

FOOD CONSUMPTION IN THE SAUNDARANANDA-MAHAKAVYA

Sudaporn KHIEWNGAMDEE¹, Phramaha Boonkerd PANYAPAWUTTHI^{1*} and Somkhuan NIYOMWONG^{2*}

1 Department of Pali and Sanskrit, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand; sudaporn_khiewngamdee@hotmail.com (S. K.); poom630@gmail.com (B. P.) (Corresponding Author)

2 Chaiyaphum Buddhist College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand; Somkhun.niy@mcu.ac.th (Corresponding Author)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 28 April 2025

Revised: 12 May 2025

Published: 29 May 2025

ABSTRACT

The Saundarananda-Mahākāvya is one of Aśvaghoṣa's most notable works in Sanskrit literature. It describes the love story between the Venerable Nanda and the Sundari. There are 18 chapters in this Mahākāvya, each chapter contains many interesting and useful topics that are worth studying and considering. The researcher is particularly interested in analyzing the dietary practices as taught by the Buddha in Chapter 14 of this work, namely the discipline and practice of eating the right amount of food, as well as comparing it with modern medical studies. This article is a documentary research, based on the study of the Saundarananda-Mahākāvya, the Tripitaka and other related articles and theses. The results of study were found that Aśvaghoṣa composed the advice on carefulness in food consumption, with the Buddha teaching the Venerable Nanda in the story. In this regard, it is believed that it was influenced by the Doṇapāka Sutta in the Tripitaka, which is a Sutta in which the Buddha taught King Pasenadi of Kosala about the matter of moderation in food. Aśvaghoṣa composed this useful teaching in beautiful and attractive Sanskrit verse. In the story, the Buddha taught that eating food is to satisfy hunger, to prevent disease, and to sustain the body. Excessive consumption causes drowsiness, discomfort, fatigue, disease, and even death. Insufficient consumption causes the body to lack nutrients and energy for work. Nowadays, most human illnesses are caused by food intake, such as obesity, acid reflux, diabetes, high cholesterol, etc. Therefore, we should eat food with prudence.

Keywords: Food Consumption, Saundarananda-Mahākāvya, Doṇapāka Sutta

CITATION INFORMATION: Khiewngamdee, S., Panyapawutthi, B., & Niyomwong, S. (2025). Food Consumption in the Saundarananda-Mahakavya. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(5), 99.

INTRODUCTION

The Saundarananda-Mahākāvya is a Sanskrit poem that tells the story of Nanda, the half-brother of the Buddha. The story begins with a description of the city of Kapilavastu, the king, the Tathagata, the love of Nanda and Princess Sundari, and the unwilling ordination of Nanda because he missed his wife. The Buddha therefore uses a trick to calm Nanda's grief by taking him to see the city of heaven. On the way, he saw a blind monkey. Lord Buddha compared the beauty of Sundari to that blind monkey. When they reached heaven, Lord Buddha compared the beauty of the apsaras (aerial nymphs) to Sundari. When Nanda saw that the blind monkey was uglier than his wife, but also that the apsaras were more beautiful than his wife, he desired to possess her. Lord Buddha then advised him on a method of practice to achieve what he wanted, which was meditation. Later, when Nanda practiced the Dharma that the Buddha taught, his mind became calm, steady, and steadfast, and he lost his lust and desire for the apsaras. He eventually attained enlightenment (Arahantship).

