

# THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF 'FOOD IN MODERATION' FOR GLOBAL HEALTHCARE

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The objective of this research is to illuminate the value of applying the practice of food in moderation for maintaining of a healthy life in the globe. In the modern world, since millions of people are suffering with a number of ailments caused by misbehaviours regarding consumption of food, the Buddha's instruction for his disciples to practice food in moderation is much applicable to change food related wrong behaviours of people laying strong foundation to have a healthy and happy life. There is a growing body of research material to show that most illnesses happen due to immoral mental factors. This shows that while moral behaviour leads to health, immorality leads to ill health. Therefore, in our day, it is global application that illuminating Buddhist moral practices related to eating behaviours.

Modern medical science, physicians and drug industries strive in different ways to consult and support the unhealthy society to get cure of ailments once they on-going to suffer with sickness. Healthcare services come from practitioners of medical science to the patients are mostly based on medication prescriptions, surgery or modification of a person's lifestyle. Researchers have reviewed that modern diet and over-eating behaviour as one of main reasons for the obesity and sickness. Therefore, healthcare professionals are

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very demanding today by preparing instructions, guidelines and prescriptions to the society as much as wrong behaviours of eating are growing rapidly. In addition this, “healthcare is conventionally regarded as an important determinant in promoting the general physical and mental health and well-being of people around the world (World Health Organization, 2010).

Food (*āhāra*) is the major and essential requirement of human beings that enjoy physical form and continue to be the same with all living beings. Buddhism too accepts food as a dominant necessity among all beings (*eka nāma kim? Sabbe sattā āharaṭṭhitikā*) (Smith, H 1978, p.2). Buddhism also asserts that all beings are pleased with association and receiving food (*Yathā, mahārāja, sabbesaṃ sattānaṃ āhāro upatthambho, āhārūpanissitā sabbe sattā sukhaṃ anubhavanti*) (Rhys David 1999, 4: Paṭipadādosapañha). In the *Aggañña sutta*, (Rhys Davids 1995, p.83) the discourse that elaborates Buddhist concept on the origination and evolution of the human beings and the world, states how humans’ physical body transformed from softness into hardness gradually because of food intake and craving to it. In addition, the discourse further explains how food necessity took place among humanity.

In fact, unlike to some other religious extremists, Buddhism does not encourage avoiding from food entirely for either the purpose of spiritual development or other reason. In this manner, “Food was and important item in the communal life of the saṅgha, for it was essential for the support and upkeep of the body which in turn was necessary for the practice of the holy life” (Malalasekara 1961, p.64). In addition, the Buddha introduced to his followers ethical based sociological and biological aspects of searching, accepting and eating food. Hence, Buddhist disciples advised to practice moderation and self-control in eating as a leading discipline of holly life. The reason might be for this practice to be highly concerned by the Buddha not to grow roots of sickness and difficulties caused by food within one’s physical body, which also can be directly or indirectly affected mental cultivation.

The Buddhist concept of eating food in moderation (*bhojane mattaññutā*), is practically applicable teaching for every human being those who wish to maintain a healthy life by preventing a

number of diseases or controlling them for a long time to cure. By applying Buddhist teachings on purpose and basic ethics of eating, modern healthcare system can be further improved. As well as it is significant to educate people regarding necessity of controlling senses and limitless desires towards food what is not highly accustomed by modern healthcare professionals. Especially, in Buddhist point of view, bad effects of attachment and well-being of detachment to food should have applied by healthcare professionals to eliminate misconceptions and immoral patterns of food intake amongst people.

Researchers have brought into consideration various food related cultures in different parts of the world that are more or less dissimilar one to another. It is true to note that same as other beings, in the past, collectively humans associated with the environment as a part of their life. Hence, their eating methods gained through traditional knowledge were beautiful and moderate having healthy and natural foods those inherited from the environment. Nevertheless, in this modern world the activities of human beings seem modernized considerably in the abnormal way. In other words, life-style and eating methods of human beings have tended towards habitually erroneous, being against to the nature. Therefore, the clear fact is that in the present world, food has become not only major necessity, but also the major reason of illnesses among themselves rather than early periods of humanity.

