

Ecological Nutriment in Buddhism: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This paper deals with dietary choices mentioned in Buddhist literature. It attempts to provide a conceptual structure to capture the phenomenon of food and values, prescriptions, taboos and ideals that are associated Buddhism. By exploring doctrinal and practical aspects of food in the teachings of the Buddha and subsequent Buddhist literature this paper argues that the concept of food has been an organic part of Buddhist values. It has also been demonstrated that Buddhist teachings and practices are not obsessed with a particular variety of food. Instead, food was seen as a choice of human beings and less to do with the path of spirituality. This study is useful in the contemporary context wherein food choice emerged as a site for conflict among different groups all over the world. This study is essentially a historical commentary on Buddhist ethics in the domain of food.

Keywords: Buddhism, Theravada, Vegetarianism, Religion, Meat

Introduction

Buddhism as a religion and value system, neither encourages nor forces its followers to eat a particular category of food. In a way, it upholds the democratic outlook towards food choices of followers. This premise is evident with absence of no concrete suggestions so far as vegetarian diet is concern. Buddhism perceives the process of eating as an essential factor to preserve life. At preferential level, it advocates to get rid of cravings (cravings) attached to food while eating. Generally, Buddhists are advised to avoid the two extremes: these two are firstly, aalways doing self-harming behavior (Attakilamathanuyoga) and secondly, constantly enjoying sensual pleasure (Kamasukhallikanuyoga).¹ In view of this, the aspects of food and eating are being conceived as important sources to capture the Buddhist perspective on the dietary patterns. This paper explores, analyzes and documents the Buddhist universe of dietary patterns which are useful to contemporary society.

The notion of ecological nutrients used in this article refers to the Buddhist perspective of dietary choices that are adhered, prescribed and endorsed by the Buddha and subsequent Buddhist literature. The concept of Buddhist perspective of dietary patterns refers to the conceptual phenomenon of food represented by the central tenants of the Buddha insofar as food is concern which can be captured from the following words: ‘Vegetarianism is wrong; I

¹ Vinayapitaka, Mahavaggapali, paccavaggiyakatha. Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1991.

never said it was true. With vegetables or to be balanced when eating food with meat or fish, to know the length (Bozanamattannuta) is only preached'.²

Food is a critical necessity for living things to live and survive. No species can survive without food. Food thus is a paramount reality that sustains the bio-cellular life that manifested in multiple forms of species. That's why the Buddha said, "All living beings are dependent on food (Sabbesatta aharathitika)."³ It implies the simple principle that to eat is to live. In pre-Buddhist period, it was assumed that it is possible to eliminate bad deeds by austerity in terms of consuming food. There were some ascetics and Brahmins, who used to believe that they can become pure by maintaining austerity towards food choices. They eat only a small amount of rice or vegetables. Often they can go without food. They have this self-torture (Attakilamathanu yoga) which is a practice of austerity and chastity, they believe that liberation can be achieved by doing so. At the time of the Buddha a strong believe existed on the self-torture with dietary choices as a means to attain divine grace.⁴

The views of the Buddha can be captured from the following words: "O ... dear son Sariputta. There are some ascetic and Brahmins who believe that purity can be achieved through nutrition (Aharena suddhi)'.⁵ He further said 'we eat green vegetables, they only eat millet, they only eat scraps of leather, Chaff ... they only eat sesame flour (Mahathihanadasutta)'. Explicitly, the Buddha does not accept the idea that the purity of the mind and the liberation of life can be achieved through the choice of food. This means that food is not the main thing for purity of mind although it is important. Some religious leaders strictly practice this vegetarianism. And throughout life, they avoid eating meat and fish. The Buddha said to those people, "They are those who torture themselves. Those who practice self-harm," he said. (Attanta Po, Attapritapanna nuyoga manuyutto).⁶ The Buddha did not consider vegetarianism to be a virtuous practice to be adhered strictly. This practice of vegetarianism is not at all a virtue included in the middle way (Magganga).

Refuting the practice of austerity in terms of dilatory choices, the Buddha advised his disciples to observe the practice of dhutanga (discipline of passion). The direct meaning of the Pali word dhutangha means to destroy bad karma and impurities. The Buddha believed that vegetarianism is not a virtue. Moreover, it is not important for the cessation of suffering. Therefore, the Buddha did not encourage his disciples to practice vegetarianism. He insisted upon perceiving food as a source of survival not as a means to establish superior ethical, moral and spiritual value. Thereby the value the Buddha seems to uphold is that there exists no critical relationship between food and spirituality.⁷

² Sagathavaggaatthakatha, samyuttanikayapali, Yangon, Myanmar, religious affairs, 1990.

