

# **True Education Begins with Wise Consumption**

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translated by Robin Moore

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## Anumodanā – Appreciation

For many years the Buddhist followers of Wat Nyanavesakavan have printed numerous books as a ‘gift of the Dhamma’ (*dhamma-dāna*) for free distribution. Sometimes these faithful individuals have wished that people from other countries can be introduced to and learn about Buddhism by way of these books, and they have therefore translated them themselves or supported skilled and knowledgeable individuals to translate them on their behalf. As a result, many Dhamma books, both large and small, have been translated into foreign languages—in particular into English.

About 2-3 years ago, the Buddhist congregation (*buddha-parisā*) at Wat Nyanavesakavan, both monastics and close lay supporters, agreed that there should be a systematic, earnest, and ongoing effort and procedure for translating Dhamma books into English and publishing them for wider distribution. Establishing such a procedure will help to ensure that the study of Dhammavinaya and the propagation of Buddhism proceeds in a stable and secure way. Fortunately, a skilled and accomplished translator was at hand to perform this task on a regular basis, namely Mr. Robin Moore. In respect to funding this project, Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart has faithfully shouldered responsibility throughout, both in supporting Wat Nyanavesakavan and in providing financial assistance to the translator. This has been a tremendous act of generosity and dedication.

On this occasion, the book titled ‘True Education Begins with Wise Consumption’ has been completed as an English translation.\*

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\* Trans.: the Thai title of this book is การศึกษาเริ่มต้นเมื่อคนกินอยู่เป็น.

I wish to express my gratitude to Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart who has acted as patron and managed various tasks with devotion to the Triple Gem, wholesome enthusiasm for the threefold training, and great goodwill and kindness towards students and practitioners of Dhammavinaya, enabling this gift of Dhamma to bear fruit and meet with success. Furthermore, may I express thanks to Mr. Robin Moore, who has cultivated the Four Paths to Success—wholesome desire, effort, committed attention, and thorough investigation. He has used his skill and expertise to carry out this scholarly work to fulfilment, which will be of long-lasting value and benefit to people worldwide.

Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P. A. Payutto)

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## True Education Begins with Wise Consumption

### Learning from the Monk's Life

As human beings we have no choice but to engage with the four basic requisites of life: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

If one looks at the monks' training one sees that it begins with an awareness of how to properly use the four requisites, which is considered an aspect of moral conduct (*sīla*). It may not have occurred to some people that knowing how to eat or consume is a part of morality.

This so-called 'ethical eating' refers to eating with a due consideration of the true objectives of eating. Put simply, it is wise eating—or wise consumption—which implies a balanced and optimum form of eating. Technically speaking, this is called *bhojane-mattaññutā*: 'moderation in eating.'

A related matter that the Buddha gave great emphasis to is sense restraint (*indriya-samvara*), i.e. knowing how to use the sense bases—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—with mindful awareness. This too is classified as an initial stage of spiritual training and as a basic form of moral conduct, even more fundamental than observing the five precepts.

When thinking of moral conduct for laypeople, it is common to only consider the five precepts. Yet the Buddha gave great import to these two basic forms of moral conduct: moderation in eating and sense restraint.

When monks and novices are ordained they are encouraged to begin with sense restraint, to guard their senses and be self-composed, to

receive sense impressions mindfully.<sup>1</sup> Mindfulness nurtures wisdom and understanding, preventing greed, hatred, and delusion from arising; the mind thus abides with wholesome states. This mindful reception of sense objects, and the prevention of unwholesome states from overpowering the mind, is seen as an adequate starting point of spiritual practice.<sup>2</sup>

A third supporting principle is called *santosa*: contentment with the four requisites. In the monk's life this refers to contentment with whatever robe, almsfood, dwelling, and medicine one may obtain—to be content with having enough of these requisites to survive and exist, to meet the basic needs of life.

When one has an adequate amount of these requisites, and one is not infatuated with consuming things, one can then devote one's complete time, energy, and attention to self-development, to fulfilling one's responsibilities, to engaging in work, and to cultivating wholesome and virtuous qualities. This is the true meaning of 'contentment' (*santosa*).

