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## The Buddha's Last Meal: A Case Study of The Mahāparinibbana Sutta

CASS

Mrinalini

*Research Scholar, University of Delhi**Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

Gautama Buddha holds an important place in the history of Indian religion. In India, the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E was marked by profound social and religious changes and amidst the chaos of the time, Buddhism as a religious movement started. It was spearheaded by the Gautama Buddha against the backdrop of the existing corrupt social and religious practices prevalent in the society. As far as the basic idea of classical Buddhism was concerned, the Buddha was totally against the slaughter of animals. However, it is not clear whether the Buddha was a meat eater or not, and preferred vegetarianism. It has been stated in the Buddhist canonical texts that the Buddha died of eating something called '*sūkara-maddava*'. The term *sūkara-maddava* has been understood as the meat of the pig but a few scholars say that it's a certain type of mushroom. Thus, from this uncertainty emanated a whole range of debate regarding the cause of the Buddha's death. In this paper, will aim to analyse the term “*sūkara-maddava*” in detail and the cause of the Buddha's death from a nuanced perspective based on the reading of the Buddhist canonical texts specially, the *Mahāparinibbana sutta* of the *Dīgha nikāya*. However, while analysing the debate regarding the Buddha's last meal I shall also briefly look at the matter of vegetarianism in Buddhism.

**Key words:** Buddha, Vegetarianism, meat-eating, *sūkara-maddava*, pig's delight, mushroom, truffles, *Mahāparinibbana sutta*, *Dīgha nikāya*

**Introduction**

The name of the chapter itself indicates that this research paper shall precisely focus on a single text, i.e., *Dīgha nikāya* and an incident mentioned in it, that is, the passing away of the Buddha. According to the tradition, the text of the Buddhist pāli canon was finalized at a council held at Rājagaha. The texts were finalized soon after the death of the Buddha. However, from the writing of the texts, it appears that the collection as we have it today, must have originated over a longer period of time. Before the Buddhist pāli canon got fixed in the writing, the canon was preserved in oral form until the first century BCE. The *Dīgha nikāya* forms a part of the *Sutta piṭaka* which has been considered as a first basket of the three Piṭakas or *tripiṭaka*. The *tripiṭakas* contain the teachings of the Buddha. This paper shall look at the event of the *Mahāparinibbana* (death of the Buddha) and will analyse how The Buddha died. The age of the Buddha, i.e., the fifth century BCE was marked by socio-religious and economic changes. In the changing times of the fifth century BCE,

Buddhism as a movement emerged which with its philosophy of compassion and *ahiṃsa* appealed to the masses on a very large extent. The Buddhist as a religious movement was headed by the Gautama Buddha who renounced his Kṣatriya status in the favour for the search of

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true knowledge. After attaining the enlightenment he went on to teach the tenets of the Buddhism to common people. Inspired by the teachings of the Buddha, common people in large number had adopted Buddhism. Many people joined the order of the Buddha by severing their old kinship ties and many became lay Followers of the Buddha.

One of the foremost rules of the *saṅgha* was that the monks and nuns could not cook themselves in the monastery but they have to go to the adjoining areas may be villages or cities for the alms begging. The Buddha had given special set of instructions to the monks and nuns as far as the eating practices were concerned. According to the Buddhist Pāli canonical texts, the monks and nuns cannot deny the food which has been given to them during their alms round. They had to eat whatever given as alms in their alms bowl without any desire or complains, even if the dish served were made of meat. Thus, in this paper we shall look at the conditions under which the Buddha allowed the meat eating by the monks and while doing so, will also give a cursory glance at the practice of meat eating in classical Buddhism.

However, the core area of this paper shall focus on the term *sūkara-maddava*. According to the Buddhist Pāli canonical texts, the Buddha died of eating a dish called *sūkara-maddava*. The Dish was prepared and served to the Buddha by a smith named Cunda in a place called Pāva during his last journey of his lifetime. The term *sūkara-maddava* however created a very exciting debate in the scholarly circle. The scholars have accorded different meanings and explanations to the term. Terms like “pig's delight”, “truffles”, mushrooms, meat of a boar etc. were given by the scholars for *sūkara-maddava*. So to get a clear understanding, a fresh perspective is needed.

