

Moderation in Eating (*Bhojane Mattaññutā*) in Early Buddhism: An Analysis of Its Ethical, Psychological, and Meditative Dimensions

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Introduction

The practice of moderation in eating, depicted in Pāli as *bhojane mattaññutā*, shows a outstanding and foundational discipline within early Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Unlike the punishing asceticism of self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) that believed as one of path of emancipation in the contemporary society that the Buddha rejected concerning its negative perspectives. This moderation process is not a mere dietary recommendation for physical health, but a sophisticated contemplative skill designed to support ethical restraint, psychological training, and meditative cultivation.

The purpose of this research is to examine *bhojane mattaññutā* as an integrated practice operating simultaneously across ethical, psychological, and meditative dimensions by examining Theravāda Pāli canonical and commentarial sources. This paper demonstrates that moderation in eating functions as a foundational discipline without which advanced meditative attainments remain inaccessible. The paper argues that the Buddha's teaching on food consumption represents a distinctive soteriological strategy that transforms a biological necessity even for spiritual development.

Research Objectives

To establish the textual and doctrinal foundations of *bhojane mattaññutā* through analysis of Theravāda Pāli sources.

To examine the psychological mechanisms through which moderation in eating functions specifically its role in countering craving (*taṇhā*), assistant sense-restraint (*indriyaśamvara*), and making optimal circumstances for mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*).

To explore the meditative purpose of moderation in eating, mostly its relationship to the cultivation of *jhāna* (absorption states) and its integration with the *asubha* (repulsiveness) contemplation applied to food (*āhāre paṭikūlasaññā*),

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while considering contemporary empirical findings on dietary practices and meditation-related distress.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative textual analysis of primary Theravāda Pāli sources, including the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Saṃyutta Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, and Vinaya Piṭaka, accompanied by Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga and Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā. Data was collected by systematically identifying all passages related to food and eating through authoritative English translations. A thematic-critical method was applied, wherein identified passages were grouped into regular themes, and categorized into three systematic dimensions—ethical, psychological, and meditative corresponding to the research objectives.

Results

Textual Foundations in Theravāda Sources

The canonical formulation of *bhojane mattaññutā* seems prominently in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 4.37 – Aparihāṇi Sutta), where the Buddha classifies four features leading to non-decline for a monk: “accomplished in virtue, guarding the doors of the sense faculties, knowing the right measure in eating, and devoted to wakefulness”. The text elaborates:

“And how does a monk know the right measure in eating? Here, a monk wisely reflecting takes food neither for fun nor for pleasure nor for fattening nor for beautification, but only for the maintenance and continuance of this body, for preventing harm, and for assisting the holy life, considering: ‘Thus I shall terminate old feelings and not produce new feelings, and I shall be healthy, blameless, and dwell in comfort.’” (AN 4.37)

The Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 3.13 – Doṇapāka Sutta) provides a practical illustration through the narrative of King Pasenadi Kosala, who was suffering from obesity due to overindulgence. The Buddha instructs him: “A person who is always mindful, knowing moderation in the food he eats, his discomfort diminishes, he ages slowly, and protects his life.” (SN 3.13)

Upon receiving this verse, the king had it recited before every meal and eventually reduced his consumption, becoming thin and finally declaring that the Buddha had “penetrated my welfare both in this life and the next” (SN 3.13). This narrative demonstrates the practical efficacy of *bhojane mattaññutā* as a behavioural intervention.

The Vinaya Piṭaka creates the one-meal-a-day (*ekabhattika*) practice as the normative monastic standard, with the Buddha uttering that the monk who eats a single meal “maintains a healthy body, has few weaknesses, and rests alert”. This rule does not represent ascetic extremism but a real support for the contemplative life.

Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* clearly categorizes moderation in eating as a *dhutaṅga* (ascetic practice) that “shakes off” defilements, uttering that the adequate eater practices “for the purpose of enduring in comfort and for the sake of cultivating the meditative attainments”.

Psychological Dimensions

The psychological purpose of moderation in eating functions through numerous interconnected mechanisms. First, it directly counteracts craving (*taṇhā*) the cause of suffering according to the Second Noble Truth—by applying restraint to a primary purpose of desire. As the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 4.37) states, the moderate eater takes food “wisely reflecting,” thereby “recognising and transforming unwholesome mental formations, especially greed” (AN 4.37).

