

# Moderate Consumption of Food – A Buddhist way to alleviate poverty

---

**Prof. Tilak Kariyawasam (\*)**

---

It is an accepted norm that all living beings’ life is dependent on food. The food is the most essential item of a human being (a living being), therefore it has become a primary item among the needs of a human being such as food, clothing, shelter and medicine. With food we take nutriment which we need to sustain our life. In Buddhism “Āhāra” is the term used for “food”: but this term Āhāra is used in a wider sense in Buddhism as energy for sustenance at all levels, material, biological, volitional and intellectual. In the material level the word Āhāra refers mainly to eatable food (*kabalīṅkāra āhāra*) and the term “*Ojā*” is introduced in the *Abhidhamma* for its nutritive effect.

In many writings the concept of Āhāra (food) has been discussed

---

(\*) Dean, Graduate School. International Buddhist College, Thailand

in wide sense in the levels of material and spiritual food, specially for the benefit of religiously motivated clergies. In the discourses the emphasis is more on the food habits of the members of the clergy. This should not be taken to mean that the Buddha singled out the clergy for the application of his teachings on food habits. This focus is on monks because the discourses are mostly delivered for monks, taking them as models of good and restrain mode of life. Therefore, in so many places the Buddha advocated this teaching in a number of important sermons with regard to taking food. Going in to details of food-eating the Buddha said one should not fill the stomach to the maximum with food, but leave some room for water, a space that will accommodate 4 or 5 mouthfuls of solid food<sup>1</sup>. More than these instructions the best instruction is the advice given for monks to refrain from taking food in the evenings or instruction to have food once a day. In the *Kakacūpama Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* the Buddha mentioned that he partook one meal a day (*Ekāsanabhojanam*), therefore, he experienced good health, strength, comfort and living without illness<sup>2</sup>.

It is the intention of this paper to investigate whether this instruction to maintain health globally, reducing over consumption of food is applicable globally. According to the medical instructions also one must reduce the weight, controlling food and nutriment. If people follow this method it will lead to balancing the food consumption by the people globally and will help to protect the health standard in the world along with increasing the food surplus and the economic standard will help for the poverty alleviation.

The important aspect of moderate food consumption as mentioned by the Buddha was that he was aware of little illness, good health, lightness of body, strength, and bodily comfort. By these five ways of expression explained extreme comfortable way of life could be achieved by way of moderate food system. Those who familiar with Pali words could easily and fully comprehend the Buddha's powerful expression of the benefit of moderate food consumption. (*ekāsana bhojanam kho aham bhikkhave*

---

1. "Cattaro pañca ālope abhutvā udakam pive"-, Milndapañha.P.407

2. Majjhimanikāya.I.124.

*bhuñjamāno appābhādatañ ca sanjānāmi appātāṅkatañ ca lahuṭṭhānañ ca balañ ca phāsuvihārañ ca.)*

*Appābādha* = little illness. Buddhism has explained this physical body has a lot of illnesses. Hunger is a natural bodily function and this hunger is also has been mentioned in Buddhism as a greatest disease<sup>3</sup>. Therefore *Appābādha* means except those natural problems there are no other illnesses.

*Appātāṅka* = little disease. There are some diseases which are created within the body with the agitation of phlegm and bile. Moderate food consumption controls those diseases also.

*Lahuṭṭhāna* = Lightness of Body. Our body feels us not heavy when there is no any kind of ailment at all. This means that we can activate our physical body anyway we wish. No any stiffness or any mal function. That is the meaning of lightness of Body.

*Balaṃ* = Power. When an extreme health is prevailing in us we feel a power similar to very young age. That feeling also occurs because of good health condition.

*Phāsuvihāra* = Easy living. Easy living is possible when the bodily function is smooth. That means there is no complains what so ever with regard to the body. Then only, one can have an easy living.

At the end of the Buddha's experience of one meal a day the Buddha with confidence invited those monks also to have one meal a day and experience the same comfort what the Buddha experienced.

Here it is mentioned "One meal" (*Ekāsanabhojanam*) a day. It is to be mentioned here that it is a custom for monks to take their meal in the day time before noon that has been mentioned here as one meal. But normally this indicates one meal a day. In the case of different cultures and for lay people they can adjust it as evening meal provided that they take food once only a day. But for monks evening meal has been prohibited. In the *Kiṇṇigiri sutta* directly mentioned it to the

---

3. Jighacchā paramā rogā. Dhammapada. 203 verse.

monks to avoid the night meals<sup>4</sup>. Taking meals in the evenings have been prohibited with the consideration of social problems, monks' behavioral problems and the spiritual problems.