The essential principles of practice in regard to the four requisites are thus moderation in eating, sense restraint, and contentment. It is not just monastics who should practise these principles of training. Laypeople too should apply and benefit from them so that their personal lives and communities truly prosper and flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> Trans.: when encountering the term 'monk' (and 'novice') in this text, it is perfectly valid to interpret this term in a non-gender way, i.e. as encompassing both monks and nuns, or monastics in general.

<sup>2</sup> Trans.: the Thai word 'gahn seuksah' (การศึกษา), stemming from the Pali *sikkhā*, has a broad range of meaning, including 'education,' 'learning,' and 'spiritual training.' I have used the term 'education' in this book's title, but as readers can see this term goes far beyond simply absorbing information in school or university. 'True education' continues throughout one's entire life.



## **Cognitive Skill**

We live in the world. Indeed, our survival depends on communication with the external world. The instruments we use for such communication are our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. If we are unskilled at utilizing these six senses they become the source of detriment and harm, causing affliction for ourselves and others.

Lack in cognitive skill refers to engaging with the senses in a deluded or impulsive way. One sees, but one lacks skill in seeing; one hears, but one lacks skill in hearing. Seeing visual forms, for example, gives rise to problems and ill-effects, leading to obsession and infatuation. Greed, hatred, and delusion proliferate. One may enjoy watching television, for instance, but instead of obtaining knowledge one merely gets fixated and mentally confused. One's physical health deteriorates, one's positive efforts are undermined, and one wastes an opportunity to learn.

If one is skilled at watching, however, one gains knowledge. One knows how to select those TV programmes that are of good quality and useful. Even if one ends up watching a poor quality programme one can still learn from it and draw moral lessons; one applies discrimination to derive benefit from it.<sup>3</sup>

Such cognitive skill marks the beginning of spiritual training or of true education. True education begins at the five senses. If one does not attend to this matter correctly, one's training or education is misdirected and fails. Modern education tends to fail because people do not give this matter enough attention. For this reason it is important to discuss this topic of sense restraint and proper engagement

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<sup>3</sup> Trans.: in English, we can call this being 'sensible.'

with the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned above, the starting point of training or education is proper consumption and engagement with the sense doors. If one reaches this point one's training and education will make headway.

The preliminary training for new monks thus highlights these basic principles. Indeed, they are not then abandoned but rather applied throughout spiritual practice.

To give structure to the training in sense restraint (*indriya-samvara*), there are traditional teachings outlining specific conduct in relation to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body.

In most situations, the eyes are the first to arrive at a scene and to become engaged with surroundings. The monks' training includes a formal procedure in this context, i.e. the monks should train in having a non-roving eye, to prevent the eyes from straying here and there. They should look at things around them just enough to perform their activities, in particular just enough to walk safely wherever they may go. This kind of composure thus becomes the regular behaviour of a monk.

Here, specific conduct is set down as a means to support spiritual training. It is important to remember, however, that the Buddha's essential message here is for us to practise mindfulness (*sati*). We need to apply mindfulness as a protection, to prevent unskillful states and

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<sup>4</sup> Trans.: note that the full set of sense bases (*indriya*) comprises six senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In the scriptures, sometimes only five sense bases, i.e. the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, are mentioned, as these five come in initial and direct contact with the external objects or the world. The sense base of the mind is set aside as it experiences on a secondary level the object already contacted by any of the five sense bases. In the Thai vernacular, sometimes only four senses are mentioned (excluding body and mind), as seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting are considered the most familiar sense experiences.

negative perceptions from overwhelming the mind. One thus receives sense impressions mindfully and generates wisdom. One benefits from sense contact; by seeing, hearing, etc. one grows in knowledge and virtue.

Some people experience only superficial and frivolous amusement or stimulation from sense contact. Nothing good comes of this. This shows that their education or training has failed.

