



Food Ethics and Practices in the Religious Ethos of Early Buddhism in the Jātakas

Km. Rakhi¹ & Dr. Shweta Verma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of History Including Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology
Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University (A Central University), Garhwal, Uttarakhand

²Assistant Professor at Department of History Including Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology
Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University (A Central University), Garhwal, Uttarakhand



Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2026-JAN-011

Subject: History

Received : 13.12.2025

Accepted : 23.12.2025

Published : 31.01.2026

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n2.26.Jan011

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Food and foodways played vital role in early Buddhist religious milieu as it was a medium to show inter relationship amongst the renouncers inside the Sangha and medium through which a renouncer was able to reconnect with the world after renouncing it. Bhikkhu/Bhikkhuni who chose to follow Buddhism, after renouncing world, emerged amongst the major categories that time. In religious ethos of early Buddhism the bhikkhus were one of the significant categories of that time along with the Brahmanas and the samanas. The paper mainly focus on two questions; one for a laity based on the concept of merit making through almsgiving and second, is to know the significance of food in monastic order and its role to determine the hierarchy amongst the bhikkhus in Sangha. In this paper we will try to look at the different Jātaka stories, in popular culture, from the perspective of ideas surrounded with food ethics and consumption amongst bhikkhus in monastery in early Buddhist religious ethos. Contribution of almsgiving in Dana tradition of early Buddhist philosophical ideals for the benefit of beyond life for a laity.

Keywords: food, folklore, identity, merit making, ethics

Introduction

The Jatakas, which is part of folktale, describe how the Bodhisatta—the being destined to become the current Buddha in his final life—developed throughout hundreds of lifetimes. The Jatakas, which date from the fifth century BCE to the third century CE, are among the world’s largest and oldest collections of stories. They are written in Pali, the language of the Theravada Buddhist canon. These stories have been passed down through generations in South and Southeast Asia. Structure of the stories, so these stories are located along two distinct temporal planes- the paccupannavathu, or the story of the present, pertaining to the existence of the Buddha in what was regarded as his present life and the atitavathu or story of the past, focusing on the

existence of the Buddha in his previous births, as a Bodhisatta. The stories of the present are almost invariably located in a monastic setting, whereas those of the past are situated in more diverse contexts.

Preaching of perfections, which was incorporated into the Jatakas by later commentarial tradition, is the primary objectives of the narratives and Food plays important role in Buddhist religious ethos. Generosity (dana) and renunciation (nekkhamma), one of the ten perfections, whom a Bodhisatta fulfills in his previous births, which allow him to not only discover a way of enlightenment but also to instruct others, were closely related to Food ethics for both renouncers and laypeople. Thus, food played a dynamic role in the early Buddhist socio-religious milieu and culture.



Religious significance of Food: Making merit through almsgiving

There were two vital aspects of the bhikkhu's life: 1) his relationship with members of the confraternity, and 2) his interaction with the lay public outside the sangha, with whom he came into contact in the course of his daily alms-round.

Many narratives of Jataka focus on growing needs of the Bhikkhu-Sangha naturally resulted in the establishment of permanent ties between the sangha and the laity. Giving alms was important part of day to day life of a layman as the social and religious milieu of that time was in a transformative stage. Thus, concept of dana became central to the Buddhist concept for lay supporter of the religion called upasakas and upasikas who had supported the sangha for its minimum needs and accepting the Buddha's basic teachings at the same time. Giving alms, giving them often and extravagantly, is portrayed in the Pali Vinaya literature as a central feature of lay religiosity. Dana was described as the most important means available to the layman of accumulating merit. In cullavagga we find an instance where a setthi of rajagaha stated relationship between dana and punna for a layman. He says "Lord, I had these sixty dwelling-places built because I need merit, because I need heaven". Similarly in Mahavagga it is observed that people were happy as they were giving dana and because of it they will gain punnya. Parallel to this, notions like rebirth and belief of attaining places like heaven through charity or Dana particularly through practice of almsgiving is emphasized in many narratives of Jatakas. Bilari-Kosiya-Jataka(Vol-IV, No.450) and Shuddha Bhojana-Jataka(No.535, Vol-5) (Both sharing same story but the later one slightly in an expanded form) are some example of it. Above mentioned Jatakas are woven around a rich merchant who was a stingy person and discontinued the practice of almsgiving practiced by his five generation of ancestors. Thus, his ancestors (who had secured their places in heaven due to the practice of almsgiving), had to come on the earth to teach him the merits of almsgiving. These narratives the consequences of actions (Karma) and the cycle of rebirth, often highlighting the suffering experienced by those who have acted poorly or had not given alms properly.

