

WHAT KIND OF FOOD DID ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA EAT ?

— summary —

John Stevens

Following his renunciation of the world, Śākyamuni followed the diet of mountain ascetics i. e., roots, fruits, and dry grains. He gradually assumed the most rigorous diet of the strictest ascetics, described in the *Buddhacarita* (XII, 96) as “*ekaikaih.....kola-tila-taṇḍulaiḥ*.” That is, only one piece each of jujube fruit (Hindi *Ber*), sesame seed (Hindi *Til*), and husked rice per day. This minuscule amount of food cannot sustain life indefinitely, and was likely a slow form of starvation to purify the flesh and to transform oneself into pure spirit.

Near death, Śākyamuni decided to abandon his fruitless reliance on ascetic practice, mental gymnastics, and meager diet. He would, he declared, take nourishing food to fortify himself and then either attain awakening or die in the process. Although a few texts state that Śākyamuni received various kinds of food and drink prior to his enlightenment, most accounts identify the food that restored his health as *pāyasa* (Pali *payāsa*, Hindi *Khīr*, 乳糜), rice cooked with milk and mixed with crystal sugar and fragrant spices. The most detailed description of the preparation of this delicious, nutritious dish—a favorite treat of the upper classes as well as the preferred oblation to the gods—occurs in the *Nidānakathā Jātaka*.

The first food that Śākyamuni ate after his enlightenment was honey (*madhu*, Hindi *Madhula*, 蜜) and *mantha* (麦少), a cake made from parched barley mixed with honey or curds. These high-energy foods were offered to him by two merchants.

The main source of information on the daily fare of Buddha and his monastic disciples is the *Vinaya-pitaka*. There are hundreds of references to food and drink in the canon; main points to be noted are:

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Buddha praised the ten advantages of *yagu*, gruel taken daily as morning meal. *Yagu* “gives one life, beauty, comfort, strength, and intelligence, as well as checking hunger, satisfying thirst, regulating the wind, cleansing the bladder, and aiding digestion.” Regular *yagu* was prepared with a large quantity of water and a handful of rice and salt. *Yagu* was also made with sour-milk, curds, fruit, leaves, and occasionally meat or fish.

The “Five Foodstuffs” (*bhojanīya* or *bhojana*) recommended by Buddha were: (1) *odana*, boiled rice prepared with ghee, meat, fruit, etc; (2) *sattu*, baked grain—e. g., barley, graham flour, wheat, or millet—taken in the form of small balls or licked as a paste; (3) *kummāsa*, a boiled mixture of barley (or rice) and pulse; (4) *maccho*, fish; and (5) *maṃsa*, meat.

It is well known that Buddha expressly allowed his followers to eat most types of fish and meat provided the food was pure in the “three ways”—i. e., the person has not seen, nor heard, nor had the apprehension that the animal was killed especially for oneself—and that he refused to make vegetarianism compulsory. Raw meat was wisely prohibited because of the hazards involved, as well as the flesh of unhygienic animals such as dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and hyenas. Horse and elephant meat was proscribed, presumably because they were royal animals, and human flesh was never to be eaten under any circumstance. (Human flesh was, and apparently still is, part of the Indian *materia medica*.)

All leafy vegetables were permitted as well as lotus root, gourds, cucumbers, and eggplant but garlic and leeks were to be avoided presumably because of their offensive odor and because they are allegedly aphrodisiacs. However, those two vegetables could be taken in case of illness.

Edible fruit (*phalakhadaniya*) mentioned in the canon includes jackfruit (*panasa*), breadfruit (*lubuḥja*), palmyra fruit (*tala*), coconut, mango, rose-apple (*jambu*), and wild banana (*coca*); apparently no fruit was prohibited. *Sadavana*, a type of fruit pudding, was singled out as an excellent dish.

Sweet drinks (*pana*) were recommended by Buddha for their capacity to refresh and he allowed them to be taken in the late afternoon as a kind of pick-me-up. Those drinks were made from extracts of mango, rose-apple, wild ba-

nanas, honey tree fruit, water lily root, grapes, and sugar cane.

