

The three good habits that bring happiness now and beyond

Source: **Rathôpama Sutta** (S 35.198, SD 55.14), translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012, 2019.¹

1.1 The Rathôpama Sutta (S 35.198) is a short discourse where the Buddha lists 3 qualities that bring a Dharma practitioner happiness in this life itself, and that is the start of the path of awakening leading to arhathood. The 3 qualities are sense-restraint [§§3-6], moderation in food [§§7-9] and devotion to wakefulness [§§10-11].

1.2.1 Sense-restraint (*indriyesu gutta, dvāra*)

1.2.1.2 The Buddha gives the 1st quality or condition (*dhamma*) for happiness and spiritual progress as that of **sense-restraint** [§§3-6], that is, guarding the 6 sense-doors—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—from being distracted by either the very first *sign* of a sense-object or any of its *details*, once we start to look closer into it. Sense-restraint, then, is a kind of “early warning” habit of mindfulness, where any potentially unwholesome sense-experience is nipped in the bud before we are overwhelmed by any unwholesome effect.

1.2.1.3 The purpose of sense-restraint is neither to let any greed draw us into the experience nor hate push it away, nor doubt bore or confuse us with an object that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. When we feed the sense-object with *greed*, our latent tendency of **lust** grows; when we feed the object with *hate*, our latent tendency of **ill will** grows; when we feed the object with doubt or worldly indifference, our latent tendency of **ignorance** grows.

This 1st stage of meditative training is about keeping our senses free from distractions, from being drawn out and dissipated by our sense-experiences, the world.² The experience of meditation starts with the gradual letting go of our projected “sensing” of the world. In such a projective experience, we are seeing, as it were, only the surface of the world that are visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, and deluded by our virtual world of thoughts.

We are, as it were, closing the first 5 sense-doors—those of the physical senses—so that we experience only the 6th sense, **the mind** and its processes. Here, we examine, refine and, in due course, transcend our feelings (our affective reactions), perception (how we recognize realities), formations (how we deliberately, morally or immorally, create karma), and consciousness (how we basically sense things). Meditation, then, is the overhauling of our mental apparatus so that it presents to us true reality with greater truth and beauty, clarity and joy.

1.2.1.4 The commentary on **the Putta,maṁsa Sutta** (S 12.63) says that the Buddha gives the teaching on the 4 kinds of food to show how just as food nourishes the body, all our feelings, willing and knowing (affective, conative and cognitive) aspects are *conditioned* (like a snake eating its own tail). This is the Buddha’s strong warning to monastics since they have been receiving an abundance of gains and honours (*lābha, sakkāra*), and that some of the monks are not using their requisites with proper reflection.

The situation deteriorates to such a level that the Buddha declares giving this teaching as “**the 5th rule of defeat**” (*pañcama pārājika*). When a monastic knows no restraint towards gains and honours, they automatically fall from monkhood: they are spiritually defeated. To prevent this, he presents to the monastics the teaching that is “**a Dharma mirror**” or “mirror of the Dharma” (*dhamm’ādāsa*), that is, **self-**

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/55.14-Rathopama-S-35.198-piya.pdf>

² See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

restraint.³ Constantly reflecting on this teaching, they would use the 4 requisites—almsfood, robes, shelter and medical requisites—with restraint (*samvara*) and limits [strictly defined relationships] (*mariyāda*). (SA 2:102,1-103,20)⁴

1.2.3 Moderation in food (*bhojane mattaññutā*)

1.2.3.1 Moderation in food refers to the right diet and the right amount. The “**right diet**” refers to taking food for the sake of *good health, strength* and *diligence* to keep up our spiritual practice. This is what we are reminded of in the reflection on food [§7]. We eat to live; we live to learn; we learn to know; we know to free ourself. Moderation in food keeps us to the middle way.