Similarly, in another story named Kummasapinda-Jataka (vol.3, pp.244-) almsgiving leading to good fortune is repeated thrice. First incidence is about Mallika in the story of the present and second and third incidences are related to the story of the past. Mallika, a daughter of a garland seller, when she offered three portion of sour rice gruel to Buddha he blessed her with the boon that she will become chief queen of the Kosalan King on the very same day through the fruit of the three portion of rice and this turned true. Similarly, the second part of the story which is story of the past is about Bodhisatta who was a poor wage earner and had offered four portions of rice gruel to pacckaabuddhas due to this act of almsgiving he was born as prince Brahmadata of Benaras, with lots of property and splendor, in immediate after birth. His chief queen had also been once a handmaid's slave but she too attained to royalty owing to the alms of rice she had given to a monk. In one such story Kundakapuva-Jataka , a poor laborer who was a laity offers a dry cake to Buddha and Buddha accepted his alms and disdained all other dainty dishes presented in front of him by all the people of the city. Thus, people requested the poor man to accept their offering in form of food and money so that he would make over to them the merit of his act.

Similarly, in another story named Kummasapinda-Jataka (vol.3, pp.244-) almsgiving leading to good fortune is repeated thrice. First incidence is about Mallika in the story of the present and second and third incidences are related to the story of the past. Mallika, a daughter of a garland seller, when she offered three portion of sour rice gruel to Buddha he blessed her with the boon that she will become chief queen of the Kosalan King on the very same day through the fruit of the three portion of rice and this turned true. Similarly, the second part of the story which is story of the past is about Bodhisatta who was a poor wage earner and had offered four portions of rice gruel to pacckaabuddhas due to this act of almsgiving he was born as prince Brahmadata of Benaras, with lots of property and splendor, in immediate after birth. His chief queen had also been once a handmaid's slave but she too attained to royalty owing to the alms of rice she had given to a monk. In one such story Kundakapuva-Jataka ,



a poor laborer who was a laity offers a dry cake to Buddha and Buddha accepted his alms and disdained all other dainty dishes presented in front of him by all the people of the city. Thus, people requested the poor man to accept their offering in form of food and money so that he would make over to them the merit of his act.

Alms Gathering amongst Renouncers

Massimo Montanari's most influential work in food studies named *Medieval Tastes: Food, cooking, and the Table* discussed medieval European food history. In this book he discusses about the monastic cooking during medieval period. In the book he argues that if monastic culture is in agreement: there would be no value or merit in a renunciation that was obligatory in some way because of circumstances: it is necessary to renounce an available "pleasure" so that the "choice" acquires value and meaning. Kate Nolfi has illustrated the notion that our food practices are tied to the moral quality of our characters, also finds voice in different ways in many of the canonical texts of the world's major religion and these choices and actions might reveal about our moral characters focused on the relationship between those choices and specific moral virtues.

Food and the idea of food within the monastic order also share a rich diversity here, the emphasis is less on the merit making or symbiotic relationship between laity and renouncers but what we find instead food as medium to built relationship amongst renouncers on the basis of hierarchy or to show honor and respect in the monastic order. Distribution of food in the monastery was followed by the rule whereby the seniors received the best quality rice, water and lodging. Two Jataka stories are parallel to this Tandulanali Jataka and Tittira Jataka follow such narrative related to the distribution of best quality rice, best water and best lodging according to the seniority among the Bhikkhus. In both the Jatakas the hierarchy as a theme emerges among the Bhikkhus. In Tandulanali Jataka dispute arose over the question that who should be distributed with of best quality rice in the Monastery? Similarly, in the other Jataka, Tittira Jataka, the story of elder Sariputta where he could not get a place to sleep in the newly built monastery as all other disciples have reserved