It is very interesting to read how the Buddha took this once a day food habit very seriously when refers to the incident in the *Kiṭāgiri Sutta* where one monk when said that "though the Buddha advise once a day meal provide a good health condition I have food several times even in the evenings I also feel very much bodily comfort". When the Buddha heard this from other monks Buddha called that monk and given a long speech mentioning that without investigating, without self experiencing, without someone is not getting good results when followed that advice and except the truth the Buddha has not expressed anything<sup>5</sup>. By saying that, the Buddha confirmed the absolute nature of his speech. This particular incident could be taken as one clear proof for the benefit one could achieve by the moderate food consumption.

This system is followed in almost every temple in the countries where Theravāda Buddhist tradition prevails. In some countries slightly modified the system as to the availability of food. For example in Sri Lanka even breakfast is taken as somewhat simple way because in some provinces devotees bring breakfast and lunch both to the temples the way they can bring and always even the breakfast also will be not very simple. *Amaravati* Buddhist Centre in England is run by English *Theravāda* Buddhist monks, trained in *Thailand*, have a cup of gruel and a cup of tea only for breakfast and lunch is the main meal (Vegetarian). That's all till the following day morning.

The intention of this paper is to introduce this especial way of reducing food consumption to the society at a large level and to find the way to adjust the lives of the people according to these new concepts. For example most European people take evening big meal. They have morning tea before they go to work and after hard day work in the evening they come home and have a good meal. That is also becomes one meal a day. This also can be considered as one way of contributing for the moderate food consumption.

---

4. M.I.473-76.

5. M.I.475-76

## OVER CONSUMPTION OF FOOD

As every living being is dependent on food, naturally the people have the desire to eat food more and more. Therefore more and more productions have to be increased in the world daily because of the more demand for food. Among the productions, food comes as the first item. When the demand and the production increased there will be competition. With the increasing population in the world the possible food shortage is eminent. When the food shortage is increasing only rich people can have proper meal. All the developed countries naturally buy the food productions from developing countries. All the best quality food of developing countries will be going to the developed countries. Therefore mostly the people in the developing countries will consume the waste product of the quality product they produce and they export the good part of their production to developed countries. The best example is the tea production in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan tea is famous in the world market. Therefore any Sri Lankan also could drink best quality Sri Lankan tea when they travel to developed countries and the people in Sri Lanka drink mostly what the tea factories throw as waste and those tea are called "dust tea". This means under-developing countries sell the good production to developed countries to earn money.

The people in the developed countries consume more and more food as they can easily buy those items. When they tend to buy more and more food, some food goes waste. One of the best examples is in USA and Canada tea is available in three levels: Small, Medium and Large. When someone orders a tea he has to mention the particular category of tea and even the small tea cup is larger than that of the tea cup one can buy in an Asian country. Then one can imagine the size of a large cup. When someone gets a large cup he cannot finish drinking easily that tea but have to keep it and take time to drink. By the time some part of the tea have to throw or either go waste as cannot drink and finish quickly. This example is to show how the so called develop country people spend money as well as how the food go waste.

When people buy food meat production get the priority. During the past few decades the meat consumption has increased tremendously in global level. Earlier meat was consumed by rich people only, now it has become

every body's diet. Consuming a meal with meat gives the notion of having a luxury diet. That is the very reason even the people who could not very much afford also try to increase the taste of their food with meat. Now not only European countries but Asian Buddhist countries too such as *Thailand* also has increased their meat production to the maximum level. Not only selling meat but also the way they give enormous suffering to the innocent creatures could see in the markets.

### **COST FACTOR ON MEAT PRODUCTION WITH ENVIRONMENT PROBLEMS**

Though the meat production has increased, the prices have not come down. That is the nature of the meat production. The meat prices will increase day by day as the production cost naturally increase day by day. In order to increase meat production live stock and animals should feed with a lot of grain and vegetables. Ultimately one piece of meat will cost few times over size because of the good food grown which could have given to people to increase their health are given for those animals to increase meat products.

