

Refraining from Eating at the Wrong Time

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We live in an ever-changing world, in which events are overtaking us with such rapidity that we sometimes scarcely know how to adapt to the changing circumstances that frequently confront us. In a shrinking world, things that were once crystal-clear to us no longer appear so, yet without obvious solutions to the problem itself. In the Theravada tradition, it is taught that the Buddha instructed his monks that they should eat only in the morning, and refrain from eating at all other times, which were deemed '*vikala*', or the wrong time to eat. Yet, while this may have been appropriate in the fifth century BC, it may not be so appropriate in the present day, in which monks, especially those of the Theravada tradition, frequently find themselves obliged to travel to other countries, most of which observe different time zones, and all of which brings to question: what precisely we should understand in such circumstances by the term *vikala*.

My aim, therefore, in the present paper, is to discuss the history of, and the intent behind, the rule against eating at times deemed *vikala*, and then proceed to some observations as to how to observe that rule, or *at least seek to violate it* with a minimum degree of culpability.

Shortly after the Lord Buddha's Parinibbana, a prominent elder, by the name of Mahakassapa, convened an assembly of 500 arahant-monks in the Sattapannaguha on Mount Vebhara just outside Rajagaha (modern Rajgir), in northwest India. The meeting was summoned in order to determine what had been the authentic teachings of the Buddha, with the aim of preserving it for posterity. The various details of monastic discipline were provided by Upali, which were then assembled into what is now known as the Vinaya-pitaka. The contents of what is now known as the Sutta-pitaka came mainly from Ananda, who had been the Buddha's personal attendant during the last 25 years of the Buddha's ministry, and who had, therefore, been present on each and every occasion upon which the Buddha had delivered a teaching [or privately, on later occasions - concerning earlier

teachings]. Finally, at the close of the meeting, which has since come to be called the First Council, or Sangayana, all of the teachings agreed upon were recited.

It is interesting to note that Ananda informed the council of an important event that had taken place on the eve of the Buddha's Mahaparinibbana, at Kusinara, in which the Buddha told Ananda that, after his passing, the Sangha could, should it so wish, abolish the minor and lesser rules.

Ananda, however, seemingly failed at the time to ask which particular rules the Buddha had in mind. The Council, therefore, under the leadership of Mahakassapa, unanimously decided that the Sangha should neither abolish, nor alter, any rule that had been advocated by the Buddha himself, since this was felt the best way of preserving the authenticity of the teaching in its unbroken entirety.

The teachings thus unanimously agreed upon at the First Council subsequently became the basis of the Theravada (Doctrine of the Elders), sometimes also spoken of as the Kassapavamsa (the Kassapa Lineage). In this way, the First Council gave substance to the Buddha's statement, shortly before his death, that whatever Dhamma and Vinaya he had pointed out and formulated for them should become their Teacher when he had gone [DN16]. Since then, nobody in the Theravada tradition has, over the intervening 2500 years, ever dared to introduce any new item into the body of the monastic disciplinary rules advocated by the Buddha, nor to revoke any existing ones – let alone innovate any changes to those rules, not even any that might be considered by some as the 'minor and lesser' ones. That is to say, the tradition has throughout, adhered to the decision by the First Council, to retain everything intact.

The Significance of the Vinaya:

When a man becomes a monk in the Theravada tradition, he must shave his head, lead a celibate life, and embark on a life of depending upon little for his existence. At the conclusion of the full ordination ceremony, the newly ordained monk is told by his preceptor of the four 'requisites' or resources, that he can always depend upon. These four are: clothing, food, accommodation, and medicine. In addition, he is allowed only eight possessions – or attaparikkara – three robes, a begging-bowl, a razor, a needle, a water-strainer, and a belt in which to carry these eight requisites. A monk is not allowed to possess any other treasures, such as money, gold, jewelry, or other valuable things, since these are regarded as

temptations that might lead back to the lay life and thus present an obstacle to the spiritual way of life. He is allowed to possess only whatever is needed for the road leading to the attainment of nibbana or ultimate truth.