Moderation supports the broader training of sense-restraint (*indriyasamvara*). The *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN 2 – Sabbāsava Sutta) shows that reflection on the purpose of food avoids the ascending of unwholesome mental states: “He does not reflect unwisely on that nutriment: ‘This nutriment is pleasant,’ but reflects wisely: ‘This nutriment is for the care of this body... for supporting the holy life.’” (MN 2) Moderation avoids the psychological consequences of both overindulgence and extreme removal. Buddhaghosa’s *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā* shows that King Pasenadi’s heaviness led to physical discomposure and presumably mental agitation, while contemporary research confirms that dietary restriction can precipitate cognitive impairment. The *Diversities of Reflective Experience* study documented that severe dietary changes can produce “intense hunger pains” and reduced concentration, bring into line with the Buddha’s importance on maintaining physical strength for practice.

Meditative Dimensions

The link between moderation in eating and meditative development is clear in early Theravāda sources. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN 46.51) classifies the four supports for the awakening factor of mindfulness, including “having moderate eating” as a condition for the development of the seven awakening factors (*bojjhaṅgā*). Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (IV.40-42) states that excess or inadequate food hinders the growth of *samādhi*, while moderate eating “promotes the mind’s unification”.

The contemplative dimension of moderation contains the practice of *āhāre paṭikūlasaññā* (perception of repulsiveness in nutriment), detailed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10). The meditator reflects: “He fully understands the nutriment he uses, its source, its nature, and its purpose... He sees that food is repulsive, being mixed with various impurities.” (MN 10)

Discussion

The study reveals that *bhojane mattaññutā* functions as an integrated discipline rather than a merely dietary recommendation. Ethically, it supports the precepts by countering the craving that inspires moral transgression. Psychologically, it supports mindfulness and restraint while avoiding the cognitive impairment connected with plain control. Reflectively, it marks situations for *jhāna* growth through appropriate sustenance and the application of contemplative consideration to eating.

This combination proves the general character of early Theravāda soteriology. As the Buddha’s denial of not eat indicates, the path to awakening needs neither indulgence nor asceticism but the middle path of mindful eating. The contemporary research on meditation-related challenges reinforces this wisdom: dietary practices that deviate significantly from moderation risk precipitating or exacerbating distress. The significance of moderation in eating extends elsewhere monastic contexts. The five contemplations provide a framework accessible to lay practitioners for transforming eating into a spiritual practice.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study draws completely on Pāli Theravāda bases, with limited commitment with additional early Buddhist backgrounds. The integration of contemporary research, while suggestive, cannot be interpreted as proving the efficacy of ancient practices. Further research exploring the practice’s application in contemporary mindfulness-based interventions is warranted.

Conclusion

Moderation in eating (*bhojane mattaññutā*) signifies a distinctive revolution in early Theravāda Tradition, avoiding both the extremes of indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and asceticism (*attakilamathānuyoga*). Functioning across ethical, psychological, and meditative dimensions, this practice supports the growth of mindfulness, counters craving, and makes optimal circumstances for meditative attainment. The textual record creates moderation as a foundational discipline without which progress on the path remains compromised.

In arguing Buddhist food ethics, **bhojane mattaññutā** should be understood as the wider ethical and psychological principle of moderation in eating, significance “knowing the measure in food” or consuming with wise reflection. It does not itself denote a dhutaṅga vow. Rather, specific ascetic observances such as **ekāsanikaṅga** symbolize formal disciplinary practices within the dhutaṅga tradition, requiring one to take food in a single sitting. Thus, **mattaññutā** functions as the underlying doctrinal ideal, while **ekāsanikaṅga** is a solid ascetic expression of that ideal

Contemporary research on meditation-related challenges confirms the importance of balanced dietary practice, revealing that severe restriction can precipitate distress while suitable nourishment supports meditation. This convergence between ancient Theravāda wisdom and empirical findings recommends the continuing relevance of *bhojane mattaññutā* for both Buddhist practitioners and those interested in the intersection of diet, mindfulness, and wellbeing.

Keywords - *Bhojane Mattaññutā*, Ethical, Food, Meditative, dietary

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