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Putta,maṃsa Sutta

The Discourse on the Son's Flesh | S 12.63/2:97-100

Theme: The true nature of food

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

Der Mensch ist, was er isst

(A man is what he eats. German proverb)

1 Introduction

It is imperative to understand here that this Sutta (or Buddhism as a whole) does not advocate or endorse cannibalism, which is clearly prohibited by the Vinaya.¹ The Putta,maṃsa Sutta tries to say in the strongest terms, how we are attached to our bodies, and yet not knowing its true nature. We need to understand the true nature of our mind-body.

1.1 ORIGIN STORY. The Putta,maṃsa Sutta—the discourse on the son's flesh—as the title suggests, is a set of strong statements on *nibbidā*,² regarding how life and suffering are fuelled by the four kinds of food, namely, material food, sense-stimuli, mental volition and consciousness. **Bodhi**, in the Introduction to his translation of the Nidāna,vagga of the Saṃyutta, says that the Putta,maṃsa Sutta

[is] entirely devoted to the four nutriments with no explicit mention made of dependent origination, introduced four thought-provoking similes to expose the dangers in the four nutriments and to inspire a sense of revulsion towards the whole process of nutrition. Because at least three of the four nutriments are internal to the sentient organism itself, the teaching of the four nutriments implies, at a very deep level, that sentient existence not only requires nutriment from outside but is itself a self-sustaining process of nutrition. (S:B 524)

The Sutta's Commentary explains that the Buddha gives this teaching because the monastic order has been receiving an abundance of gifts and honour (*lābha,sakkāra*), and that some of the monks are not using their requisites with proper reflection. Indeed, the situation is so urgent that the Buddha is represented as giving this teaching as “the fifth rule of defeat” (*pañcama pārājika*), that is, a rule which when broken entails automatic defeat or fall from monkhood. To prevent this, he places before the monks (by way of this teaching) “a mirror of the Dharma” (*dharm'ādāsa*) for their self-restraint. Constantly reflecting on this teaching, they would use the four requisites—almsfood, robes, shelter and medical requisites—with restraint (*samvara*) and proper limits [strictly defined relationships] (*mariyāda*). (SA 2:101 f).

1.2 SUMMARY. The Putta,maṃsa Sutta is quite straight-forward: the Buddha teaches unprompted by first stating the syllabus [§§2-3] and then he elaborates on it in a simple dialogue. However, it is interesting that each of the four teachings of “food” (*āhāra*) is expanded by a powerful simile that clearly evokes *nibbidā* by way of the Dharma mastered, thus:

<u>Food</u>		<u>Simile</u>		<u>Dharma mastered</u>	
(1) material food	[§4]	an only son's flesh	[§§5-11a]	sensual lust	[§11b]
(2) contact as food	[§12]	a skinless cow	[§13]	feeling	[§14]
(3) mental volition as food	[§15]	a fiery coal-pit	[§§16-17]	craving	[§18]
(4) consciousness as food	[§19]	a punished thief	[§§20-24]	name-and-form	[§25]

¹ According to the Vinaya, the following types of meat are not allowable for monastics: human flesh, elephant meat, horse meat, dog meat, snake meat, lion meat and meat of all other wild animals (Mv 6.23-24 = V 1:217-220). Only available meat (*pavatta,mamsa*), ie, the killing of which the monastic has not seen, heard or suspected is done specially for him or her, is allowable (V 1:217; 3:172).

² See SD 20.1.

The Sutta ends abruptly, as it were, but this suggests that the teaching is addressed to us directly, and that the Buddha expects us to complete the Sutta ourselves with our own attainment of awakening.

1.3 RELATED SUTTAS AND TEXTS. The following three suttas have important sections dealing with “food,” namely, **the Sammā Ditṭhi Sutta** (M 9),³ **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38),⁴ and **the (Āhara) Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2).⁵ The term “food” is also briefly mentioned in **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56):

And what, monks, is **form**?

The four great elements⁶ and forms derived⁷ from the four great elements—this is called “form.”
With the arising of food, there is the arising of form.

With the cessation of food, there is the cessation of form. (S 22.56/3:59)

Āhāra is further discussed in **the Moliya Phagguna Sutta** (S 12.12) from the perspective of non-self,⁸ and **the Atthi,rāga Sutta** (S 12.64), where it is said that lust for “food” brings on suffering.⁹

The Āhāra Sutta (S 46.51), using the term *āhāra* in a broader sense, without reference to the four kinds of food, shows how the mental hindrances are fed or fuelled, how the awakening-factors are starved, so that we do *not* progress spiritually; and how the hindrances are starved, and the awakening-factors nourished, so that we progress spiritually towards awakening.¹⁰ **The Abhisanda Suttas** (S 55.31-33), too, uses the term *āhāra* in a broader sense.¹¹

The Visuddhi,magga, too, discusses *āhāra*.¹² The Putta,maṃsa Sutta and its long commentary are fully translated with related texts and notes in Nyanaponika Thera’s *The Four Nutriments of Life* (1981).¹³

2 True nature of food

2.1 PURPOSE OF THE TEACHING. In **the Boy’s Questions** (*kumāra,pañha*) (Khp 4), the very first question and answer are:

What is “one” (*eka nāma kim*): “All beings are sustained by food” (*sabbe sattā āhāra-ṭ,ṭhitikā*).¹⁴
(Khp 4/2 & KhpA 75-78)

The same question and answer are found in another similar set of ten questions in **the Mahā Pañha Sutta 1** (A 10.28), and where the fourth question and answer are:

Bhikshus, when a monk becomes fully revulsed towards four things, when his lust for them fully fades away, when he is fully liberated from them, when he sees the complete ending of them, then he is one who, having fully realized the goal, makes an end of suffering here and now.

In what four things?

In the four kinds of food. (A 10.27.6/5:50 f)¹⁵

³ M 9.9/1:47 f.

⁴ M 38.15-16/1:261.

⁵ S 46.2/5:64-67.

⁶ “The 4 great elements,” (*cattāro mahā,bhūtā*). See **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56) in SD 3.7.7n.