Abnormal life-style and wrong patterns of eating lead human society to its destruction slowly but surely. Therefore, strong and firm changes are required within people to build up healthy society but not through temporarily solutions. A number of researchers have revealed how humans seriously affected because of wrong living and eating patterns. For instance, Dr. Baxter and Montgomery (2011, p.5) describes in their research with comparison survey of WHO reports that;

*“The major risk factors influencing morality today are our patterns of living and consumption. In countries like the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, people die from complications related to the fact that we simply eat too much, drink too much, and exercise too little”* (cited in Baxter and Montgomery 2011, p.5).

Buddhist clarification on food in moderation points the attention towards three directions, but not solely just eating in moderation. As Dhirasekere (1981, p.41) points out “*These bounds of propriety apply not only to the quantity of food consumed but also to the amount sought and accepted*”. These three facts illustrate in the pāli commentaries as; “*bhojane mattaññutā’ti bhojane yā mattā jānitabbā pariyesanā-paṭiggahanā-paribhogesu yuttā*” (Woods et al. 1977-79, p.152). The word “*matta*” expresses “*dose.*” Then, “*mattaññutā*” word emerges meaning “*knowing the dose or quantity*” (Nyanatiloka 1946, p.33). Hence, in the context, the meaning comprises with *searching for food in moderation (pariyesanā)*, *receiving of food in moderation (paṭiggahanā)* and *eating of food in moderation (paribhogesu)*. This interpretation drives us to huge series of directions regarding food in moderation. Unusual collection, storage and eating habits of people in the world caused for wasting a lot of food and increasing starvation among poor communities while caused for quick drop of human health. However, within this context special attention will be paying on eating food in moderation (*paribhogesu*) and side effects of behaving against to this practice for the health of human beings as a global application.

Firstly, attention will be paying to understand Buddhist attitude towards purpose of intake of food and its related actions. Significantly, the Buddha advised his followers to be mindful while accepting and eating food or drinking beverages. In the discourses as well as in the *Vinaya-Piṭaka* enclosed with substantial, ethical basis food related statements taught by the Buddha. As a common practice, Buddhist disciples advised to reflect compulsorily on purpose of eating before each meal by reciting thus;

“*Wisely reflecting, we take alms food, not for the purpose of fun, not for indulgence or the fascination of taste, but simply for the maintenance of the body, for the continuance of existence, for living the higher life. Through this eating, we subdue old painful feelings of hunger and prevent new painful feelings from arising. Thus do we live unhindered, blameless, and in comfort*” (Smith, H 1978, p.4).

Through regular reflection twice a day on the purpose of eating, the practitioner is able to train avoiding misbehaviors of eating such as constant intake even irregular times, searching for delicious

food and over-eating. As the first step of eating food in moderation, this practice leads everyone to be mindful on what and why one is eating. Consequently, one should be aware about the portion of food receiving and intake to maintain one's material body but not to fulfill desires or experience with tastes. Limitless and over-eating habits increase among people because of unawareness on the purpose of eating and generating too much craving within themselves towards flavors. Hence, Buddhist practitioners advised to practice detachment and to be aware on quantity of eating. The benefits of this practice has further discussed by one of well-known Buddhist scholars in his research;

*"A high value was set on physical fitness and freedom from disease-not so much for its own sake, but as forming a solid basis for mental development. It is partly with this end in view that the Buddha regulated the lives of the monks with regard to their habits of food and drinks. Regularity and moderation in eating, the Buddha maintained, contributes to a healthy life; but lack of food would impair the successful progress of brahmachariya"* (Dhirasekere, J 1982, p.110).

Since regularity and eating in moderation becomes front-runner of a strong and healthy life, it is applicable not only for practitioners of holly-life but also for all humans who wish to maintain a healthy life. In addition to this, as previously mentioned, one should eat food to overcome past and future painful feelings of hunger as well as for the support of maintaining physical body but not for fun, indulgence or fascination. In fact, Buddhism demonstrates clearly, the quantity of food one should consume under practicing eating food in moderation; *"He, who practices self-control, should eat four or five mouthfuls less than stomach could hold, and then should drink water as it makes easy for one's spiritual practices"* (Rhys David, C.A.F 1909, verse 355).

