

# The Buddha and the Philosophy of Food



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

## The Buddha and the Philosophy of Food

Like other ancient Indian thinkers, the Buddha saw that existence could be related in one way or another to food. He underlined food's fundamental importance when he said: "All that lives subsists on food" The quest for food is the basis of all human action as it provides the energy to sustain life. Thus the Pali word for food, *ahara*, is derived from the Sanskrit *a-hr*, to fetch, to bring near, or to convey to oneself. The Buddha spoke of four types of food or sustenance; material, mental impressions, volition and consciousness. The first of these maintains the body and can be either gross (*olarika*) or subtle (*sukhuma*), while the three others maintain the mind. The craving for is one of the factors which creates the momentum that leads to repeated rebirth.

An important quality of food is taste and the Buddha identified six different types; sweet (*madhura*), sour (*ambila*), saltiness (*lavana*), bitterness (*tittaka*), savoury (*katuka*) and pungency or alkalinity (*kasaya*). Later commentators added the qualities of hotness (*unha*) and coldness (*sita*) to these six. The receptors for these flavours were the 17000 taste buds (*rasaharani*) in the mouth and parts of the throat (A.III,250). Early Buddhist texts also mention the three spices, the four types of sweets, the five bovine bounties, the five kinds of tasty meat, and the 18 varieties of solid eatables. The three spices, according to some lists, consisted of cumin seeds, a compound of cumin and asafoetida, and garlic. The four sweets were honey, ghee, butter and sugar, the third was milk, cream butter ghee and the skimmings of ghee, but what made up the others is not given. The Abhidhamma work, the Atthasalani, attempted to classify life forms according to the fineness of the food they ate. In this schema crocodiles were the lowest because they were known to sometimes eat pebbles, higher still were peafowl which feed on snakes and scorpions, then came hyenas which can digest horn and bone, then elephants, deer, cows, rabbits, and other animals in ascending order. Higher than these were villagers, then urbanites, followed by kings and their courtiers, and at the top were the gods who lived on ambrosia.

The Buddha had ideas about how food supported life, although these were probably influenced by the medical theories evolving at the time. Both accepted that there was some kind of fire or heat element (*tapo* or *udaraggi*) in the stomach, which was responsible for digesting food and allowed for its assimilation into the organism. It was this fire that also caused the warmth characteristic of most living beings. Food was recognized as having two constituents; bulk (*rupa*) and nutritional essence (*oja*), some types having more of one than the other. Bulky foods such as grains would allay the pangs of hunger but only briefly, while foods rich in nutritional essence such as butter or ghee satisfied for much longer. It was believed that the flesh of herbivorous animals such as cattle and deer was more nutritious than that of carnivores such as tigers and crocodiles. The nutritional essence of food was identified as one of the four things that build physical form. While food is essential for the maintenance of life it was believed that it could be dangerous if too much of the same type was eaten, if the heat in the stomach was low, or if one had bad digestion.

The early Buddhists were quick to point out and mock what they saw as brahman obsessiveness concerning what they ate, where and from whom they accepted it, and their notions of pollution and purity. The Satadhamma Jataka is an example of this. According to this tale an untouchable youth, supposedly the Buddha in one of his former lives, and a young brahman "from a distinguished northern family" found themselves on the road together. Although loath to be in the company of an untouchable, the brahman decided to travel with him for safety's sake. When the two stopped for breakfast, the untouchable washed his hands in the nearby stream, unwrapped his rice packet and before eating it, offered some to the brahman who had nothing to eat. The brahman indignantly refused the offer so the other ate with a shrug of his shoulders. By the time the two stopped in the evening, the brahman was exhausted and famished. The untouchable ate his rice without a word while the brahman stood by watching. Finally, unable to stand his hunger pangs any longer the young brahman decided he would eat his companion's leftovers. As soon as he had finished he was overcome with revulsion at the thought of what he had done. Unable to stand himself

or face his family or kin ever again, he ran into the forest and lived in complete isolation for the rest of his life.

The Mahajanaka Jataka tells another story deliberately meant to emphasise the early Buddhist rejection of pollution by food. A man, again the Buddha in one of his past lives, roasted some meat on a spit and put it aside to cool before eating it. While the meat was momentarily unattended a dog grabbed it and ran off with it. However, before the dog could eat his prize he was startled by a crowd, dropped the meat and ran away. Seeing this, the man retrieved his meat, cut off the part touched by the dog and without further ado ate it. It would be difficult to imagine something more revolting and polluting in Brahmanism. The story concludes by saying: "If purchased with wealth righteously earned any food is pure."

For the Buddha, virtue was many more times more important than supposedly pure or impure foods. The Amagandha Sutta from the Sutta Nipata says: "If one is rough, lacking pity, back-biting, harmful, arrogant, mean, sharing nothing with others, this makes one impure, not the eating of meat. Anger, arrogance, and stubbornness, hatred, delusion, envy, pride and conceit and keeping bad company, this makes one impure, not the eating of meat. Immoral behaviour, refusing to repay debts, informing on others, cheating in business, causing divisions between people, this makes one impure, not the eating of meat.

