

THE CONCEPT OF ĀHĀRA (FOOD) IN BUDDHISM

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In the world today, no problem concerns us more deeply than that of food. The quest for food constitutes, physically and sociologically, the basis of all human action. As a primary need of life itself it conveys the energy for sustenance at all levels material, biological, volitional and intellectual. In the Khuddakapāṭha, phrased in catechetical form for beginners in the training of the pure life, it is asked, 'What is the one principle of life?' (*Eka nāma kiṃ ?*). And the answer is made, 'Food is the sustenance of all beings' (*Sabbe sattā āhāraṭṭhitikā*).¹ In the Dasuttara Sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya, the Buddha says that there is one thing that must be thoroughly understood, that is, that all that live subsist on food. (*Katamo eko dhammo abhiññeyyo? Sabbe sattā āhāra-ṭṭhitikā. Ayam eko dhammo abhiññeyyo*).²

All this is involved in the term āhāra, which is formed from the Sanskrit root *āhr*, which literally means, taking up or on to oneself. In Buddhism, the term is used comprehensively and the usual enumeration comprises four kinds of nutriment, namely, bodily nutriment (*kabalīṅkāra āhāra*), the nutriment of contact (*phassāhāra*), the nutriment of volition (*mano sañcetanā āhāra*) and the nutriment of consciousness (*viññānāhāra*). These four sustenances are involved in the maintenance of beings (*bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭṭhitiyā*) and in assisting those seeking birth (*sambhavesiṇaṃ vā anuggahāya*).³ Thus the Buddhist concept of food is both material and mental.

Kabalīṅkāra - āhārā is the edible, material food which sustains the body. As the Buddhist texts describe it, it is either solid and gross (*olārika*) or fine and exquisite (*sukhuma*). It is with this that man is most concerned. The varieties of edible food and drink which the people during Buddha's time enjoyed appear to be unbelievably large. A statement referred to in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya refers to five kinds of food. They are hard food that require mastication (*khādaniya*), soft food (*bhojaniya*), food that has to be licked (*lehaniya*), food that has to be sucked (*sāyaniya*) and food that has to be drunk (*pāyaniya*).⁴

Rice must have been as at present the staple food of the people and the fertile earth nourished by plenty of rainfall always ensured a bumper harvest. Rice was the most longed for article of diet. It was boiled and eaten alone or with a little animal food or with condiments made into a curry or chatni or it was made into cakes. The preparations from rice which find frequent mention in early Pali literature are gruel (*yāgu*), milk - rice (*pāyāsa*).

1. *Khuddakapāṭha*, Ed. L. Gunaratne, Ratna Publishers, Colombo, p. 4.

2. *The Dīgha-Nikāya*, Vol. III, Ed. J. Estlin Carpenter, P.T.S., (London, 1960), p. 27.

3. *Samyutta-Nikāya*, Pt. II, *Nidāna-vagga*, Ed. M. Leon Feer, P. T. S., (London, 1960), p. 11.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 151.

boiled rice (*odana*), junket (*kummāsa*) and oil - cake (*pūva*). Of these, rice gruel (*yāgu*) is highly praised both in the early Buddhist and Jain works. The early Pali texts enumerate ten health giving qualities of this preparation. In a passage in the Vinaya Mahāvagga it is stated that a person who offers rice-gruel (*yāgu*) gives long life, a fine complexion, bodily comfort, strength and intelligence. Also *yāgu* allays one's hunger, quenches one's thirst, allays the windy elements in the body, cleans the bladder and helps to digest any undigested food (*Yāguṃ dento āyuṃ deti, vaṇṇaṃ deti, sukhaṃ deti, balaṃ deti, paṭibhānaṃ deti, yāgu-pitū khudaṃ paṭihanati, pipāsaṃ vinodeti, vātaṃ anulometi, vatthiṃ sodheti, āmāvasesaṃ pocati, ime kho brāhmaṇa dasā-nisaṃse yāguyāti*).⁵

Thus rice-gruel was a highly praised health giving food in Buddhist India. Of the other cereals, wheat and barley, various millets and pulses and sesamum are mentioned in early Pali literary works.

Through the influence of Buddhism, Indian society largely adopted vegetarianism. However, although many Buddhists even now refrain from eating meat, it must be clearly emphasized that no prohibitive decree was ever promulgated - doubtless based on the pragmatic principle that in certain areas of the world people would be compelled to eat meat due to various reasons such as the inferiority of soil.