⁷ On the “derived elements,” see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56) in SD 3.7.7n.

⁸ S 12.12/12-14 = SD 20.5.

⁹ S 12.64/101-104.

¹⁰ S 46.51/5:102-107 = SD 7.15. See esp its Intro.

¹¹ S 55.31-33/5:391-392. See also S:B 731 n19 (These four kinds of nutriments have craving as their source).

¹² Vism 11:1-3/341.

¹³ See biblio. For Comy tr, see pp 17-27.

¹⁴ Khp 4/2 = D 3:211; cf D 3:273 = Pm 1:5 (*katamo eko dhammo abhiññeyāyo*); S 5:65+65 (*pañca nīvaraṇā āhāraṭṭhitikā*); S 5:65+67 (*satta bojhaṅgā āhāraṭṭhitikā*); Pm 1:122+174 = 2:34 (in answer to *eko loko*), UA 207, SnA 2:442, J 1:131, Nc 40. See also KhpA 77 f; PmA 1:65, 67; also A 10.27/5:48-54.

Two important points are evident from the Mahā Pañha Sutta passage here. Firstly, the four kinds of food form a single set, the “one dharma” (*eka, dhamma*), that is, they are to be understood as a set. Secondly, the purpose of reflecting on the four kinds of food is to arouse *nibbidā*, revulsion towards the virtual reality we create as a very private limited world of our own. *Nibbidā* is like the proverbial chicken’s beak or claw with which it breaks through the shell of ignorance so that it emerges into the open fresh air of true reality. A medieval Jewish sage was once moved to say, “I am fed up with being hungry again and again, and I hunger after final satiety.”¹⁶

2.2 THE FOUR FOODS DEFINED. The suttas, such as **the Putta,maṃsa Sutta** (S 12.63), often mention four kinds of **food or nutriment** (*āhāra*), namely: solid food, contact (sense-stimuli), volition, consciousness.¹⁷ The Commentaries give very detailed analyses of *āhāra*. They are called *āhāra* because “they nourish” (*aharanti*) their own effects, and that they have craving as their source. Although there are other conditions for beings, these four alone are called “food” because they serve as “*special conditions* for the personal life-continuity” (*ajjhatika, santatiyā visesa, paccayattā*).¹⁸ That is to say, with this special condition, that particular state does not arise.

Material food (*kabalīṅkāra āhāra*) is basically the kind of solid food that we take to sustain or build our physical body. This is the support for the physical body that is the stage, as it were, for the other three kinds of non-material food.

In the mental body, **contact** is the special condition for *feeling*, and **contact as food** produces the 3 kinds of feelings, that is, the pleasurable, the painful and the neutral.¹⁹

Mental volition is the special condition for *consciousness*, and **mental volition as food** produces the 3 kinds of existence, that is, the sense-world, the form world, and the formless world.

Consciousness is the special condition for *name-and-form*, and **consciousness as food** produces name-and-form on the occasion of rebirth.

In summary, **the products of food** (what it nourishes) as the special condition are as follows:

- (1) material food (*kabalīṅkāra āhāra*) put into the mouth produces the groups of “form with nutritive essence as the eighth” (*oj’atthamaka, rūpa*);²⁰
- (2) contact as food (*phass’āhāra*) produces the three kinds of feeling (pleasurable, painful, neutral);
- (3) mental volition as food (*mano, sañcetan’āhāra*) produces the three kinds of existence [sense-world, form-world, formless world]; and
- (4) consciousness as food (*viññāṇ’āhāra*) produces name-and-form (*nāma, rūpa*) at rebirth.

(MA 1:207-215; SA 2:22-27, 104-113; KhpA 76-78)

Let us now examine these four kinds of food in greater detail.

¹⁵ *Catūsu bhikkhave dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyaṇṭa, dassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh’eva dhamme dukkhass’antakaro hoti. Katamesu catūsu? Catūsu āhāresu.*

¹⁶ Abraham ben Chisdai, in *Ben-hamelekh we-hanasir (The Prince and the Ascetic)*. This is an old Hebrew version of the “Barlaam and Joasaph” story which unwittingly carried the main features of the Buddha’s life story through a major part of the medieval world. The Hebrew version has several distinct traces not only of the Buddha’s life story, but also of Buddhist ideas, like the one quoted above. Only a comparison of the numerous versions of the “Barlaam and Joasaph” story could decide on whether these ideas were part of the tradition and common to other versions, or whether they originated in the Hebrew author’s mind. This is from Nyanaponika 1981.

¹⁷ D 3:228; M 1:48, 261; S 2:13, 48, 98-105; Vbh 401.

¹⁸ MA 1:209; SA 2:26; DhsA 153. See also Vism 11.1-3/341. In **Āhāra S** (S 46.61/5:102-107) & **Abhisanda Ss** (S 55.31-33/5:391-392) *āhāra* is used in a broader sense of “special condition” without reference to the four kinds of food. See also S:B 731 n19 (These 4 kinds of nutriment have craving as their source).

¹⁹ On *feeling*, see *Vedanā* = SD 17.3.

²⁰ I.e., it is the basic corporeal octad (*suddh’atthaka*), consisting of the 4 great elements, colour, smell, taste, and nutritive essence. On *oja, atthamaka, rūpāni*, see SD 26.2 esp (3).

2.2.1 Material food (*kabalīnkāra āhāra*) is the special condition (*visesa paccaya*) for the physical body of those beings that subsist on material food, of the gross (solid) kind in the case of the physical sense-world, or the subtle in the case of the sense-based celestial worlds. The Commentary says that *kabalīnkār'āhāra* is “a term for the nutritive essence (*ojā*) of which boiled rice, etc, is the base (*vatthu*)” (SA 2:22-24). Material food, as soon as it is placed in the mouth (in the case of humans), brings forth the groups of form with nutritive essence as the eighth (*oja aṭṭhamaka,rūpa*, an Abhidhamma term for the simplest cluster of material states).²¹

The word *kabaḷiṅ,kāra* (Ee Se) or *kavaḷiṅ,kāra* (Ce) or *kabaḷī,kāra* (Be), is resolved as *kabala* (“morsel, mouthful”) + *kāra* (“doing, making”), and means “made into morsels” (but is used only in combination with *āhāra* as a phrase or a compound). As such, the compound, *kabaḷiṅkār'āhāra*²² (and its variant forms) means “material food.” The word “material” is broad enough here to encompass the senses “physical” food, as applied to the human and physical world, while the term “non-physical” or “fine (or subtle)” food as applied to the sense-bound celestial worlds.