This Saundarananda-Mahākāvya is a literary work of the type Padya-Śravya-Kāvya, which means it is a poem composed entirely in verse. One thing that tells us that this piece of literature is the Mahākāvya is the text that appears at the end of each section, such as the text “saundaranande mahākāvye kapilavāstuvarṇaṇo nāma prathamaḥ sargah”. Considering the entire story, we can say that this work is without a doubt the Mahākāvya according to the criteria set by the Dāṇḍin.¹ This story of Saundarananda is based on an ancient story that the author did not make up. It is a story that describes the nobility, family, city, love, entertainment, and the attainment of the highest goal. The story contains literary sentiments, has a good plot and uses beautiful language. In addition, it also has clarity about the four purposes of life (purusārath): the pursuit of worldly pleasures (kāma), the pursuit of wealth (artha), doing good deeds according to religious principles (dharma), and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (mokṣa). (Samniang Luemsai, Ph.D., 2000: 8)

The author of the Saundarananda-Mahākāvya is Aśvaghoṣa. He was born into a Brahmin family and was an expert in the Vedas. He later converted to the Sarvāstivāda sect of Buddhism. According to the final record of the Saundarananda-Mahākāvya, he was the son of Suvarṇākṣī and he was a monk from the city of Sāketa. His titles included Bhikṣu, Acārya, Bhadanta, Mahākavī, and Mahāvādin.² Aśvaghoṣa is believed to have been a contemporary of King Kaniṣka of the Kuṣāṇa, who ascended the throne in 120 AD. (Vincent A. Smith., 1967: 272) He is thought to have lived between 80 and 150 AD. (Patrick Olivelle, Suman Olivelle., 2005: 24) Apart from the Saundarananda, Aśvaghoṣa also wrote many other important works on philosophy and religion, such as the Buddhacarita, the Sūtrālankāra, Śariputraprakaraṇam, such as the Buddhacarita, the Sūtrālankāra, Śariputraprakaraṇam, Vajrasūcī³, etc. However, it is not clear in which year Aśvaghoṣa composed the Saundarananda.

The Saundarananda-Mahākāvya is divided into 18 chapters with a total of 1,066 verses. Aśvaghoṣa wrote the purpose of writing this story at the end that he aimed to show the essence of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In addition, readers will gain a lot of knowledge and benefits to apply in their daily lives. For example, in Chapter 9, titled “Madāpavāda” (the elimination of intoxication), it talks about restraining the body, emotions, and mind to always be stable. In Chapter 13, “Silendriyajaya (Sīla and the Restraint of the Indriyas)”, it describes how to conduct and live a successful life. In Chapter 14, “Ādiprasthāna” (The Basic Steps of Practice) it describes how to eat and how to alleviate sleepiness, etc. The researcher would like

¹ For the rules and characteristics of the dāṇḍin's Mahākāvya, see (T.K. Ramachandra Iyer ,1977 : 65-66 and A.B. Keith, 1966 ; 92).

² āryasuvarṇākṣīputrasya sāketakasya bhikṣorācāryabhadantāśvaghoṣasya mahākavermahāvādinah kṛtiriyam : (E.H. Johnston, 1975 : 142).

³ Vajrasūcī was composed by Aśvaghoṣa with a clear attitude against the castes system of Brahmanism. Cited in : M. Winternitz, Ph.D., 1985 : 265).

to select useful practices from the scripture to study and analyze, such as the method of consuming good food, which the poet has inserted in Chapter 14. Therefore, the researcher will study the practices on the issue of “Food consumption” from the poet’s ideas to find the answer to where the poet was influenced and how it is beneficial to the readers.

Research Objectives

- 1) To study the methods of food consumption in the Saundarananda.
- 2) To study the methods of food consumption as stated in the Tripitaka and current methods

Scope and Delimitation of the Research

This is an analytic study of the method for food consumption as stated in the Saundarananda was conducted from Chapter 14, titled “ādiprasthāna” (First Steps of Practice). The source materials used in the study are Mahākāya Saundarananda by Aśvaghoṣa, translated by Samniang Luemsai, Ph.D., published by Paetmuengsiphaphrathammakhan Foundation in 2000, and The Saundarananda of Aśvaghoṣa edited by E.H. Johnston, published in 1975 by Motilal Banarsi Dass. Moreover, there are the Pali Tipitaka and other related documents

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is an interdisciplinary documentary research, including Pāli Language, Sanskrit Language, Buddhist Studies, and Medical Science, as following:

- 1) Search and collect data from the primary sources, i.e., The Saundarananda.
- 2) Search and collect data from the secondary sources, i.e., The Tipiṭaka, and other scriptures, and related documents.
- 3) Collect and analyze the data, report the results in the descriptive form.