If students go to school or university but do not know how to properly engage with their sense faculties, real learning will not occur. One can say that their education has not yet begun. In such contexts we need to ask ourselves:

1. Do I learn from sense contact? Acquiring knowledge means growing in wisdom or making spiritual progress. On the path to realizing the truth, we require knowledge in order to live well and act successfully and to solve problems. Sense contact should provide us with information and understanding and lead us to truth.
2. Do I benefit from sense contact? Benefitting from sense contact means being able to use it for improving one's life and engaging with things creatively. Sense contact should provide us with good examples and lessons, and new perspectives of thinking, that can be applied in daily life.

If one can answer in the affirmative to these two questions, it shows that one has developed two kinds of wisdom: wisdom that accesses knowledge and wisdom that reaps wellbeing.

Already from childhood people need to exercise in proper seeing and listening. Children should be skilled at watching television and

listening to the radio.<sup>5</sup> We should ask ourselves what kind of knowledge and advantages children gain from these things. And we should beware that children don't simply become consumers wallowing in casual forms of amusement.

These days society produces more consumers than true scholars. Although some people claim to be scholars or intellectuals, they may only be consumers. If one is not really committed to scholarship it would be better to admit that one is merely a consumer. If scholarship and consumerism are not clearly distinguished, this situation can pose a danger to society.

We call the present age the 'age of consumerism.' We can see from this label that there is a trend in society for people to consume. There is a predominance of consumers. If one is predominantly a consumer it is invalid to call oneself a true scholar or learner. Consumers and learners are at cross purposes. Essentially, one is either one or the other.

As a learner or true scholar one uses the eyes, ears, nose and tongue for discovery and understanding; one uses them to seek wisdom and to seek ways to create true wellbeing.

These days many people call themselves scholars or intellectuals, but they primarily use their senses to seek gratifying objects. Although they experience a plethora of sense impressions, they do not examine and learn from them. They are caught up only in consuming.

This is a vital matter. Sense restraint (*indriya-samvara*) is a crucial practice enabling one to be a learner, a scholar, a sage. Here, one uses the senses or engages with all one's experiences to develop wisdom;

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<sup>5</sup> Trans.: these days it may be more appropriate to say 'listening to an iPod' or 'listening to audio recordings'!

these things thus promote understanding and provide blessings to one's life.

### **Wasteful Consumption Is Not Skilful Consumption**

Immediately after their ordination, monks and novices train in the proper use of the four requisites. A basic principle for monks and novices is to live simply, to rely on the four requisites merely to sustain life, and to use things wisely. In regard to food, there is a special reflection used for recitation.

Before ordaining, the ordination candidate is asked to recite the *taṅkhaṇika-paccavekkhaṇa* verses, i.e. the reflections for specific occasions. When eating, for instance, one contemplates food in order to develop mindfulness: the awareness that one eats to meet the genuine needs of the body, not merely for delicious flavours or beautification. As a regular reminder and to instil a sense of earnestness, there is a tradition for monks to chant these verses of reflection before each meal.

Of all the chants for monks and novices there is one chant that is considered especially important. This chant is called the 'Paṭisaṅkhā Yo' chant, named after the first words of the chant. The technical title for this chant is *Taṅkhaṇika-paccavekkhaṇa*; it is precisely the chant referred to above.

The term *paccavekkhaṇa* means 'reflection' or 'contemplation'; the term *taṅkhaṇika* means 'in that moment,' 'on that occasion.' 'Reflecting on that occasion' refers to reflecting on the four requisites while one is using them.

If one reflects while one is eating, this is *taṅkhaṇikapaccavekkhaṇa*: reflection in the moment. In the circumstances that one may have

been inattentive, one reflects retrospectively, as a form of self-reminder and review. This is called *atīta-paccavekkhaṇa*: reflection on the past. This reflection on the past is also commonly included as a formal chant. In some monasteries the Atitapaccavekkhaṇa Chant is chanted every evening.

Reflection on the four requisites is considered of central importance, because every person's life is linked to and dependent on these things. The Buddhist teachings thus encourage people to use them with wise consideration, i.e. to consume with wisdom (*paññā*), not with craving (*taṇhā*).

