



Food and Buddhism

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By

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato, Arahato, Samma Sam-Buddhassa.*¹

These are the words which are traditionally said when starting a teaching or a discussion relating to Buddhism and the Buddha, or a meditation. They are in Pāli, a sanskritic language which conveys the primitive and most ancient Canon of Buddhism. The Thera-vāda tradition, which means the "Ancient Voice", abides by the Pāli Canon. This Buddhist tradition is practiced in Sri-Lanka, in parts of India, in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, as well as in parts of Vietnam and Indonesia.

In the Theravāda tradition, food rituals are very simple, convivial and good-natured; they are nevertheless quite important, if anything else because, as we shall see later, monks need to be fed on a daily basis by the lay population. This being said, of course food is essential *per se*, for sustaining the body and mind, and as a healthy source of pleasure; but for Buddhists it is also considered as a practical and daily opportunity to exercise four virtues: restraint, contentment, compassion and generosity.

¹ *Homage to Him the Blissful One, the Accomplished One, Fully and Generously Awakened.*

1. Restraint

A king – King Pasenadi of Kosalaⁱ - was indulging himself in food, eating so much that he did not feel well and was getting fat; the Buddha reminded him that mindfulness must also be applied in the matter of food, that one feels better and ages more slowly when eating in moderation. The king followed his advice, became lean, felt better and thanked the Buddha for his practical advice.

Of course, physical restraint is meant to help not only to feel better in the body, but also to practice mental restraint. The whole idea is to keep away from gluttony, self-indulgence, insatiability and greed, at all levels. As a practical rule of restraint, a monk can feed himself only between sunrise and midday. Unless he is sick, as we shall see, or has special medical requirements.

2. Contentment

It is a virtue indeed. We may notice that in his advice to the king, the Buddha provided an impetus for feeling better, simply through eating a reasonable amount. Happiness here and now was a basic aim of his teachings, and his followers take opportunity of the daily necessities of sustenance to indeed be content and happy, here and now.

There is a well-known and poetical sermonⁱⁱ in which the Buddha advises to cultivate serenity by nurturing a spirit of friendship (*mettā*) toward all living beings. In this sermon, there are two key words describing the wise practitioner: he is *subhāro*, which means 'frugal (easy to support)'; and *santussako*, which means 'content with little'. A monk will be content with whatever is offered to him, with some qualifications as we shall see. Feeding him should not be a source of trouble to the supporting community.

That the wise one can deeply enjoy simple and reasonable things, is an old, golden rule -- one thinks of the Epicurean approach to life and food, in its original sense.

3. Compassion

“I commit myself to strive to refrain from causing suffering (from hurting sentient beings).”²

This is the first and foremost moral precept for the Buddhist. It is the precept of *avihimsā*, the precept of non-violence, the vow to renounce cruelty, brutality and abuse of force.

This precept implies practicing the virtue of *karuṇā*, compassion. Regarding the matter of food, this moral precept was clarified by the Buddha himself, at the request of a man called Jīvaka:ⁱⁱⁱ

”I say there are three instances in which any animal flesh should not be eaten: when it is seen, heard or simply suspected that the animal was slaughtered for feeding you.”

Jīvaka asked the Buddha to further spell out his instructions, particularly on the following aspect: monks have to accept whatever food is given to them by the supporting population, but they are meant to practice the virtues compassion and non-violence, so what if meat is given to them?

“Jīvaka, if someone causes suffering to an animal, to serve me or any of my disciples, this person commits evil five times. Firstly, with the very thought of laying a hand on the animal. Secondly, there is evil from the fact that the animal experiences fear and grief from being led to its death. Thirdly, with the very thought of killing a sentient being. Fourthly, from the fact that this animal experiences fear and pain while it is being killed. Finally, evil is committed from the very fact of offering to me or my disciples unwelcome food.”

² This first moral precept is, for all Buddhists, the foremost, but there often is some confusion on the term used to express it. The correct term for this pledge is *avihimsā*: it is the vow of non-violence, of renouncing any form of cruelty, any brutality and any abuse of force. For the Buddhist, the correct term is not *ahimsā*, which is the vow of renouncing any use of force (a vow which is practised by some Jain ascetics, and also by some Buddhist monks).