The Brahma,jāla Sutta (D 1) speaks of “the divine, having physical form, of the sense-sphere, partaking of solid food,”²³ which clearly suggests that the term *kabaḷiṅkāra āhāra* applies to the whole of the sense-world. Moreover, the Putta,māmsa Sutta clearly states two kinds of “material food,” that is, the gross (*oḷārika*) and the fine [subtle] (*sukhuma*) (*kabalīkāro āhāro oḷāriko vā sukhumo vā*), where “gross” refers to the solid food, such as those of human beings, and “fine” or “subtle” to that of the sense-world divine beings. The beings of higher worlds do not partake of any such food.

2.2.2 Contact as food. In the mental body, **contact** is the special condition for feeling, and **contact as food** brings forth the three kinds of feelings, pleasurable, painful and neutral.²⁴ Contact or sense-impression occurs because we have a physical body nourished by food, “made consisting of the four great elements, procreated by mother and father, nourished on boiled rice and porridge.”²⁵

In Buddhist psychological terms, this body comprises of the six sense-faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), which in conjunction with their respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses,²⁶ result in sense-contact (*phassa*), from which arises feeling (*vedanā*), which refers to the hedonic tone or affective value of the resultant experience. For example, the meeting of eye, form, and eye-consciousness is called eye-contact. Contact, according to dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), is the principal condition for feeling. Feeling and perception are inseparable.²⁷ Hence, contact produces feelings.

2.2.3 Mental volition as food. **Mental volition** is the special condition for consciousness, and **mental volition as food** produces the three kinds of existence, that is, the sense-world, the form world, and the formless world. The Commentary says that *mano,sañcetanā* is identical with *cetanā* (“volition”), and here refers to karmic volition (SA 2:24). As noted by **Gethin**, *cetanā* is closely related to *saṅkhāra*:

The *nikāyas* define *saṅkhāras* primarily in terms of will or volition (*cetanā*); they also describe them as putting together (*abhisankharonti*) each of the *khandhas* in turn into something that is put-together (*saṅkhata*).²⁸ In this way *saṅkhāras* are presented as conditioning factors conceived of as active volitional forces. *Cetanā* is, of course, understood as *kamma* on the mental level,²⁹ ...

(Gethin 1985:37)

²¹ On *oja,aṭṭhamaka,rūpāni*, see SD 26.2 esp (3). See prec n.

²² BHS *kavaḷī,kārāhāra*.

²³ *Dibbo rūpī kāmāvacāro kabalīnkār'āhāra,bhakkho*, D 1.86/1:34 = SD 25.2.

²⁴ On *feeling*, see *Vedanā* = SD 17.3.

²⁵ *Cātum,mahā,bhūtikassa kāyassa...mātā,pettika,sambhavassa odana,kummāsūpacayassa* (**Vammika S**, M 23.4/1:144; **Udaka S**, S 4:83 f; **Kimśukopama S**, S 4:194; **Kāma,bhū S**, S 4:292; **Gaṇḍa S**, A 4:386).

²⁶ The meeting of these three is contact (*tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso*) (**Madhu,piṇḍika S**, M 18.16/1:111) = SD 6.14.

²⁷ **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.9/1:293) = SD 35.1.

²⁸ Eg **Khandha Saṃyutta** defs, S 3:59 f, 86 f. (Gethin's fn)

²⁹ A 3:425. (Gethin's fn)

The formations aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k, khandha*) is a comprehensive group comprising a number of volitional factors. The most important is volition (*cetanā*), the mental factor that causes us to act by way of body and speech. Mental formations do not include feeling (which forms its own aggregate) but includes all the different desires and emotions, including the wholesome and unwholesome roots. They are the psychological roots of unwholesome actions (greed, hatred and delusion), and of wholesome actions (charity, lovingkindness and wisdom). As the second factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence.³⁰

2.2.4 Consciousness as food. **Consciousness** is the special condition for name-and-form, and **consciousness as food** produces name-and-form on the occasion of rebirth. The relationship between consciousness (*viññāna*) and name-and-form (*nāma, rūpa*), and this relationship is the heart of dependent arising.³¹

When name-and-form is correlated with the **five aggregates** (*pañca-k, khandha*),³² form is identified with the aggregates of physical form (*rūpa*), and name with the three aggregates of feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) (Vism 17.187/644 f).³³ Consciousness (*viññāna*), although inseparably linked with the three mental aggregates, is not included here as it is the condition for name-and-form. Hence, **the Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2) gives this definition of name-and-form:

And what, bhikshus, is **name-and-form**? Feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention. This is called name. And the four great elements and the material form derived from the four great elements. This is called form. Thus this is name and this is form—this is called name-and-form. (S 12.2.12/2:3) = SD 5.15

The Mahānidāna Sutta (D 15) explains the connection between consciousness and name-and-form, and how they lead to existence, in this manner:

It is said: ‘**With consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form.**’ Ānanda, how consciousness conditions name-and-form should be known in this manner:

If there were no consciousness to descend into a mother’s womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?”³⁴

“Certainly not, bhante.”

If, after descending into the mother’s womb, the consciousness were to depart, would name-and-form be generated in this state of being here?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

³⁰ For a detailed study, see *Saṅkhāra* = SD 17.6.

³¹ This is in fact the theme of **Mahānidāna S** (D 15/2:55-71) = SD 5.17.

³² The 5 aggregates: for a general survey, see (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭā S** (S 22.56) = SD 3.7; for study of the individual aggregates, see SD 17.