#### **Issue of vegetarianism and the term *sūkara-maddava***

The philosophy of Indian Buddhism has been rooted in the concept of *ahiṃsā*. In the fifth century BCE the Buddha appropriated this concept in his main teachings. Killing of living beings was highly condemned in classical Buddhism and it applied even to the crops and seeds. However, pāli canonical texts are buzzing with the references of meat eating. If we go by Pāli Buddhism, vegetarianism was not a prerequisite condition for becoming monks and nuns. The Buddha allowed the eating of meat in three conditions. The rule is called *Tikoṭiparisuddha* (*Pure in Three Ways*). The verse 5 of the Jīvaka sutta of the *Majjhima nikāya* mentioned the statement of the Buddha (Ñāṇmoli and Bodhi 474). According to it:

“Jīvaka, I say that there are three instances in which meat should not be eaten: when it is seen, heard, or suspected [that the living being has been slaughtered for the bhikkhu]. I say that meat should not be eaten in these three instances. I say that there are three instances in which may be eaten: when it is not seen, not heard, not suspected [that the living being has been slaughtered for the bhikkhu]. I say that meat may be eaten in these three instances.

The above statement verify to the fact that the eating of meat was not forbidden in Buddhism. If we talk about the question of vegetarianism in Buddhism, the Buddha out rightly discarded the proposal of his cousin Devadatta. The wicked cousin of the Buddha named Devadatta wanted to create a schism in the *saṅgha* by making vegetarianism a prerequisite condition for the inclusion of monks in the monastery. The Buddha rebuked Devadatta for the idea and on that occasion again repeated the rule of *Tikoṭiparisuddha*, as he did not wanted to create a divide in the monastery on the basis of eating practice (Horner 360-363). However, scholars like K.T.S. Sarao do not agree with the fact that the Buddha really sanctioned meat eating in three conditions (*Tikoṭiparisuddha*). According to the author, the Buddha always strongly disapproves the slaughter of animals and hunting. Thus, according to the author it is really difficult to accept that he allowed meat eating practices with those three clauses (Sarao).

If we go by the references cited in the pāli canonical texts, the allowance of meat eating and the concept of *ahiṃsa* followed by the Buddha in his main line teachings produce a very confusing and contradictory picture. Here the question arises that if the Buddha was so keen about the propagation of *ahiṃsa* among the masses than why he sanctioned meat eating even under the rule of *Tikoṭiparisuddha*? One cannot give a fixed explanation for this phenomenon but there are

few points which need to be explained. According to the Buddha a bhikkhu should eat food without any infatuation and being tied to it. He should not be greedy and should be satisfied with what he has been given in alms. In pāli text, there are references of monks accepting meat on their alms round because if they do not do so, they might end up making a mistake of devoiding the donor of acquiring merit. It can also be said that the Buddha was really far sighted in making decisions because if he had made the vegetarianism a criteria for getting entry into the fold of Buddhism he could have denied a larger chunk of population of getting into it and adopting Buddhist way of life. He also did not want to create a rift in the monastery and loose followers only because of the meat eating practice.

Nevertheless, the practice of meat eating in the classical Buddhsim gave rise to the issue of vegetarianism. Pāli Buddhist texts like the *Dīgha nikāya* and the *Vinaya piṭaka* mentioned that the Buddha died of eating something called *sūkara-maddava*. According to some scholars Buddha died of eating pork as they translate the term *sūkara* as pork, while according to some the term *sūkara-maddava* can be translated as “truffles”. From the question over the practice of meat eating in Buddhsim emanated a giant debate over the cause of the Buddha's death. Hence, in this paper shall analyse the debate over the term “*sūkara-maddava*” and shall look out for the probable answer. This paper will rely on the accounts given in the '*Mahāparinibana Sutta*' of the *Dīgha nikāya*.

The story of the Buddha's death given in the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* goes like this; the Buddha along with his order of monks was travelling and in his last days came to a place called Pāva. The Pāva was an ancient city of the Mallas which the Buddha visited during his last journey of his lifetime. In the place called Pāva, the Buddha stayed at the mango-grove of Cunda the smith along with his order of monks and his chief disciple named Ānanda. When the smith named Cunda heard that the Lord was staying at his mango-grove, he went there to listen Buddha's teaching. After the Dhamma talk, Cunda invited the Buddha to have a meal at his place along with his order of monks. The Buddha consented by keeping silent (Walshe 256). Further, the story proceeds like this:

And as the night was ending Cunda had a fine meal of hard and soft food prepared with an abundance of 'pig's delight', and when it was ready he reported to the lord: 'Lord, the meal is ready' (Walshe 256).

