



## BUDDHIST NOTION OF FOOD AND ITS IMPLICATION WITH HYGIENE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Food, which maintains a healthy life, is one of the basic requirements of all living beings. Though the Buddhist vision is to make sure a healthy mind in the healthy body it is not systematic health science in the modern sense. Therefore, the insights of Āyurveda and health science may be utilized in order to understand the Buddhist standpoint. The Āyurveda says that the people should refrain from three kinds of modes of taking food, namely; non-use (ayoga), wrong-use (mittiyāyoga) and excessive use (atiyoga). According to the principle of middle path (majjhimāpaṭipadā) adherents should refrain from self-mortification and self-indulgence because self-mortification (kāmasukhallikānuyoga) can be leading to the high nutrition whereas self-indulgence (attakilamathānuyoga) can be leading to malnutrition. By considering quality of food, the Buddha prohibited taking solid food at wrong time and recommended four soft foods (catumadhura) for monks and nuns. They should refrain from taking meals after mid-day and therefore, the energy has to be protected for their mind culture. The uniqueness of the Buddhist concept of food is that it is not limited to the material food. Psychological base is important for all activities. The practice of reflection (paccavekkhaṇā) on food helps to understand the psychological standpoint of it. Though the person can claim freedom from suffering of bodily diseases for one year or more beings, except arahants, are hard to find in the world who can claim freedom from mental disease even for a moment.*

Key words: Hygiene, Āyurveda, food, Middle Path

## 1. Introduction:

Food, which helps to maintain a healthy life, is one of the basic requirements of all living beings. Food originates from plants and animals. It contains essential nutrients like carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, and minerals. In the modern world, we are destroying resources of food because of bad attitudes as regards the environment. Since Buddhism is not systematic health science in the sense of modern health science, the light of Āyurveda and health science may be used in order to understand the information depicted in the Buddhist texts. However, the final goal of Buddhism is the result of mental health and physical health and the social wellbeing are supportive facts of it.

By discussing the Buddhist notion of food related to health, this research paper will focus on the following issues: place assigned to food in the teachings of the Buddha, methods of taking food, food types, limitation of food, quality of food, and the reasons why the Buddha paid specific attention to the phenomenon of food.

## 2. Research Methodology and Limitations:

This research paper is literature based. The discussion is basically limited to the Pali texts which are considered as primary sources in Theravada Buddhism and its commentaries. Data will be collected from the Pali canon and its commentaries and analyze the facts regarding health. The available facts in Buddhist sources will intermittently be compared with Āyurveda.

### 3.1 The position assigned to food

One of the great sources of Āyurveda, the Carakasamhitā mentions that there are three main aspects which help to maintain life. They are food (*āhāra*), sleep (*nidrā*) and holy life (*brahmacaryā*).<sup>1</sup> Before the young Sopāka entered into the Order, the Buddha asked ten questions to assess his intelligence. The first question was what is one? Sopāka replied that all beings are sustained by food. These ten questions are considered as the fundamentals of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist legend on the beginning of the four castes, *khattiya*, *brāhmaṇa*, *vessā* and *suddā* are directly related to the utilization of foods. According to this story referred to in the Aggañña sutta, there was no private possession of the land where was paddy which was born of

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhadasa. R. (tr.) (1960) *Carakasamhihā*, Colombo: Department of Governmental Languages, p.199.

<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Tr) (1978) *The Minor Readings (Khuddakapāṭha)* London: The Pali Text Society, p.2.

itself (*sayañjāta*). People went to collect the paddy, when they were hungry and ate enough food. Once, a certain lethargic man carried on food for two days. By following this, others also carried on three, four, or five days and then they divided their own plots of land. Thereafter, some greedy man stole from others, and it caused the advent of uncongenial activities; telling lies, quarreling etc. Meanwhile, people gathered and discussed selecting a ruler (*mahāsammata*) and to entrust him the power to govern people and give a part of their harvest to him in respect of the duty performed by him. Further, he was the proper controller of all paddy fields (*khattiya*). After that, a group of people who were worried about the bad activities above, decided to practice good activities against evil and they were called *brāhmaṇa*. The group, conducted various business activities, called *vessās* and the group who performed lower business were called *suddās*.<sup>3</sup>

Once when the Buddha was living at Sāvatti, he preached to the monks; this body is depends on food and the body exists because of food. If there isn't food the body will not exist.<sup>4</sup> Friendly talk is the common practice of the Buddha, and in this discussion the Buddha always asks whether there was adequate food or not. Once the Buddha went to a village named Lonakāra and asked from Bhagu for alms food (*kacci pindakena na kilamasīti*).<sup>5</sup>

According to the Buddhist notion, the worst disease is hunger (*gigacchā paramā rogā*).<sup>6</sup> The Dhammapada commentary, Paramatthajotikā explains why hunger is the worst of diseases. The rest of the diseases can be immediately cured totally or temporarily after treatment, but the hunger should be treated again and again when it rises. Therefore, hunger is the worst of diseases.