whole available lodgings to their Superiors, teachers and themselves. Thus, elder Sariputta had to spend the whole night under a tree. Thus, Buddha then laid down that the order he had established, preference in matter of food and lodging would be decided by Seniority not by birth into noble or brahmana family, nor by material possession before admission into the monastery, nor it is either the attainment of any of the four stages of mystic ecstasy or the walking in any of the four paths of salvation. One such story Bhikkha-Parampara-Jataka (vol. 4, no 496), story of the present, describes food being used to show honor in the monastery. Food as a gift provided by a wealthy landowner to elder Ananda, who thought he was not a right recipient of the food and chose gave it to the elder Sariputta after coming back to monastery. Elder Sariputta too felt the same way and had given food to lord Buddha who was the ultimate lord of the law and was the 'worthy' of food as gift. Food given as gift had fallen to the lot of the worthy by successive steps. As in the story it is stated that 'thus, the gift of food has found its master by going to him whose right it was'.

Food related practices are being discussed in the Jatakas particularly among Bhikkhus at Sangha in terms of almsgiving. Few Bhikkhus being deviant renounced the practice of gathering alms. In one such instance (Story of the present, no. 6), a squire of Savatti rejects getting alms by stocking ghee, rice etc., in his chamber which was built in the outskirt of the Monastery before joining the order. Even after joining the order he sent for his servants to cook food according to his wish. Similarly, in another story (Story of the present, no.26) where King Ajatsattu built a monastery for Devadatta, where he and his followers were supplied with perfumed three-years-old rice along with choicest flavourings. One Bhikku from Buddha's order was invited to Devadatta's monastery by his friend who was disciple of Devadatta by stating 'Sir, why do you daily go round for alms with the sweat streaming off you? Devadatta sits quietly at Gaya-sisa and feeds on the best of fare, flavoured with all the choicest flavouring. There is no way like this. Why breed misery for yourself? Why should it not be good thing for you to come first in the morning here and drink our rice-gruel with a relish after it, try our eighteen kinds of solid victual,



and enjoy our excellent soft food, flavoured with all the choicest flavouring.’

In both the narratives Buddha strongly condemned the practice of leaving gathering of alms and did not promote this behavior among renunciators. All the stories disdain the practice of not having alms as per the ideals of the Buddhist notions. Next is Vatamiga-Jataka, a story about elder Tissa, who could not quell his desire for the taste and craving of food and thus broke his vow and obligation to eat no food except alms received direct from the giver in the Brother’s alms bowl. This story has many layers. Food when entering the brother’s alms bowl had no longer stays as a pleasure of tongue but turned into a substance to live off with a sense of detachment. Sometimes food became obstacle in the path of enlightenment and could divert the Bhikkhus from it. Also, this story indicates the rigors of monastic existence and the difficulties of convincing men of the need rules towards almsgiving which must be followed.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that Jataka stories are important medium to know early Buddhist religious ethos surrounded with food and food ways developed interrelationship between renunciators. Also, it created a sense of seniority and hierarchy amongst

them. Meanwhile through alms giving lay followers become part of early tradition of dāna and developed concept of merit making and good rebirth in them.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

1. All references of Jataka stories are taken from E. B. Cowell. (1895-1907). *The Jataka, or stories of Buddha’s Former Birth*, Vols.1-6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895-1907.
2. I.B.Horner.(1949-1952). *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka)*, Vols-1-5, London: Pali Text Society.

Secondary Sources

1. Chakravarti, Uma. (1987). *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, OUP, New Delhi.
2. Kate Nolfi, Kate. (2018). ‘Food Choices and Moral Character’, *Oxford Dictionary of Food Ethics*, Oxford University Press.
3. Ulrich, E. Katherine. (2007). ‘Food Fights: Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Dietary Polemics in South India’, *History of Religions*. 46(3).
4. Montanari, Massimo. (2025). *Medieval Tastes: food, Cooking, and the table*, Columbia University Press.