Also, the principle of choice must be left to each individual and not be violated with trifling lists of 'do's' and 'dont's' on issues of secondary importance. However, Buddhism denounced the killing and selling of animals for food.

The frequent references to milk and its by products like curds, whey, butter, ghee, casein and clarified butter indicate the popularity of these items in the day to day life of the people. Fruit juices and cordials prepared from fruits were used in the evening by the order of monks as they were debarred from taking solid food after noon. Cordials and syrups were prepared from ripe mango juice, rose-apple, plantain fruit, grapes, edible root of water-lily, honey and coconut.⁶ Leafy vegetables, honey, various kinds of spices and spirituous liquors are also mentioned in early Pali literary works. Unless in case of illness the Buddha did not allow his followers indulgence in wines. These are the main items of edible food (*kabalīṅkāra āhāra*) mentioned in early Pali literary works, which form the vital nutrient sustaining life.

Buddhism constitutes the middle path between two extremes of self-indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and self-mortification (*atta-kīlamathanuyoga*). Today we see these two extremes in practice in certain parts of the world. On

5. *Vinaya - Piraka*, Vol. 1, Ed. Herman Oldenberg, P.T.S., (London, 1964), P. 221.

6. *Niddesa*, P.T.S., (London), p. 372.

the one hand, we see in affluent societies people over-eating and drinking while in other parts of the world people do not have the wherewithal to keep them alive. They live on the border line of starvation. In this situation it is apt for us to remember the following admonition of the Buddha 'Now O, monks, the monk wisely considering partakes of his food, neither for pastime nor for indulgence nor to become beautiful and handsome, but merely to maintain and support this body to avoid harm and to assist the holy life' (*Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu paṭisaṅkhā yonisī āhāraṃ āhūreti neva dāvāya, na madāya, na maṇḍanāya na vibhūsanāya, yāvadeva imassa kāyassa thitiyā yāpanāya vihiṃsūparatīyā brahmacariyānuggahāya*).⁷

Hunger is the greatest illness (*jighacchā paramā rogā*)⁸. The Buddha, therefore, rightly says 'Monks, in giving a meal, a giver gives five things to the receiver. What five? He gives longevity, beauty, comfort, strength and power of understanding' (*Bhojanaṃ bhikkhave dadamāno dāyako paṭiggāha-kānaṃ pañca thānāni deti. Katamāni pañca? Āyuṃ deti, vaṇṇaṃ deti, sukhaṃ deti, balaṃ deti, paṭibhānaṃ deti*).⁹

While it is admitted that edible food is the main pre-requisite for existence, it is also acknowledged as a principal source of temptation, as an object through which the sense of taste develops into craving. Hence on numerous occasions, the Buddha advocated temperance with regard to food, although never to the extent of self-mortification. The ideal monk is described as controlled in deed and word, restrained in food for the stomach (*kāya-gutto, vacī gutto, āhāre udare yato*).¹⁰ In the Buddha - vagga of the Dhamma-pada, moderation in eating is extolled (*mattāññutā ca bhattasmiṃ*).¹¹ The Suka Jātaka¹² relates a story of a monk who died of over-eating. Although food is the main pre-requisite for survival, good health and long life, if it is over-eaten it paves the way to temptation, craving, disease, ugliness and untimely death. Thus it is pointed out in the Suka Jātaka :

'Be moderate in eating wet or dry,
And this thy hunger's need will satisfy,
Who eats with care, whose belly is not great,
Will be a holy hermit soon or late.
Four or five mouthfuls - then a drink is right,
Enough for any earnest eremite.
A careful moderate eater has small pain,
Slowly grows old, lives twice as long again.'

7. *Āṅguttara - Nikāya*, Vol. I, P.T.S., (London, 1960), p. 113.

8. *Dhammapada*, Ed. S. Radhakrishnan, v. 203, p. 126.

9. *Āṅguttara - Nikāya*, Vol. III, *Pañcaka Nipāta* and *Chakka Nipāta*, Ed. E. Hardy, P.T.S., (London, 1958), p. 42.

10. *Samyutta - Nikāya*, Ed. M. Leon Feer, P.T.S., (London, 1960), pt. I, p. 172.

11. *op. cit.*, v. 115, p. 121.

12. *Jātaka*, Vol. II. Ed. Fausboll, P.T.S., (London), No. 255, p. 291.