However, in this modern world, objectives and limitation of food intake of many people are out of consideration with regard of Buddhist ideology of food intake. In other words, intentions and aims between almost all the food producers and consumers do not interact with the Buddhist concepts. Unfortunately, today food industries carry on their production with the sole intention of improving their volume of turnover, based on the theory of

“supply for needs” or “All determinants are predominantly taken as constant factors of demand and supply” (Wikipedia, 2019). These are some modules that dominated by modern economists for all the productions including food, leading the human society to be unhealthy. Therefore, since people develop too much greediness towards food, then the manufacturers ready to supply as much as they required without much concerning on quality or quantity. In this manner, Buddhism highly values self-awareness and self-control of eating to avoid risks that come through unusual and unhealthy food productions and consumptions.

### TRUE VALUES OF EATING FOOD AND HEALTHCARE

According to the Buddhist teachings, the material body that composed with elements is uneasy to keep perfectly avoiding from ailments. So, one should reflect this nature always as daily practice “disease can come upon me; I have not outstripped disease” (Hare, E.M 2006, iii.57). In fact, Buddhism explains, “this body is wasted, full of sickness, and frail; this heap of corruption breaks to pieces, life indeed ends in death” (Max Muller 1998, p.15). Nevertheless, Buddhism accepts that everyone should determine to prevent from supplying fertilizers for the growth of unhealthy sources within one’s material body. The Buddha has realized mainly eight sources that caused for arising of physical ailments; viz:

“*Pitta samuṭṭhānā ābādhā* (the agitation of the bile), *Semha samuṭṭhānā ābādhā* (the agitation of phlegm), *Vāta samuṭṭhānā ābādhā* (the agitation of air), *Sannipātītā ābādhā* (the union of humors), *Utuparināmajā ābādhā* (the changes of seasons), *Visamaparihārajā ābādhā* (using of poisoning things), *Opakkamikā ābādhā* (because of contraptions), *Kammavipākajā ābādhā* (because of evil kamma)” (Woodward 2005, p.109).

In the sense of wrong eating patterns and imbalance of food intake, apart from fifth, seventh and eighth factors, the other said factors directly or indirectly related to the food. In addition, the Ayurvedic reasons for arising of ailments within material body are quite different in respect with Buddhist points of view. According to the Ayurvedic acceptance;

“Beings are born with a unique constitution, which is an individual

*combination of the three doṣhas, or principles that govern the function of our bodies on the physical, mental, and emotional levels. These three energies are vāta, pitta, and kapha. Disease is caused by an imbalance of any of the doṣhas and by the presence of āma, or toxic food byproducts (food that hasn't been totally digested)" (The free library, 2006).*

Buddhist interpretation on basic reasons of which would cause for ailments are more advanced than western scientific findings and Ayurvedic teachings, partly because, Buddhism discovers all the sociological, biological and environmental aspects of internal and external diseases. On the other hand, Buddhist view deals with even karmic influence that is not declared in any other science related to the health. In fact, as the initial procedure of the global healthcare system, should provide satisfactory details to improve knowledge of people about roots of ailments.

Buddhism clearly explains how over-eating style affects one's health decreasing and shortening the life span. The Buddha taught advancements of eating in moderation to the king *Kosala*, having taken lunch, when he approached the Buddha with full of stomach. The guidance given by the Buddha was, *"When a man is always mindful, knowing moderation in the food he eats, his ailments are diminish: he ages slowly, guarding his life"* (Bodhi, Bhikkhu 2000, p.176). This statement assumes that one who is not practicing food in moderation, consequently caused for serious illnesses and drops his life span. Tyler Graham & Drew Ramsey (2011, p.xi) describe in their study comparatively through with WHO reports, the influences of bad habits in eating food for a healthy life by presenting prescriptions for food to reduce ailments and specially over-weight and obesity of the people. As they point out;