Moreover, upon full ordination, a monk is taught the 227 monastic disciplinary rules, known as the Patimokkha, to which all monks must adhere, and to which are recited on each full-moon day and on each new-moon day. The penalties for infringement of these 227 rules vary in severity, depending upon whether they are classified as major, medium or minor. The most serious transgressions are those involving sexual intercourse, stealing, intentional killing, and claiming false spiritual attainments. The major ones are known as the four parajikas (defeats) and lead to expulsion from the Sangha. Of the remaining transgressions, the thirteen known as the Sanghadisesa are considered medium infringements, and require that the Sangha be convened with at least twenty monks present. Finally, the minor offences, known as the pacittiya, usually require that a monk confess to some fellow monk not in breach of the said offense of the possession of some prohibited item, which he should then forfeit. An example of a pacittiya offence might be that of a monk who has breached the rules concerned with eating by eating at the wrong time. It has become customary in Southeast Asian Buddhist countries to see two monks turning to face one another and then confess some minor offence in the chapel hall, when they are gathered there for the morning and evening chanting sessions and for listening to the Patimokkha.

The various rules surrounding eating are practical, and seem to come from the Buddha's first teaching, known as the Dhammacakkappavattanasutta, delivered to his five former ascetic companions at Samath. In this discourse, the Buddha suggested that his disciples avoid the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, and adopt instead the majjhimapatipada, or middle path, leading to the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha refused to allow a monk to chew or consume staple and non-staple food at any time he deemed a wrong time (vikala). Seemingly a simple rule, yet one which is giving rise to much consternation in the mind of the monk of today, especially when its breach, even when accidental, or as a result of misinformation, still requires confession of the transgression to another monk.

Traditionally, by vikala, it is understood to be the time from noon and the following dawn. The occasion of 'dawn' is, no doubt, very easy to determine, being clearly discernible even on dark, wet, and windy days. Noon, on the other hand, can

give rise to some uncertainty. Strictly speaking, by noon is meant the moment when the sun reaches the zenith of its daily course through the sky, which may not be the precise moment at which the clock strikes twelve. No doubt, 'noon' would have been equally discernible for monks living the outdoor life in the jungle of ancient India. Not so for his modern, often city-dwelling counterpart who, for practical reasons, generally is obliged to take 'noon' to be 12 o'clock midday, rather than the actual position of the sun overhead.

However, even this is not as simple as it sounds, since these days many monks live overseas, in countries which often introduce daylight savings time. Again strictly speaking, 'noon' is still 'noon' even if at such times the clock should show the time either as eleven or as one o'clock.

Moreover, things today are not as simple as they were in the time of the Buddha when life was conducted at a much more leisurely pace, and when the normal means of transport was walking around on foot. No one could have suspected that, centuries later, people, including monks, might find themselves passing through multiple time zones, as they flew around the world on board international flights.

The problem for the modern period is, therefore, what is meant by 'mid-day', and what 'noon' should a monk traveling on an international flight observe, if he is not to be in breach of the rule, even accidentally, or unknowingly, of refraining to at a time deemed *vikala*? Should he observe 'noon' as understood in the country he is departing from, the local 'noon' below in the country over which he is presently flying, or the 'noon' in the country of destination.

A colleague tells me that he once flew from Delhi to London, during the evacuation of Saigon, on a Pan-American 'hopping' jumbo, which landed en-route first at Karachi, and then at Tehran, Istanbul, and Frankfurt – before finally touching down at London some twelve hours later. The plane, he says, originally took off from Delhi at 7 o'clock in the morning (Indian time), when he was served a large American-style breakfast. When it took off at Karachi, it did so again at 7 o'clock in the morning (Karachi time), when he was again served a large American breakfast. It was also 7 o'clock in the morning when it took off both at Tehran and Istanbul, immediately after which, on both occasions, he was served a large American breakfast. He was therefore, very relieved to find that, when the plane took off from Frankfurt, just before noon, he was served, instead, an even larger lunch.