The lord went to the Cunda's place and sat down on the prepared seat and asked Cunda to serve the meal. He specifically instructed Cunda to serve the “pig's delight” to him and the rest hard and soft food to the order of monks. Then further, the Buddha asked Cunda to bury the remaining “pig's delight” in a pit. In the verse 4.19, it has been stated that:

Then the Lord said to Cunda: whatever is left over of the “pig's delight” you should bury in a pit, because, cunda I can see none in this world with its devas, māras and Brahmās, in this generation with its ascetics and Brahmins, its princes and people who, if they were to eat it, could thoroughly digest it except the Tathāgata. Very good Lord said Cunda and, having buried the remains of the 'pig's delight' in a pit, he came to the Lord, saluted him and sat down to one side. . . (Walshe 256)

After the meal, the Buddha was attacked by a severe sickness with bloody diarrhoea and the Buddha died soon. The term *sūkara* has been translated as the 'boar's flesh' by the Pāli-English dictionary of the Pāli Text Society (Davids and Stede 180). T.W. Rhys Davids opines that the term *sūkara-maddava* may means “quantity of Truffles” (W. and Davids 137). “Truffles” as defined by Davids definetly comes under the category of vegetable. Maurice Walshe in his translation of the *Dīgha nikāya*, uses the term “pig's delight” for *sūkara-maddava* (Walshe 256).

Scholars like Arthur Waley interpret *sūkara-maddava* in four different ways. According to the author, the term *sūkar- maddava* may be translated as a pig's soft food or the food eaten by a pig, secondly he states that it can also be termed as pig's delight or a favourite food of a pig. Thirdly, according to him, the term *sūkara-maddava* may be explained as the soft parts of a pig, and lastly, it perhaps means food crushed or trampled by pigs. Arthur Waley gives the vegetarian interpretation of the term *sūkara-maddava* (Morris 342). He based his analysis on the findings of the medicinal research

undertaken by Neumann. According to Neumann, it was quite common during the Buddha's time to have pig's prefixes for certain medicinal plants/herbs and the name of the pig's prefixes had nothing to do with the idea of meat (Morris 345). Waley further remarks that as Cunda was a lay follower of Buddhism and knowingly he could not have offered the Buddha, a dish made of meat.

K.T.S Sarao, one of the authorities on the Buddhist canonical texts surmises that the savouring of meat by the Buddha himself is totally a vague idea and it has nothing to do with the death of the Buddha. According to the scholar, upon the reading of the Buddhist text it appears that the section on meat eating by the Buddha himself must be interpolated by the later scribes. He further argues that Cunda the smith mentioned in the Pāli texts cannot feed the Buddha some meat preparation knowingly (Sarao).

On the other hand scholars like Fa Chow and R.Gordon Wasson claims that the term *sūkara-maddava* means a certain kind of mushroom. Fa chow relies on the Chinese text *Dirghāgama* which is an equivalent of Indian *Dīgha nikāya* to explain the debate over the term *sūkara-maddava*. According to the author, the story lines in both the texts are same except one thing. In the Chinese *Dirghāgama*, the story proceeds like this, Cunda the smith prepared a stew made from fungus grown on a sandal wood tree. The fungus is called the 'ears of the sandal wood tree' and is still eaten in China. Hence, the author comments that *sūkara-maddava* was not boar's flesh but it was a dish prepared from fungus grown on the sandal wood tree. He also explains that Cunda under the influence of Buddhist teaching could not have killed a pig to feed the Buddha. Chinese people as per the author include pig's flesh in their diet and never find any difficulty in digesting the flesh. Thus, it is very much possible that the Buddha died of eating fungus which may have turned poisonous rather than eating pig's flesh (Chow 127-133).