On a mundane level, “the middle way” refers to a healthy body as a support for a healthy mind by way of good meditation and a heart of alert, calm and clarity. On a spiritual level, “**the middle way**” is the wholesome path of the 3 trainings: moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom. In this way, we have a **healthy mind in a healthy body** as we head for the path of awakening, that is, stream-winning and beyond.

1.2.3.2 “The right amount” of food that we eat means knowing *when to stop eating*: this is the rule for renunciants. For the laity, this is clearly the practice on precept days and during retreats. “**Knowing when to stop**,” the Commentaries explain as “**grasping the sign in over-eating**” (*ati,bhojane nimitta-g,-gāha*).⁵ This key expression refers to the awareness impending sufficiency of food taken so that we will stop taking any more, beyond which would be considered “over-eating.”

We can only notice the “sign in over-eating” when we eat mindfully. Basically, we feel a sense of hunger-free physical comfort. For this reason, good monastics, as a rule, **take their food mindfully and slowly**, a morsel of well-mixed meal, preference-free, one handful or spoonful at a time, chewing it properly; then, one takes another morsel, and so on. In this way, not only will we notice *the sign in over-eating*, but the food is well chewed, and well digested, contributing to good health.

In simple layman’s terms, this is called “stopping to eat before we feel full.” In practice, we should train ourselves to stop eating at least a few mouthfuls before we are full, as advised in **the Sāriputta Thera,gāthā**, thus:

*Cattāro pañca ālope
abhutvā⁶ udakaṃ pive
alam phāsu,vihārāya
pahit’attassa bhikkhuno*

With four or five morsels
more to eat, he but drinks water.
this is enough for living comfortably
for a monk of resolute mind.

Tha 983⁷

³ Such a mirror is taught to Rāhula by way of self-reflection: **Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 61,8), SD 3.10.

⁴ S 12.63 (SD 20.6). Also at SD 55.14 (1.1.2).

⁵ DA 3:780; MA 1:284 = SA 3:166 = AA 1:50 = ItA 2:180; VbhA 273.

⁶ *Abhutvā*, absol of *abhuñjati*, “he does not eat.” See Tha:N 261 n983. Comy: “Therein, **abhutvā** means that, not eating **the 4 or 5 morsels of** solid food, withholding that much food, he should drink water. For this is one who is easily contented” (*Tattha abhutvā ti cattāro vā pañca vā ālope kabaḷe abhuñjitvā tattakassa āhārassa okāsam ṭha-petvā pānīyaṃ piveyya. Ayañ hi āhāre sallahuka,vutti*) (ThaA 3:99).

⁷ **Tha 983** qu at DA 3:778; MA 1:282; SA 2:107, 3:165; AA 1:47; ItA 1:43, 2:179; SnA 2:494; ThaA 3:99; Miln 407 (with Tha 982), J 255/2:294 (with Tha 982); Nm 2:345; Dhs 404; VbhA 270. Cf A 6.19,6/3:304 f, 8.73,8/4:318 f. See SD 32.6 (3.2.4). On stopping to eat before we are full, see **Doṇa,pāka Sutta** (S 3.13) + SD 37.13 (3.2.4). On overcoming gluttony, see SD 37.13.

1.2.3.4 The practice of “**cutting off**” food before we are actually full means that we should consume only just enough to kill our hunger, which also signifies sufficient food for our good health.⁸ Beyond that, taking more food than we need—especially when we are devoted to a meditative life—means that we are accumulating the conditions for sloth and torpor. We will be overwhelmed with mental distraction, preventing us from proper meditation and building up indolence. This is what is clearly stated in the sutta reflection of meal-taking⁹ [§7].

Food (*āhāra*), then, should contribute to our health and diligence in the spiritual life. We are, however, sustained not merely by material food, but also by what we “feed” our feelings, our motivations and how we know things—how we condition the affective, the conative and the cognitive aspects of our being. Hence, there are 4 kinds of food that we should know about and properly manage. [2]

1.2.3.5 The Vinaya proscribes monastics, especially forest monks, from taking certain kinds of food, especially **the 10 kinds of prohibited meat**. These are the flesh of human beings, elephants, horses, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, leopards, bears and hyenas (V 1:218-220). These kinds of meat should never be offered to monastics, and they would not accept such offerings.