### 3.2 Methods of taking food

The method of taking food prescribed in Buddhism is also interesting. Āyurveda says that people should refrain from three modes of taking food, namely; non-use (*ayoga*), wrong-use (*mittiyāyoga*) and excessive use (*atiyoga*). According to the principle of the middle path

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<sup>3</sup> Carpenter, Estlin J. (ed.) (1976) *Dīghanikāya III*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.80-81.; Walshe, Maurice (2012) *The Long Discourses of the Buddha A Translation of the Dīghanikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, P.407-405.

<sup>4</sup> *Ayam kāyo āharatthitiko. Āharam paticca titthati. Anāhāro no titthati.* Feer Leon M. (ed.) (1976) *Samyuttanikāya V*, London: The Pāli Text Society, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Chalmers Robert (ed.) (1977) *Majjhimanikāya III*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.155.

<sup>6</sup> Hinuber, O. von & Norman, K. R. (ed.) (1995) *Dhammapada*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.57.

(*majjhimāpaṭipadā*) the Buddha asks one to refrain from both; being addicted to sensual pleasure (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and self mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) because *kāmasukhallikānuyoga* can lead to the high nutrition whereas *attakilamathānuyoga* can lead to malnutrition. When the Great-being practiced sense indulgence, it shows that how he practiced non-use and wrong use of food. He refrained from taking food gradually up to totally, and ate his own excreta, and he comprehended the wrong practice. After realizing the fruitlessness of the practice followed, he stopped it and started to follow the middle path. Finally, he had the milk rice given by the daughter of baron named Sujātā and realized the Dhamma. Refraining from taking food after midday is one of the practices conducted by the Buddha and recommended to monks and nuns considering a healthy life.<sup>7</sup>

Āyurveda states that when we take food we have to divide the stomach into four parts; half of the stomach has to be allocated for foods; a quarter for water a quarter should be kept for air etc. *annena kukṣor dvāvamśo pānenaikam prapūrayet*  
*Āśraye pavanādīnam caturthamavaśeṣayet.*<sup>8</sup>

The Buddha's explanation is that the consumption food has to be stopped before four or five mouthfuls. In brief, the Buddha did not admire the taking of food for a full belly. "Let him drink water - here is sure mouth; Refreshment for a Bhikkhu - filled with zeal".<sup>9</sup> Over-consumption of food causes various diseases for the body. King Kosala's event indicates how he destroyed his health. By following the preaching of the Buddha, king Kosala was healthy and praised the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> When the venerable Nāgasena replied to the question of king Milinda; "Is it fruitful to chant *paritta* for all living beings? He mentions that there is no guaranty of all food, whether it is fruitful or not. Limitation of food will be discussed latter. In the discussion between the Buddha and Kasibhāradvāja, the Buddha mentioned his qualities. Restraint in the use of food for the stomach is one of them (*āhāre udare yato*).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Trenckner V. (ed.) (1979) *Majjhimanikāya I*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.449.

<sup>8</sup> Pemananda, Rev. Parvahera (ed.) (1939) *Aṣṭangahrdaya hevath Vagbhataya*, Colombo: Jinalankara, P.36).

<sup>9</sup> Davids, Rhys Mrs. (tr.) (1969) *Psalms of the Brethren*, London: Pāli Text Society, p.89.

<sup>10</sup> Feer, Leon M. (ed.) (1973) *Samyuttanikāya I*, London: Pāli Text Society, p.81-82.

<sup>11</sup> Andersen, Denes & Smith Helmer (ed.) (1984) *Suttanipāta*, London: Pāli Text Society, P.14; Feer, Leon M. (ed.) (1973) *Samyuttanikāya I*, London: Pāli Text Society, p.172.