³³ On some technical difficulties regarding this term, see Bodhi 1984:18 n1, Harvey 1993:3-5 (digital ed) & Hamilton 1996a ch VI, esp 124-127.

³⁴ Cf **Tiṭṭh’āyatana S** (A 3.61) where the Buddha declares: “Based on the six elements, there is descent into the womb; | (On account of) such a descent, there is name-and-form; | With name-and-form as condition, there is contact; | With contact as condition, there is feeling. | Now, it is for one who feels that I make known [the 4 noble truths]” (A 3.61.9/1:176). This clearly shows that feeling arises with the descent of the gandharva (rebirth consciousness) into the womb. However, this is not a common interpretation of *viññāna-nāma, rūpa* dyad, where “*viññāna* in this context became the consciousness that descends into the mother’s womb at conception, while *nāma-rūpa* became the body complex that takes shape and, after developing sense-organs (*saḷāyatana*), experiences contact (*phassa*) and so on.” (Bucknell 1999:339). More commonly, *viññāna* is “the consummation of the six types of consciousness associated with the sense organs, which makes the version read like an account of the psychological process of sensory perception.” (Bucknell 1999: 327): see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18.16-18/1:111-113). See discussion on *nāma, rūpa* in **Dependent arising** = SD 5.11 Intro.

“If the consciousness of a young boy or a young girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow, develop and mature?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, the source, the origin, the condition for name-and-form, that is to say, consciousness. (D 15.21/2:62 f) = SD 5.17

2.3 THE FOUR SIMILES. The Putta,māmsa Sutta (S 12.63) gives a full definition of the four kinds of food, along with four graphic similes:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| (1) material food | = | an only son’s flesh; |
| (2) contact as food | = | a skinless cow; |
| (3) mental volition as food | = | charcoal pit; |
| (4) consciousness as food | = | a man given 300 strokes of the spear. ³⁵ |

Here we will examine the four similes a little more closely.

2.3.1 The simile of the only son’s flesh [§§5-11a]. The simile of the only son’s flesh is perhaps the grimmest simile in Pali literature, and is especially so when contrasted with another simile of the only son (*eka,putta*) in the **(Karaṇīya) Metta Sutta** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8), lovingkindness should be cultivated in the same way “as a mother would guard her own child, | her one and only child, with her own life.”³⁶ That being the case, the simile of the only son’s flesh is even more poignant is arousing revulsion (*nibbidā*) towards material food.

On a practical level, the monastic is admonished to use his almsfood in the way that the couple eat their only son’s flesh: without greed or desire, without pickiness, without gorging themselves, without selfishness, without any delusion about what they are eating, without longing to eat such food again, without hoarding, without pride, without disdain, and without quarrelling. (SA 2:108)

On a spiritual level, that of mindfulness training, the simile of the only son’s flesh is perfectly understandable: we need a powerful call or shake to be woken from our soporific dream-like life driven on by greed, hate and delusion. A lighter example is found in the **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 378), where Moggallāna psychically shakes up the celestial Vejayanta mansion in the Heaven of the 33 to waken the gods there to a lesson on spiritual urgency the Buddha has earlier taught them.³⁷

2.3.2 The simile of the skinless cow [§13]. Just as a cow, seeing the danger of being bitten [devoured] by creatures living in the places it might seek refuge in, would not wish to be honoured or venerated, or to have her back cleaned, or to be massaged, or given warm baths, etc; even so, a monk, seeing the danger from devouring creatures that are mental defilement rooted in food as contact, becomes desireless towards contact in the three planes of existence. (SA 2:111)

The simile of the cow brings us to a higher, a non-physical level of food, that of food as contact, that is as sense-impressions and feelings, or in a word, *excitement*. **Nyanaponika** puts the human craving for this kind of food in this way:

Though man is amply aware of the host of impressions that cause painful sensations in him, yet he is quite willing to pay that price for his pleasurable experiences, nay, for almost any sort of “experiencing” which he prefers to no sensation at all, unless the pain it causes comes too close to tolerance level. What is at the psychological root of this situation is man’s hunger for ever new experiences. If that hunger is not temporarily but [sic] regularly satisfied, it leaves him empty, starved and helpless. From that comes man’s wish for change and novelty, and his longing for a close contact with life that for its own sake becomes a habituation and makes solitude unbearable for most men. (1981:8 digital ed)

³⁵ S 12.63/2:97-100.

³⁶ *Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ | āyusā eka,puttāṃ-anurakkhe* (Khp 9/8 f = Sn 1.8/25 f) = SD 38.3.

³⁷ M 37.11/1:253 f; cf Tha 1196 f; ThaA 3:173 f. The palace was also made to rock by the novice Saṅgha,rakkhita on the day he joined the order (DA 2:558).

This simile is quoted in **the Brahma,datta Thera,gāthā**, where the elder Brahma,datta reflects: “when craving for tastes should arise, remember the simile of the child’s flesh” (Tha 445).³⁸

2.3.3 The simile of the fiery coal-pit [§§16-17]. The fiery coal-pit represents the samsara of the three planes; the man wishing to live, the foolish worldling attached to samsara; the two strong men, whole and unwholesome karma. When they seize the man by both arms, and drag him towards the pit, this is like the worldling’s accumulation of karma; for, the accumulated karma drags along a rebirth. The pain resulting from falling into the coal-pit is like the suffering of samsara. (SA 2:112 f)

Nyanaponika reflects on this simile for mental volition, that is, mental karma, or what drives many of us beyond the “normal” routine of life, to chase the rainbow’s end or to empower ourselves:

The nutriment volitional thought manifests itself in man’s incessant urge to plan and to aspire, to struggle and conquer, to build and to destroy, to do and to undo, to invent and to discover, to form and to transform, to organize and to create. This urge has sent man into the depth of the ocean and into the vastness of space. It has made him the most vicious of predatory animals and also enabled him to reach the lofty heights of a genius of creative art and thought. (1981:8)

There is one dimension that such adventurous people might avoid, perhaps because they think it is “unexciting,” or perhaps because they fear that they might lose their grip of their familiar virtual world—that is, the mental venture into the *inner space* of meditation and mindfulness. This is the only way to successfully escape the fiery coal-pit.