Expected Outcome

- 1) To know the method of consuming food to benefit the body in the Saundarananda.
- 2) To be able to apply the guidelines of the method of consuming food in the Saundarananda, Tripitaka and medical documents to benefit health.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Chapter 14 of the Saundrananda has 52 verses in total, and about 19 verses describe how to eat food to sustain life, to satisfy hunger, not for luxury or intoxication. Excessive appetite will cause harm to the body. In this regard, it is believed that Aśvaghoṣa was influenced by some of the suttas of the Tipitaka written in Pali. Since Aśvaghoṣa, who was born into a Brahmin family, had true faith in the original teachings of Theravada, each of his works closely resembled the beneficial teachings of the Tipitaka.

In the Tripitaka, volume 15, there is a chapter called “Doṇapāka Sutta”, a Sutta on moderation in food. The story goes that King Pasenadi of Kosala of Sāvatthī felt uncomfortable after eating. He went to see the Buddha. The Buddha knew about this and spoke this verse at that time: “A person who is mindful at all times and knows moderation in the food he eats, that person will have less suffering, will age slowly and have a long life.” After that, King Pasenadi summoned “Sudassana Manava” (servant) and ordered that whenever he ate food, he should tell Sudassana Manava this verse to him and he would reward him. Following this verse of the Buddha, King Pasenadi became healthy.⁴ From this Sutta, the Buddha teaches us that consuming too much

⁴[364]sāvatthiyam viharati ... tena kho pana samayena rājā pasenadikosalō doṇapākasudham bhuñjati | atha kho rājā pasenadikosalō bhuttāvī mahassāsī yena bhagavā tenupasaṅkamī upasaṅkamitvā bhagavantam abhivādetvā ekamantam nisīdi |

[365] atha kho bhagavā tam rājānam pasenadikosalām bhuttāvīm mahassāsim viditvā tāyam velāyam imam gātham abhāsi
manujassa sadā satimato
mattam jānato laddhabhojane
tanukassa bhavanti vedanā

will make the body uncomfortable and cause physical pain. We should live our lives on the middle path, as the Buddhist proverb says, “Bhojane mattaññutā: Know the amount of consumption.” Consuming in moderation allows us to survive and work without difficulty. Consuming in excess will lead to illness.

The content of the method of consuming food in the Saundarananda is the same as in the Doṇapāka Sutta, except that in the Saundarananda, the Buddha taught Nanda in Sanskrit verse, while in the Doṇapāka Sutta, the Buddha taught King Pasenadi in Pāli. Aśvaghoṣa has composed these useful teachings in beautiful and easy to understand language. Here are some examples of verses in Chapter 14, verses 1-7:

And so using the floodgate of awareness to close a dam on the power of the senses, / Know the measure, in eating food, that conduces to meditation and to health. // 14.1 //

For it depresses in-breath and out-breath, and brings tiredness and sleepiness, / When food is taken in excess; it also destroys enterprise. // 14.2 //

And just as eating too much conduces to a dearth of value, / So eating too little makes for a lack of efficacy. // 14.3 //

Of its substance, lustre, and stamina; of its usefulness and its very strength, / A meagre diet deprives the body. // 14.4 //

Just as a weighing scale bends down with a heavy weight, bends upwards with a light one, / And stays in balance with the right one, so does this body according to intake of food. // 14.5 //

Therefore food is to be eaten, each reflecting on his own energy, / And none apportioning himself too much or too little under the influence of pride. // 14.6 //

For the fire of the body is damped down when it is burdened by a heavy load of food, / Like a small blaze suddenly covered with a big heap of firewood. // 14.7 //⁵