Human flesh is prohibited on obvious humane grounds against cannibalism. Elephants and horses, besides being large and intelligent animals, are the rajah’s emblems and means of defence. Meat of dogs and snakes are regarded as loathsome. Dogs and cats (and other household pets) have close karmic connections with us: in future existences, the roles of the killer and the eaten, will be reversed, as long as the conditions persist.

The others are fierce jungle animals that may be able to sense and attack those who have taken the flesh of their kind. Not taking meat is a wholesome gesture of respect for life, and also contributes to good health. We can begin by consuming less meat, and taking more vegetarian food in a healthy manner that helps us in our Dharma living.¹⁰

1.2.3.6 A very effective mindfulness practice to help us cut down on unhealthy eating and understand the true nature of food is that of **the perception of loathsomeness in food** (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*). Buddhaghosa, in his **Visuddhi,magga**, gives a detailed exposition on **the perception of repulsiveness of food**.¹¹ He details 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 early elders:

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]¹²

⁸ On food and health, see **Subha S** (D 10,1.2) SD 40.13 = **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,1.2), SD 9.

⁹ On moderate eating, see **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,7.2), SD 38.1; **Bhaddāli S** (M 65,2), SD 56.2; **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,9), SD 10.13; **Kīṭa,giri S** (M 70,4), SD 11.1; **Āma,gandha S** (Sn 2.2), SD 4.24 (3.4.1); SD 32.2 (5.1); SD 37.13 (1.2, 2.2).

¹⁰ On meatless diet and meat-eating, see **Āma,gandha S** (Sn 2.2) + SD 4.24 (3.1.4).

¹¹ See SD 20.6 (3); Vism 11.1-26/341-347.

¹² As at SD 20.6 (3.2).

A simple form of the loathsomeness of food—taught in **the (Chakka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 1** (A 6.19)—is to reflect on death as we eat, chewing a single morsel or mouthful, we should reflect how death may come to us at any time.¹³

1.2.4 Devotion of wakefulness (*jāgariyânuyoga*)

1.2.4.1 The 3 teachings of **the Rathôpama Sutta** (S 35.198)—sense-restraint, moderation in food, and devotion to wakefulness—are the supporting conditions for Dharma-spirited meditative training [1.2.1.1]. **Sense-restraint** keeps our senses free from distraction [1.2.1-1.2.2]; **moderation in food** readies our body and clears our mind for mental cultivation [1.2.3].

1.2.4.2 In the early stages of meditation, we gently let go of all our physical sensing by simply taking them to be just as they are, neither attending to their sign nor their details. Technically, this means we neither think of it (1st thought) nor ponder over it (keep on thinking of it). It's like we are standing on the pavement of a **busy road with traffic** moving back and forth before us. We do not follow any of the vehicles, but only know they are coming and going, left and right. When there is a clear break in the traffic flow, we cross safely over to the other side.

Psychologically, whether the sense-object that arises is desirable, undesirable or neither, we see it simply as being **impermanent**, *changing*, *becoming other*, that is, as rising and falling away. Hence, we see it as it really is. When we do this habitually so that we see it ever clearer, **insight wisdom** arises. In due course, this mental habit will fruit in our reaching the path of awakening as a streamwinner in this life itself.¹⁴

1.2.4.3 In other words, sense-restraint and moderation in food are the bases for good meditation practice and spiritual progress. By this is meant that we naturally direct our attention away from the “world” of physical senses and keeping it healthy and ready to focus on the mind, which frees itself to reach the heights of joy, peace and clarity.

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¹³ A 6.19/3:306 (SD 48.11).

¹⁴ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.