How does wise consumption differ from covetous consumption?

Covetous or greedy consumption is an indulgent form of consumption whereby one pursues delightful sense impressions answering to or satisfying personal preferences (or even aversions). Here, deriving some form of pleasure is paramount. In relation to food one seeks only delicious flavours. It is a way of satisfying craving through stimulation of the five senses.

In relation to clothing, one strives for beauty, elegance, and trendiness, to the extent of jostling for social position and personal recognition. Food, clothing, and housing can all become instruments for showing off one's social status.

Acting in this way, however, does not fulfil the genuine needs of human life. Put in modern parlance, it is not a sign of a truly first-rate quality of life.

Some people are wealthy and eat excellent food, i.e. they have a high standard of living, but they lack a good quality of life. Instead, they have a poor quality of life. Theirs may be called undiscerning consumption.

Recent generations have given great emphasis to possessing a ‘high standard of living.’ Attaining this so-called high standard of living was seen as greatly desirable. More recently, however, the new expression ‘quality of life’ was coined.

Having a high standard of living is no guarantee that one lives a good life. It is important, therefore, to come up with a new yardstick for assessing or measuring a good life. The phrase ‘quality of life’ helps to refocus our perspective and underscore this important distinction.

Some people live a comfortable life, have a high standard of living, and eat expensive food, but suffer from various ailments and illnesses. This is because they conduct their lives incorrectly and live in conflict with nature, giving rise to sickness and disease. Such people eat extravagantly rather than wisely. In this context the term ‘diseases of affluence’ has been coined. Such diseases, e.g. heart disease, hypertension, etc., may be abundant in developed countries while less prevalent in poorer countries.

There is no guarantee that inhabitants of a developed country invariably have good physical health, which is one important aspect of a fine quality of life.

### **Wise Consumption is Skilled Consumption**

Let us look at an example from the monks’ life, whereby a formal Dhamma principle is applied in daily practice.

Especially in former times, before the meal, monks would chant the verses of reflection on food as a reminder. Indeed, mindfulness (*sati*) must be functioning throughout the entire duration of eating, not only at the start of the meal. The reason for beginning the meal with a chant is to bring about a sense of vigilance, to be self-aware and

attentive from the start. Here, the following verses laid down by the Buddha are chanted:

*Paṭisankhā yoniso piṇḍapātaṃ paṭisevāmi*: Having skilfully reflected—having examined with wise and reasoned reflection—I eat almsfood.

*Neva davāya na madāya na maṇḍanāya na vibhūsanāya*: Not for fun, not for indulging in delicious flavours, not for beautification, not for ostentation.

*Yāvadeva imassa kāyassa ṭhitiyā yāpanāya*: For the survival and sustenance of the body.

*Vihimsuparatiyā*: To alleviate hunger and reduce malnutrition, afflictions of the body.

*Brahmacariyānuggahāya*: To support the holy life (*brahmacariya*).

Here we come to a key point. The purpose of the monks' life is to practise the holy life, i.e. to follow the Noble Path. The term *brahmacariya* ('holy life') here has a broad scope of meaning. Speaking more precisely, the purpose of the monk's life is to practise in harmony with the Noble Eightfold Path and to cultivate the threefold training, i.e. to provide the resources for undertaking spiritual work and developing virtue.

To sum up, the act of eating should provide monks with the strength and energy to fulfil their responsibilities, to effectively work and train, to cultivate the qualities of a renunciant, and to develop virtue, mental composure, and wisdom. We consume food as a support in order to live a good life, to develop ourselves, and to increase in virtue.

*Iti purāṇaṅca vedanaṃ patihāṅkhāmi navaṅca vedanaṃ na uppādessāmi*: By such wise eating, former sensations are alleviated, i.e. the distress



and agitation stemming from hunger are dispelled, and new sensations do not arise, for instance one does not feel cramped or stuffed, suffer from colic, or have indigestion, etc. result-ing from overeating or ingesting spoiled or poor quality food.