³ Dhghanikaya, pathikavaggapali, sangitisutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1990.

⁴ Suttanipataatthakatha(commentary) vol(1) Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1995.

⁵ Suttanta Pitaka, Mulapannasapali, Thihanadavagga, Mahathihanadasutta, . Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1981.

⁶ Suttanta Pitaka, Majjhimanipannasapali, Ghatativagga, Apannaka sutta, Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1991.

⁷ Vinaya Pitaka, culavaggapali (five things demanded by Devadatta), Department of religious affairs, Yangon Myanmar, 1994.

It would be worth to have a glimpse on the popular food items that exists during the Buddha's time. These can be observed and can be traced through Pali literature. According to the Vinaya Pitaka, there are five types of foods mentioned in pacittiya pali. Those five types are: rice (odna), barley (kummatha), fried dumpling of glutting rice (satthu), fish (maccha) and beef (mamtha). These five types of food are usually consumed by people during the time of the Buddha on a daily basis. These are the food offered to monks as well. In addition to these foods in the (39th) precept of the Book of pacittiya, nine kinds of delicious food are mentioned. These are: butter (sappi), Si U (Nawanita), Oil (Tela), Pyar (madhu), Tan Lay (fanita), fish (maccha), beef (mamtha), milk (khira), and curd (dadhi).⁸

Generally, the aforementioned nine types of food can be found in the dining room of a wealthy family. They also donate this food to the monks. If people can donate food like this according to their wishes, Buddhist monks can accept (donate). But what food should be offered to people without reason (especially when they are sick)? Bhikkhus are guilty if they are asked to offer food. In the kitchen of a poor family, you will find broken rice and rice soup. This food will be the weakest food in the Buddha's time. This food is generally eaten by workers in the homes of wealthy people. They usually feed the servants. The Buddha's father, King Suddhodana, was peaceful and prosperous. As per legend, he feeds servants rice mixed with meat (biryani) every day. Buddha said about this. "O ... monks, in other houses, workers, they used to feed the servants a dish of broken rice and soup. As for my father, King Suddhodhana, for his servants, served with rice mixed with meat (biryani)"⁹

From the aforementioned information, it can be deduced that vast section of population during the Buddha's time regularly consumed rice, fish and meat, and various vegetable on daily basis. As the Buddha and his disciples depended on alms, they all eats fish and other vegetables. But of course, the meat and fish should not be specially prepared for you.¹⁰ Meat eating was quite common during the time of the Buddha. It can be illustrated by a story available in Pali literature which as follows: once upon a time, a disciple of the Buddha named ugga living in Vaishali offered alms to the Buddha and his monks at his house. At that meal, the meal and meal dishes, as well as various food items, are carefully planned. There Uggā asked to the Buddha "Holy Buddha, the pork curry cooked with prunes is delicious. Accept your disciple with mercy, God." The Buddha accepted it.¹¹

In the well know story of the Buddha's last food mention about meet could be seen. The Buddha went to Kusinaga on his last day. On the way, Sunda, the silversmith's son, served the Lord Buddha with a young pig's curry, which he called sukaramaddava. This pork is very tender and very nutritious. Scholars have interpreted the word sukaramaddava in various ways, but the Atthakatha (commentary) teacher ashinbuddha ghosathera accepted only the above meaning of

⁸ Vinaya Pitaka, Pacittiya Pali, panitabozana sikkhapada, Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1992.

⁹ Anguttaranikaya, tikanipatapali, Thukumalasutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1992.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Anguttaranikaya, paccakanipatapali, Manapadayi sutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1970.

virgin pig.¹² This story further attest the dietary choices of the Buddha and his non rigid attitude towards food. Of course, this story is not free from controversy. Ashin Buddhagosathera described the interpretations of other scholars about sukaramaddava. Some teachers say that sukaramaddava is cow's milk or milk rice. Some say it's a tonic.¹³ Some scholars who believe in vegetarianism still say that sukaramaddava is a type of mushroom.

Non vegetarian foods are contemplated and reflected in Buddhist Pali literature. The following ten categories of meats discouraged for monks to eat: human flesh (manussamamsa), Elephants (Hattimamsa), Horse meat (assamamsa), Dog meat (sunakhamamsa), snake meat (Ahimamsa), the lion meat (Sihamantha), tiger meat (byagghamamsa), leopard meat (dipi mamsa), bear meat(acchamamsa) and hyena meat(taracchamansa).¹⁴ Monks are advised to avoid the aforementioned meat and classified them as undesirable. There are reasons why Buddhist monks refrain from eating these ten types of meat. These reasons are briefly described in the Book of vinaya mahavagga. Since human flesh belongs to the same caste, it should not be eaten. elephant and horse meat is the property of the king and should not be eaten. Dog meat and snake meat are disgusting and should not be eaten. Lion meat such as tiger meat is harmful and should not be eaten.