Food was seasoned with salt—sea, black, kitchen, and red—and spices such as pepper, cumin, myrobalan, ginger, and turmeric. Mustard and cloves were used as flavorings. Molasses (*guḍa*) was an important sweetener and sweet. Sesame cakes were a favorite treat.

Food was cooked in vegetable oil, and, in the case of illness, with animal fat such as bear, fish, alligator, pig, porpoise, or ass.

The “Five Medicine Foods” (*bhesajja*) —to be taken only in case of illness—permitted by Buddha were: (1) *sappi*, ghee; (2) *navanīta*, fresh butter; (3) *tela*, oil made from sesame, mustard, or castor seed; (4) *madhu*, honey; and (5) *phāṇiṭa*, molasses made from sugar cane.

Among other healing agents mentioned in the Pali canon we find the following: *āmisakhāra*, raw lye prepared from burnt rice for stomach disorders; *kapaḷikā*, medicinal paste made from grain to apply to wounds and abrasions; *kaśāva-bhesajja*, astringents prepared from bark or plants; *guḷa*, a lump of molasses for fatigue and illness; *sītaloḷi*, a powerful antidote made from the mud adhering to a plough; *cunṇa-bhesajja*, powdered medicine made from lime, effective for skin problems; *jaḷogi*, unfermented toddy; *tilakka*, sesame paste for treating wounds; *dhūmanetta*, smoke pipe (*Hukka*?) used for curing severe headaches; *pajjaṃ*, medicinal oil for chilblains; *paṭicchādantiya*, meat gravy; *bhaṅgodaka*, medicinal drink made from bhaṅga (hemp) for the treatment of gout; *mahāvikatāni*, antidote for snake bite made from excreta, ash, and clay; *muttāharitika*, yellow myrobalan soaked in cow urine for jaundice; *mūla-bhesajja*, medicinal roots such as ginger and turmeric; *lasuṇa*, garlic; *loṇasakkharika*, salt-crystal as a caustic for wounds; *loṇasovīraka*, salty vinegar for stomach disorders; and *vaṇarela*, medicated oil.

In Buddha’s time, the regular daily fare consisted of: *yagu* gruel, taken with a ball of honey mixed with molasses (*madhugoḷaka*), in the morning; a substantial midday meal of rice, meat or fish curry, fresh fruit and vegetables; and an evening repast of fruit juice, sugar water, or molasses. No solid food was allowed after noon; this rule was instituted not as an ascetic practice but in order to promote health—“Not eating food at night, I enjoy good health, vigor,

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and comfort.” (Mahāvagga, IV.)

The exact nature of *sūkara-maddava*, Buddha’s final meal, has long been the center of religious and scholarly controversy. The following interpretations of *sūkara-maddava* have been proposed: (1) a dish of (young?) pork; (2) truffles or some other type of mushroom; (3) bamboo shoots; (4) a rice broth made from the five products of the cow (i. e., milk, curd, butter, urine, and dung); and (5) some type of “elixir” for prolonging life. Recent research supports the theory that *sūkara-maddava* was in fact a mushroom dish¹⁾. Whatever it was, Buddha clearly recognized that there was something wrong with it. After eating some of the food from a well-meaning but poorly prepared lay follower Buddha ordered the rest of the dish to be buried in a hole. He thus both honored the layman by accepting the food and protected his monks by having the remainder discarded. Shortly thereafter Śākyamuni became violently ill and died.

Śākyamuni Buddha’s attitude towards food was, in keeping with his teaching of the Middle Way, moderate. While encouraging his followers to eat simply, only taking the minimum of gross and subtle nourishment necessary, very few foods were absolutely prohibited. It was the intention, not the food, that was paramount for enlightened eating.

1) See *The Last Meal of the Buddha*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, 102. 4 (1982): p. 591-603.

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