2.3.4 The simile of the punished thief [§§20-24]. The rajah represents karma; the criminal, a worldling; the three hundred strokes of the spear, rebirth-consciousness. The time that the rajah gives his command is like the time that the worldling is driven towards rebirth by King Karma. The pain from being struck by the spear is like the resultant suffering in the course of existence once rebirth has taken place.

There is a problem in translation here of *satti,satena hanatha*, usually translated as “Strike (the man) with a hundred spears.” I have however rendered it as “Give (the man) a hundred strokes of the spear.” *Satti* (Skt *śakti*) can mean either “spear, lance, pike, javelin”³⁹ or “sword, dagger, knife, dart.”⁴⁰ It is hard to imagine how a hundred spears could be used either at once or in a series to strike a person. Common sense would dictate that he is given a hundred strokes with the flat of the spear. It is possible, however, that the term refers to an ancient form of torture where the victim is pierced with a hundred darts in the manner described.

2.4 FULL UNDERSTANDING. Each of the four Sutta passages on food ends with the statement that “when material food is fully understood,” a higher understanding arises leading to awakening [§§11b, 14, 18, 25]. The full understanding occurs on these three levels:

- (1) the full understanding of the known (*ñāta,pariññā*);
- (2) the full understanding by scrutinization (*tīraṇa,pariññā*); and
- (3) the full understanding as abandonment (*pahāna,pariññā*). (Nm 53; Vism 20.3-5/606 f)

The Sutta Commentary goes on to explain how this occurs (here paraphrased).

(1) This material food is “form with nutritive essence as the eighth”⁴¹ together with its sense-base is to be understood as follows. Food impinges on the tongue-sensitivity (the sense of taste), which is dependent on the four great elements.⁴² Thus, food, tongue-sensitivity, and the four elements constitute the form aggregate. The contact pentad (contact, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness) that has arisen

³⁸ *Uppajje ce rase tanhā | putta,mamsūpamaṃ sara.*

³⁹ S 1:13; A 2:117; J1:150.

⁴⁰ A 4:130; J 2:153; Vism 313.

⁴¹ *Oja,aṭṭhamaka,rūpāni*, an Abhidhamma term for the simplest cluster of material states. This explanation is of course not canonical but commentarial, but is helpful in understanding the teaching’s context. See SD 26.2 esp (3).

⁴² The 4 great elements (*mahā bhūta*) are: earth or solidity, water or fluidity and coherence, fire or heat and decay, and wind or motion. See SD 17.2a.

in one who discerns this constitutes the four mental aggregates. In brief, these five are **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*). Next he seeks out the conditions for these phenomena and sees dependent arising in the direct (arising) and reverse (ending) order. Thus seeing name-and-form as it really is, material food is fully understood by “the full understanding of the known” (*ñāta,pariññā*).

(2) Next, name-and-form is scrutinized or reflected on in the light of the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering, non-self), and explore it by way of the seven contemplations (of impermanence, suffering, non-self, revulsion, dispassion, cessation and relinquishment).⁴³ Thus, food is fully understood by “the full understanding by scrutinization” (*tīraṇa,pariññā*).

(3) The attainment of non-return (*anāgāmi*), which cuts off desire and lust for name-and-form, refers to “the full understanding as abandonment” (*pahāna,pariññā*). (SA 2:112)

2.5 BENEFITS OF UNDERSTANDING “FOOD.” The Putta,māṃsa Sutta states the following spiritual benefits of understanding the true nature of the four kinds of food, and the following explanations are culled from the Sutta’s Commentary.

2.5.1 “Lust for the 5 cords of sense-pleasures is fully understood” [§11b]. This statement should be understood in the following manner:

(1) by way of the one understanding (*eka,pariññā*), namely, that it is the craving that arises at any of the five sense-doors;

(2) by way of the comprehensive full understanding (*sabba,pariññā*), namely, that lust for any of the five cords of sense-pleasure arises even in regard to a single morsel of food placed in the bowl (for, food arouses desire in all the five senses); and

(3) by way of the root full understanding (*mūla,pariññā*), namely, that food is the root of all the five types of sensual lust, since sensual desire thrives when we are well fed with material food (*kabaḷinkār’-āhāra*). (SA 2:110-113)

The statement, “**there is no fetter by which the noble disciple would be bound**” [§11b], means that this teaching takes us only as far as the path of non-return. However, if we develop insight into the five aggregates by way of these same forms, etc, it is possible to apply it as far as arhathood.

2.5.2 “The 3 kinds of feeling are fully understood” [§14]. This should be understood in the same way as for material food, except that contact (*phassa*)⁴⁴ is taken as the starting point for the discernment of the five aggregates. When contact is fully understood, the three kinds of feeling are understood because they are rooted in contact and associated with it. This teaching by way of contact as food brings us as far as arhathood.

2.5.3 “The 3 kinds of craving are fully understood” [§18]. The three kinds of craving are craving for sense-pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.⁴⁵ They are fully understood because craving (*taṇhā*)⁴⁶ is the root of mental volition (*mano,sancetanā*). Here this full understanding can bring us as far as the realization of arhathood, too. The Commentary says that lust (*rāga*), delight (*nandī*) and greed (*lobha*) are synonyms for craving (*taṇhā*)

2.5.4 “Name-and-form is fully understood” [§25]. When consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is fully understood, name-and-form is fully understood, because it is rooted in consciousness and arises along with it. By way of consciousness, this teaching brings one as far as arhathood, too. (SA 2:111)

3 Mindfulness regarding food

3.1 THE REPULSIVENESS OF FOOD. In a series of grim, even gruesome, similes, the Putta,māṃsa Sutta tries to evoke in us the sense of urgency (*saṃvega*),⁴⁷ and the feeling of revulsion (*nibbidā*),⁴⁸ so that we would simply let go of our attachments to the world. In the first teaching, the Buddha admonishes us

⁴³ Vism 20.4/607.

⁴⁴ On *phassa*, see *Vedanā* = SD 17.3 esp (3).