From the verses in the Saundarananda that have been given as examples, it is said that eating too little food will cause the body to lack nutrients, the body to be weak, lacking energy, and not being able to work effectively. However, eating too much food will cause difficulty breathing, discomfort, and drowsiness easily. Therefore, we should take the middle path, eating food to eliminate hunger and for the sake of living, consuming in moderation to avoid disease and for good health.

saṇikam jīrati āyu pālayanti |

[366] tena kho pana samayena sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadikosalassa piṭṭhito ṭhito hoti | atha kho rājā pasenadikosalo sudassanam māṇavam āmantesi ehi tvam tāta sudassana bhagavato santike imam gātham pariyāpuṇitvā mama bhattābhīhāre bhāsa ahañca te devasikam kahāpaṇasatam niccabhattam pavattayissāmīti | paramam bhoti kho sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadikosalassa paṭissuṇitvā bhagavato santike imam gātham pariyāpuṇitvā rañño pasenadikosalassa bhattābhīhāre bhāsatī

manujassa sadā satimato

mattam jānato laddhabhōjane

tanukassa bhavanti vedanā

saṇikam jīrati āyu pālayanti |

[367] atha kho rājā pasenadikosalo anupubbena nālikodana paramatāya sañthāsi | atha kho rājā pasenadikosalo aparena samayena susallikhitagatto pāñinā gattāni anumajjanto tāyam velāyam imam udānam udānesi ubhayena vata maṇ so bhagavā atthena anukampi diṭṭhadhammikena ceva atthena samparāyikena cāti | : (Syāmaraṭṭhassa tepitākam,.., 2013 : 118-120).

⁵ atha smṛti-kavātena pidhāyendriya-sarīvaram /bhojane bhava mātrā-jño dhyānāyānāmayāya ca // 14.1 //

prāṇapānau nigr̥hāti glāni-nidre prayacchatī /kṛto hy atyartham āhāro vihanti ca parākramam // 14.2 //

yathā cātyartham āhārah kṛto 'narthāya kalpate /upayuktas tathātyalpo na sāmarthyāya kalpate // 14.3 //

ācayaṁ dyutim utsāham prayogaṁ balam eva ca /bhojanam kṛtam atyalpariṁ śārīrasyāpakarṣati // 14.4 //

yathā bhāreṇa namate laghunonnamate tulā /samā tiṣṭhati yuktena bhojyeneyarūtathā tanuḥ // 14.5 //

tasmād abhyavahartavyaiḥ sva-śaktim anupaśyatā /nātimātraiḥ na cātyalpariṁ meyaiḥ māna-vaśād api // 14.6 //

atyākrānto hi kāyāgnir guruṇānnena sāmyati /avacchanna ivālpo 'gnīḥ sahasā mahatendhasā // 14.7 // :

(Johnston, E.H, 1975 : 96)

Lack of mindfulness in eating often causes us to eat too much, which has negative effects on health and may lead to various diseases in the long run, such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, etc. Eating mindfully and carefully will help you improve your eating habits to be healthier and sustainable. You don't have to focus on your weight or shape just to lose weight, but you should focus on your normal lifestyle. (Siriraj Piyamaharajkarun Hospital. 2024, August 26) The author would like to mention some verses in the Saundarananda which say that we eat food to satisfy hunger, not for the sake of beauty of the body, not for intoxication, and not for luxury, and we should be careful in our eating.

Excessive fasting, also, is not recommended; / For one who does not eat is extinguished like a fire without fuel. // 14.8 //

Just as one who is wounded, for the purpose of healing, puts ointment on a wound, / So does one who wills freedom, for the purpose of staving off hunger, eat food. // 14.11 //

So food should be eaten, consciously, / Neither for display, nor for appearance; neither to excite hilarity, nor to feed extravagance. // 14.14 //⁶