(*Allaṃ sukkhañ ca bhujanto na bālhaṃ suhito siyā
 ūnūdarō mitāhāro sato bhikkū paribbaje
 Cattāro pañca ālope abhuvā udakampive
 alaṃ phāsuvihārayā pahitattassa bhikkhuno
 Manujassa sadā satimato mattaṃ jānato laddhabhojane
 tanū tassa bhavanti vedanā sanikaṃ firati āyu pālayantīti*)¹³

Modern medical research has also confirmed that to eat and drink too much over-burdens the digestion, impedes the efficiency of the body and predisposes it to break-down and disease. In the Kakacūpama Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha admonishes the monks on the eating habits that must be followed by them in order to be physically and mentally healthy. The passage runs thus, 'Now I, monks, partake of a meal at one session. Partaking of a meal at one session, I, monks, am aware of good health, and of being without illness and of buoyancy and strength and living in comfort. Come, you too, monks, partake of a meal at one session; partaking of a meal at one session, you too, monks, will be aware of good health and of being without illness and of buoyancy and strength and living in comfort' (*Ārādhayimsu vata me bhikkhave bhikkū ekaṃ samayaṃ cittaṃ. Idhāhaṃ bhikkhave bhikkhū āmantesiṃ: Ahaṃ kho bhikkhave ekāsana - bhojanaṃ bhujāmi; ekāsana-bhojanaṃ kho ahaṃ bhikkhave bhujamāno appābādhattaṃ ca sañjānāmi, appātaṅkataṃ ca lāhuṭṭhānaṃ ca balaṃ ca phāsuvihāraṃ ca. Etha tumhepi bhikkhave ekāsana - bhojanaṃ bhujatha. Ekāsana - bhojanaṃ kho bhikkhave tumhepi bhujamānā appābādhattaṃ ca sañjānissatha appātaṅkataṃ ca lāhuṭṭhānaṃ ca balaṃ ca phāsuvihāraṃ cā ti.*)¹⁴

The above quotation shows that it is for the health and general well-being that Buddhist monks have been instructed to take one meal a day before noon, and thereafter to drink some kind of fruit-juice to slake their thirst. The Pali commentary explaining 'ekāsana - bhojana' states that it is permissible to eat any number of times before mid-day. Whether it was one meal or several meals before noon, the Buddha has specifically asked his disciples to live with a light stomach, moderate in food, easily satisfied and not gluttonous (*ūnūdarō, mitāhāro, appicchassa, alolupo*).¹⁵

Now, let us consider the importance of mental nutriment categorized as the nutriment of contact (*phassāhāra*), the nutriment of volition (*mano - sañcetanā āhāra*) and the nutriment of consciousness (*viññānāhāra*). The nutriment of contact nurtures the senses with feelings of delight (*sukha - vedanā*) and displeasure (*dukkha - vedanā*). The nutriment of volition sustains the three forms of becoming, for *cetanā* or will is the food of the mind through which action is formed. This is the most important nutriment because it is equivalent

13. *op. cit.*, No. 255, p.293-94.

14. *The Collection of Middle length Sayings*, Vol. I, trans. I.B. Horner, P. T. S., (London, 1954), p.161.

15. *Sutta-Nipāta*, Ed. Dines Andersen and Helmer, Smith, P.T.S., (London), v.707 p. 137.

to *karma* which feeds rebirth, fixes destiny and forms the 'soul' of existence. The nutriment of consciousness conditions both mind and body. It is the rebirth linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāna*) the food which at the moment of conception feeds mind and corporeality in the new life.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha said that all states have mind for their cause (*manopubbaṅgamā dhammā*).¹⁶ On another occasion a monk asked the Buddha 'Pray, venerable sir, by what is the world led? By what is the world drawn along? Under the sway of what one dhamma (state) have all gone?' (*Kena nu kho bhante loko niyyati, kena loko parikissati, kassa ca uppannassa vasaṃ gacchati?*).¹⁷ The Buddha's answer is categorical: 'Well, monk, the world is led by mind, by mind the world is drawn along, all have gone under the sway of the mind, the one dhamma.' (*Cittena kho bhikkhu loko niyyati, cittena parikissati, cittena uppannassa vasaṃ gacchatīti*).¹⁸

The Buddhist point of view is that all our psychological experience, such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and happiness, good and evil, life and death are not attributed to any external agency. They are all mind-made. That is the simple reason why we should fill our minds with wholesome nutriment that are free from greed, hatred, jealousy, conceit and delusion and obsessions of various types.