*"Our eating habits have led to increasing number of overweight and clinically obese (Americans). This is tragic. We need to view being over-weight as a critical sign of deteriorating health. More than mere inconvenience, being overweight is associated with adverse metabolic effects on blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, and insulin resistance. Risks increase greatly for coronary heart disease, ischemic stroke, and type 2 diabetes. Sadly, we often focus primarily on the superficial aspects of being overweight, and miss the core issue that carrying excess weight is really an outward manifestation of inner disease. Being overweight*

*or obese has reached epidemic proportions globally. WHO estimated in 2005 that 1.6 billion adults, age 15 or older, were overweight, and at least 400 million were obese. The organization projects that by the year 2015, 2.5 billion adults globally will be overweight, and another 700 million will be obese. In February 2010, WHO reported that at least 2.6 million people die each year as a result of being overweight or obese” (cited in Tyler Graham & Drew Ramsey, 2011, p.xi)*

In respect with Tyler Graham & Drew Ramsey opinion, Buddhism accepts that the right consumption always should contribute to well-being and forms a basis for further development of human potentialities. This is an important point often ignored by contemporary economists. When consumption plays as a necessity, much more than just satisfy one’s desire; it contributes to well-being and spiritual development. Through comparative studies between Buddhist concept of food consumption and economic values of present world, some scholars opine that humans’ true values of eating food considerably seem changed to the worst.

*“People in this modern world probably depend on wrong values of food consumption and intake. We must distinguish which kind of desire our daily foods are intended to satisfy: is it to answer the need for things of true value, or to indulge in the pleasures afforded by artificial value? Consumption is said to be one of the goals of economic activity. However, economic theory and Buddhism define consumption differently” (Gnanarama 2008, p.66).*

According to the Buddhism, the nature of worldly people is never satisfied with any gains. *“Life in any world is incomplete, insatiate, the slave of craving” (Ñānamoli Bhikkhu & Bodhi Bhikkhu 2009, p.687).* When the true values of food consumption overcome by humans’ desire and things supplied as much as they wanted, it is hard to build a healthy society. However, this is also true on a global scale, if all economic activities aimed by only necessity, the result would be much more than just a healthy economy and material progress as such activities would contribute to the whole of human development and enable humankind to lead a noble life and enjoy a more mature kind of happiness. Therefore, Buddhism encourages both food industries and individuals to be intelligent regarding food productivities and consumptions to build a better and healthy society.

## FASTING FOR A HEALTHY LIFE

The other Buddhist practice in line with eating food in moderation is preventing taking solid food after mid-noon for the cultivation of spiritual life. This practice also significantly can apply to the global healthcare system. Fasting for a long hours in the monastic community enclosed with ascetic practices (*dhutaṅgas*) as well as in the precepts of novices. “*Dhutaṅga*” means “the observance of which is meritorious in a Buddhist monk precept by which the passions are shaken or quelled”. There is a specific list of thirteen practices under this category, four of which are pertaining to food; eating once a day, eating at one sitting, reducing the amount you eat on alms-round, eating only the food that you receive at the first seven houses. Individuals adopt these practices voluntarily; they are not required in the normal course of a Buddhist monastic life of practice. The Buddha, as is well known, emphasized moderation, the Middle Way that avoids extremes, in all things. Fasting is an additional method that one can take up, with supervision, for a time.

During the time of the Buddha, there were various types of religious practices in India developing their inner qualities preventing or controlling extremely their food intake. Ascetic Siddhārtha experienced its over-limit through practice of self-mortification for six years by preventing food totally at the final stage. However, at last, he understood that, giving boundless sufferings to the body with lack of food, is not the right path to attain the Enlightenment or even to train the mind. Hence, he abandoned self-mortification, considering it as an extreme practice. Then onwards, even food became moderate in his daily life. In this sense, very clearly Buddhism states here that, preventing from food intake totally, in other words, fasting for a longer period continuously would be an extreme practice that also could cause for bodily harm.