*Yātrā ca me bhavissati:* And our lives will carry on.

*Anavajjatā ca:* Such consumption is pure, blameless, and faultless.

This means that one is free of harm and ill-effects, free of any reprehensible faults or transgressions. For instance, one does not pursue consumable objects by unwholesome, unscrupulous means. One causes no hardship or affliction to oneself, to others, to society, or to one's natural environment. There is both inner and outer wellbeing.

*Phāsuvihāro cāti:* One lives happily and at ease.

This is the true purpose of eating and the true value of food. It is one of the responsibilities of a monk to reflect on this true purpose of eating before each meal, in order to correctly understand and hold to it.

This is a fundamental moral practice for monks. Newly ordained monks are encouraged to train in these principles from the first day in robes, by reciting the verses of reflection and actively applying these principles while eating.

If one can eat wisely, one recognizes the true objective of eating, which has two benefits:

1. One limits the optimum quantity of food for the needs of the body.
2. One limits the optimum types of food so that one obtains a good balance of healthy food.

At this stage optimum and balanced eating occurs. Wise eating is equivalent to optimum and balanced eating. In Pali this is called *bhojane-mattaññutā*—‘moderation in eating.’

Newly ordained monks are enjoined to train in this vital principle of moderation, which is greatly advantageous to their lives. This is a training in basic virtue (*sīla*), i.e. it is a training in behaviour and conduct in relation to food and to consumption in general. It extends to other things that one uses and consumes, e.g. clothing. One applies a similar reflection in relation to these other objects.

In former days, at the start of the meal, monks would scoop one spoonful of plain rice and place it in their mouths to begin this reflection on moderation. These days one still finds individuals who practise this way, because they have made a skilful habit of it ever since the days they were novices.

When donning the robe, monks reflect: *paṭisaṅkhā yoniso cīvaraṃ paṭisevāmi....*: ‘Reflecting wisely—reflecting with discernment and recognizing its true purpose and value—I use this robe, for warding off cold, heat, biting insects, and for the sake of modesty.’

This reflection reveals the true objective of wearing clothing, whereby one derives its true value and benefit. It induces a training in wisdom. One asks oneself: ‘Why am I wearing this robe?’ and one can confidently answer: ‘Oh yes, of course, it is for this reason.’

When we wear clothes are we deriving their true benefit, or do we wear them primarily as an adornment, to appear smart and attractive and to show off social status? If the latter is true, one buys excessively expensive and lavish clothing but fails to obtain the true value of clothing. Sometimes expensive clothes end up being worthless in any valid sense. One then uses clothing obsessively and undiscerningly.

Many people in today's age are caught up in this obsession with material things. We ramble on about how educated we are, but we fail to apply wisdom. This infatuation extends towards our behaviour in relation to the four requisites; we often use them tainted by craving and heedlessness. In such circumstances how can real training or education progress, since the basic foundations for learning have not yet been laid down?

In regard to the ordinary lay community it is acceptable to make some concessions around an interest in sense enjoyment, beauty, and fashion, but the following principles should be adhered to:

1. As a basis, one should derive and give import to the genuine value and benefit of material things. This principle is essential and should not be compromised, otherwise one's conduct and lifestyle will be faulty and real learning will not occur.
2. As for accompanying so-called substitute or artificial benefits, e.g. delicious flavours, beauty, charm, elegance, etc., one's interest in these should not become so excessive or unrestrained that they cause harm to oneself or others. This is of tantamount importance.
  - A. Causing harm to oneself: here one damages one's physical health, for instance as a result of the food one eats, due to a preoccupation with artificial or synthetic benefits, e.g. delicious flavours or beautification. One may eat until one is bloated or eat toxic foods.
  - B. Causing harm to others: one causes conflict and distress to one's society by competing with or exploiting others or by taking an unreasonable and excessive amount of things for one's own use.

- C. Causing harm to one's environment through wanton consumption, by destroying natural resources and causing pollution.

