

# 1 **Desiring Foods: Cultivating Non-Attachment to Nourishment in Buddhist Sri Lanka**

## 2 **Abstract**

3 Food and desire are intimately entangled whereby food becomes a core tool to manage desire  
4 in fashioning oneself as a morally virtuous person. This paper looks at the ways in which  
5 Buddhist texts conceptualize human interactions with food and formulate prescriptions on  
6 how to handle food as a means of developing an attitude of non-attachment that aids in  
7 achieving nirvana—the extinguishing of desire to get released from the cycle of death and  
8 rebirth. The particular texts—the Aḡañña Sutta, the Āhāra Patikūlasaññā, and the Vinaya  
9 Pitaka— discussed here exhibit an attitude of deep ambiguity towards food in its capacity to  
10 incite desire. On the one hand nutrition is required to maintain life, but on the other, food can  
11 potentially be the cause of a degenerate state of mankind and a source of moral degradation.  
12 Hence, the Buddhist development of a dispassionate attitude towards food seeks to enable  
13 both nourishment and the pursuit of the extinction of the flame of desire in nirvana. Even  
14 though the texts formulate practical prescriptions for monks on how to relate to food to aid  
15 them in their pursuit, they also serve as moral standards for lay Sinhalese Buddhists who seek  
16 to model their everyday behaviour accordingly.

## 17 **Key Words**

18 Food, Desire, Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Non-Attachment

19

## 20 **Introduction**

21 Food and desire are intimately entangled. Desire is expressed in multifarious ways through  
22 human interactions with food, ranging from gluttonous indulgence in seductive sweets to self-  
23 control in the religious practice of fasting. Anthropologists have described the diverse shapes  
24 that this entanglement of food and desire can acquire across different cultural settings, such as  
25 in Florence (Counihan 1999), post-socialist China (Farquhar 2002), and Papua New Guinea  
26 (Kahn 1986), illustrating its general salience in human life. Moreover, the relation of food and  
27 desire is of a mutual nature. Jean Baudrillard (quoted in Belk, Ger & Askegaard 2003) writes:  
28 “everything is reversed if we turn to thinking about the object. Here it is no longer the subject  
29 who desires but the object that seduces.” The title *Desiring Foods* precisely denotes both the  
30 person desiring the food and the food desiring the person in its seductive capacity. This  
31 mutuality of desire invests food with a powerful ambiguity, since desire can be so  
32 overwhelming that it leads to loss of self-control involving dangerous social consequences  
33 and as such it is met with ambiguous feelings and mixed responses (Belk, Ger & Askegaard  
34 2003:337). Indeed, as Sigmund Freud (2010) discusses, desire in the form of love can come  
35 into opposition to the interests of an orderly civilization which threatens desire by attempting  
36 to restrict it for its survival. In a similar way engagements with food have been subjected to  
37 moral prescriptions (e.g. table manners) as a means to keep desire in check and develop a  
38 civilized attitude (Elias 2000, Rozin 1999). In this paper, I will explore the ways in which  
39 Buddhist philosophy and Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka deal with desire as they carefully  
40 craft their engagement with the desire-inducing capacities of food that render it extremely  
41 ambiguous.

42 I will first discuss two texts that are highly evocative of the Buddhist attitude to food and  
43 food-related desires: the Aḡaṇṇa Sutta and the Āhāra Patikūlasaṇṇā. The former text discusses

44 the role of food in the degeneration of humankind and is known by lay people whereas the  
45 second is more oriented towards monks to help them develop an attitude of non-attachment to  
46 food by meditating on its repulsive aspects. Thereafter, I will relate some of the emergent  
47 themes in these texts to the rules of the Vinaya Pitaka or monastic code on how monks should  
48 practically deal with the powerful agency of food, including the rule of not licking fingers, not  
49 eating mouthfuls and so forth. Finally, we will look at the way the monastic prescriptions  
50 resonate with ordinary everyday practices as these prescriptions constitute an ideal to strive  
51 for among lay Sinhalese Buddhists (75% of the population) as well.

52 Before discussing these texts, it is important to elaborate the notion of desire more extensively  
53 and in a cross-cultural way to provide a general context and overall basis from where the  
54 ambiguity of food stems in terms of its desire-inducing capacities. This should start with  
55 explaining some basic tenets in Ayurveda and Theravada Buddhism (that draws extensively  
56 on ideas and concept of the former) of how the world and its entities, including human beings,  
57 are composed and where desire is located.

## 58 **Ayurvedic and Theravada Compositions of the World**

59 Ayurveda is an influential health system in South Asia that emerged between 2000 and 2700  
60 years ago (Rodrigues 2006:41) and that radically influenced Theravada Buddhism. Ayurveda  
61 views entities in the world as being uniquely composed of various identical substances, but in  
62 differentiated combinations and balances. All entities are made up of the five elements (water,  
63 earth, fire, wind, and ether), the three humours (wind, bile, and phlegm), and the qualities of  
64 rasa (flavour), guna and dosa (presence of beneficial quality or absence respectively)  
65 (Seneviratne 1992: 179-184, Obeyesekere 1977: 155-156). Contrastingly, Buddhism discerns  
66 five aggregates: those of materiality (which includes the five Ayurvedic elements), feeling,  
67 perception, formations, and consciousness (Buddhaghosa 1976:489). The world, its entities,

68 human beings and food are as such all composed of identical elements and aggregates  
69 distributed in individuated ways accounting for the differentiation into the different entities  
70 with their specific characteristics.