⁴⁵ See **Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattanā S** (S 56.11.6/5:421) = SD 1.1. See also SA 2:264 & also SD 19.3(2).

⁴⁶ See “**Mine**”: **The nature of craving** = SD 19.3.

⁴⁷ See SD 1.11 (3).

⁴⁸ See *Nibbidā* = SD 20.1.

that “material food should be seen” as an only son’s flesh [§11]. The Saṃyutta Commentary explains that material food should be regarded as similar to an only son’s flesh by way of the ninefold repulsiveness regarding food, thus:

- (1) of having to go out for it;
- (2) of having to seek it;
- (3) of eating it;
- (4) of the bodily secretions;
- (5) of the receptacle for the food (that is, the stomach);
- (6) of digestion;
- (7) of indigestion;
- (8) of smearing, and
- (9) of excretion. (SA 2: 2:105 f)

The Visuddhi, magga adds a tenth aspect—that of its being “the fruit,” that is, the repulsive parts of the body produced by food.⁴⁹

The monastic is admonished to use his almsfood in the way that the couple eat their only son’s flesh: without greed or desire, without pickiness, without gorging themselves, without selfishness, without any delusion about what they are eating, without longing to eat such food again, without hoarding, without pride, without disdain, and without quarrelling. (SA 2:108)

3.2 THE PERCEPTION OF REPULSIVENESS OF FOOD. Buddhaghosa, in his **Visuddhi, magga**, gives a detailed exposition on the perception of repulsiveness of food (*āhāre paṭikkūla saññā*).⁵⁰ He goes on to detail the practice in terms of the mediaeval background of Sri Lanka of his times. Of special interest is this passage he attributes to the Ancients (*porāṇa*):

The food and drink, eaten and drunk at a great price:
They enter by one door, but ooze out through nine!

The food and drink, eaten and drunk at a great price,
They are eaten in company, only to be voided in secrecy!

The food and drink, eaten and drunk at a great price,
They are eaten with delight, but voided in disgust!

The food and drink, eaten and drunk at a great price,
A single night will make everything rot!

[Vism 11.23/346; untraced]

4 Theophagy

It is important to remember that the simile of the only son’s flesh is only a *simile or parable*, that, in all its gruesomeness, tries to evoke in us a sense of urgency (*samvega*), and a feeling of spiritual revulsion (*nibbidā*), so that we will simply let go of our attachments to the world. The practice is never to be taken literally in any sense. In fact, the monastic rules clearly forbid the taking of human flesh.⁵¹ In other words, cannibalism, even in the form of **theophagy** (ritual eating of a god’s body), is totally foreign to and disallowed in early Buddhism.

In ancient religions, there is a close connection between food and death, poignantly expressed in Greek mythology, according to which Demeter is the goddess of corn (that is, food) and of death as well. In the Dionysian tradition, as recorded in the *Bacchae* (“Worshippers of Bacchus,” another name for Dionysus), the Athenian playwright Euripides (c485-406 BCE) has the prophet Tiresias observe that two

⁴⁹ Vism 11.5-26/342-346.

⁵⁰ Vism 11.1-26/341-347.

⁵¹ Mv 6.9 = V 1:218.

indispensable gifts were made by the gods: Demeter gave grain or bread to sustain life, and Dionysus gave wine to make life bearable.⁵²

Next came the son of the virgin, Dionysus,
 bringing the counterpart to bread, wine
 and the blessings of life's flowing juices.
 His blood, the blood of grape,
 lightens the burden of our mortal misery...
 it is his blood we pour out
 to offer thanks to the gods. And through him,
 we are blessed. (“The Bacchae,” tr M Cacoyannis, 1982:18)

Based on such sources, Stephen L Harris declared that “long before Jesus linked wine and bread as part of the Christian liturgy (Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20)⁵³ the two tokens of divine favor were associated in the Dionysian tradition.”⁵⁴ Harris is referring to the Eucharist, as recorded in the Bible, for example:

And as they ate, Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” And He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And He said unto them, “This is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.” (Mark 14:22-24; 21st Century King James Bible)

Others have expanded on Harris’s theory by declaring that an idea of theophagy, or at least of feeding on the life-force of a mystical entity, was characteristic of the central rites of some Graeco-Roman and Near-Eastern mystery religions, and claiming that the acts and ordinances of Jesus and his apostles were “memorialized” in that context. According to them, the Eucharist conveyed the purported mystical benefits of flesh-eating and blood-drinking that were proclaimed by the proponents of animal sacrifices and of cannibalism, and can be seen to translate the vestiges of ancient animal sacrifice or ritualistic cannibalism (or both) into our times.

Another theory that attributes a pre-Christian connection to the Eucharist is that of John Allegro⁵⁵ and Carl Ruck,⁵⁶ who claimed that Jesus was seen as a vegetation god incarnated, like Dionysus and Osiris, not as a human but as an entheogenic⁵⁷ plant or fungus or both.⁵⁸

⁵² Euripides, “The Bacchae.” Tr by Michael Cacoyannis. Plume Publishers, 1982:18.

⁵³ Also at Matt 26:26-28 & Corinthians 1 11:23-26. Cf “For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. | He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me, and I in him.” (John 6:55 f).

⁵⁴ Stephen L Harris, *Understanding the Bible*. McGraw Hill, 2002:362 f. Harris is Professor and Chair, Dept of Humanities and Religious Studies at California State University, Sacramento. Harris, a fellow at the Westar Institute, was a fellow of the controversial “Jesus Seminar,” and has written numerous books, many of which are catered to introductory religious study students at public universities. His textbook *Understanding the Bible*, a historical-critical book-by-book study, is the best-selling nonsectarian intro to Bible studies in the US and has been in print over 25 years.

⁵⁵ John Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, 1970. Allegro (1923-1988), a philologist and freethinker, challenged orthodox views of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bible and the history of religion, with books that attracted popular attention and scholarly revision.

⁵⁶ Carl Ruck (b 1935) is best known for his work (along with other scholars) in mythology and religion on the sacred role of entheogens, or psychoactive plants that induce an altered state of consciousness, as used in religious or shamanistic rituals. His focus has been on the use of entheogens in classical western culture, as well as their historical influence on modern western religions. He currently teaches a mythology class at Boston University that presents this theory in depth.