The story of Commander Thiha

The Buddha maintained consistent outlook towards non-vegetarian food. Once a Vazzi state commander, named Thiha who entered Buddhism had invited the Buddha and the monks to eat alms at his house. He inform that he procured meat and fish from market and cooked it. The next day, the Buddha and his disciples received food.¹⁵ The discourse between the Buddha and Jivaka also reflects his perception towards food. One day, the doctor Jivaka asked the Buddha about the news he had heard. "Lord . . . It is said that they kill the lives of animals to donate to the monk Gautama. Bhikkhu Gautama also said that he used meat dishes that were slaughtered and cooked for him knowingly. Let the disciples know whether what they are saying is the truth." The Buddha rejected this statement and replied that "Jivaka ...seeing, hearing I have already declared from the beginning that monks should not eat meat if they are in agreement with the three points of doubt. Oh...Jivaka is the Buddha and Referring to the Buddha's disciple as well, anyone who kills and persecutes a living being causes many evils due to five reasons.

(1) "Let them go, "What kind of creature did they bring?"

(2) "The suffering of a creature tied around the neck and carried, many evils occur because of these two reasons, "feeling miserable".

¹² Dighanikaya, Mahavaggapali, Maha Parinivvana Sutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1982.

¹³ Dighanikaya, Mahavaggapali, Maha Parinivvanasutta commantry, Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1970.

¹⁴ Vinaya Pitaka, Mahavaggapali Hatthimamsadipatikkepakatha, Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1992.

¹⁵ Anguttaranikaya, sattakanipatapali, Sihasenapatisutta, Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1994.

- (3) "Let's go and kill this animal." These three reasons caused many evils.
- (4) "The suffering of the slain creature" causes many evils due to this fourth reason.
- (5) "The Buddha and Buddha's disciple and many evils have been caused by this fifth cause, which is to cause the Buddha and his disciples to slow down due to the offering of inappropriate meat."¹⁶

Buddha said, "Seeing, hearing it has been said that you can eat meat if you are free from the three 'doubts'. i.e. The animal has been kill on purpose for the monk. This rule is called the rule of Tikotiparisuddha (pure in three Ways).¹⁷ Because eating meat is not as bad as killing an animal. But other religious teachers (Annatitthiya) believe that those who eat meat are those who receive the inheritance of karma. The Buddha did not accept this concept and rejected this proposal.

The endorsement for non-vegetarian food could also be seen in the conversation between Buddha and Devadatta. Once, Devadatta, who always opposes the Buddha, asked the Buddha. "Lord, Bhikkhus more than life ... meat curry, do not eat fish dishes. If the meat if you eat fish, tell the person who eats it to be a sin."The Buddha strongly objected to this.¹⁸ When it comes to eating meat, amagandha sutra is very important. This sutra, Suttanipata, it is mentioned in Sula vagga. This sutra was first preached by Kassapa Buddha. Then Gautama Buddha spoke again.¹⁹

Once a vegetarian hermit approached the Kassapa Buddha and asked him whether he should eat or not eat 'Amagandha'. The Buddha asked him, 'What is Amagandha?' 'Amagandha means flesh,' he replied. The literal meaning of amagandha is "the smell of flesh". He has unpleasant, Orglisan-sara (the smell of green algae, the smell of green moss, the bark of shoots) has a dark meaning. So the hermit used the word amagandha instead of the word meat. At that time, the Buddha said to the hermit, "Flesh is not the real Amagandha (the real flesh).

The Buddhist perspective of dietary choices could also be observed from the Amaganda sutra. The following points are mentioned:

- (1) "Killing his life; persecution amputation of hands and feet; binding stealing speaking incorrectly thinking spinning around learning useless scriptures; clinging to someone else's son and wife, this is Amagandha. The food that is meat is not just a thing.
- (2) Those who are in this world should not be bound by lust. He lusted after the temples. He became an impure false organism. Naughty's ideology is over. It is filled with incoherent

¹⁶ Dighanikaya, Majjhimanipavasapali, Ghativagga, Jivaka Sutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1982.

¹⁷ Vinayapitaka, parajikapali, Sanghabedakassikkapada. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1994.

¹⁸ Vinaya Pitaka, culavagga pali, pancavathuyacanakatha Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1994.

¹⁹ Suttanta pitaka, suttanipatapali, Amaganda sutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1980.

physical activity. It is hard to know. Their disobedience in these sexes, etc. The food that is meat is not the same.

