# The sweetest of offerings

Posted on
A compound of butter, jaggery, ghee and honey, Chathu Madura, the finished product, sits in the middle

**The words ‘Chathu Madura’ summon up ideas of purity, sublimity and sweetness. Few today can explain, however, what Chathu Madura actually is. And fewer still know the ingredients required to prepare it. This traditional Buddhist offering is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.**

**Words** Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Vishwa Tharmagulasigham and Isuru Upeksha

Chathu Madura offered here to the Buddha is no longer a common sight

Chathu Madura is associated almost exclusively with Buddhism,  as one of the most eminent *poojas*, or offerings, presented to the Buddha. For Buddhist monks, it is also one of the very few types of nourishment permitted all the time, as monks are bound by a rule that forbids solid food at certain hours of the day, known as Vikala Bhojana.The mists of antiquity shroud the origins of Chathu Madura, but, taking into account the ingredients as well as the opinions of historians, it seems fairly clear that it was first prepared in ancient India.

Chathu Madura translates as ‘the four delicacies’. Those used today are ghee, jaggery, honey and butter, but historians believe that the original Indian recipe called for a fifth ingredient: sesame oil. Sri Lankans did away with the oil, which was not a great favourite with them.

Chathu Madura is prepared with great care. Not only the cooking utensils but the surroundings and the clothing of those preparing the food should be spotlessly clean. Masks and even a special white canopy are also usually recommended. The recipe seems simple enough, but perfecting it takes a lot of experience.

Chathu Madura has many Ayurvedic properties. Honey is an all-purpose treatment for all types of diseases. In particular, it helps those with weak digestion, and provides energy. It also strengthens the white blood cells to fight bacteria and viral diseases. Ghee, smooth and nurturing, is said to aid longevity and makes one’s

voice soft and melodious. Jaggery, a healthy substitute for sugar, aids digestion. Rich in iron, important vitamins and minerals, it also offers an instant energy boost. Butter too, despite often being cast as a villain today, is full of vitamins and prevents tooth decay and gastrointestinal infections. It nourishes the tissues of the body, stimulates the appetite, and is very effective against piles and hemorrhoids.

Yet Chathu Madura is fast becoming a folk memory. If it survives today, it is only on the margins. Often, when something called Chathu Madura is offered, it is simply a tray with the four ingredients laid out separately. There are even instances when chocolates and toffees are offered instead. These practices not only corrupt tradition, but also violate the rule of not partaking of solid food during Vikala.

The near extinction of Chathu Madura is a sign that a millennia-old agrarian Buddhist tradition is sadly drawing to a close.

- First, chop the butter into small pieces, and grate the jaggery.
- Heat the butter and add the ghee.
- The jaggery is sprinkled with water and heated separately.
- After the jaggery has melted and come to the boil, add the ghee and butter.
- As the mixture thickens it should be taken off the heat and stirred well. Once it is cool, add the honey.
- The resulting concoction has a colour similar to that of jaggery and keeps for about a week.
- According to traditional thinking, the best Chathu Madura should taste equally of all four ingredients, with no one flavour dominating.
- Each of them is said to endowed with many Ayurvedic properties.