The Buddha has particularly considered the methods of taking food because of ethical values. There are twenty nine *vinaya* rules out of seventy five *sekhiyā vinaya* rules in the Pācittiyapāli directly related to the food ethics. Consuming food provided as alms appreciatively, eating such food with attention focused on the bowl, not eating alms food taking mouthfuls from a heap, not looking at another's bowl intent on finding fault, not taking an extra-large mouthful, making a rounded mouthful, not opening the mouth when the mouthful has yet to be brought to it, not inserting the whole hand into the mouth while eating, not speaking with the mouth full of food, not eating in the form of lifted balls of food, not nibbling at mouthfuls of food, not puffing out cheeks, not eating shaking (food off) the hand, not eating by scattering lumps of rice about, not eating with tongue sticking out, not eating smacking lips, not eating making a slurping noise, not eating licking one's hands, not eating licking the bowl, not eating licking the lips, not accepting a water vessel with a hand soiled by food are few rules of them. These rules indicate how an ethical value was associated with food appreciated by the Buddha. Some ethics are related to physical health, some are mental, and some facts are related to social well being. The Buddha also practiced much ethics related to food and its usages.

The next point is that Buddhism is deemed the psychological base of all our activities. It is even related to food. The practice of reflection (*prayavekṣā*) on food is to overcome more problems related to it. The concept of *pratyavekṣā* shows how the Buddhist concept of food is related to its final goal. Once, when the Buddha was living at Assapura village, in Anga Janpada, he addressed the monks and preached how to use robe material, alms food, lodgings and medicine for the sick for the benefit of monks and devotees. In this discourse there are various practices, from bottom to top, which have to be completed becoming a monk or a brahman (*samana* or *brāhmaṇa*). Moderation in eating (*bhojane mattaññutā*) is one of them. It has to be practiced “we must be moderate in eating carefully, reflecting that we eat not for fun (*nevadavāya*), or pleasure (*na madāya*), or adornment (*na mandanāya*) or beautifying (*na vibhusanāya*) but just enough to maintain this body (*yāvadeva imassa kāyassa thitiyā*), and keep it going (*yāpanāya*), for keeping it from harm (*viḥimsūparatīyā*), to assist for religious life (*brahmacariyānuggahāya*) with the thought: ‘I am destroying old feelings and I must not allow new feelings to arise, so that there will be blamelessness for me and live in comfort.’<sup>12</sup> Out of the eight qualities of the theory of reflecting regarding alms food above; the first four points should be abstained from, and the rest

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<sup>12</sup> Horner, I. B. (tr.) (1995) *Middle Length Sayings, [Majjhimanikāya]* Vol. I, London: Pāli Text Society, p.327.

four should be followed. The aim of taking food is most probably differentiated from the modern practices of the world.

Material food is also directly related to its final goal of *nibbāna* because the Vitthatasatta Sutta in the Aṅguttaranikāya, depicts seven thoughts that are very fruitful in gaining deathless. The third point is the thought of the cloying of food. When a monk lives much with the thought of the cloying of food heaped around the mind. It facilitates decrease craving for taste.<sup>13</sup> Among the Buddhist concept of mind culture related to the development of tranquility (*samatha*), the thoughts of cloying of food is one of the subjects of meditation.

### 3.3 Limitation of food

Limitation of food is one of the basic facts related to the prevention of disease. This is also considered in Buddhism. The Aṅguttaranikāya mentions that there are four qualities of a person who is close to *nibbāna*. Moderation in food is the third. Limitation of food is one of the characteristics among the fifteen characteristics of spiritual purification. The person who is moderate in food, as the wind, does not throw down a rocky mountain and who is not moderate in food, as the wind, throws down a weak tree. Further, limitation of food is a virtue called *paccayasannisita sila*. That is the fourth moral pattern, and it means that a monk should be guided by the right mental attitude in using four requisites; namely, robes, alms food, dwelling and medicine. The terms like *appāhāra*, *alolupa* are frequently used to introduce the arahants and it shows that limitation of food is a frequent quality among the arahants.

### 3.4 The quality of food

The quality of food is also discussed in Buddhism. The Buddha prohibited taking solid food at the wrong time. He has recommended four soft foods (*catumadhura*) for monks and nuns. For the monks, who refrain from taking meals after mid-day, because energy should be conserved for their mental culture. The Mahāvagga states that *catumadhura* is famous as a medicine and it can make the food objective too (*yam bhesajjañceva assa bhesajjasammatañca lokassa, āhāratthañca phareyya, na ca oḷāriko āhāro paññāyeyyā'ti*).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hare, E.M. (tr.) (1978) *The Book of Gradual Sayings [Aṅguttaranikāya] Vol. IV*, London: The Pali Text Society, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Oldenberg, Hermann (ed) (1949) *Vinayapiṭaka (Mahāvagga), Vol. 1*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.199.