Harold A. Mooney, Professor of Biology and a Senior fellow at the Stanford Wood Institute for the Environment says "That's fundamental and that's true for all food," Mooney said. "We should pay the real cost, and that would make a huge difference for the environment." By this statement he brings forward the cost factor to produce meat and says "meat industry also has a significant impact on global warming. Livestock production accounts for 18 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, including 9 percent of carbon dioxide and 37 percent of methane gas emissions worldwide"<sup>6</sup>.

*Livestock's Longshadow- Environmental Issues and Options* is a United Nation Report, released by the food and Agricultural Organizations of the United Nations (FAO) of on 29 November 2006, assess the full impact of the livestock sector on environmental problems and says now this livestock's Industry has fully analyzed as an environmental hazard in

---

6. Prof. Harold A. Mooney- Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment.

this United Nation Report and talk about creating the foresting problems, greenhouse emission problems, environmental problems. Further explains seriousness of greenhouse emissions says livestock are responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse emissions, a bigger share than that of transport, the livestock sector is one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global.<sup>7</sup>

## **OVER CONSUMPTION CAUSED HEALTH PROBLEMS**

It is an accepted fact that over nutriment will be a cause for the health problems. Present day foods in most parts of the world are caused health problems for people because they have rich diet now unlike good old days. Therefore now the most of the people are warned by the doctors when they reach the 40 years of age. When someone is reached to the 40 years of age normally the advice is to check the Blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes level. These are considered as causing health problems. Normally someone is reaching to the elderly age fat level of the body tend to increase and with the fat level these blood pressure and cholesterol level also tend to increase.

These health problems normally occurred for the people not normally engage in physical activities. For those who care for their physical abilities and for those who follow medical advice, for those who do not take more food in their meals have nothing to worry.

Now the food system has changed because most of the food now buys from the eating shops. Those food are not prepared carefully but prepared to make it with more taste. To make it taste normally the foods have been fried in the oil and added various kinds of tastes. This oily food is not good for health especially they take them in the mornings and that also not healthily wise to consume with taste making items.

As we have discussed earlier taking meat with meals also tend to increase the nutriment level in the body. There are some people who must have meat with their meal to enjoy the food. In the same way there

---

7. En.wikipedia.org/wiki/livestock's long shadow.

is a Jataka Story in the name of “Porisāda Yakkha” who could not stop eating flesh. He was a King but because of he was eating human flesh had to leave the throne and went to the forest and living there even eating flesh. The interesting feature here is meat consumption has been considered as not proper even on those days also.

When over nutriment level increase with food the weight factor of the body also increased. If the weight is increased that is the beginning of health problem in the body. Now a day’s one of the main problems people experience is overweight. According to the medical norms there should be a certain weight of a person as to his height. These overweight problems come with people from the young age, because the parents of a child as to extreme affectionate towards their child try to overfeed him or her. They want to make their child big as quickly as possible. Due to this wrong attitude of parents poor child becomes big child. Normally doctors are warned the parents saying “Big child means big man” and avoid feeding him too much. But some ignorant parents do not care for that valuable advice and made their child suffer when he becomes an adult.

### **SOLUTIONS MAY COST MORE**

It is an obvious factor when increase sick people in the society the government have to increase medical facilities. Increase of medical facilities not an easy task. Hospitals alone cannot solve this problem. Hospital needs medical team such as Doctors, Nurses, attendants, medical equipments and medicines. These things and these experienced persons cost more and separate budget allocations have to introduce by the Governments. Apart from the Governments the people also have to have good financial positions to deal those health problems when they occurred to them.

According to the nature of technological development in the world new gadgets and new medicines and new experienced people also will increase time to time and everything is valued according to the available financial ways. Therefore nothing is going to be very easy except finally we ourselves have to look after our problems. This is where can apply the very good English proverb “Prevention is better than cure”.

## AWARENESS

In order to counterproductive of these problems a very important awareness has been originated in the society, that is the Vegetarianism. This involves a long time vision of people as it has a religious backing also. This is the method of using plants, leaves, roots and herbs. This is the very good vision of the people to use only vegetables for food because most of the people do not understand people's lives depend on mainly on plants. The best food is not meat but vegetables because it contains all the nutriment we need to our sustenance of life. Plants get all the necessary ingredients from the soil, sun shine and from the raining. When we eat those plants the body will absorb necessary nutriment only for our sustenance and rest of the things remove as waste. This is the remarkable function of our physical body and another remarkable feature of the nature is that every plant is a medicinal herb. That has been tested through Jivaka by his medical teacher in the Pali Commentary<sup>8</sup>. After completion of his medical course he was sent out to bring a plant which is not becoming a medicine and he was failed to bring any plant which is not a medicine and that itself was the proof for his successful completion the medical course.