### **Fostering Kindness and Consideration in Children**

Moral conduct is not limited to the five precepts, which stipulate to refrain from blatant mutual abuse, mistreatment and transgression. The basic forms of virtuous conduct outlined above are also vital, in particular the proper practice in relation to the four requisites.

One should develop a reflective ability when using and engaging with all things. Here, the emphasis is on eating. The act of eating and one's relationship to food is given special emphasis because eating is a prominent activity in people's everyday lives.

As mentioned earlier, if one forgets to reflect while eating, it is also valuable to reflect retrospectively. The monks' chant on retrospective reflection changes to *ajja mayā apaccavekkhitvā*, translated as: 'Having eaten earlier today without proper reflection, may I now reexamine and review; tomorrow I shall redirect attention and reflect with mindfulness.' This chant is used for all four requisites; all four requisites have a corresponding *paṭisaṅkhā yo* chant and an *ajja mayā* chant.

When larger numbers of monks live together this chanting becomes a communal matter and it may be necessary to set down formal procedures to support shared discipline and dedicated practice. For instance, a group of monks may agree to chant the *paṭisaṅkhā yo* chant together before each meal.

Western cultures also practise chanting before the meal, thanking God for the gift of food. In Buddhism, however, the chant is designed to reflect and eat with wisdom, by understanding the true purpose and objective of eating.

If there is thankfulness involved, one may thank one's parents and express gratitude to the faithful lay benefactors who offer the requisites to support the holy life and to fulfil one's responsibilities as a monk without worrying about making a living through some form of commerce.

The Buddha laid down a formal discipline for the monastic sangha, enabling them to live without needing to earn a livelihood. The monks do not need to engage in a money-making profession like laypeople; instead they have the opportunity to undertake their spiritual work. Undertaking spiritual work is in itself the vocation of a monk. It is not true that monks do not have a profession. Their profession is living correctly in line with the Dhammavinaya. This is a pure profession.

Faithful and devoted laypeople wish for the Dhamma to be well-established in the world. They wish for there to be virtuous people in the world, who act as a protection and security for society. In order to support such people they offer food with the wish to protect the Dhamma. They support those who practise and impart the Dhamma, enabling them to sustain life and perform their duties with convenience.

Monks depend on others for their survival. They constantly bear in mind: *paraṇiṭṭhā me jīvika*: 'My existence is tied up with others; I should thus make myself easy to support.'

Being one who is easy to support means not being self-centred and overly demanding, not primarily seeking personal gain or wishing for

others to minister to one's desires. Instead, one consumes things in moderation. One is determined to fulfil one's responsibilities, exert oneself in spiritual training, and share one's accumulated virtue with society.

In Pali, one who is easy to support is called *subhāro*. The abstract noun denoting the state of being easy to support is *subhāratā*. Such a person is naturally kind-hearted and considerate towards others. Being one who is easy to support is considered a cornerstone of spiritual practice. This principle is not limited to the monks and novices. All children should be introduced to it and consider how to apply it in regard to their parents.

They can reflect in this way: 'I am not yet prepared to earn my own living. My parents earn money, taking care of me until I grow up and providing me with an education. They must be fatigued, both mentally and physically. I therefore shouldn't disturb them too much.'

If children learn to apply wisdom when consuming things their lives will truly progress. They will be easy to look after and recognized as children who are genuinely thoughtful and loving towards their parents. And their parents' joy and happiness will increase manyfold.

### **True Contentment is a Rejoicing in Performing Good Actions**

Because monks are prevailed upon to be easy to support, the Buddha also described the supporting principle of contentment (*santosa*).

Monks are encouraged to be content with whatever requisites they have or obtain, including almsfood, robes, dwellings, etc. When laypeople offer such requisites the monks should refrain from asking for more or badgering them and causing annoyance. They should accept just what is enough for providing them with the strength and resources to fulfil their duties.

Contentment helps us to avoid suffering and prevent turmoil in relation to sense objects and consumable things. It also helps us to dedicate ourselves, devote attention, and sacrifice time in performing our respective work free from anxiety and worry.