⁵⁷ “Entheogenic” = (of a substance) psychoactive or psychedelic, often inducing what is perceived as a religious or mystical experience.

⁵⁸ For refs, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist>.

The Discourse on the Son's Flesh

S 12.63/2:97-100

- 1 At Sāvattthī. [98]
 2 “Bhikshus, there are these four kinds of food [nutriment] for the maintenance of beings that have arisen, and for the support of those seeking birth.⁵⁹
 3 What are the four?
 (1) material food (*kabaḷiṅkāra āhāra*), gross or subtle;
 (2) contact [sense-stimuli] (*phassa*) is the second;
 (3) mental volition (*mano, sañcetanā*) is the third; and
 (4) consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the fourth.
 These, bhikshus, are these four kinds of food [nutriment] for the maintenance of beings that have arisen, and for the support of those seeking birth.

(1) Material food

- 4 And how, bhikshus, should **material food** be seen?
 5 THE SIMILE OF THE ONLY SON'S FLESH. Suppose, bhikshus, a couple, husband and wife, had brought along limited provisions and were travelling on a road through the wilderness. They have with them their only son, dear and beloved.
 6 Then, bhikshus, the couple, husband and wife, having gone into the wilderness with only limited provisions, used up and exhausted them, but they have yet to cross the rest of the wilderness.
 7 Then, bhikshus, it would occur to the couple, husband and wife, thus,
 ‘Our only limited provisions have been used up and exhausted, but we have yet to cross the rest of the wilderness. What now if we kill our only son, dear and beloved, and prepare dried meat and peppered meat.⁶⁰ Thus eating our son's meat, we will cross over the rest of the wilderness. Let not all of us perish!’
 8 Then, bhikshus, the couple, husband and wife, having killed their only son, dear and beloved, and prepared dried meat and peppered meat, ate it. Thus they would cross over the rest of the wilderness. And while they are eating the son's flesh, they would beat their breasts and cry,
 ‘Where are you, our only son? Where are you, our only son?’⁶¹
 9 Now what do you think, bhikshus, would they take that food for amusement, or for intoxication, [99] or for adorning,⁶² or for the sake of beautifying?⁶³

⁵⁹ *Cattāro me bhikkhave, āhārā bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭhitiyā sambhavesīnaṃ vā anuggahāya*. “Those about to arise” (*sambhavesī*). This para & foll are found in **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 38.15/1:261 = SD 7.10) & also in **Āhāra S** (S 12.11/2:11 f). On *sambhavesī* as a fut active part formed from *-esi(n)*, see Geiger, *Pali Grammar* §193-A, Tha:N 527n & CPD: *-esi(n)* (2). Bodhi: “The commentators apparently were not acquainted with this grammatical form (of which only very few instances exist in Pāli) and hence explain *sambhavesin* as if it was a bahubbīhi compound made up of the noun *sambhava* and the adjectival termination *-esin*.” (S:B 730 n17). Thus Comy says: “Beings that have arisen (*bhūta*) are those who have been born, been produced. Beings seeking birth (*sambhavesī*) are those seeking, looking for, a new existence, birth, production (*sambhavesino ti ye sambhavaṃ jātim nibbatim esanti gavesanti*) (SA 2:22). On *sambhavesī* as “intermediate beings,” see “Beings seeking birth” = SD 2.16(7).

⁶⁰ “Dried and spiced meat,” *vallūraṇ ca soṇḍikaṇ ca*.

⁶¹ On the simile of the only son's flesh, see Intro (2.3.1).

⁶² Such as fleshing up the limbs, or fattening (Vism 1.89/32).

⁶³ *Tam kiṃ maññatha, bhikkhave, api nu te davāya vā āhāraṃ āhāreyyūṃ, madāya vā āhāraṃ āhāreyyūṃ, maṇḍanāya vā āhāraṃ āhāreyyūṃ, vibhūsanāya vā āhāraṃ āhāreyyūṃ ti?* Cf **Sabb'āsava S** (M 2.14/1:10) = SD 30.3. **The Attha, sālinī** explains that that to eat “for amusement” (*davāya*) means eating like actors, acrobats, (or, like village boys, Vism 1.89/31), ie, they seek food for the sake of dancing, singing, composing songs, eulogizing [understandably, such people also eat in a playful or sporting manner]; “for intoxication” (*madāya*) means eating like kings or the kings' ministers, to swell his pride and manhood; “for adorning” (*maṇḍanāya*) means eating like women like courtesans, who live by physical beauty, or like court ladies, who eat for the sake of an attractive shape

“No indeed, bhante!”

10 “Would they, bhikshus, take that food only for the sake of crossing over the rest of the wilderness?”

“Yes, bhante.”

11.1 “Even so, bhikshus, I say that material food should be seen thus.⁶⁴

11.2 Bhikshus, when *material food* is fully understood, lust for the five cords of sense-pleasures is fully understood.⁶⁵

NON-RETURN. When lust for the five cords of sense-pleasures is fully understood, there is no fetter by which the noble disciple would be bound so that he would return to this world again.⁶⁶

(2) Contact as food

12 And how, bhikshus, should **contact as food** be seen?

13 THE SIMILE OF THE SKINLESS COW. Suppose, bhikshus, that a hideless [flayed] cow⁶⁷ were to stand near⁶⁸ a wall, creatures dwelling in the wall would bite [devour] it.

If it were to stand near a tree, creatures dwelling in the tree would bite it.

If it were to stand in the water, creatures dwelling in the water would bite it.

If it were to stand in the open air, creatures dwelling in the air would bite it.

