies, which is why Hokkaidō is popularly known as “milkland.” Forty percent of Japan’s dairy production originates in Hokkaidō, and the quintessential Hokkaidō farmer is not the rice farmer associated with the mainland but the dairy farmer (Hansen 2014). Thus, a story about a dairy cow has special resonance in Hokkaidō where Team Ichibanboshi is based.

Ultimately, Toyota stressed, the deaths of the animals were everyone’s responsibility, not that of the slaughterhouse worker alone:

Actually, it is not just people like Mr. Sakamoto who should say, “I’m sorry,” but we who eat these lives should also say, “I’m sorry” and “thank you.” That’s because we take away their lives and because we cannot live without relying on these lives (7676Amida 2012b).

Toyota contended that the consumption of animals was necessary for human survival and needed to be acknowledged by the expression of gratitude and remorse. While contemporary vegan rhetoric may dispute such a claim, anti-discrimination literature in Japan often makes the argument that humans rely on animals in virtually every aspect of their lives—from food and leather to cosmetics and pharmaceuticals—and are unable to extricate themselves from this dependency. In the face of this inextricable entanglement, recognizing the sacrifice of the animals and the labor of the producers, through the expression of one’s gratitude, is upheld as the only moral option (Cangia 2013; Komori 2005; Mori 2006). Reviews of *Partaking of Life* on amazon.co.jp and other online sites frequently emphasize this point as well. Reviewers state that uttering “itadakimasu” and “gochisōsama deshita” is key to finding redemption for taking lives. Only a very small number of reviews venture that vegetarianism would be a better alternative to eating meat. Such arguments are sometimes met with vehement protests charging that vegetarianism is a Western invention and thus un-Japanese and that vegetarians are at fault for prioritizing animal lives over plant lives, a position that is portrayed as more compatible with Japanese worldviews.

Toyota likewise emphasized that consuming meat with gratitude while uttering the words “itadakimasu” (I gratefully partake of this food) and “gochisōsama deshita” 御馳走様でした (it was a delicious feast) was what made a person human:

That’s all the more reason why we should say “itadakimasu” and “gochisōsama deshita” at every meal. We must not allow ourselves to eat without saying these words. It’s a very embarrassing thing to do as a human being. That’s because “itadakimasu” and

“gochisōsama deshita” have the meaning of “I’m sorry” and “thank you” toward the lives we partake of (7676Amida 2012b).

For Toyota, the remorse and gratitude expressed by these uniquely Japanese words had religious meaning that was central to Jōdo Shin doctrine. He continued:

If we let “I’m sorry” and “thank you” permeate our society and our human lives not just when we eat but in all aspects of our daily lives, that is what it means to lead truly rich human lives. This is the wisdom taught by the nenbutsu 念仏 that we practice. It’s a daily life of remorse and gratitude. We should live lives that will permeate society with “I’m sorry” and “thank you” in your interactions between husband and wife, parent and child, within the neighborhood association, and at work. That’s the important lesson we should learn from Partaking of Life. We should take responsibility for partaking of life. We sincerely hope that you have come away with this lesson today (7676Amida 2012b).

Toyota equated the utterance of “itadakimasu” and “gochisōsama deshita” with the recitation of the nenbutsu, that is, the words “Namu Amida Butsu” 南無阿弥陀仏 (Praised be Amida Buddha), the key practice of Jōdo Shin Buddhism. Both, according to Toyota, inspired the feelings of remorse and gratitude that had the potential to transform all human social interactions. But just as traditional Jōdo Shin doctrine exhorted devotees to embrace faith in the other-power of Amida’s grace, rather than relying on the self-power of their own actions, Toyota seemed to suggest that his audience should accept the consumption of meat and the taking of lives, rather than making an effort to find better alternatives.

It is, however, striking that while classic Jōdo Shin doctrine foregrounds faith in Amida Buddha, this concept is rather muted in Toyota’s sermon. The new meal verses adopted in 2009 by the Nishi Honganji branch of Shin Buddhism, to which Team Ichibanboshi’s members belong, likewise shift the focus from Amida Buddha to the sacrifice of lives. The earlier version of the verse recited before the meal was, “Thanks to the Buddha and to everybody, we have been blessed with this feast,” while the new verse has, “Thanks to many lives and everybody, we have been blessed with this feast.” According to the official commentary, the substitution of “the Buddha” with “many lives” was intended to dispel the misunderstanding that the Buddha was like a creator divinity who had created animals so that they could serve as food for humans. Instead, the new phrasing was meant to express remorse and to highlight “that the sacrifice of ‘many lives’ and our indebtedness to the Buddha are different things.” Furthermore, the meal verses were intended as a counterpoint to the ethics education in schools that stresses the preciousness of human life, but ignores animal and plant lives (Kyōgaku Dendō Sentā 2009, pp. 6–9; quote on p. 8). In an interview with the author, members of Team Ichibanboshi downplayed the similarities between their reading of *Partaking of Life* and the new meal verses as coincidental, despite the obvious conceptual overlap. Nevertheless, the continuities between Team Ichibanboshi’s message and the new meal verses might explain why the sectarian leadership has been receptive to the performance of *Partaking of Life* at sectarian functions.

7. Conclusions

Contemporary Japanese arguments for the consumption of meat, including those made by Shin Buddhist clerics, have adopted a sacrificial reasoning. Unlike earlier Buddhist discourses that stigmatized meat consumption or averted the human gaze from the slaughter, contemporary Japanese discourses propose that witnessing the killing of animals makes the consumption of meat wholesome, as long as humans avoid wastefulness and express their gratitude for the animals’ sacrifice. Contemporary Japanese Shin Buddhism embraces a sacrificial logic as a critique of mindless consumerism. Recognizing the indebtedness of humans to animals, creates an opening for reflection that makes it possible to see animals as subjects and to de-stigmatize the labor involved in animal slaughter and the manufacture of animal-based products. Yet, while the expression of gratitude validates the deaths of animals, it does not necessarily better their lives. On the contrary, the expression of remorse and gratitude can serve to spur consumption, without the need for altering any exploitative practices inherent to the modern animal-industrial complex. Similar to what

Stephanie Assmann has observed about contemporary dietary education in Japan, this strategy resonates with a neoliberal agenda that places moral responsibility on the individual, rather than holding the state or society accountable (Assmann 2015, p. 165, 169). Likewise, contemporary Japanese Buddhist arguments, infused with a sacrificial logic, do not seek to change or even curb meat consumption, but wholeheartedly endorses it, while providing an ideal moral framework for consuming meat, which does not require systemic changes.

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