

Chew Your Food Well

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The mind has a habit of feeding on things. And for the most part its feeding habits are pretty bad. It feeds on all the wrong things and it suffers as a result. Like a person who just takes anything at all and stuffs it in his mouth: He's sure to damage his digestive system and his body as a whole.

But the feeding of the mind is much more complex than the feeding of the body. The mind tries to feed on sensual things, but they don't give any satisfaction. It tries to feed on becoming this or becoming that, and whatever it becomes doesn't last very long. Then it gets all disgusted with the whole thing and wants to destroy everything, so it feeds on the idea of destruction. When it doesn't have anything left, it has to start all over from scratch because it still needs to feed. It hasn't gotten over the need to fill the big gaping hole it feels inside. Part of the Buddha's genius was to realize that there are other ways of feeding the mind, skillful ways that bring it to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. That's what the path is all about: It's a different way to feed.

The word for feeding and clinging are actually the same in the Pali: *upadana*, the things you cling to as sustenance for the mind. And basically what the Buddha has us do in the path is to take our old habits of feeding and apply them in new ways. We still hold on for a while, we still cling for a while, but it's not quite the same as the clinging that causes us to suffer. In other words, we don't hold on to these things as ends in and of themselves. We hold on to them as a path, as tools.

The Buddha allows for a certain amount of sensual pleasure on the path. He tells you look at your practice: If you see that when you indulge in certain pleasures it doesn't harm the mind, then they're okay. Some sensual pleasures, he says, are out of bounds. They can't be skillful by *any* stretch of the imagination. But in other cases, it really depends on the individual: Some people find that they can meditate perfectly well in busy surroundings, whereas other people have to go off and live in the forest. Some people find that they can eat a nice moderate diet without any problem, while other people practically have to starve themselves. It's really an individual matter. But even when you starve yourself, the Buddha doesn't have you totally starve yourself. It simply means that you eat less than you normally might like—for, after all, the body *does* need food to keep going.

The same with the other forms of clinging, such as attachment to views: As the Buddha points out, there's right view. Right view starts as an understanding about karma. And it's interesting to note that when the Buddha talks about karma, the first two things he focuses on are gratitude and generosity. If you don't see the virtue, the value of gratitude, if you don't see the value of generosity, it's hard to do anything else on the path. You have to appreciate the good that other people have done for you, and see that something really good does come from being generous. Generosity is not a sham. It's one of the things that makes life worth living. If you don't appreciate the good that other people have done for you, the ways they've been generous, how are you going to be generous yourself? How are you going to be a good person? This is why the Buddha has you reflect on generosity and gratitude as the very basis for any kind of practice.

From that point, right view moves on to an understanding about suffering: why we suffer, how we suffer, what we can do to put an end to suffering. That kind of view is a useful tool because its very nature is not to be taken as an end in and of itself. It's a means to put an end to suffering. It's a good view to feed on, a good view to apply as a tool.

The same with clinging to habit and practices: The Buddha wasn't just talking about rituals. Any type of practice, any type of precept, any kind of habit, if you take it as an end in and of itself, is a kind of clinging and therefore suffering. But in the path of practice, we have precepts, we have practices, we develop good habits: You practice concentration, you maintain the precepts, as means to an end because these kinds of precepts and practices really do nourish the mind. They strengthen you. If you know that under no circumstances would you ever kill, under no circumstances would you ever steal, there's a very strong sense of self-worth that comes from that knowledge. If someone were to come and offer you a million dollars to lie and yet you could say no, that means you've got a precept that's worth more than a million dollars. A great sense of self value comes with that, and that's an important food for the mind. It really strengthens the mind to have a precept, to have a practice like that.

And even views of the self. The Buddha doesn't have you totally drop any view of what you are or of what kind of self you've got. You can create a sense of self as a strategy in lots of skillful or unskillful ways, and he recommends the skillful ones. Being generous, being virtuous, following the path, meditating: These require a sense of self that's responsible, a sense of self that can practice deferred gratification. Then when that sense of self has taken you as far as it can—you realize it's a strategy and there are times when that strategy doesn't work—you drop it and move beyond it. But again, we need that kind of strategy to get anywhere on the path.