Eating fish and meat is a very popular practice in the modern world, to maintain the quality of food. The Āyurveda and the health science of West appreciate eating fish and meat. In relation to the Buddhist perspective of universal love (*mettā*), there is no justification to kill any living beings. Nevertheless, in Buddhist texts, there is no specific rule, which prohibits eating fish or meat. Although, once Ven. Devadatta requested from the Buddha for the recommendation of refraining from eating meat for monks, it was not accepted by the Buddha.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, eating the meat of ten animals is not allowed by the Mahāvaggapāli. They are; human being, elephant, horse, lion, snake, dog etc., which should not be eaten for meat.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, this report logically points out that there is no prohibition to eating other kinds of meat. Further, the Buddha allowed monks and nuns to have meat which was not seen, not heard and there is no suspicion that the animal had been killed for them.<sup>17</sup> At this point, I would like to quote Mohan Wijjyaratna's point, that is;

“The reason was the principle that monks and nuns had to obtain their food through begging or being invited to eat by lay householders. They were not to ask anything of their donors, or to express their preferences. Thus they had to accept what was given to them, and could not influence what kind of food they received. Moreover, monks and nuns were often strangers in the town or village where they begged for food, so that their donors did not know what they preferred; they gave them part of what they had already prepared for themselves. Therefore, monks and nuns who received meat were not responsible for the fact that animal had been killed. Of the five precepts intended for lay Buddhists, the first one was to “abstain from destroying life”. Of course, lay followers who observed the precepts did not kill animals to feed them to members of the Community. So monks and nuns could safely assume that any meat they might happen to receive did not come from an animal killed on purpose for them; they could be certain that they were not connected with the killing of the animal. In this case, there was no logical difference between meat and vegetable.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Oldenberg, Hermann (ed.) (1964) *Vinayapiṭaka, (Suttavibhaṅga) Vol. III*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.171.

<sup>16</sup> Oldenberg, Hermann (ed.) (1949) *Vinayapiṭaka (Mahāvagga) Vol. I*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.216-220.

<sup>17</sup> Trenckner, V. (ed.) (1979) *Majjhimanikāya Vol. I*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.578.

<sup>18</sup> Wijjyaratna, Moman (1990) *Buddhist Monastic Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.70, 71.

However, it can be assumed that this is unnatural. Whatever monks and nuns received they have a right to decide whether it should be eaten or not. As animals are not killed for the purpose of monks and nuns, and if they are safe from killing animals, it has to be assumed that there are some rights for someone to kill animals for the purpose of someone. Further, the Pali canon states, on the business of meat, fishermen and so on. Therefore, a devotee can buy meat from shops for themselves as well as for monks and nuns. The point is that fishermen kill fish for the purpose for their customers.

Regarding awareness of meat eating, attention will be paid to the psychological basis and the final goal of Buddhism. According to the Buddhist teachings, achievement of its final goal, disciples have to destroy all cravings including the desire of food (*rasa taṇhā*). The desire of food, whether it is vegetable or meat is an obstacle to attaining *nibbāna*. The Buddhist concept of reflection on food (*prayaveksaṣā*) says, when monks and nuns are having food, they have to refrain from four facts; not for fun, pleasure, adornment, beautifying and observe four facts; just enough for maintaining this body, keeping it going, for keeping it from harm, for furthering the Brahma-faring. If body can be maintained with vegetarian food what is the purpose of lacto-vegetarian. In brief, vegetarianism is better than non-vegetarianism. The question is why the Buddha allowed eating meat, which was pure in three facts above mentioned and how can be found that type of food in modern world.

### 3.5 Type of food

The uniqueness and identity of the Buddhist concept of food, is that the material food is not consider purely as food. When we consider the early discourses in the sutta piṭaka, there are four types of foods, namely; material food (*kabalimkārahāra*), sensorial and mental impression (*phassāhāra*) mental volition (*manosañcetanāhāra*) consciousness (*viññāṇāhāra*).<sup>19</sup> Etymologically, the term *āhāra* derived from the root *hara* with connecting prefix called *ā* (*ā+hara*). The Visuddhimagga says “*āhartīti āhāro*”.<sup>20</sup> In this common sense is useful to understand the four types of food.

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<sup>19</sup> Feer, Leon M. (ed.) (1970) *Saṃyuttanikāya II*, London: Pāli Text Society, p.11; Carpenter Estlin J. (ed.) (1976) *The Dīghanikāya III*, London: Pāli Text Society, p.228.

<sup>20</sup> Rhys Davids C.A.F. (ed.) (1975) *The Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa*, London: The Pali Text Society, p. 341.