While the Buddha ignored Brahmanical food prescriptions, he did require his monks and nuns to avoid two types of food; garlic and the flesh of certain species of wild animals. From the earliest times, Indians have believed that garlic and onions provoke unruly desires and have shunned their use. The Manusmṛti, the most authoritative Hindu law book, goes as far as to say that a brahman will lose his caste if he eats garlic. It seems the Buddha took this popular taboo into account and prohibited monks and nuns from eating garlic too, but gave a rational reason for the prohibition. According to the Vinaya, the rules for monastics, the reason for the ban was because a monk who had eaten garlic and then attended one of the Buddha's talks offended the audience with his breath. When told of this, the Buddha instructed his monks to avoid garlic as a courtesy to others. Significantly, he allowed monks to take garlic for medical reasons.

Rational reasons were likewise given for the prohibition on certain meats. Eating elephant and horse flesh for example, might bring unwelcome attention from monarchs who regarded such animals as symbols of royalty. Dogs and snakes were widely considered loathsome and eating them would attract social disapproval. Lions, hyenas and other large carnivores were believed to be able to smell the flesh of their kind on someone who had eaten it and would attack them. The evidence given for this last reason was that some hunters had offered lion meat to a forest-living monk who ate it and was subsequently mauled by a lion. A similar thing happened to monks who ate tiger, leopard and bear flesh.

Like most other ascetics of the time, Buddhist monks were celibate, itinerant and mendicant, and like other ascetics, one of their major concerns was acquiring food. The rules the Buddha drew up for his monks relating to food were not meant to mortify their bodies but to simplify their lives, make them easy to support and encourage acceptance and contentment. The words for monks and nuns, *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*, are derived from the Sanskrit root meaning 'to beg', although Buddhist monastics did not actually beg in the usual sense of the word. To beg is to request or plead for alms whereas Buddhist monks and nuns were not supplicants. They would present themselves at the door of a potential donor, stand quietly for a few moments and after receiving something move on, or if nothing was forthcoming, move on anyway.

Concerned that monks should not become a burden or a nuisance to the lay people who provided their food, he counselled: "As a bee takes nectar and goes its way without damaging the colour or the fragrance of the flower, so the sage should go through the village for alms." Monks in Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand collect alms food in this manner even today. Monks were not allowed to cook or keep food overnight, thus freeing them from having to collect fire wood, and needing pots, pans and storage facilities. An exception was made for basic foods such as sugar, honey, salt, ghee and so on, which they were allowed

to be kept for seven days. This meant that Buddhist monks were entirely dependent on the lay community for their food and therefore had to interact with them. They may have spent time in solitude but they could not become hermits in remote forests.

Monks were also expected to eat whatever was put in their bowls as an exercise in acceptance and gratitude. A story was told of the particularly grave and austere monk Maha Kassapa, in order to reinforce these attitudes. Once, as a leper offered Maha Kassapa some food, one of the wretched man's fingers dropped into his bowl as well. The monk ate this thoroughly unappetizing titbit together with the other food without a murmur. In contrast to brahmins and the ascetics of some other sects, Buddhist monks were expected to accept food from whoever was willing to offer it. Only one exception was made to this requirement. If an individual had deliberately disadvantaged the monastic community in some way or had spoken ill of them without justification, monks were allowed to express their disapproval by "turning over the bowl" (*pattam nikkujjeyya*), i.e. refusing to accept that person's alms.

Monks and nuns were not to consume any food after midday, apparently for health reasons. The Buddha said: "I do not eat in the evening and thus I am free from illness and affliction and enjoy health, strength and ease. By so doing you too will be free from illness and affliction and enjoy health, strength and ease." However, this rule may have also taken into account when people eat their food and leftovers were more likely to be available. Before commencing a meal, the Buddha advised monks and nuns to quietly recite these words to themselves: "We will eat in moderation. Reflecting wisely we will not eat for fun, for amusement or for physical attractiveness but only for the maintenance and continuance of this body, for allaying the discomfort of hunger, for assisting in living the holy life and with the thought 'I will end the old desires and not give rise to new ones and thus be healthy, blameless and live in comfort.'" In the better monasteries, these words are still recited before meals.

Once, an admirer told the Buddha that his disciples gave him the highest respect because, among other things, he ate modestly and was content with whatever alms food he received. The Buddha's reply to this observation gives an insight into his attitude towards food as well as to his dining habits. He said: "Suppose my disciples honour and respect me and accept my tutelage because I eat little and commend eating little, and because I am content with any kind of alms food I get and commend such contentment. But some of my disciples live on a cupful or even half a cupful of food, or on a single or even half a *beluva* fruit, while I sometimes eat a whole alms bowl of food or even more. Suppose my disciples honour and respect me and accept my tutelage because I am content with whatever alms food I get. But some of my disciples eat only what they beg for, never accept an invitation to a meal, beg from every house without missing one, and eat whatever they receive. I on the other hand, sometimes accept invitations to meals and eat fine rice with a variety of sauces and curries. So it is not because of such things that my disciples honour and respect me. There are other more important things. The Buddha then listed these other things by which he had earned the respect of his disciples; his moral integrity, inner calm and spiritual attainments.

