

Minding food

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There are 4 kinds of food¹:

- (1) material food (*kabaliṅkār'āhāra*)—the food we need daily;
- (2) contact (*phass'āhāra*)—our on-going awake experience;
- (3) mental volition (*saṅkhār'āhāra*)—the fuel that keeps us in samsara; and
- (4) consciousness (*viññāṇ'āhāra*)—what is sustaining us right now, awake or asleep.

Middle way of eating

In meditation practice, it helps to see how all the last 3 kinds of food are rooted in the 1st kind. When we take **too much** food (more than we need), we easily feel sleepy; we are less exertive; and we do little good for the mind.

When we eat too little, our body suffers, we feel weak, and we do little good for the mind. Eating too much is extreme; eating too little is extreme. Eating what we need at the right time helps us progress on the middle way,

Proper meals

Monastics who keep the precepts with great **lovingkindness and charity**, find it easier to meditate; and vice versa. The same goes for lay practitioners who are serious about reaching the path in this life. (Notice how monks who habitually—secretly or openly—take evening meals tend to be fleshy, lazy, fall badly sick in no time, and often die younger.)

Although the *vikāla, bhojana* rule, or the 6th of the 8 precepts for laymen, prohibits meals between dawn (when day just breaks) and noon (when the sun is above the meridian), some monastics take only **one meal** a day, especially when they spend a lot of time meditating and do less physical work. The same applies for the laity who are used to regular and long meditation.

Mindful eating

For most practitioners, however, not used to true monastic discipline, they take breakfast and a healthy lunch finishing well before noon. **The way** we eat also helps: eating slowly and chewing mindfully helps to digest our meal effectively.

Water should be drunk at any regular and proper times, and is best done mindfully, too. Often drinking sufficient water also helps to lessen, even overcome, our hunger. This means we should know when to ease ourselves. However, when we are in a good long deep meditation, the body will adjust accordingly. Hence, the more we are focused on our practice, and worrying less (or at all) about food, naturally, helps our body adjust, too.

Healthy eating

Since this habit helps to lower our blood pressure, heart rate, and lessen our worries and body weight, we often emerge from our practice healthier than before, both physically and mentally. We are also closer to the path than ever before.

¹ See SD 20.6 (2) for details.

Mindful eating, taking just enough (or a little less), and regular meals help us to keep our mind and body light, which brightens up our meditation. We can neither force this nor should we worry that we are not eating enough (the body will “tell” us).

Gastric worries

It does not help a practitioner to worry about food, especially wondering if we get gastric attacks, etc. The Buddha spent 6 long years eating so very little, often almost nothing. We are not even near the Bodhisattva’s self-mortification. If we are serious in our practice, then let it come first, and deal with our “health” concerns when they actually occur.

There were occasions when my students who had gastric issues told me how they were at first worried, but they progressed without any episodes of gastric attacks. They focused on their practice and routine, and emerged being healthier: their gastric issues were healed!

Avoid luxury foods

During actual retreats, practitioners are often allowed suitable warm drinks in place of dinner, or when we feel tired and need some food. Milk products (like cheese and chocolates) are said to be “allowables” for monastics. But this is an irony: we are avoiding healthy regular foods for expensive and luxurious sweets. The Fat Fo (the China “Buddha”) and the round Guru are reminders what luxury food does.

Mindful eating is compassionate eating. Hence, when we do feel really sick and need food, take it if we must. After that, we need to reflect why we **really** did this: what actually happened. This is a great time to learn something about ourselves and discover some new gut strength.

True renunciation

Keeping the 8 precepts should be understood as making an effort to **renounce** the world by a lay practitioner. The essence of the Buddha’s teaching is **less and less** of worldly things (in this case, food). We are simply training our body and mind to be healthier with less of the world so that there is a growing space for the joy and wisdom of the teaching and the path in this life itself.

A very powerful drive for us is to emulate **the Buddha** and the arhats: it really helps to aspire to streamwinning in this life itself. Then, this precept-keeping is not only meaningful (giving up worldliness) but also purposeful (heading for true self-awakening).

We are limited by our own thought; we are liberated by our own thoughts.

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