However, the interesting fact is that the Buddha explained healthy advantages of having single meal or maximum two meals per day. Detachment for food is very essential for practitioners so that they could maintain their spiritual life easily managing time for mental cultivation. Conversely, when we concern ten precepts of the novice, it seems that the method of fasting for nearly eighteen hours is in their routing of daily life. As a precept, they are

supposed to prevent intake food after mid-noon (at irregular time) “*vikālabhojanā veramaṇi sikkhāpadam*” (Ñanamoli, Bhikkhu 1997, p.1). This means approximately for eighteen hours interval for their digestive system. Interestingly, some of modern researchers also have discovered healthy benefits of preventing eating food for a few hours as a daily practice.

*“The health points of view suggest that two meals a day are quite sufficient to keep one in good health. Avoiding a meal at night provided a well-earned rest to the body, and also allows a person to involve oneself in meditation or any other such important task pertaining to mental development. Five results that arise from not taking a third meal for the day are given as follows: i. It leads to a life without various pain and aches. ii. It contributes to a life full of health. iii. The body becomes light by such a practice. iv. The strength of the body is sustained. v. One could live happily”* (Nandasena, R 1993, p.177).

What is more, recently health professionals have emphasized the importance of fasting and modern medical science is now confirming that fasting has many positive effects in the context of life expansion. Modern physicians have found that fasting is a scientific and very significant practice for the healthy life. It is important to note that the modern scientists and physicians endorse the same facts what the Buddha and some other religious leaders preached theoretically and practically. For instance: Dr. Shahid Athar, a well-known endocrinologist in Malaysia, wrote an article that the physiological effect of fasting.

*“In fact, Fasting is ideal for treating mild to moderate, stable, non-insulin diabetes, obesity and hypertension. When a person fasts, the body burns stored resources from excess fats, carbohydrates and sugars to produce energy. It is also a process of detoxification as the colon, liver, kidney; lungs, lymph glands and skin eliminate or neutralize toxins. This process speeds up during fasting as the body breaks down fat. Chemicals and toxins absorbed from food and the environment are stored in fat reserves and released during fasting. When the body is deprived of food for more than 12 hours, energy is diverted from the digestive to the immune system and the metabolic process allows the body to heal, rebuild and replenish itself”* (Submission.org, 2013).

Buddhism, also firmly states that, hunger directly connected with mind and one must be often aware of eating food. The *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* explains that one should practice awareness when performs all the actions including eating and drinking. The nature of the mind is functioning with all kind of process of the body while it is engaged in outer world through bodily organs.

*“The sensation of hunger enters the inner forces of the mind in the heart stimulates the other organs to activity in order to bring about the conditions necessary to find relief from the pangs of hunger. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, and touch spring in active strength; visualizations, plans, and schemes, soon follow each other in quick succession. Experiences in the past which remain in the mind in the form of impressions –memory- are revived and, in the meanwhile, the faint sensations occurring in the organs of tongue, nose and eye soon prompt the heart to know what action is necessary to be performed in the circumstances”* (Ranasinghe, C.P 1957, p.224).

It should note here that some of modern scientists describe the interrelationship between senses and brain rather than senses and mind. They discuss the brain and nervous system as functional Centre that is influencing over the addiction. Therefore, addiction is practically able to control by prescribing medications deactivating or changing process of nervous system that directly connected to the brain whereas modern physicians attempt to keep the patients away from over-eating and misbehaviors of food intake. However, the weak point we should understand is most of modern physicians are not aware of the mind as controlling Centre of the senses. That is why; sometime their efforts have not brought desired results. Meanwhile, the Buddhism teaches that, the practice of “*food in moderation*” directly connected with one’s mind, as all other actions. When one strives to control senses, only by the mind can succeed in it but not by any influence of others. Interrelationship between hunger and mind has described by Buddhist scholars as;

*“When the touch reflective element in our stomach becomes active as a result of stimulation by emptiness, the sensation of hunger is felt; hunger stimulates the heart into activity, and the heart in turn stimulates the appropriate environment sense organs and, in this manner, a series of visualizations occur in our mind”* (Ranasinghe, C.P 1957, p.227).

