

SŪKARAMADDAVA, THE BUDDHA'S LAST MEAL

John D. Ireland

From the earliest times the nature of this dish, *sūkaramaddava*, which was the Buddha's last meal and associated with the sickness the Buddha suffered at the time, has been the subject of continuing controversy. *Sūkara* in Pāli means a pig or young hog, and *maddava* means soft, tender, succulent, etc. The Commentaries give various speculations: the tender parts of a pig carefully prepared; or a soft-boiled rice dish; or a plant or mushroom loved by pigs (hence it was translated by Rhys Davids as 'truffles'¹); or again bamboo shoots trampled by pigs, etc. It has also been suggested that the dish was an infusion of an alchemical elixir prepared by Cunda, the (gold-)smith. Thus the meaning of *sūkaramaddava* has never been settled.

It is possible that it was purely a local dish or perhaps, more likely, the name was a dialect word unknown to the compilers of the Canon and retained for want of an equivalent in Pāli. So, for some reason, such as its symbolic or traditional importance, because signifying an important event during the last days of the Buddha's life, this word, approximating to *sūkara-maddava* in Pāli was retained.

Another possible explanation of the word which has, so far as I am aware, never been suggested, is to read *sukara* instead

1 *Dialogues of the Buddha* II, the translation of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. A modern variation of this theory is that it was a dish of psychedelic mushrooms! Nāṇamoli, in his anthology *The Life of the Buddha* (BPS), chooses the perhaps literal 'hogs' mincemeat'.

of *sūkara*. By the simple expedient of shortening a vowel this compound word would have a slightly different meaning. *Sūkara* means 'well-made', 'well-prepared', and the idea of 'pig' or 'hog's flesh' would disappear². Combined with *maddava* it could be interpreted as a dish that was 'made well softened', that is to say, 'easily digestible' and thus suitable for an invalid and saying nothing about its actual ingredients. However, even if *sūkara* was an ingredient the commentators still state its preparation involved a certain care, which suggests the idea it was intended as something special. That the devas too are said to have infused it with heavenly essences is significant and together with the care taken in its preparation also suggests it was, perhaps, a special sacrificial offering³.

If Cunda the smith was aware the Lord was suffering from a stomach or bowel upset, from dysentery⁴, it would be considerate of him to prepare a meal suitable for someone in that condition. There is no need to jump to the conclusion, because

2 Thomas has pointed out that if 'pork' was originally intended it is curious that the word for flesh or meat (*mamsa*) does not occur and Pāli is usually very precise in these matters. See E.J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha in Legend and History*, p.149.

3 It was for this reason that it was made unsuitable for another to eat and that the Buddha advised Cunda to bury the remainder in a hole. Not, as John Stevens naively suggested, because there was actually something wrong with the food (see John Stevens, 'What did the Buddha Eat?', BSR 4, 1, 1987). The procedure for the disposal of food consecrated by being offered to the Buddha was either to bury it or put it into water with no living creatures. See the *Kasibhāradvaja Sutta* (Sn p.15) where the offering of milk-rice smoked and steamed with sacrificial heat when put into water after first being offered to the Buddha and rejected by him.

4 The *Udāna Commentary* suggests the illness was *visūcikā*, which the dictionaries say is cholera.

of subsequent events, that the meal was the actual cause of the Buddha's sickness, as has been thought⁵. He could well have been suffering from the illness prior to the meal⁶. All that is said is that shortly after eating the food the Buddha had an attack of violent pains, passed some blood and then recovered somewhat, deliberately suppressing the pains by an act of will and mindful endurance. Then, after accepting a drink of water, he continued the journey to Kusinārā.

Thus this special dish, prepared for the Buddha because he was unable to eat ordinary food, may have helped by acting as a purge. That the Buddha subsequently says that Cunda the smith should feel no remorse because the last meal was received from him, again need not imply that it was the cause of the sickness. Possibly the remorse of Cunda was that his food did not result in a complete recovery, but we know it was already settled the Buddha would pass away even before his arrival at Cunda's dwelling. The Udāna Commentary actually suggests that Cunda prepared the food with the purpose of prolonging the Buddha's life.

These ideas are also supported by the Milindapañha (p.175), where Nāgasena says the food was good for the digestion (*jaṭher 'aggitejassa hitam*) and the Buddha did not pass away because of it, but because his life-force was spent.

5 Mrs Rhys Davids' 'fatally indigestible truffles', referred to in her introduction to Woodward's translation of the Udāna, 'Verses of Uplift', and her *Manual of Buddhism*.

6 The Buddha is indeed recorded as having fallen ill during the last rains-retreat in an earlier part of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D II, p.99). This was some time before the Cunda episode which must have taken place shortly after the retreat ended.