71 Let us now look at where desire is located in all of this. David Webster (2005:51) notes that  
72 desire in the Vedic texts (of which Ayurveda is part) has only partially been referred to and  
73 often in the context of ritual and sacrificial contexts. Yet, he states that desire in Vedic  
74 tradition is central to all activity and that the differentiation of the world implicates desire in  
75 its creation, as “Desire forms part of the fabric of the universe” (Webster 2005:53). As such,  
76 in Vedic thought desire is everywhere, permeating and animating life. Contrastingly, in the  
77 Ayurvedic views on the mind and consciousness, desire is treated more partially and  
78 explicitly in theories of mental health and healing. Here, mental health gets disturbed when  
79 the five elements and three humours grow out of balance (and get ‘excited’ and ‘angry’) and  
80 reach the heart, where the mind and consciousness are located (Obeyesekere 1977). Humoral  
81 imbalances occur by way of an unbalanced intake of certain foods, thus psychological states  
82 and problems can be treated through an adjustment of the diet (see also Hippocrates and  
83 Galen, from whom we derived the humour-based concepts of melancholy, *colère*, etc). For  
84 instance, nutritious sweet food that increases the phlegm humour (as well as the water  
85 element, the sweet *rasa*, and semen) in combination with little exercise can cause an  
86 excessive sex drive (Obeyesekere 1977:163-164). Hence, the intake of counterbalancing  
87 foods and/or the diminution of the intake of nutritious foods help to ease this desire.  
88 Moreover, food in general and nutritious food in particular is the fuel for the gastric fire  
89 (could be freely translated as the metabolic process) that ‘cooks’ food in its digestion. The  
90 burning fire creates the feeling of hunger as well as of desire. People with a lot of fire are  
91 deemed intemperate (*badeginni karea*: gastric fire person) as well as full of emotional heat.

92 Fire in its numerous formations occupies a central place in South Asian worldviews and I  
93 have elaborated this more extensively elsewhere (Van Daele 2013). Excessive desire can  
94 either be fuelled or tempered by consuming certain cooling or heating foods (in terms of their  
95 sensorial effects in the body and not in terms of actual temperature) that impact the humours  
96 that then can exert their effects when they reach the heart. So, in Ayurveda we see a  
97 symptomatic, curative, and practical approach to wellbeing and desire. Simultaneously the  
98 Ayurvedic approach problematizes a clear-cut distinction between the physical and the mental  
99 realms. It follows from this introductory description that food and human beings share similar  
100 components (elements) and that food clearly affects the human person (by way of humours)  
101 as a whole, including the consciousness with which desire is often associated.

102 Theravada Buddhism deals with desire in more comprehensive, systematic, and existential  
103 terms, even though we will see later that it has also developed very practical guidelines to  
104 handle it carefully by prescriptions on how to relate to food. David Webster (2005:158) states  
105 that in Theravada Buddhism desire arises within the complex of the five aggregates or  
106 *khandhas*—materiality, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. The processes that  
107 establish the arising of desire and life are not a matter of a single cause and result, but instead  
108 entail the complex interplay of conditions that allow the emergence of various effects. The  
109 Buddhist teaching on the twelve-fold Dependent Origination or *paticca-samuppāda* should  
110 thus not be read as a mere chain of singular causalities but rather as a multiple interaction of  
111 the following elements: “ignorance – formations – consciousness - mind-and-body – six  
112 sense-bases – contact – feeling - craving (*tanha*) – grasping – becoming – birth – ageing, and  
113 death, suffering” (Webster 2005:148-149). Link number eight, *tanha*, points at the appearance  
114 of desire out of the former plurality of conditions, while desire simultaneously becomes an  
115 enabling condition (among others) for both suffering and creation of life. Because of its

116 arising and conditioning, desire almost acquires a metaphysical quality or cosmogenic  
117 (cosmos-making) principle in its generativity of life while being operative within the five  
118 aggregates. Yet, David Webster (2005:137) opposes the foregrounding of desire in the form  
119 of craving or greed (*tanha*) as the sole creative principle. Instead, desire arises as the result of  
120 a co-production of different factors, while it is indeed also pervasive and productive. In short,  
121 desire is part of the interactions that it creates and from which it arises and actualizes.

122 The ambiguity around the status of desire derives from the Vedas, the ancient Hindu texts that  
123 have influenced Buddhist doctrine, which state that desire is a creative power that permeates  
124 the universe (Webster 2005:53) and so is distributed throughout the various entities of the  
125 world, albeit in different degrees. In this light, desire is inherent in both food and human  
126 beings who as such can desire each other. Even more, we will see that in the Buddhist story of  
127 The Fall (the *Agañña Sutta*), food is ascribed such a powerful agency and therefore nearly a  
128 cosmogenic (creating and shaping the cosmos) power by way of its intrinsic relation to desire.