If people are discontented and dissatisfied with the things they have, and crave for other things to gratify their pleasure, they will be caught up in pursuing excess and luxury. Their time, energy, and attention will be wasted in this pursuit. They will be entirely preoccupied with such thoughts as: ‘Tomorrow, what delicious fare will I be able to eat?’

This matter is especially important for the monastic sangha. If monks are discontent, their spiritual endeavour is completely undermined. But if they can establish contentment they will preserve energy, time, and mental alertness.

Contentment enables us to be happy with only a few belongings. When this is the case, we devote our available time, energy, and attention to performing our work and fulfilling our responsibilities.

The duty of the monks is to cultivate the threefold training. The duty of laypeople is to perform their respective work in society. The duty of children is to commit themselves to their education and learning. By attending to these duties, people’s work and activities proceed well, and the country in which they live progresses. Contentment thus supports true progress and growth.

Many people harbour the misunderstanding that contentment impedes progress. This is because they fail to understand the true meaning and purpose of contentment. In fact, the opposite is true: if people are discontent real progress can not occur.

In any case, acting incorrectly in respect to contentment can indeed obstruct true progress. In such a case, when one is content and satisfied with those things one has obtained, one is complacent. This specious and invalid kind of contentment aims only for pleasure.

Genuine contentment is a delight and rejoicing in performing good actions, a delight in preserving one's time, energy and mental alertness in order to fulfil one's responsibilities. This contentment is used to prepare oneself for using one's time, mobilizing one's strength and rousing one's attention, devoting these resources for making determined effort in spiritual training, performing work, and cultivating wholesome qualities. The Buddha therefore taught the cardinal principle that one should be content with material things yet discontent with wholesome qualities!

Discontentment with wholesome qualities is a virtue. This is an important teaching by the Buddha. He even claimed that his enlightenment resulted from discontentment, from dissatisfaction with wholesome qualities. It is imperative that one continually cultivates wholesome, virtuous qualities until one has reached one's goal.

If monks are discontent with material things trouble ensues. They then go out and bother the laypeople in search of material belongings. Even if they do not disturb the laypeople directly, they may act with deception, for instance by flattery or by bargaining. There are many methods used for seeking material things. In Pali these forms of behaviour are called *anesanā*: 'wrong pursuit.' They are considered 'wrong livelihood' (*micchā-ājīva*) for a monk.

Monks are not even allowed to ask for food from the laypeople. There is a Vinaya rule stating that any monk who verbally asks for food for his own consumption from a layperson who is not a blood



relation or who has not earlier made an invitation commits an offence of expiation (*pācittiya*).

When on almsround the monks must walk quietly and composed. They cannot beg. The faithful laypeople recognize what the monks are doing and make offerings; only in this way may the monks accept food. The only exceptions for making a verbal request are those mentioned above. Blood relations are determined as encompassing seven levels: the same generation of a specific monk, three older generations, and three younger generations. Those individuals who have made a formal invitation (*pavāraṇā*) have earlier made an announcement, e.g.: ‘If you need anything in the future, please inform me.’

Living amidst the wider society the monks should practise a conduct similar to bees, who collect pollen without damaging the flowers. Similarly, the monks should refrain from undermining the faith of the laypeople and depleting their material wealth. This is the proper conduct of monks. The Buddha laid down this principle as a reminder to the monastic sangha.

Besides not damaging the fragrance and colour of the flowers, bees also help to enrich the plants, by propagating them. Likewise with the monks. If they conduct themselves properly, they help to elevate and enhance the minds of the general public, sharing peace and wellbeing with them. The laypeople thus grow and blossom in the Dhamma, in virtue, and in wellbeing, similar to plants who benefit and flourish from the pollination by the bees. This relationship represents the essential maxim of the monk’s life.

## Conclusion

The preliminary principles of spiritual practice underscored by the Buddha are as follows:

1. Sense restraint (*indriya-samvara*): knowing how to skilfully engage with the sense faculties, i.e. the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.
2. Moderation in eating (*bhojane-mattaññutā*): wise and optimal consumption.