The Saṃyuttanikāya commentary says that *āhara* means cause. Those causes bring own results, therefore those are named foods. *Kabalimkārahāra* means the material foods which have to be taken as a lump of food, rice etc. and it is two types; soft and hard. The mental impression is nothing but six touching objects of sense which arising based on twelve faculties and six consciousness. Basically it brings three feelings, namely; agreeable feeling, disagreeable feeling and indifferent feeling (*sukha, dukkha adukkhamā sukha*). Mental volition is *cetanā* (intension), and it can be brought three becoming; sensuous existence (*kāma bhava*), five material existences (*rūpa bhava*) and immaterial existence (*arūpa bhava*). The consciousness is the mind and can be brought the consciousness of conception (*patisandhivīññāna*). Furthermore, it mentions how these four types of food help to maintain the physical and mental body of a person. And what are the fears that can be raised from these foods. The material food makes the duty of food what common people aware as food. The mental impression is touching feelings and helps to beings. The mental volition, which collects wholesome and unwholesome, helps to give a birth for beings. The consciousness helps for existing of beings. There are four fears; we have to see the fear of desire (*nikanti bhaya*) on material food, the fear of coming near (*upagamana*) on mental impression food, fear of collecting (*āyūhana*) on mental volition food, and the fear of falling down in to womb on consciousness (*abhinipātabhaya*).<sup>21</sup>

### 3.6 Why the Buddha's specific attention

The next question is why the Buddha paid specific attention to the concept of health. In the Roga sutta, in the Aṅguttaranikāya, the Buddha has mentioned two types of diseases: namely; diseases of the mind and diseases of the body. Though a person can claim freedom of suffering from bodily diseases for one year or forty or fifty years, beings except arahants are hard to find in the world who can admit freedom from mental disease even for a moment.<sup>22</sup> A healthy life is very significant factor for the achievement of the final goal of Buddhism. Further, the Aṅguttaranikāya says, that there are five easy periods and five difficult periods in order to

<sup>21</sup> Woodward, F. L. (ed) (1977) *Sāratthappakasīnī Vol. II*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.22-25.

<sup>22</sup> “*Dveme, bhikkhave, rogā. Katame dve? Kāyiko ca rogo cetasiko ca rogo. Dissanti, bhikkhave, sattā kāyikena rogena ekampi vassaṃ ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, dvepi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, tīnīpi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, cattāripi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, pañcapi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, dasapi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, vīsati vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, tiṃsampi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, cattārīsampi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, paññāsampi vassāni ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā, vassasatampi, bhīyyopi ārogyaṃ paṭijānamānā*”. Morris Richard (ed.) (1976) *Aṅguttaranikāya II*, London: The Pali Text Society, P.142; Hare, E.M. (tr.) (1994) *The Book of the Gradual Sayings Vol. V*, London: The Pali Text Society, P.146.

practice Buddhism. Healthy young age, less diseases, no famine, people living in friendship and the *sangha* living in harmony are the easy period for the practice of Buddhism. All the above five factors are directly related to the modern concept of health that consists of mental, physical and social wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This research paper has discussed about the position assigned to food in the teachings of the Buddha, methods of taking food, food types, limitations of food, quality of food, and the why the Buddha paid specific attention to the phenomenon of food. It is clear that food is considered as a primary necessity to maintain the life of human beings in both Buddhism and Āyurveda. The Buddhist notion of food is not merely material food and there are three other types such as sensorial and mental impression (*phassāhāra*) mental volition (*manosañcetanāhāra*) consciousness (*viññānāhāra*). Food ethics recommended in Buddhism is relation to the modern world also. We waste much food due to bad practices of use, and lack of loving kindness towards the world. This practice shows how useful it is for modern society to balance between malnutrition and high nutrition. Physical well being facilitates mental well being and mental wellbeing facilitates physical wellbeing. *Nibbāna*, the final goal in Buddhism, is the ultimate wellbeing of mental balance. Therefore, the Buddha specially considered material food and the other three types. The Buddhist notion of taking food is to sustain the body and right livelihood. As we know, the modern world kills millions of animals every day and wastes much food. Further, people are divided into several groups by food forgetting the aim of taking food. Therefore, the concept of reflecting on food helps to overcome adverse emotions like pride, envy and controls the craving of taste and colour.

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<sup>23</sup> Morris Richard (ed.) (1976) *Aṅguttaranikāya III*, London: The Pali Text Society, p.65-67.; Hare, E.M. (tr.) (1994) *The Book of the Gradual Sayings* Vol. V, London: The Pali Text Society, P.54, 55.