129 If viewed in the sense of *tanha*, desire would only have the negative qualification in  
130 Buddhism as metaphysical cause of existence, life, and suffering. However, such a view is  
131 one-sided, as Buddhism has a much more varied approach to desire. David Webster (2005:98-  
132 140) discusses 24 of the manifold desire-related terms that unfold throughout the Buddhist  
133 Canon. Some forms of desire are viewed positively, particularly those that are required in  
134 reaching nirvana (calm forms of desire, such as compassion and effort). Hence, given the  
135 ambiguous nature of desire as being both degenerative (in terms of attachment) as well as  
136 creative (in the pursuit of non-attachment) in the Buddhist view, we need to further clarify the  
137 status of desire by comparing it to the ways in which it has been viewed in Western  
138 scholarship.

139 The 24 multiple desires with which Buddhism engages seem to integrate the two main  
140 divergent approaches to desire, which Webster (2005:188) discerns among certain scholars in  
141 the Western philosophical tradition. On the one hand, there are authors, such as Sartre  
142 (Webster 2005:43-44) and Lacan (n.d., Bailly 2009, Goodchild 1996:88-89) who define  
143 desire in terms of lack where it is seen as the consciousness of absence, and in which this lack  
144 can be traced to the Judeo-Christian notion of the Fall (Sahlins 1996, Loy 1998). On the other  
145 hand, scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 2011) regard desire more as creative and  
146 powerful, viewing it as a force that generates relationships and interactions of entities through  
147 their mutual transformations, syntheses, and actualizations, and that thus drives productive  
148 processes, (Goodchild 1996:4) akin to the Vedic view on desire as a creative force. In  
149 Buddhism, both strands of thought seem to be integrated as desire plays a pivotal role in the  
150 dependent origination of life (pointing at desire's creative power and sometimes positive role  
151 in achieving nirvana) as well as causing the suffering state of humanity in and after the  
152 Buddhist Fall (the degenerative and destructive force of desire). As we will see, food plays a  
153 pivotal role in inciting desires and clinging throughout the Buddhist texts that we will soon  
154 discuss. As such, food must be handled carefully in everyday practice, both by monks in  
155 observation of the monastic code, as well as by lay Buddhist followers.

156 Now that we have scanned this context of Ayurvedic and Theravada Buddhist thought, we are  
157 better equipped to grasp the more concrete expressions of the complex entanglement of food  
158 and desire. The empirical material that I utilize for the specific analysis has been gathered  
159 through library research of translated Buddhist texts, analysing textual references to food and  
160 desire, interpreting these in conversations with Buddhist scholars, as well as through  
161 interviews, participant observation, and anthropological fieldwork among both urban and  
162 rural Sinhalese during three years between 2004-2015. Turning to the Buddhist texts, I will

163 first discuss the Aḡañña Sutta and the Āhāra Patikūlasañña, which are revelatory of a deep  
164 ambiguity towards food and human existence in Buddhist doctrine. Thereafter, I will relate  
165 some of the emergent themes from the previous texts with the more practical rules on how  
166 monks should deal with the powerful agency of food as stipulated in the monastic code of the  
167 Vinaya Pitaka. Finally, I will illustrate that the monastic prescriptions also serve as a moral  
168 standard for lay practices.

### 169 **Aḡañña Sutta**

170 The Aḡañña Sutta or “The Discourse on What is Primary” as translated by Steven Collins  
171 (1993:341-348) evokes a Buddhist notion of the Fall *into* Humanity as related to food and  
172 desire. It starts as follows. At the time the world came into being, certain beings entered it.  
173 They were made of mind, produced their own light, and moved through the air. At that time,  
174 there was only darkness making it impossible to discern any differentiation and individuation  
175 into moon, sun, light, man or woman. There was only primordial water, but at some point, an  
176 earth essence started covering the water like “the spreading out (of skin) on the top of boiled  
177 milk-rice as it cools down. It had colour, smell and taste.” (Collins 1993:342) A certain being  
178 tasted this sweet essence, became pleased and this experience incited the desire and lust for  
179 more (evoking the orientation towards ‘sweetness’ in life that implies desire). By eating ever  
180 more of this earth-essence, these beings’ appearance differentiated while they lost some of  
181 their capacities. Here we can already see the formative power of food expressed in the text  
182 alongside its seductive force initiating the first steps of the Fall into differentiation. The  
183 productive force of food and desire is thus viewed as highly ambivalent. Moreover, desire  
184 produces clinging, as we have seen in the formula of dependent origination, and the Aḡañña  
185 Sutta continues by saying that due to the pride these beings took in their individuation and  
186 differentiation, the earth-essence disappeared, and a fragrant earth emerged with colour, smell