When one has established these two principles one is ready to link with the next stage of practice known as:

3. Steadfast application of watchfulness (*jāgariyānuyoga*): traditionally, this term has been defined as ‘endeavouring in the factor of wakefulness.’ Here, one is not eager for sleep and inactivity; one uses one’s time in the most advantageous way. One reflects on those actions that should be performed, on those tasks that should be done in respect to the threefold training. As monks, one reflects on the responsibilities of a renunciant. One then performs these tasks with mindfulness endowed with constant vigilance.

When one has established the foundation of sense restraint and moderation in eating, one’s entire lifestyle will be distinguished by dignity and balance, supporting the undertaking of further spiritual work.

These qualities are then linked with watchfulness and constant vigilance. One uses one’s time constructively for fulfilling one’s responsibilities. One cultivates virtue, concentration, and wisdom, developing oneself through training and practice, advancing on

the Path and bringing goodness to completion, both for oneself and one's society.

Wakefulness is another name for mindfulness (*sati*). Mindfulness pertains to the mind (*citta*)—to focused attention. It is a vital factor in the training of the mind and is classified as part of *samādhi* ('concentration'; 'mental collectedness'). When one is endowed with mindfulness one reflects on aspects of nature with wise discernment. Mindfulness is thus linked with wisdom (*paññā*).

In sum, sense restraint and moderation in eating are aspects of moral conduct (*sīla*). They are linked with concentration and wisdom at the point of watchfulness (*jāgariyānuyoga*).

From another angle moderation in eating (*bhojane-mattaññutā*) already surpasses moral conduct and merges with concentration and wisdom. As mentioned earlier, the act of eating is balanced when accompanied by wisdom, which has been prepared by contemplating and understanding the true purpose of eating.

With this understanding one acts with determination and commitment in those ways guided and dictated by wisdom, in order to generate moderation and balance. This is an aspect of mental training, classified as part of *samādhi*, whereby one makes the mind steadfast, potent and well-poised. Moreover, when one experiences a good quality of life as a result of how one consumes things, one feels delight and contentment, marking another stage of mental development.

One group of people derive pleasure from eating because they experience a gratification of sense desire. When the food is delicious they are happy. Most laypeople fall under this category; they eat in order to gratify sense desire. In contrast, the monks' training encourages people to eat in order to bring about and fulfil a good

quality of life. These are two distinct forms of transaction, with varying objectives.

According to the Buddhist teachings, when we consume things in order to bring about a good quality of life, we experience another kind of happiness, permeated by wisdom. Here, our desires transform from craving (*taṇhā*) to wholesome enthusiasm (*chanda*). Consuming in order to indulge in sense pleasure is called *taṇhā*; consuming in order to generate a good quality of life is called *chanda*. These two forms of desire are at cross purposes.

It is not only the monks who must train in sense restraint—in guarding the eyes, ears, tongue, body, and mind. Laypeople too should train in this principle.

If children can practise according to this principle they will experience self-esteem and self-confidence, because this practice is based on wisdom. When people act with clear understanding they will feel a deep sense of conviction and self-assurance. This differs from confidence based on others' opinions.

It is claimed that the Middle Way (*majjhimā-paṭipadā*) must be applied to all aspects of one's life. But often we do not clearly understand what is the Middle Way. When one discerns and practises according to the principles described above, one can confidently state: 'This indeed is the Middle Way!' For instance, when one consumes things wisely and one's consumption is instilled with moderation and balance, the Middle Way is inherently present.

The Middle Way—the way of moderation and balance—is an integrated form of practice, in which moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) are fully unified. Appropriate external actions, focused attention, and wisdom function

in harmony. If any of these factors are missing integration does not take place.

These factors operate in an integrated and interconnected system, which is precisely the system or mode of how we live our lives. We thus live righteous, blessed, and happy lives.

When we are skilled at consumption and skilled at receiving sense impressions, i.e. we begin to be skilled at living, we can say without exaggeration that our spiritual training has truly begun. At this point we reach a life of virtue and wellbeing, flourishing and prospering in ever greater ways.

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