In medicine, besides stress and environment, food is considered an important factor that causes physical deterioration. According to the free radical theory, it is a substance that causes deterioration or aging called an oxidant. Every human body has this substance. The normal mechanism is to have antioxidants to destroy. If there are too many oxidants or too few antioxidants, the process of destroying oxidants will create a chain of free radicals, which continuously cause inflammation in the body. Therefore, it makes us age. Excessive oxidants come from junk food, fast food and another harmful substance is AGEs (Advanced glycation end products) found in foods with protein or fat and sugar such as bacon, condensed milk, non-dairy creamer, sausage, barbecue. Eating too much of it will cause you to age very quickly. (Nalinee Yingchankul, Assoc. Prof. 2024, February 23) Therefore, we should follow the Buddha's teachings on consuming in moderation. This will make us age slowly and live a long life.

CONCLUSION

In the Saundarananda, there are 18 chapters. Each chapter contains a lot of interesting content. For chapter 14, the topic of food consumption, which is mentioned in this article, emphasizes the importance of consuming food in moderation. Do not eat too little to the point that the body lacks nutrients, and do not eat too much to the point that it has negative effects on health. Eating too much makes the body feel uncomfortable, drowsy, and not lively. In modern medicine, it is believed that consuming too much food will cause the body to receive substances that are harmful to the body and lead to illness, as the saying goes, "You are what you eat." Therefore, we should follow the Buddha's saying found in the *Doṇapāka Sutta* of the *Tipitaka*: "A person who is mindful at all times, who knows the moderation of the food he receives, will have less suffering, will age slowly, and will have a long life." This saying is still very modern and useful.

SUGGESTION

Stories in Sanskrit and Pāli scriptures have many interesting points for researchers to study and explore. When we consider studying and analyzing any issue, we should consider the benefit of the readers first. What benefits will the readers of our work gain for their daily lives?

⁶ atyantam api saṁhāro nāhārasya praśasyate /
anāhāro hi nirvāti nirindhana ivānalaḥ // 14.8 //
cikitsārthaṁ yathā dhatte vraṇasyālepanaṁ vraṇī /
kṣud-vighātārtham āhāras tadvat seyyo mumukṣuṇā // 14.11 //
evam abhyavahartavyam bhojanam pratisarikhyayā /
na bhūṣārthaṁ na vāpuṣe na madāya na dṛptaye // 14.14 // : (Johnston, E.H, 1975 : 97)

Researching Buddhist scriptures, which are stories from the past that span thousands of years, still has many interesting contents and issues, such as meditation, keeping the precepts, eliminating anxiety, treating illnesses, creating peace, etc. The author sincerely hopes that new researchers will study and research these interesting issues to provide the greatest benefit to people in the present era.

REFERENCES

- Johnston, E. H. (1975). *The Saundarananda of Aśvaghoṣa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass.
- Keith, A. B. (1966). *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Nalinee Yingchankul, Assoc. Prof. (February 23, 2024). *How to eat? Slow down aging*. Retrieved from <https://www.cmu.ac.th/th/article/148d706c-3961-4d06-b081-33bbb0cc6924>.
- Patrick Olivelle, & Suman Olivelle. (2005). *Manu's Code of law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ramachandra Iyer., T.K. (1977). *A Short History of Sanskrit Literature*. Madras: Bharathi Viyayam Press.
- Samniang Luemsai, Ph.D. (2000) *Mahakab Saundarananda*. Bangkok: Foundation of Paetmuensiphan phrathammakhan.
- Siriraj Piyamaharajkarun Hospital. (August 26, 2024). *Mindful eating*. Retrieved from <https://www.siphospital.com/th/news/article/share/mindful-eating>.
- Syāmaraṭṭhassa tepiṭakam. (2013). *suttantapiṭake samyuttanikāyo (sagāthavaggo) Vol. XV*. Nakhon Pathom: Mahamakuta-Raja-Vidyalaya Press.
- Vincent A. Smith. (1967). *The Early History of India*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Winternitz, M., Ph.D. (1985). *A History of Indian Literature Vol. II*. New York: Russell & Russell.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. This is a fully open-access article distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).