So the Buddha teaches you to hold on to things as part of the path. The image he has is of a raft. You use the raft to get across the river. When you've gotten across the river, you don't need the raft anymore. But while you're still on the river, you need the raft. Otherwise you drown. So make sure that this raft you're taking here is well lashed together. This is why we spend so much time practicing the concentration—because it's the centerpiece of the path. Only by holding onto a good state of concentration can you get across the river.

So, where's your concentration right now? How do you develop it? You give the mind something good to focus on, like the breath. If the breath isn't enough, you can add the word "*bud-dho*" together with the breath: "bud" with the in-breath; "dho" with the out. *Buddho* means "awake." No matter what else happens—there may be the sound of traffic or music off in the distance, or pains in your legs, or whatever—don't let that deter you. Don't let that distract you. Just stay here with the breath. Those other things don't really destroy the breath. Even though there may be noises off in the distance, you've still got the breath right here. It's simply your choice: Where are you going to focus your attention? Focus it on something good. Focus on eating good food, not on junk food.

And do your best to give yourself a good foundation. Of all the different elements of the path, concentration is the one the Buddha most often compares to food: a sense of stillness, a sense of well-being that you can create here in the present moment. It is a creation, it is something put together—which means that it's not the goal of our striving, but it certainly is the path to that goal.

So just stay with the breath. *Feel* the breath and the process of breathing. Where do you feel it? Where do you notice it? Where can you see most vividly: "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out"? Well, focus right there. And then allow that part of the body to feel comfortable. You may notice that at the end of a breath it tends to feel squeezed or strained. That's a sign that the breath is too long. If you've been breathing in and don't quite feel full, allow the breath to get longer. Learn to experiment. What feels good right now? What feels right for the body right now? What feels right for the mind? That makes the breath a lot more interesting—and more useful as well. If you can create a sense of well-being in the present moment, it's a lot easier to stay here for the whole hour.

As you settle down with the breath, you begin to notice other parts of the body as well. You begin to realize that the whole body can be involved in the breathing process. There's energy throughout the whole body. So make a survey of the body to see where there's tension: Is there any tension related to the in-breath? Are you holding on to tension with the out-breath? Where? In your hands? In your feet? Well, let them relax.

You're working on your raft here, so make sure that it's a good raft. You don't want it to fall apart in mid-stream. Have some pride in your workmanship. The more attention you pay to the breath, the more you can feed off it, the more solid your foundation is, then the more trustworthy your raft. So think back on any skill you've ever developed in the past and apply the attitudes that worked there to this skill, here. Pay careful attention to what you're doing. Try to notice even the *slightest* stress that you're causing, the slightest tension that you're creating in the process of breathing; and learn to let go of whatever is causing that tension or stress.

If you find that that's too much to focus on right now, just stay with any spot in the body where you can keep tabs on the breath and try your best to make it comfortable right there. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing: "Okay, what kind of breathing *really* feels good right now?" You're the one who decides. So experiment. Deep breathing might feel good for a while and then you decide that it doesn't feel so good anymore. Well, you can change. Pay attention to what you're doing with the breath. As with any craft, the more you pay attention to what you're doing, the better the results are going to be. And this raft you're working on will become a good solid raft, one that doesn't fall apart when the currents get strong—the kind of raft that can get you all the way across.

If you want to think of the concentration as food, okay, chew your food well. In other words, pay really close, careful attention to what you're doing. Don't just try to gulp it down. Choose good food, chew it well, and you'll find that it gives you the strength you need. You don't have to go feeding in other ways. You're learning new habits here, new ways of feeding the mind. And as with any change in diet, in the beginning it may be a little hard, it may feel a little unnatural, but as you get used to eating health food, you reach a point where you look back at the old junk food you used to love and you realize you can't stomach it anymore, because the health food really does make your body feel better and stronger. You realize that you craved junk food because you didn't know any better. The junk food created the sense of lack that made you crave more and more junk food. It was a vicious cycle. But now you're getting out of that cycle. You've got an alternative. Instead of gobbling down sensual pleasures, getting sick of them and then trying to trash everything, you've got an alternative way to feed, one that doesn't cause any harm to anybody.

Ultimately you get to the point where you don't have to feed anymore. The raft gets you all the way over to the other side. That's when it has done its task and you can really let go. But in the mean time, as long as you have to hold on, hold on to good things. That's the only way you're going to get across.