187 and taste. The beings started to eat this earth as their food. Their looks became more visible  
188 and they increasingly turned arrogant (mobilized by greed), which led to the disappearance of  
189 the fragrant earth. Later in the story, rice emerges as the first food as we know it. Reminiscent  
190 of the situation in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall, the beings didn't have to toil their  
191 food. Rice grew without cultivation and without husks. No processing was required to eat this  
192 sweet-smelling substance. Then, by its consumption: "The female parts appeared in a woman,  
193 and the male parts in a man. The woman looked at the man with intensive, excessive longing,  
194 as did the man at the woman. As they were looking at each other with intense longing passion  
195 arose in them, and burning came upon their bodies; because of this burning, they had sex."  
196 (Collins 1993:343-344) So, here we see food as constitutive of differentiated humankind as  
197 well as desire in terms of fire (animating life and fed by food). The craving for food is  
198 repeated later in the Aḡañña Sutta when it describes how the 'immoral' beings increasingly  
199 became greedy in collecting the rice and storing it. As a consequence, husk covered the grain  
200 and rice had to be harvested, and so these beings started lamenting their state of existence as  
201 degenerated human beings. Later on, the story narrates that as people grew ever greedy, they  
202 started accumulating possessions in a selfish manner, and in order to quell these unleashed  
203 desires, socio-political structures emerged. Hence, desire and food entangle and become  
204 productive of sexuality, lust, and lack, as well as the societal arrangements to which both are  
205 immanent.

206 By way of attractive food and their own desire, beings were thus drawn and seduced into  
207 existence as human beings and the undesirable cycle of death and rebirth, indicating the text's  
208 ambivalent attitude toward food. The theme of degenerative becoming resonates with the  
209 Judeo-Christian version of the Fall, in which 'hunger and toil' arose in order to obtain ones'  
210 food and to endure the hardships associated with it—weeds, pests and animal-competitors

211 (Sahlins 1996:328). In both Buddhist and Judeo-Christian versions, the Fall is induced by an  
212 inappropriate burning desire for food (whether metaphorical or not), causing the loss of  
213 abilities necessary in obtaining it without suffering and lack. This excessive desire links up  
214 with sex, passion, regeneration, arrogance, and impurity. Thus, on the one hand, food is  
215 related to the emergence of the world, differentiated life, and productive desire, and on the  
216 other hand, food and desire are linked to decay, loss of capacities, and a fundamental sense of  
217 lack. In this story we see both Western philosophical approaches (mostly negative as lack and  
218 sometimes positive as creative force) combined in a concern with the ambiguous creative and  
219 degenerative capacity of food. Finally, from this story it is difficult to discern one single  
220 causal factor of the Fall, as the becoming of the world, food, desire, and human beings  
221 gradually co-evolve, while being influenced by a previous phase of evolution, differentiation,  
222 and degeneration (slightly differentiated beings, fragrant earth, etc).

223 The ambivalence to food in Buddhism is made more explicit by the text that we discuss next.

#### 224 **Āhāra Patikūlasaññā**

225 This text, which is translated by Pe Maung Tin (1975) from Buddhaghosa's commentaries,  
226 shows a more negative view of food as it is translated as "The Development of the Perception  
227 of Revulsion from Food". Buddhaghosa was an important Buddhist scholar and commentator  
228 who lived in the fifth century and who wrote commentaries that have profoundly shaped the  
229 understanding of Theravada Buddhism. The development of a distinctly negative view on  
230 food in this particular text serves the purpose of aiding emotional detachment from food, but  
231 not to spur total abstinence. Webster (2005:200) notes that Buddhism is not annihilistic and  
232 its middle path avoids extreme deprivation. In such a moderate view, food remains functional  
233 to maintain personhood. Conversely, gluttony, indulgence, and sensuous enjoyment of food  
234 are not perceived as a necessity, but instead as detrimental because of the arising of desire,

235 clinging, becoming, rebirth, and suffering. Hence, the requirement to develop a non-attached  
236 attitude towards the dangerously attractive and seductive food emerges.

237 It is in this light that the summary of the *Āhāra Patikūlasaññā* (Buddhaghosa 1975: 395-402)  
238 should be read. It starts off with an endorsement of the previous statement: “in material food  
239 there is the danger of desire (for taste); in contact there is the danger of approach (or attraction  
240 to the object); in purpose [I would modify ‘purpose’ along with Kate Crossby (personal  
241 communication) into ‘will’] the danger of coming to be; in consciousness the danger of re-  
242 conception [or rebirth].” (Buddhaghosa 1975:395). Recall that this refers to the twelve-fold  
243 Dependent Origination as discussed earlier. Because of this danger of food and desire, the text  
244 views it as favourable for monks to develop a revulsion to food by meditating on its  
245 abominableness, which manifest itself in ten ways: “(1) From the necessity of having to go for  
246 it; (2) of seeking for it; (3) of eating it; (4) because of ingredients; (5) of the receptacle; (6) of  
247 its undigested state; (7) of its digested state; (8) of its fruit; (9) of its oozing; (10) of its being  
248 smeared” (Buddhaghosa 1975:396). In what follows, I summarize the explanation of each  
249 point, foregrounding the most striking elements for our purposes.