R. Gordon Wasson asserts that *sūkara-maddava* was a type of Indic mushroom. His research is based on the botanical findings. The author and his associate named Heim carried out research in the areas of Bihar and Orissa. Based on the findings, Wasson suggests that *sūkara-maddava* is actually the name of the fungus known as "*Pūtika*" (Gordon, Flaherty and Doniger 592). He cites two reasons to reach the conclusion. According to Wasson, the Buddha ordered Cunda to bury the remaining *sūkara-maddava* because it was indigestible to all except the Lord. The second reason he provided that, during the research, his Santal informants explained to him that pigs foraged for the fungus named '*pūtika*' and it is still a common custom in the santal country to bury the left-over *pūtika* in a pit (Gordon, Flaherty and Doniger 593). The leftover *Pūtika* was buried in the ground because of its stinking property. Hence, the term *pūtika* and *sūkara-maddava* are synonymous. The name *sūkara* comes from the pig, who likes to trample the field in the search of mushroom. The author agrees to the findings of Waley and Walsh that the term *Sūkara-maddava* could possibly be explained as 'pig's delight'. Wasson in his research writes that, dishes made from mushroom have always been discarded by the orthodox brahmanical society as they considered it as impure and disgusting (Gordon, Flaherty and Doniger 592). The Buddha previously been associated with the brahmanical religion may felt nauseated after eating a dish made from mushroom and fell sick and died eventually (Gordon, Flaherty and Doniger 597).

As we saw above in the debate a variety of interpretations has been provided by the scholars for the term *sūkara-maddava*. However, there are certain loopholes in the scholarly writing which need to be discussed here. For example, as per K.T.S. Sarao, the meat eating section in the Buddhist canonical texts has been the result of the later interpolation. But, we cannot outrightly discard the meat eating sections of the Buddhist canonical texts just because they seem to be interpolated. The Buddhist canonical texts are buzzing with the meat eating reference and the Buddha himself allowed the monks and nuns to accept meat under the rule of *Tikoṭiparisuddha* explained above in the paper. Further, the Buddha has also been shown as accepting meat in a chapter mentioned in the *Aṅguttara nikāya*.

Further, in the case of the author Fa Chow, the Indian context of the story has been removed. Fa chow uses the

Chinese text *Dirghāgama* to support his arguments. In the Chinese text the term *sūkara-maddava* has not been mentioned instead uses the term 'ears of the sandal wood tree'. Thus, it is not proper to compare the Indian and the Chinese term without explaining the context.

Another scholar Wasson in his writing cites that the Buddha possibly had a previous brahmanical connection and as mushroom has been considered impure in the brahmanical tradition, the Buddha after eating Cunda's dish felt nauseatic and fell sick and hence, died. But here the statement given by Wasson needs to be set in the right tone. It is a well known fact that the Buddha came from a kṣatriya clan which was known as the clan of the *śākya* and hence, he was not a Brahmin but a kṣatriya. It has been approved by many classical Indian texts that the warrior classes of classical India were very much engaged in meat eating practices.

However, if we read carefully the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* of the *Dīgha nikāya* there is no doubt left that the Buddha died of eating something called *sūkara-maddava* and if properly analysed, the term *sūkara-maddava* gives a very confusing account. The term itself is very obscure in nature. If we rely on the scholarly writing, the term *sūkara-maddava* might mean some kind of vegetable/fungus probably mushroom or it can be a dish made of boar's flesh. We cannot provide a fixed definition to the term *sūkara-maddava*. We can rather say that the author of the *Dīgha nikāya* chose to use a very dubious term, that is, *sūkara-maddava* instead of a very specific term for the Cunda's dish. The reason he probably used this term so that people could not raise any difficult question over the death of the Buddha.

In the story it has been stated that except the Buddha, no one can digest the dish *sūkara-maddava*. Hence, the Lord asked Cunda to bury that dish in a pit. But from the above mentioned story, we can say that the Buddha himself died of diarrhoea and thus, the statement provided in the text is itself contradictory. Hence, it can be probably said that the author of the *Dīgha nikāya* probably used confusing and contradictory term and statements to mislead people regarding the death of the Buddha.

However, we cannot outrightly discard the fact that the Buddha himself had never eaten meat in his lifetime. We have previously seen in this paper that the Buddha allowed the eating of meat under the *Tikoṭiparisuddha* rule and he must have accepted the meat if given by the donors during his alms round. It has also been recorded in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that the Buddha accepted meat by his lay follower Ugga and the term used here for the meat is *sūkara-māmsam*, which definitely means the meat of the pig. Thus, we can say that the Buddha had not really an aversion towards the eating of the meat and thus, *sūkara-maddava* perhaps means either of the two, that is, mushroom/vegetable or the meat of a pig. The debate regarding the term *sūkara-maddava* does not provide us with a fixed definition but in one line it can be said that it does provide some useful insight into the complexity of the term and a platform for the new research to be carried out.

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