

Beyond Inter-eating

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In Pali the word for enjoying something is the same as the word for eating it. When you're enjoying a mind state, you're feeding on the mind state. If you enjoy a relationship, you're feeding on the relationship. And as the Buddha points out over and over again, to be in a position where you have to feed is to be in a position where you have to suffer. And not only are you suffering, but the people or whatever it is you're feeding on suffers as well. We've got to keep this point in mind: that as long as the mind needs to feed, it's causing suffering. And the greatest act of kindness both to yourself and other people is to put it in a position where it doesn't need to feed.

We tend to forget this. We think that sitting here meditating, trying to get the mind under control, is a selfish thing because we don't see how other people benefit. But actually it's one of the kindest things you can do, because if the mind is in a position where it needs to feed that means it needs a constant food source. And if you don't get the food source you want, you start scrambling around trying to find another food source, and at the same time you feel threatened, fearful. And we know what the mind does when it feels threatened and fearful: its stupidest things, most heartless things, thoughtless things, mindless things.

Someone did a study of prisoners, people who tend to live in fear not only while they're in the prison, but also when they're out on the streets in a position where they feel fearful, threatened, and commit their crimes. They did brain scans of these people and discovered that they don't use their frontal lobe very much. The lizard brain is more in action because once you're in fear, that's the part of the brain that takes over. In a situation like that, when you use the frontal lobe it's basically to rationalize what you've already done: the decisions that the lizard brain made. So the frontal lobe is there for rationalizations; it's not for reasoning. Reasoning is basically the thinking you do before you make a decision, the thinking you do that actually weighs things as to whether they're right or wrong, wise or unwise. That kind of thinking can happen only when you're not feeling threatened.

So think about it, what state is your mind in? Is it in a position where it has to feed? If so it's going to feel threatened at some point or another because all our food sources are limited, whether physical food or emotional food, mental food. If you let the mind continually feed on its thoughts, it's developing bad habits. It's in that feeding mode. So what you've got to learn how to do as a meditator is to feed in a new way, in a way that eventually gets the mind into a position where it doesn't have to feed anymore. You have to strengthen it.

First you have to have the conviction this is something you can do, that you have it within your power to strengthen the mind in this way—in other words, that your actions and decisions really do make a difference. This conviction is what gets you started on the path. And it gives you strength you need to get started. Until you start seeing results, you need to operate on the principle of conviction, because the path requires effort and persistence. You've got to stick with it because the mind has its old habits and it's easy to slip into its old habits.

You meditate for a while and things aren't going well, and you want to give the mind a hit of whatever pleasure it's used to feeding on. When that happens, you have to keep reminding yourself, no, come back, come back, come back to the breath. This is where mindfulness comes in: to keep reminding you that sitting around and thinking about whatever kind of thought you like to feed on—whether it's thoughts of kindness or thoughts of anger; skillful thoughts or unskillful thoughts—you're continuing the mind's old habits. It likes to take on an identity in these thought worlds, and that taking on an identity is precisely what needs to be fed.

So you try to develop a new identity: the meditator who's mindful, who's heading in a different direction. This is an identity that needs to be fed as well, but it's one of those identities that ultimately leads in the right direction. So keep reminding yourself, "Come back to the breath," so you can be in a position where you can watch those thought worlds, pull yourself away from them. The stronger your mindfulness, the more you get into good solid states of concentration. Again this is a skillful kind of feeding. You're feeding on the sense of ease, on the sense of rapture and refreshment that can come in the concentration. It's good food and relatively harmless. Blameless. There's nothing unskillful about it. If you can feed on this, that takes a lot of the weight and pressure off your relationships with other people, which is why concentration is an act of kindness. You're not feeding on them in the same way. You've got a better source of food inside, a more reliable source of food inside.

And it's one that can allow you to watch this process of how a thought world arises in the mind, and how you take on an identity in that thought world. Where it is that you make that decision to slip into this different world as you move out of the world of the breath and the world of the body into the world of your thought? Why do you do that? How does it happen? You've already got some practice in pulling yourself out of these thoughts simply as you develop mindfulness and concentration. But the concentration allows you to see them even more clearly as processes. You see how they form; you can see how they disband. You see the precise points where you're making a decision to move in and continue creating more and more form and feeling and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness in that thought world, all of which involve taking on an identity—which in turn takes a lot of food.

So only when you see the harm of that process do you realize this is what you've been doing all along. Your interactions with other people have been a kind of feeding. We don't like to think about it but interbeing, the idea that we're all connected, basically comes down to intereating. We feed on other people. Even when we're nice to them, we feed on them. And the feeding seems to come first. The niceness comes second.

This is why I see so many cases of people being nice to people in the ways they want to be nice to them, but without much thought as to what the people on the receiving end really need. It's only when you don't have to feed on people that you can really see what they need, and provide it if you can.

So these five strengths that provide food for the mind also bring it to the point, ultimately, where it sees through the need to feed; sees something even more lasting in which you don't take on a state of being, which means that you don't need to feed. There is one verse in the Canon where they talk about

feeding on nibbana. You feed on it freely in the sense that there's no cost, there are no drawbacks—you're not harming anybody, you're not harming yourself, you're not harming other people. But most of the descriptions that discuss the issue of feeding with regard to nibbana say that it's a state of no hungering. You don't need to feed at all, because you're not taking on the identity in that thought world or in the world outside.

This is why meditation is an act of kindness. You're putting the mind in a position where it doesn't have to be threatened by a lack of food, because you don't need food. And even on the path, you're developing sources of food inside that require less and less and less from other people, and place less and less of a burden on yourself, less of a burden on them. So that you're less likely to be coming from that part of the lizard brain that always wants to feed, and is afraid when there's no source of food around. So that the more reasonable part of your mind can continue reasoning and not just rationalizing what you've already done. You reason about what you see as the proper thing to do in the future, or here in the present. That's the proper use of that part of your brain, but you can use it that way only when there's no sense of threat, no fear.

So when you start wondering what you're doing for the world sitting here enjoying pleasant sensations in the body—well, you're feeding on the pleasant sensations in the body, which means that you're not having to feed on other people. That in and of itself is something of a gift, but it also puts you on the path where you can go to a more advanced level, where ultimately you don't even need to feed on these pleasant states of mind, pleasant states of the body. They're helpful and they're harmless, but the most harmless thing is a mind that doesn't have to eat, doesn't have to feed, doesn't have to enjoy things, doesn't have to indulge in things, because it has everything it already needs.

This way you're not only placing less of a burden on other people; you're also providing them with a good example: that it is possible not to feel threatened, not to feel fearful—not because you suppress your fear, but you put yourself in a different position entirely. You find a different position entirely, a position that nothing else can assail.