250 1) Because of the necessity of food, the monk has to disrupt his duties to go through the  
251 filth on the road to the village, where he has to go for the sake of food. “He arrives  
252 near the village gate where he must behold corpses of elephants, of horses, of cattle, of  
253 buffaloes, of men, of snakes and dogs...he must also suffer their smell to strike his  
254 nose” (Buddhaghosa 1975:397) The section concludes in a formula repeated  
255 throughout the text, but mentioned only once here: “thus he should consider its  
256 abominableness [of food] from the necessity of having to go for it.”

257 2) In the necessity to search for food, the monk has to suffer filth again as well as harsh  
258 speech from the villagers. “Reaching every door he must behold and step into dirty

259 pools and pools of mud mixed with the washings of fish, of meat, of rice, with saliva,  
260 mucus, dog's dung, pig's dung, and so on, and full of worms and black flies.”  
261 (Buddhaghosa 1975:397-398)

262 So, in these first two considerations we see that the attitude of revulsion is cultivated  
263 towards the arrangements that emerge around food in order to procure it, rather than food  
264 itself, like in the next section, of which I quote a larger part.

265 3) The villager who sees the food-begging monk is presumed to invite him in so long as  
266 he has not eaten himself since monks should receive the first (best) part not already  
267 spoiled by the man's hand (as in South Asia people eat with their right hand). Then the  
268 text starts accounting for the repulsiveness of this man dipping his hand in the food:  
269 “And as he kneads the food ..., the perspiration that flows along his five fingers wets  
270 the dry, hard food and makes it soft. When making lumps of the food which has lost  
271 its beauty through kneading, he puts it in his mouth, the lower teeth fulfil the functions  
272 of a mortar, the upper teeth those of a pestle, the tongue those of the hand. There in the  
273 mouth it is ground like dog's food ... and is besmeared with the thin, clear saliva on  
274 the blade of the tongue; with the thick saliva from the middle of the tongue; with the  
275 impurities from between the teeth in places where the teeth-bones cannot get at it. And  
276 so the food being at that moment a special preparation devoid of beauty and odour,  
277 reaches a highly loathsome state like dog's vomit in a dog's food dish.” (Buddhaghosa  
278 1975:398)

279 4) The food eaten furthermore becomes loathsome because of the ingredients of bile,  
280 phlegm, pus, and blood that are added to the food in digestion.

- 281 5) The food that is smeared with these four ingredients then enters the receptacle or  
282 stomach, adding to food's revoltingness, as the stomach "resembles an excrement-pit  
283 unwashed for ten years." (Buddhaghosa 1975:399)
- 284 6) Food in an undigested state also finds itself in a loathsome state as it finds itself in the  
285 stomach where it is "excessively foul-smelling, of pitch darkness, a passage for the  
286 winds carrying the smell of various corpses, all the food swallowed to-day, yesterday,  
287 and the day before, being gathered up in a lump in a membrane of phlegm, boiled by  
288 the heat of the body's fire [drawing upon the gastric fire in Ayurveda], giving rise to  
289 foam and bubble, ..." (Buddhaghosa 1975:399)
- 290 7) In the digested state food is obnoxious as it turns into excrement and urine.
- 291 8) Considering the fruits of food, the text urges us to look at, what in Ayurveda is called  
292 the finer waste (Seneviratne1992:181), the hair, nails, teeth when the food is well  
293 digested on the one hand, and to hundreds of diseases if not well digested on the other  
294 hand.
- 295 9) The situation gets worse when we look at the ways in which food oozes from the body  
296 through the various openings or 'doors'. So, consumption and oozing out is  
297 summarized as follows: "Lustful, greedy, giddy, infatuated, he eats it the first day, and  
298 ejects it on the second day, when after it has abided one night he has lost all passion  
299 for it, is vexed with it, ashamed with it, disgusted with it." (Buddhaghosa 1975:400)
- 300 10) Finally, food becomes abominable when it sticks to the hands, lips, tongue, and palate,  
301 which then needs to be washed to remove the smell.

302 The purpose of the text, as mentioned earlier is to allow the food to be eaten without inciting  
303 desire for it, hence to develop an attitude of non-attachment in contrast to the cultivation of

304 excited, passionate, and gratifying desire which leads to clinging and becoming. It thus  
305 exhibits a strong concern with the seductive potential of food, and proposes a way to  
306 overcome this danger by divesting food from its attractive qualities and replacing those with  
307 the flip-side of food's ambiguity; its disgusting properties throughout its transformation in the  
308 digestive tract. Considering those properties helps to reduce the sense-pleasures with which  
309 food is embroiled.

310 Understanding the repulsiveness of food as a means to subdue its powerful incitement of  
311 desire, passion, and craving, helps us locate the purpose of the specific rules of eating as laid  
312 out in the Buddhist monastic code, the Vinaya Pitaka.