Therefore, Buddhism points out that there is no medicine for greedy persons. The description is that some can cure a person stung by a black snake, by charms and medicines. When a person is possessed by a devil, wise people cure him by means of medicine. A person who is excessively affected by craving for worldly things and sensual pleasures nobody can cure him. If such a person, transgresses the wholesome actions and gets himself engaged in wholesome behavior then what cure is there for such a man. Therefore, the Buddha advised to train the mind since it is foremost to every action: “*training of mind, since the trained mind gives one the best: what neither mother, neither father, nor any other relative can do, a well-trained mind does; it elevates oneself*” (Max Muller, F 1998, verse 43). In this manner, the Buddhism emphasizes controlling senses by cultivation of the one’s mind could only recover from ill patterns of eating food. This is why; the Buddha included food in moderation into very highest practical doctrine of holly life.

### PRACTICAL APPROACH

Buddhist teachings demonstrate how to use this concept practically in one’s daily life. Beings are responding to the environment bodily and vocally when received signs from mind and its partner, the brain. In this sense, action called ‘moderation’ connects with the mind. Again, it is connected with five senses (*pañcīndriya*) namely, *cakkhu* (eye), *sota* (ear), *ghāna* (nose), *jivhā* (tong), *Kāya* (body). The Buddha has explained in his discourses how a trainer should deal with these five senses for right livelihood. In the Dhammapada states unrestrained mind just like a badly roofed house; “*just as rain penetrates a badly roofed house, so also passion penetrates a mind not cultivated properly*” (Max Muller, F 1998, verse 13). In addition, when one’s mind is not cultivated to be mindful on whatever food is eating, it leads to increase craving further;

“*What bhikkhus, is the nutriment for the arising of un-arisen sensual desire and for the increase and expansion of arisen sensual desire? There is bhikkhus, the sign of beautiful: Frequently giving careless attention to it is the nutriment for the arising of un-arisen sensual desire and for the increase and expansion of arisen sensual desire*” (Bodhi, Bhikkhu 2000, p.1568).

Conversely, the modern physicians and dieticians contribute great efforts to make an understanding among people to avoid certain types of food and change wrong patterns of eating that could be badly affected human health. In the past few decades, many scholars have explored how certain food can lead to addiction then to destruction of bodily strength. Nevertheless, there is dissimilarity between Buddhist practices and modern health professionals' advices for the controlling wrong patterns of eating food. Although Buddhism emphasizes control the sensual desire by developing the mind, modern medical science interprets interrelationship between senses and the brain in scientific terms, thereby attempting to pursue people to modify the habits of eating food by presenting consequences of over-eating. To change ill patterns of eating food, different menus of food seem to have prepared and prescribed. However, there is no guarantee to confirm how far people could follow advices of health professionals since in reality sensual desires constantly overtake individual's knowledge. People often conflicted with economists since hold the opinion that the experience of satisfaction is the expected result of consumption. But the crucial question here is: What is the true purpose of consuming food whether satisfaction of desires or the attainment of well-being?"

In addition, the other practical method found in Buddhism to train food addicted people to avoid from craving for food is practicing meditation on "the perception of the loathsomeness of food" (*āhārepaṭikkūlasaññā*) which includes in the methods of calm meditation (*samatha-bhāvanā*). This is the perception that arises through reflection upon the repulsive aspects of nutriment, such as the difficulty of searching food, the repulsiveness of using it, the digestive process, excretion, etc. This is also considering as practical approach to the practice of receiving and eating food in moderation.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are many arguments and statements about food production, marketing and development among economists and interpreters for the different ideas. Buddhism ignores laying the rules and regulation on the methods of food production, but

pursues people to practice self-control. In the Dhammapada states, *“he who has no wound on his hand, may touch poison with his hand; poison does not affect one who has no wound”* (Max Muller 1998, verse 124). Similarly, when individual could become self-strong by restraining senses, he is able to secure himself even though, whatever quantity of food and drinks appeared in the market or around him. Finally, regarding food consumption, the Buddhist perspective is not to control much the economic theories on food productions constantly changing time to time. Nevertheless, Buddhism guides the society to control mind and senses individually so that they could avoid bad habits of food eating and to have a healthy life which is praised by the Buddha as ‘highest wealth’ *“Ārogyā paramā lābhā”* (Max Muller 1998, verse 2014).

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