

Good Eating

July 31, 2008

You may have noticed that when babies come across something new, they don't engage in useless questions. They don't ask, "What is this? Does it really exist?" They look at it for a bit and then they stick it in their mouths. They know the important question is: Is this good to eat?

And that's an important point to keep in mind, because that's what a lot of life is all about: eating. The Buddha starts out his questions to the novice: What is one? And the answer: All beings subsist on food. That's how you're identified, how you create your identity, how you define yourself: as how you eat. And so the question is, not, "Are you creating a true identity, or are you living a false identity?" In other words, the question is not, "Who are you?" The question is, "Are you eating well? Is the way you eat satisfying?"

And *eating* here, of course, doesn't mean just eating physical food. It also refers to consuming mental food. How do you find gratification in the mind? What ideas, what sensory contacts are really gratifying? It's in the course of trying to find gratification in your mental and physical eating that you develop a sense of who you are. If it's not gratifying, it's not that you've assumed of false identity, it's just that you've been eating in the wrong places or eating in the wrong way. So the question is not, "Who am I?" but, "How am I eating? And if I don't like the way that I am eating, how can I change?"

The Buddha has a lot of answers here. The question of "Who am I?" he says is a wrong question. It gets you tied up in a tangle of views, a writhing of views, a jungle of views, a thicket of views, and you can never work yourself free. But if you ask yourself, "Where am I looking for pleasure? Where am I looking for gratification in my life? How do I deal with this hunger I seem to have all the time?": Those are worthwhile questions. And the Buddha's ultimate answer, of course, is nirvana. When you reach nirvana, there's no more hunger, there are no more questions, just total satisfaction.

But how do you get to that point of no hunger? You watch the mind to see how it's feeding. Where does it look for gratification? Does it look for gratification in the approval of other people? Does it look for gratification in taking advantage of other people, or somehow beating them out? Proving that you're better than other people? That kind of feeding is junk food. It's harmful for you, harmful for the environment around you.

You want to look for a way of feeding that's totally harmless, that really does give some solid gratification. This is why the Buddha said that the beginning of wisdom is when you ask someone who knows, "What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, you're going to learn to feed off of your actions, and you try to feed off actions that give long-term gratification, rather than just a short, nice, burst of flavor in the mouth, and then lots of problems when the food gets down into your stomach and intestines.

The Buddha's basic answers to that question are: generosity, virtue, and meditation. A sense of gratification that comes from generosity, realizing that you're able to share, you have enough to share. Even when you're materially poor, you can share your strength, you can share your knowledge, you can make a gift of your forgiveness—and the pleasure that comes from giving in these ways is good, solid food. You're not harming yourself; you're not harming anyone else. And it's the kind of pleasure that, when you think back on it, feels good. You get more pleasure out of it. It's like an investment that keeps yielding returns, a gift that keeps on giving.

It's not like a lot of your sensual pleasures—that is, once you've consumed them, that's it: That's all the pleasure you're going to get out of them. Many times they bring pain in their wake. You think about the less than noble things you did in order to get those pleasures and you feel bad about that. Or if it's a pleasure you've had once, and you're not going to have it again, you regret the pleasure, you miss it. So those kinds of pleasures really hurt over the long term. But the act of generosity is something that you can feed on for a long time.

Recollection of generosity, recollection of the gifts you've given in the past, is actually a form of meditation. It's useful for the days when the meditation seems dry and you begin to wonder if you're ever going to get anywhere with the breath. You can think back, "Well, I do have these good things in my background, these good actions that I've developed in the past." And that right there is food for the mind. It strengthens you. It gives you the conviction that you can do this, that you are a worthy person.

Virtue is also a good form of food for the mind. When you make up your mind that you're not going to harm yourself, you're not going to harm other people, and you stick to that promise that you make to yourself, you can look at your actions and see no reason for regret. You're creating a zone of safety around yourself. As the Buddha said, virtue is a type of gift. If you stick to your precepts in all situations, you're giving universal protection to all beings. And you have a share in that universal protection as well.

Recollection of your virtue is another form of meditation. It, too, is food for the mind. You can think back on times when you were tempted to break your precepts, and you said No. You realize you had the opportunity to harm somebody, and you might have gotten away with it, but you said No. Again, there's a great sense of self-worth that comes from that reflection. It gives you energy on the path.

And then, meditation itself is food for the mind. You start out with thoughts of goodwill and spread them to all beings. It feels good to be able to wish that, realizing that there is a level of the mind where your happiness doesn't have to interfere with anybody else's happiness. You're looking for happiness inside, and you wish that all other beings can find happiness inside, too. When you think about their good qualities, that gives you energy to develop good qualities yourself. And you feel good about the way you're feeding. You don't have to feed off of other people in a way that damages them, you don't have to go into denial that you've damaged them, you don't get tied up by regret. You're learning what it means to feed blamelessly.

Even more so when you get the mind into good, solid states of concentration. The Buddha actually compares these states to types of food. The first jhana, he says, is like water. The second and third jhanas are like rice and beans. The fourth jhana is like honey, ghee, butter. When you learn how to nourish the mind in this way, you find that the feeding is a lot more gratifying.

And the question of "Who am I?" gets put off to the side. You find there will be a sense of "you" that develops around these practices, but that it's secondary. Your main focus should be on the practices themselves, and the sense of well-being that comes from them. The sense of "I am" that develops around these: Eventually you're going to have to let that go.

But in the meantime, you'll find there are skillful and unskillful identities that you can develop around this kind of meditation-eating too. The skillful identity is simply: "Other beings can do this, why can't I?" And as you see that you are able to do that, it gives you a sense of self-worth, responsibility, self-respect. The unskillful "I" you might develop around this is, of course, when you start comparing yourself to other people, telling yourself, "I'm better than these other people, I've got the first jhana, they don't have any jhanas" — as if the jhanas were like baseball cards you can collect. We're not in a feeding contest. If you learn how to feed skillfully, that, in and of itself, should be gratification enough.

So remember that the question, "Who am I?" is a useless question. "Have I taken on a false identity? Do I have a true identity?" Those questions are beside the point. The real question is, "How am I feeding right now? And do I feel

gratification, do I feel real satisfaction in the way I feed? If not, are there better ways to feed?" Those questions are worth asking, and the Buddha has good answers. But the important thing is that you learn how to make those answers your own.