### 313 **Vinaya Pitaka Rules on Eating**

314 The Vinaya Pitaka is a collection of books containing rules and sanctions that aim at shaping  
315 the monks' and nuns' behaviour and thereby their self-fashioning as beings nearing nirvana.  
316 This monastic code includes prescriptions on receiving alms, sharing food, and eating (how  
317 and when), since monks have to exercise restraint to avoid being struck by the powerful  
318 capacity of food to incite desire. In its moderation, Buddhism does have a functional approach  
319 to food where it is accepted as a necessity for maintaining the body and mental health, but not  
320 as something to enjoy. In this regard, the Mahāvagga section of the code makes exceptions to  
321 its rules when foods are used as medicine for ill monks (Horner 1962:270).

322 Additionally, the collection of rules attempts to render the interactions between lay-people  
323 and monks pleasant. One example given in the Cūlavagga requires that monks not eat garlic,  
324 as teaching the Buddhist Dhamma (collection of teachings) with a bad smell would be a  
325 nuisance to the audience (Horner 1952:195). The importance of developing pleasant relations

326 with lay people derives from the facts that monks are considered teachers of good conduct  
327 who depend on the generosity and goodwill of lay people to give them food.

328 Most practical rules regarding the dealings with food are expounded in the Suttavibhanga and  
329 more specifically in the section of training (Horner 1942:126-140) and I will concisely quote  
330 from these rules in what follows. The structure of the rules generally is as follows. It first  
331 gives an example of behaviour that led to the rule, then the rule itself, and finally the  
332 explanation and qualification of the severity of breaching the rule. Generally, I list the rule in  
333 single brackets, but I quote additional information if the rule itself is unclear when taken out  
334 of context.

335 1) ‘Attentively will I accept almsfood’... Whoever out of disrespect accepts almsfood  
336 inattentively, as though desirous of throwing it away, there is an offence of wrong-doing.

337 2) ... monks accepted almsfood looking about here and there; they did not know that they  
338 were piled up and overflowing... ‘Thinking of the bowl will I accept almsfood’.

339 3) ‘I will accept almsfood with equal curry’. (curry to be in measure one fourth of the rice)

340 4) ... monks accepted heaped-up almsfood. ‘I will accept almsfood at an even level’.

341 5) ‘Attentively will I eat almsfood.’

342 The list of rules with regard to almsfood contains 5 more related rules that I will not list here  
343 for reasons of conciseness. The rule discussed next is a rule to facilitate the smooth  
344 interactions with lay people.

345 11) ... monks having asked for curry and conjei for themselves, ate it. People looked down  
346 upon ... Who does not like well-cooked things? Who does not like sweet things? [Again we

347 see sweetness as a basic and almost universal orientation to food and life] ‘I will not eat curry  
348 or conje, having asked for it for myself’.

349 12) ‘Not captious-mindedly will I look at others’ bowls’. [Reminiscent of the concern with  
350 the evil eye in South Asia and Sri Lanka where it can badly affect the food as well as its  
351 consumer. The evil eye often emerges from a desire that turns into jealousy. Many people put  
352 up distracting decorations to protect their food, young children, cattle, fields, and houses  
353 against the evil eye from people passing through.]

354 13) ‘I will not make up too large a mouthful.’

355 14) ‘I will make up the pieces (of food) into a round.’

356 15) ‘I will not open the door of the face when the mouthful is not brought close.’

357 16) ‘I will not put the whole hand into the mouth while eating.’

358 17) ‘I will not talk with a mouthful in the mouth.’

359 18) ‘I will not eat tossing up balls (of food).’

360 19) ‘I will not eat breaking up the mouthfuls.’

361 20) ‘I will not eat stuffing the cheeks.’

362 21) ‘I will not eat shaking the hands about [getting rid of the crumbs].’

363 22) ‘I will not eat scattering lumps of boiled rice.’

364 23) ‘I will not eat putting out the tongue.’

365 24) ‘I will not eat smacking the lips.’

366 25) ‘I will not eat making a hissing sound.’



367 26) 'I will not eat licking the fingers.'

368 27) 'I will not eat licking the bowl.'

369 28) 'I will not accept a drinking cup, my hands (soiled) with food.'

370 29) 'I will not throw out amidst the houses rinsings of the bowl with lumps of boiled rice.'

371 We can see in our selection (as there are many more rules throughout the entire Vinaya  
372 Pitaka) the concerns with a restraint from gluttony, excessive appetite, and indulgence  
373 regarding relations with food. Indeed, through the act of eating, it becomes possible to  
374 refashion oneself as a morally virtuous person, something that became clear to me when  
375 learning to eat decently with my hands and by remarks made during some interviews. Let us  
376 now turn to the lay people and everyday eating as an illustration of the resonance with the  
377 textual prescriptions.