It is for good reasons that in this quote the Buddha uses a verb (*parisankita*) which means: 'to suspect'. This sutta is thus quite clear: a disciple of the Buddha endeavours to avoid sustaining himself or herself in a way that implies the direct or indirect harming of sentient beings. If a person buys meat from a store, or has someone else purchasing it on his or her behalf, this person cannot hide behind the notion that the killing was not done directly for the purpose of feeding him or her... for the obvious reason that the shelf the meat was taken from will not stay empty, and the direct consequence of this person's act is that down the track another animal will eventually be killed.

That being said, the Buddha was a man of high compassion, but also a practical one. He did not accept fanaticism in the name of doing good (we have already seen that there could be medical exceptions for monks in relation with the rule of not eating between midday and sunrise). If for medical reasons a monk needed meat or food derived from meat, then so be it -- e.g., weak from using a purgative, a monk was given a meat broth.^{iv}

This firm but practical, non-extremist attitude to moral rules, was rather typical of the Buddha. It should also be noticed that the sacrifice of life can go the other way round: it's not necessarily humans who should be at the receiving end. One can find in the *Jātaka* tales the following story: one day, there was a terrible drought and famine, many plants and animals were dying and tigers too because their preys had become very rare. A monk came across a tigress lying down, with her two starving cubs clinging at her empty breasts. She saw him, there was light in her eyes: food at last! But she was too weak to even get up on her feet, and fell back on her side. The monk saw the despair in her eyes... he felt compassion towards her. He decided that his time had come, and that he would help these three tigers survive. He approached the starving tigress and offered himself to her.

This brings us to the fourth virtue in relation to food.

4. Generosity

In Theravāda countries, Buddhist monks and nuns are fed on a daily basis thanks to the supporting generosity of the population. They are called *bhikkhū* and *bhikkhunī* because they live strictly from alms. They are not supposed to store food in any manner. If for weeks no one wants to sustain them, then this means they are not needed and welcome, and they are meant to die. That's how the Buddha wanted it. So every morning you can see the monks and nuns going around in the streets, with their empty bowl, and the population actively and happily participates in feeding them. This activity very often is the occasion for simple but deeply felt ceremonies and rituals, called *pūjā*.

Because of this total feeding dependency of the monks and nuns, *dāna* (giving - generosity) has become a fundamental structuring pillar of Theravādan societies of South-East Asia. Indeed, people are taught the gesture of giving very early on: many Thai mothers patiently teach their babies to hold a grain of rice between their fingers, and to offer it to the Buddha statue or to a monk.

Giving -- a very simple gesture, which opens up a whole world of deep joys and untold riches.

***Bhojana-pūjā* -- Offering of food ^v**

Adhi'vāsetu no Bhante (Bhadde if nun)
Please accept from us, O Deeply Good,
bhojana'm pari-kappitaṃ
this food piously and carefully prepared;
anu'kampa'm upādāya
with gratitude for your compassion towards us
paṭi'gaṇhātu'm Uttamaṃ.
honoured are we to present it to the Ultimate.





Dr Bittar Gabriel Jīvasattha (1959) has a PhD in Interdisciplinary Sciences and was a researcher and lecturer in numerical phylogenetics at the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics and the University of Geneva. He is not linked to a Theravāda Monastery, but - together with his wife, Jacqueline Agnès Jīvarakkhī - they have their own retreat centre on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, where they live now.

NOTES:

ⁱ SN III.13

ⁱⁱ Karaṇīya-Mettā Sutta -- Sermon on (the Accomplishment of) Benevolence -- Appears twice in the Khuddaka-Nikāya: in its 1st sub-collection, the Khuddaka-Pāṭha (8th text), and also in its 5th sub-collection, the Sutta-Nipāta (8th text of the Uraga-vagga, stanze 143-152 BPS, under the abridged title 'Mettā Sutta').

ⁱⁱⁱ Jīvaka Sutta (MN 55).

^{iv} Vinaya-Piṭaka, Mahāvagga, Khandhaka VI, ch. 23 (2) - Suppiyā Sutta

^v offering to the altar, Sri-Lanka v. -- literal translation by Jīvasattha