As Buddhism gained first acceptance and then popularity, it became a challenge to maintain a lifestyle of simplicity and moderation, particularly in matters related to food. People were only too happy to provide monks, not just with adequate sustenance, but with the best kinds they could afford, and in generous amounts: "They chose not to take soft or hard food or drinks themselves, they did not give it to their parents, spouse or children, not to their slaves, servants or friends, and not to their colleagues or relatives, but they did give it to the monks who as a result were handsome, plump, and with radiant complexions and clear skin. The Buddha became acutely aware that even sincere monks could easily become preoccupied with food and even slip into gluttony. His discourses are peppered with warnings against preoccupations with food. Maintain "a sensible attitude towards food" he counselled, "have an empty stomach, be moderate in food and with little desire."

The prospect of regular meals and sometimes even sumptuous ones, created another less expected problem for the Buddhist Sangha. Some people came to see the Sangha as an attractive alternative to the struggles and drudgery of ordinary life. The monastic regulations contain more than a few stories of men ordaining for reasons entirely unrelated to the Sangha's true purpose, including to get free meals. One of these accounts tells of the son of a noble family, now fallen on hard times, noticing that monks "having eaten good meals, lie down to sleep on beds sheltered from the wind". He then decided to join the Sangha so as to enjoy such benefits. On another occasion a man stopped off at the local monastery on the way home after a hard morning's toil in the fields. One of the monks gave him "a helping of juicy, delicious fare" from his own bowl. Never having eaten so well in his life before, the man decided that the monk's life had definite advantages that the farmer's life does not, and he joined the Sangha. The Buddha berated such opportunists as having entered the Sangha "for the sake of your belly."

Of course, it was not just monks who could become too fond of food. According to one incident recorded in the Tipiṭaka, Pasenadi the king of Kosala, came to the Buddha bloated and breathing in a laboured manner, having eaten yet another enormous meal. Seeing this, the Buddha commented: "When a person is mindful and therefore knows moderation in eating, his ailments diminish, he ages gently and his life is enhanced." The king took the hint and asked his nephew to repeat the Buddha's words to him whenever he was taking his meals. As a result, the king gradually reduced his food intake, lost weight and regained his slim figure.

Interestingly, the Buddha's advice to King Pasenadi, to eat with mindfulness, is only now beginning to be recognized by dieticians and weight-loss experts. It helps turn a habituated behaviour into a conscious one where the possibility of choice is enhanced. It allows one to pause for a moment, think about and be aware of what one is about to do and why, and often this is enough to bring about a change in behaviour. It is also significant that the Buddha chose to motivate King Pasenadi with a positive instead of a negative message. Rather than regale him with an account of the problems caused by obesity, the Buddha listed the benefits of losing weight; a reduction of bodily ailments (*tanu tassa bhavanti vedana*), a slowing of the ageing process (*sanikaṃ jirati*) and a general enhancement of life (*ayupalayaṃ*).

The underpinning of Buddhist ethics are kindness and compassion, for oneself and for others. The Buddha said: "One who is concerned for his own welfare and that of others, is the supreme, the highest, the topmost and the best." Something in which food and Buddhist ethics converge is generosity (*dana*) and sharing (*caga*), cardinal virtues of the religion. The Buddha praised generosity as a way of developing detachment towards one's possessions and of benefiting others. He said: "If beings knew as I do the results of giving things, they would not enjoy their use without sharing them with others, nor would the taint of stinginess obsess the heart and settle there. Should it be even their last and final morsel of food, they would not enjoy it without sharing it, if there were anyone there to receive it." He encouraged his disciples to consider food beyond its material constituents, to what it can impart. As food is the mainstay of life and enhances beauty and happiness, strength and intelligence, in giving it, one also indirectly gives these qualities. Further, the Buddha added to give life, beauty, happiness, strength and intelligence to others is to partake in such blessings oneself.

Another virtue taught by the Buddha which is related to generosity and food is hospitality (*sakkara*). Hospitality to guests and strangers was already a well-established tradition in Brahmanism, although it was limited by the barriers of caste. However, for the Buddha, hospitality was to be extended to all, regardless of their caste, religious affiliation or social status. When Siha, a leading citizen of Vesali, converted from Jainism to Buddhism, the Buddha asked him to continue offering his hospitality to any Jain monks who might come to his door for alms. The first two of the Fivefold Offerings incumbent on all Buddhists is hospitality to relatives, guests and strangers. Although involving more than just providing food and water, doing so was the most common expression of hospitality. When a wayfaring monk turned up at a monastery, the resident monks were expected to go out and meet him, prepare a seat for him, bring water to wash his

feet, arrange accommodation, and do other things to make him feel welcome. This would include offering food if he had not already eaten. Of the several best times to give, the Buddha said, two were when a guest or stranger has just arrived and when they are just about to leave; the first to allay their hunger and the second to give them something to eat for the journey ahead.