### 378 **Everyday Food Life**

379 Moral codes that are shared often remain implicit until they are breached and when they get  
380 explicitly renegotiated. My personal initiation into the Sinhalese moral universe of eating at  
381 the start of my fieldwork was one such case. During my first meals among several hosts in Sri  
382 Lanka, I was a bit clumsy in eating rice and curry with my right hand. Even though, I had  
383 observed the practice and I had been explained how to eat, it took a while before I became  
384 skilled. Moreover, through my observation, I could already understand some of the  
385 aforementioned boundaries in practice. Unfortunately, during the learning process I did not  
386 recognize all the implicit rules which I had occasionally breached. At those times it was made  
387 clear what was not acceptable, and in this way my hosts made explicit the moral codes of  
388 eating they seek to adhere to. On one occasion I did not know what to do with the sticky  
389 leftovers on my fingers, so I discreetly licked them as modestly as possible (against the rule

390 26 of the Vinaya Pitaka). At once my host-brother very clearly indicated that this should not  
391 be done. Neither could I shake my hand to remove the remainder of the rice (against the rule  
392 21 of the Vinaya Pitaka). Even more out of question, was to use my left hand to remove the  
393 leftovers on my right hand, as the left hand is used to wipe the bum and the boundary and  
394 distance between the stool and food has to be strictly maintained (Appadurai 2004:80). The  
395 only thing to do was to tolerate the drying mess on my fingers until I could wash my hands.  
396 These are only a few examples of how lay people live by the rules set out in the Vinaya Pitaka  
397 in their daily practice. They may not have read these texts directed to monks, but I suggest  
398 these standards have influenced the wider morality of society through the intense  
399 engagements with monks at rituals and at the Sunday schools in temples. Hence, the rules of  
400 everyday eating coincide remarkably well with the Vinaya prescriptions, which is why they  
401 are quoted at length.

402 The everyday implicit rules of how to eat decently, that turn explicit when transgressed,  
403 likewise deal with the concern of avoiding excessive desire and its display. When asking an  
404 interviewee how he would perceive me if I ate with the food touching the palm of my hand  
405 (excessive amount), licked my fingers, smacked, and so on, he answered that I would be like a  
406 hungry ghost (*preta wagē*), thus viewing me with disgust, linking hunger to greed by way of  
407 gut feelings (Roberson 2001:14). So, by way of eating the human person can fashion himself  
408 as such and distinguish from certain ‘morally lower’ people or non-human beings. *Pretas* are  
409 hungry ghosts defined by their excessive and insatiable greed. These beings are the antipole  
410 of the aspiration for liberation among Buddhists since they are the epitome of desire gone  
411 awry. Many people fear becoming such ghosts after their death. Indulging in the sense-  
412 pleasures associated with food resembles the behaviour of *pretas*. Even more, such behaviour  
413 could spark and feed the desire to such an extent that one cannot let go and clings to the food

414 (and the home where the deceased person used to eat his/her food) at the moment of death and  
415 thus actually *becomes* a *preta*. As one can never be sure that a deceased person (friend,  
416 relative) will turn into a *preta*, people cook their favourite food at the place where the body  
417 has rested a few days. The consciousness of the deceased gets anchored to this food and the  
418 relatives facilitate its departure and detachment by placing the food outside the homestead. In  
419 this way they could avoid the deceased sticking to the home as a *preta* and rather help them  
420 pursue the path to nirvana in the afterlife. Given these and other widespread food-related  
421 funerary practices, and the remarks made by interviewees, people share with the monks a  
422 concern about the powerful seductiveness of food as well as its potential to transform people  
423 into morally higher or lesser beings, both in this life and even in the afterlife. Thus the  
424 powerfully seductive agency and transformative capabilities of food, as discussed in relation  
425 to the Buddhist texts, is also dealt with at a very practical and everyday level by lay people.

426

## 427 **Conclusion**

428 From our discussion, we can see that food and desire are intimately enmeshed in the  
429 Sinhalese Buddhist discourses and practical engagements with food in general. As such,  
430 food turns into a powerful means to refashion oneself as a virtuous person on the path towards  
431 nirvana and the release from attachment by desire.

432 From the texts and illustrative practices, it is clear that food is highly ambivalent, both  
433 regenerating and degenerating life. Yet, where is this deep ambiguity coming from? I suggest  
434 that part of the answer is given in the wider introduction on both Ayurvedic and Buddhist  
435 thought. Given that human beings, the world, and the other entities that populate it are co-  
436 composed of similar elements and forces, albeit distributed in different ways, renders these

437 entities radically interpenetrating and mutually permeable (Osella & Osella 2002:470-471).  
438 This entails that entities and human beings are regarded as unstable formations that are  
439 thoroughly altered in their being throughout interaction. In this regard we can understand that  
440 eating is a highly charged activity surrounded by multiple precautions and taboos (e.g.  
441 avoidance of sharing food across different castes in order to avoid moral pollution). Desire is  
442 a powerful creative and destructive force that in its enmeshment with food further increases  
443 the latter's ambiguity and both require careful negotiation in monastic and lay life. To get  
444 released from the cycle of death and rebirth in order to reach nirvana, the development of an  
445 attitude of non-attachment to food plays a crucial role, since dealing with food is actually a  
446 way of dealing with desire. The texts discussed ponder these themes and seek to aid people  
447 (especially monks) in this pursuit of the extinguishing of desire in nirvana. As such, they aid  
448 in the development of a civilized and moral attitude in society that keeps basic human forces  
449 in check.