There is a food chain also in the world for the sustenance of life. Every living being somehow get the green as his/its" sustenance of life. In the animal world there are some animal live on plants and some animals are carnivorous. According to the existing food chain the carnivorous animals find the green, eating those animals that eat only green leaves. That is why tigers always hunt cows and deer, fox hunt rabbits and serpents also eat some little creatures who feed on plants. Human beings are the creatures who eat both vegetables and meat, but he also can live without many troubles with vegetables only. Some vegetarian families brought to the T.V. in England who are up to the fourth generation completely vegetarians. They are quite normal as same as other people, and sometimes better than the people who take meat also as food.

Emeritus Professor Vini Vitharana,<sup>9</sup> Consultant Director Publications, Central Cultural Funds, in Sri Lanka, who is 85 years of age, Vegetarian

---

8. Aṅguttaranikāya Aṭṭhakathā.I.216.

9. [www.kadiriinstitute.lk/events/event-16052013/.../prof.vini-bio...](http://www.kadiriinstitute.lk/events/event-16052013/.../prof.vini-bio...)

from his very young age, still in good health, once said in the T.V. used to play cricket and volley Ball same as other young people and there was no difference because he was a vegetarian.

## **CONSERVATIONISTS**

There are some Societies who encourage growing plants and increasing agricultural activities in the world over, because people are engaging in deforesting activities. Most of the people who develop livestock activities tend to engage deforestations, that is the very reasons in European countries cannot see forests, in those countries only can see the meadows. In meadows their cows and sheep are grown. To realize that they also needed forests to balance the ecological system, time has passed and they are the ones who came forward to form Conservationists and Green Societies. It is important United Nations Organization also has taken part on this issue and actively involved to develop in the activities of conservation related to plants, animals, agricultural and ecological and proper standards of various communities throughout the world.

## **AWARENESS IS THERE GUIDANCE SHOULD ARRIVE**

These whole details are on about the awareness of people on the problems they have faced. All the educationists, scientists, social workers and other interested parties all together have come forward to do something to change the system and they have started to do something but still could not get the participation of people in these valuable programs.

## **SOYA PRODUCT IS VERY IMPORTANT START**

In order to change the food system with all nourishments and less expensive Soya product is the valuable selection that has come forward, but not yet in full scale popularity. The difficulty with food is the item that satisfy our senses specially the tongue. People like to have meat that because of the taste. Soya product is still try to bring to that level similar to meat. One kind of experiment is already underway that is the Soya chicken, Soya beef and soya fish. One day people will find difficult to identify the difference.

Then it will be successful.

## **EDUCATE PEOPLE WITH MODERATE CONSUMPTION OF FOOD**

In this whole explanation it has explored all the avenues where our money will spend and those expenses cannot avoid. These problems we create by ourselves and they will come with our behavioral pattern mainly due to our food system. However we cannot stop food completely, but we can change the amount of food we take. If we know we are sick in order to cure we have to take medicine, with the medicine we have to control our behavior also without taking some food and so on. All these things we have to follow for our comfortable way of living. In the same way Harold A. Mooney said “people aren”t going to stop eating meat.....one solution could be to get people in developed countries to eat less meat”. As a researcher on this subject he mentioned how we can educate people and he further mentioned “I am always hopeful that as people learn more, they do change their behavior. If they are informed that they do have choice to help build a more sustainable world, they can make better choices.”<sup>10</sup> This is very good suggestion by Professor Harold A.Mooney and he is sure people can educate to engage in some development activities. If it can put into work, why we cannot introduce this very important idea on moderate consumption of food to people and draw their special attention to take one meal a day. By that way people can have very healthy life with saving money as well as they are rendering very good service for the people who could not find enough food. As these things complete in global level this world is going to be a world where happy people are living because they are healthy, they have sufficient financial position and they help other people also to live happily in this world.

---

10. Prof.Harold A.Mooney- Stanford woods institute for the environment