Four breakfasts and a lunch, all within a twelve-hour flight, and non possibly incurring a breach of the vikala rule, were one to calculate 'noon' as the local time on each stage of the flight.

So the question as how to calculate what is actually meant by 'noon', and thus 'vikala', if we are to retain the spiritual value behind the original Vinaya rule, has become one of increasing significance for the present-day Sangha. There seem to be at least five alternate ways of resolving the issue for a monk traveling overseas:

1. To decline food served during the flight that would result in his eating vikala in the time zone in which he is normally resident, or from which he is departing
2. To adhere to the time zone applicable to the nationality of the plane in which he is sitting – if it is a British plane, he should observe the British 'noon'; if it is an Australian plane, Australian 'noon – as indeed, some monks have suggested
3. To adhere to the local 'noon' in the country over which he is flying at any given time (despite the unexpected consequences this might give rise to, as noted in the story above)
4. To adhere to the time zone of his ultimate destination, from the moment he steps on board the aircraft, since this will be the time zone to which he will have to adapt his routine, once he has arrived
5. Or perhaps, simply decline any food offered while traveling

Clearly, some degree of flexibility is required in interpreting the prohibition on eating vikala; but if we can achieve this without violating either the letter or the spirit of the Buddha's original intentions, so much the better.

It is said, that the Buddha once laid down the four mahapadesas, or the four criteria by means of which one might determine whether, by adopting a given course of action in a situation not anticipated by him, one would still remain faithful to rules actually advocated. We read:

“Monks, whatever I have objected to, saying, ‘This is not allowable,’ if it fits with what is not allowable, if it goes against what is allowable, that is not allowable for you.

Whatever I have not objected to, saying, ‘This is allowable,’ if it fits in with what is allowable, if it goes not against what is allowable, that is allowable for you.

And whatever I have permitted, saying, ‘this is allowable’ if it fits in with what is allowable, if it goes not against what is allowable, that is allowable for you.

And whatever I have not permitted, saying, ‘This is not allowable,’ if it fits in with what is not allowable, if it goes against what is allowable, that is not allowable for you.”

Perhaps, the fifth option above, that of simply declining any food offered while traveling, is the one which above all others guarantees that there will be no breach, or transgression, of the rule against eating vikala. However, this may not always be practical, in which case a monk should give some consideration to the other four possible courses of action, all of which seek to prevent eating vikala. And in this we may have to borrow something from our Mahayana friends and try to exercise a little upayakausalya [Pali: upayakosalla], or *skillful means*. That is to say, each of the above other four proposed solutions may be acceptable under certain circumstances, but unacceptable under others. If it is impractical for a monk to adopt the fifth, completely blameless solution – since there is, to my knowledge no compulsion in the Vinaya that a monk should eat when he does not wish to do so – then he will have to exercise caution, tempered by wisdom, in deciding which of the other four alternative courses of action are, if still technically in breach of the rule against eating vikala, at least the best option open to him, and the least censurable, during a period in the world’s history in which we have no clear guidance.

[Editor’s comment: Perhaps better explored would be: Is the monk blamelessly-eating five large meals within twelve hours – under scrutiny from laypeople or other seated neighbors – observing the monk’s over-indulgence and sensual-fulfillment? If the monk adopts ‘mindfulness’ – establishing his departure and arrival times for the ‘traveling period’ and only taking appropriate meals, during a ‘travel day’ – because: clearly, not eating for a 24 hour-day might bring on illness, and eating five times in twelve hours is excessive. Learned monks are taught to eat in moderation, thus one might eat a single breakfast and refuse additional meals, thinking: “Nutriment was already eaten to sustain the body today, further food should be declined.” In this respect, any philosophical speculations are put to rest, and the monk has not broken any rule. Additionally, modern airlines can provide meals pertaining to the individual needs of most customers – eliminating ‘ignorance’ from the mind of the hungry-troubled monk.]