450

#### 451 **Acknowledgements**

452 I wish to thank Kate Crossby for informing me of valuable translations of the Buddhist texts  
453 used here and for discussing them with me. I am also grateful to Vito Laterza for reviewing an  
454 earlier version of this text. Yet, both bear no responsibility whatsoever on the claims made  
455 here. Finally I wish to express my gratitude to the Pali Text Society for generously granting  
456 me the permission to quote extensively from their published translations. Finally, I wish to  
457 thank the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework  
458 Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / for the ERC Grant Agreement nr 295843.

459

460 **References**

- 461 Appadurai, A. (2004). The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. In V.  
462 Rao, & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action* (pp. 59-84). Delhi: Permanent Black.  
463
- 464 Bailly, L. (2009). *Lacan: A beginner's guide*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.  
465
- 466 Belk, R.W., Ger G., & Askegaard S. (2003). The Fire of Desire: A Multisited Inquiry into  
467 Consumer Passion. *Journal of Consumer Research* 30(3), 326-351.  
468
- 469 Buddhaghosa, B. (1975[n.d.]). *The Path of Purity [Visuddhimagga]*. London: The Pali Text  
470 Society.  
471
- 472 Buddhaghosa, B. (1976[n.d.]). *The Path of Purification [Visuddhimagga]*. Boulder:  
473 Shambhala.  
474
- 475 Collins, S. (1993). The Discourse on What is Primary (Agañña-Sutta): An Annotated  
476 Translation. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21(4), 301-393.  
477
- 478 Counihan, C. (1999). *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power*.  
479 New York: Routledge.  
480
- 481 Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2011[1972]). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.  
482 London: Continuum.  
483
- 484 Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2009[1980]). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and*  
485 *Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
486
- 487 Elias, N. (2000). *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*.  
488 Malden: Blackwell Publishing.  
489
- 490 Farquhar, J. (2002). *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*. Durham: Duke  
491 University Press.

492 Freud, S. (2010). *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.  
493  
494 Goodchild, P. (1996). *Deleuze & Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire*. London:  
495 Sage Publications.  
496  
497 Horner, I. B (trans). (1942). *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka), vol. 3:*  
498 *Suttavibhanga*. London: Oxford University Press.  
499  
500 Horner, I. B (trans). (1952). *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka), vol. 5: Cullavagga*.  
501 London: Luzac & Company.  
502  
503 Horner, I. B (trans). (1962). *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka), vol. 4: Mahāvagga*.  
504 London: Luzac & Company.  
505  
506 Kahn, M. (1986). *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a*  
507 *Melanesian Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
508  
509 Lacan, J. (N.d.). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Desire and its Interpretation, 1958-1959,*  
510 *book 6*. London: Karnac Books.  
511  
512 Loy, D. R. (1999) The Spiritual Roots of Modernity: Buddhist Reflections on the Idolatry of  
513 the Nation-State, Corporate Capitalism and Mechanistic Science. In S. Sivaraksa, P.  
514 Udomittipong, & C. Walker (Eds.), *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium:*  
515 *Essays in Honor of The Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka (Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto) On his 60<sup>th</sup>*  
516 *Birthday Anniversary* (pp. 86-113). Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation and The  
517 Foundation for Children.  
518  
519 Obeyesekere, G. (1977). The Theory and Practice of Psychological Medicine in the  
520 Ayurvedic Tradition. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 1:155-181.  
521  
522 Osella, F., & Osella, C. (2002). Quelques points de vue sur l'inné et l'acquis au Kerala, Inde  
523 du Sud. In V. Bouillier, & G. Tarabout (Eds.), *Images du corps dans le monde hindou* (pp.  
524 467-495). Paris: CNRS editions.

525 Rodrigues, H. P. (2006). *Introducing Hinduism*. New York: Routledge.  
526  
527 Robertson, A. F. (2001). *Greed: Gut feelings, growth, and history*. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
528  
529 Rozin, P. (1999). Food Is Fundamental, Fun, Frightening, and Far-Reaching. *Social Research*  
530 66(1): 9-30.  
531  
532 Sahlins, M. D. (1996). The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western  
533 Cosmology [and Comments and Reply]. *Current Anthropology*. 37(3):395-428.  
534  
535 Seneviratne, H. L. (1992). Food Essence and the Essence of Experience. In R. S. Khare (Ed.),  
536 *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (pp. 179-  
537 200). Albany: State University of New York Press.  
538  
539 Van Daele, W. (2013). Igniting Food Assemblages in Sri Lanka: Ritual Cooking to  
540 Regenerate the World and Interrelations. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 47(1):33-60.  
541  
542 Webster, D. (2005). *The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon*. London:  
543 Routledge.  
544