Thus Buddhism recognises the fact that not only wholesome edible food but wholesome mental nutriment is also essential for a healthy life. Indeed health is considered the greatest wealth (*ārogyā paramā lābhā*).¹⁹ The relationship of mind and body is amply illustrated by the *Mettānisamsa Sutta*. It speaks of the beneficial results experienced by a person who practises meditation on loving kindness.

The passage in question runs thus: 'Monks, eleven advantages are to be looked for from the release of heart by the practice of amity, by making amity to grow, by making much of it, by making amity a vehicle and basis, by persisting in it, by becoming familiar with it, by well establishing it. What are the eleven? One sleeps happy and wakes happy; he sees no evil dream; he is dear to human beings and non-human beings alike; the devas guard him; fire, poison or sword affect him not; quickly he concentrates his mind; his complexion is serene; he makes an end without bewilderment and if he has penetrated no further (to Arahantship) he reaches (at death) the Brahma-world' (*Mettāya bhikkhave cetovimuttiyā āsevitāya, bhāvitāya, bahulikatāya, yānikatāya, vatthukatāya, amuḥhitāya, paricitāya, susamāradhāya ekādasānisamsā paṭikaṅkhā, katame ekādasā? Sukhaṃ supati, sukhaṃ paṭibujjhati, na*

16. *op. cit.*, V. 1, p. 58.

17. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Vol. II, Ed. Rev. Richard Morris, P. T. S., (London, 1955), p. 17.

18. *ibid.*

19. *op. cit.*, v. 204, p. 126.

*pāpakaṃ supinaṃ passati, manussānaṃ piyo hoti, amanussānaṃ piyo hoti, devatā rakkhanti, nāssa aggi vā visaṃ vā satthaṃ vā kamati, tuvaṃam cittaṃ samādhiyati, mukhavaṇṇo vippasīdati, asammūḷho kālaṃ karoti, uttariṃ appatvivijjhanto brahmolokūpago hoti).*²⁰

Recent research in medicine, in experimental psychology and what is still called para-psychology has thrown some light on the nature of the mind and its position in the world. During the last forty years the conviction has steadily grown among medical men that very many causes of disease, organic as well as functional, are directly caused by the mental state.

Thus, the mind becomes the cause of some physical ailment or the other. In fact, a doctor once said jokingly that if the head of the patient can be cut off during convalescence his body could be cured of its ailment within a short time. What he meant was that unwholesome mental nutriment is detrimental to the physical well-being of an individual.

There is a still deeper meaning attached to this concept of nutriment or *āhāra* in Buddhism. As an active process it is also a condition of support of two kinds: the relation of edible food to the body and the relation of immaterial supports to co-existing states of mind and body. It is this nutritive support in the psychological field which forms the basis of the doctrine of *karma* and the teachings connected therewith. Food or sustenance (*āhāra*) is frequently synonymous with causal condition, as is clearly indicated by the following statement: From the arising of food is the arising of the body; from the ceasing of food is the ceasing of the body; and the way leading to the ceasing of the body is the Noble eight-fold Path (*Āhāra samudayo rūpa samudayo, āhāra nirodho rūpa-nirodho, ayam eva ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo rūpanirodhagāmini paṭi-padā*).²¹ Hence, sustenance of the body has been substituted for the usual conflict of existence (*dukkha*), its origin (*samudaya*), its cessation (*nirodha*) and the path thereto (*magga*). This deep meaning attached to food in Buddhism is amply illustrated in the following verse:

‘All ill that comes is caused by sustenance,
By ending sustenance there comes no ill’

(*Yam kiñci dukkhaṃ sambhoti
sabbhaṃ taṃ āhārapaccayā.
Āhārānaṃ nirodhena
natthi dukkhassa sambhavo*).²²

Thus, the process of nutrition in its various aspects covers the entire field of the teaching of the Buddha—physical, psychological, emotional, mental and ethical.

20. *op. cit.*, Vol. V, p. 342.

21. *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, trans. F.L. Woodward, Ed. Mrs. Rhys Davids, pt. III, p. 51.

22. *Woven Cadences of Early Buddhists*, trans. E.M Hare, v. 747, p. 112.