(3) Those who have low self-esteem. It was rough. Like eating someone else's rock, he praises it in front of him and insults him in front of his eyes. He sinned against his friends. Without pity. Very proud. It is a habit that does not give. To someone don't give a little to someone, Even if they don't raise their egos, the food that is meat is not the same thing.

(4) getting angry; arrogance, harshness, doing the opposite spinning around envy boasting and speaking; very proud associating with the wicked, this is the same thing. But the food is not the same.

(5) In this world, the wicked have bad habits. He took the debt and did not pay it. It destroys and destroys. In this world, he rules and judges by cunning. He pretends to be virtuous. He did cruel things to his mother and father. Even their bad habits are the same. The food that is meat is not the same thing.

(6) Whoever in this world does not protect himself from killing animals, He took the property of others and worked diligently to oppress him. Without virtue, there is a temporary thing. There are harsh words. Without respect. Their disobedience, etc. The food that is meat is not the same thing.

(7) Those who desire these creatures. Hatred and opposed. He quickly fell into sin and transgression. He is constantly striving to do good deeds, and he goes to darkness in the next life. He fell upside down in hell. Even this desire of theirs is the same. The food that is meat is not the same thing.²⁰

According to Buddhism, purifying unwholesome passions is very important in order to get out of the cycle of suffering and experience nirvana. One can try to purify one's mind. Purity can only be achieved by cultivating good things in your mental continuum. In order to be pure and clean, in your continuum, morality, integrity we must cultivate wisdom. Virtue driven integrity it is only through wisdom that one can attain the purity of the mind. Whether you eat meat or eat vegetables, you will not achieve purity and impurity. This means that food is not the main thing in order to be pure. Buddha did not encourage his followers to become vegetarians. But when eating he proposes that food, to be balanced one needs to control cravings for food. Cravings can only be eliminated through the perception that food is repulsive (perception of food as an abomination) or through meditation. A monk must not eat food to beautify his body. Do not eat to cause pride.²¹

The concrete perception of the Buddha towards the phenomenon of food can be captured from the following story found in Samyuttanikaya, and in the putta mamsupamasutra. The Buddha compares Kabali Karahara (the food to be swallowed and eaten after making a service) to the

²⁰ Suttanipatapali, Amagandasutta Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1980.

²¹ Anguttara nikaya, apannaka sutta. Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1994.

flesh of one's own son. Here, rice curry (vegetable or not) must be considered as Kabalikara nutrition. Buddha narrated the following story: "For example, a husband and wife take a small amount of food and go on a difficult journey. They also have a very cute child. They ran out of food on the way, so they still had to go through a long journey. If they can't cross, they will die. The couple came up with this idea. "We have run out of food. There is still a long trek to cross. If we kill our beloved son if they cut the meat and eat the son's flesh, they will be able to get through the rest of the journey. Therefore, all three were not killed. Then he killed the little boy and ate it. The rest of the meat was minced and we were able to continue the rest of the journey without difficulty. "Monks... what do you think? Do the husband and wife partake of food for pleasure? Do they use it for pride? Do they use it for decoration? Do they use it to beautify their bodies? "No Rabbi. They use food only to overcome the difficulty of the journey." According to this *Puttamamsupama* sutra, if you also eat food and eat food, you will be able to eliminate the cravings that you enjoy in food.²²

Here, let's look at nutrition from the perspective of the four noble truths. According to Buddhism, food is a material reality. It is a critical need for survival. Desire is the cause of suffering (Dukkha Samudaya) and desire for food cause suffering. It must be eliminated. The cessation of craving is the cessation of suffering (dukkha nirodha). It must arrive. Cultivating an identity that views food as abhorrent is the way to the cessation of suffering (Dukkha Nirodha Gamini patipada). Buddha's encourage cultivation of this attitude towards food and perceives it as an ideal to be adopted. The fact is that Buddhism does not believe in purity of food as a necessary condition for spirituality rather control of craving for food is genuine condition for end of suffering.²³

Conclusion

According to Buddhism, the cessation of suffering is very important goal to be achieved by human beings. In order to get rid of suffering, it is only necessary to control and if possible put away the craving completely. Therefore, in order to end suffering, we have to work hard to root out lust. Ending suffering is nirvana. You may or may not want to be a vegetarian at will, but you must try to let go of the cravings that cling to the food you eat every day. Buddhism, thus do not care much about type of food to be consumed, but do care about annihilation of craving for food as necessary condition for free from suffering of all living beings.

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²² SamyuttaNikaya, Nidanavaggasamyuttapali, Puttamamsupama sutra, Department of religious affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1990.

²³ Ibid

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