Bhikshus, wherever that the cow stands to rest,⁶⁹ creatures dwelling there would bite it.⁷⁰

Even so, bhikshus, I say that food as contact should be seen thus.⁷¹

14 Bhikshus, when *contact as food* is fully understood, the three kinds of feeling are fully understood.⁷²

ARHATHOOD. When the three kinds of feeling are fully understood, there is nothing more that the noble disciple needs to do, I say.⁷³

(3) Mental volition as food

15 And how, bhikshus, should **mental volition as food** be seen?

16 THE SIMILE OF THE FIERY COAL-PIT. Suppose, bhikshus, there were a coal-pit deeper than a man's height, full of glowing coals, flameless and smokeless. Now, there is a man, desiring to live, not desiring to die, desiring happiness, loathing suffering. Then two strong men seize him by both his arms and drag him towards the fiery coal-pit.⁷⁴ Now, the man's intention would be to be far away from it, his wish would be to be far away from it, his task would be to be far away from it.⁷⁵ [100]

and good complexion; “for beautifying” (*vibhusanāya*) means eating like wrestlers or boxers for the sake of bulky and tough muscles (DhsA 402 f). See also Vism 1.89-94/31-33.

⁶⁴ Comy: Material food should be regarded as an only son's flesh by way of the ninefold repulsiveness: see Intro (3.1).

⁶⁵ See Intro (2.5.1).

⁶⁶ See Intro (2.5.1).

⁶⁷ Alluded to at Vism 11.3/341 & 14.134/463.

⁶⁸ “For rest,” *nissāya* (lit “by means of”), which appears consistently throughout the foll 4 sentences, but each has to be tr contextually. Here, it is semantically correct to render *nissāya* as “(leaning) against,” but it is hard to imagine a cow “leaning against a wall.”

⁶⁹ “For shelter,” *nissāya*, which is contextual: see prec n.

⁷⁰ On the simile of the skinless cow, see Intro (2.3.2).

⁷¹ See Intro (2.2.2).

⁷² See Intro (2.5.2).

⁷³ See Intro (2.5.2).

⁷⁴ This sentence is part of a popular canonical imagery: **Mahā Siha,nāda S** (M 12), as an imagery for hell (M 12.-37/1:74); **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36), pains from strenuous meditation (M 36.25/1:244) = **Bodhi Rāja,kumāra S** (M 85.23/2:93) = **Saṅgārava S** (M 100.22/2:212); **Potaliya S** (M 54), on the dangers of sense-pleasures (M 54.18/1:-365); **Māgandiya S** (M 75), on the painfulness of sense-pleasures (M 75.15/1:506-508); **Anātha,piṇḍik'ovāda S** (M 143), on his bodily pains (M 143.4/3:259) = **Chann'ovāda S** (M 144.5/3:264 = **Channa S** S 35.87/4:57); **Put-**

17 What is the reason for this?

Because, bhikshus, he knows thus, “I will fall into this fiery coal-pit, on account of which I will die or feel deadly pains!

Even so, bhikshus, I say that food as mental volition should be seen thus.⁷⁶

18 Bhikshus, when *mental volition as food* is fully understood, the three kinds of craving are fully understood.⁷⁷

ARHATHOOD. When the three kinds of craving are understood, there is nothing more that the noble disciple needs to do, I say.

(4) Consciousness as food

19 And how, bhikshus, should **consciousness as food** be seen?

20 THE SIMILE OF THE PUNISHED THIEF. Suppose, bhikshus, they were to catch a thief, a wrongdoer [criminal], and bring him to see the rajah, saying,⁷⁸

‘Your majesty, this is a thief, a wrongdoer, inflict upon him whatever punishment you wish.’

The rajah then says to them,

‘Go, sirs, give this man a hundred strokes of the spear⁷⁹ in the morning!’

So, in the morning, they strike him with a hundred strokes of the spear.

21 Then at noon, the rajah says thus:

‘Sirs, how is that man?’

‘He is still alive, your majesty.’

The rajah then says to them,

‘Go, sirs, give this man a hundred strokes of the spear at noon!’

So, at noon, they strike him with a hundred strokes of the spear.

22 Then in the evening, the rajah says thus:

‘Sirs, how is that man?’

‘He is still alive, your majesty.’

The rajah then says to them,

‘Go, sirs, give this man a hundred strokes of the spear in the evening!’

So, in the evening, they strike him with a hundred strokes of the spear.

23 What do you think, bhikshus? Would that man, on account of being given three hundred strokes of the spear, feel pain and displeasure?”

“Bhante, if we were given one stroke of the spear, on account of that we would feel pain and displeasure, not to speak of three hundred strokes of the spear!”⁸⁰

24 “Even so, bhikshus, I say that consciousness as food is should be seen.⁸¹

25 When *consciousness as food* is fully understood, name-and-form is fully understood.⁸²

ta,maṃsa S (S 12.63) on the pains of mental volitions (S 12.63.16/2:99 f); **Dukkha,dhamma S** (S 35.244) on how to regard sense-pleasures (S 35.244.5/4:188 f); **Phagguna S** (A 6.56) on his bodily pains (A 6.56.1/3:380); **Dhammika S**: *abrahmacariyaṃ parivajjayeyya, aṅgāra,kāsuṃ jalitam eva viññū*, “Let the wise avoid incelibacy like a fiery coal-pit” (Sn 396). Cf **Sumedhā Thī**: *aṅgāra,kāsu,sadisā, agha,mūlaṃ bhayaṃ vadho*, “(sense-pleasures are) like a fiery coal-pit, fearful, murderous roots of evil” (Thī 491) & *aṅgāra,karṣūpamā* (Mvst 3.149); both of which are used in connection with women.

⁷⁵ See Intro (2.3.3).

⁷⁶ See Intro (2.2.3).

⁷⁷ See Intro (2.5.3).

⁷⁸ These similes are also found in a parallel passage in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129.8/3:165 f) = SD 2.22.

⁷⁹ “Give (the man) a hundred strokes of the spear” (*satti,satena hanatha*), alt tr, “Strike (the man) with a hundred spears.” See Intro (2.3.4).

⁸⁰ On the simile of the punished thief, see Intro (2.3.4).

⁸¹ See Intro (2.2.4).

⁸² See Intro (2.5.4).

ARHATHOOD. When name-and-form is understood, there is nothing more that the noble disciple needs to do, I say.”

— evaṃ —

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