Feed the Hungry Mind

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If you ever read any Western philosophy, and then some ancient Indian philosophy, you notice that they’re operating on very different models. Western philosophy is mainly concerned with how the world looks like to your sense of sight. Input comes in through the eyes, and then you have to do some building and some constructing to make sense out of it. But the initial impulse is passive; you’re on the receiving end. Whereas in Indian philosophy, they’re more concerned about eating. You start out active, you’re looking for food, you’re hungry. They talk about different food sources and how to maintain a safe food source in this life and the next. The Buddha follows in with that second pattern, with a big difference. He talks about not only feeding, but also what you do to have to find your food and to fix it. He basically says the whole process is the essence of suffering. He’s not going to tell you to stop feeding because you’d starve. He teaches you to feed in a new way. Instead of clinging to the aggregates just for their own sake, for the sensuality you can get out of them—states of becoming—you turn them into a path. And you feed on them as you turn them into a path. But you turn them into a path to something that takes you to a place where you are not no longer hungry. You no longer need to feed. So you’re going to be fixing your food with knowledge as opposed to ignorance. That’s the big problem. We fix our food in ignorance, which is why we suffer. But with knowledge, of course, we don’t know to begin with. We have to listen to what he has to say. But we learn from following his instructions. It’s like he’s teaching us how to cook in a new way, how to fix our food, what kind of food to look for, how to fix it the proper way. There are a lot of “shoulds” in his teachings, because our present moment experience is very much constructed. The raw material comes from our past karma. These are the ingredients we work with. He’s teaching us how to cook in right ways and wrong ways. It’s ironic that so many people think that the Buddha didn’t teach any “shoulds.” I sat in on a class one time when a teacher was explaining the Garuṇya-metha-sutta. The first word, Garuṇya, means “this should be done” by someone who is skilled in aims. In other words, you know what you’re going for. Someone raised his hand. I thought Buddhism had no “shoulds.” I took the poor teacher a whole morning to explain how there could be “shoulds” in Buddhism. But it’s full of “shoulds.” “Duty.” That’s what the Buddha talked about with his Four Noble Truths. The big teaching has duties. Garuṇya, “what should be done.” There’s a verb form that ends in -attabha, attabho, kattabho, “this should be done.” Dattabho, “this should be given.” Sikhitabhang, “this should be trained in.” Shuddh, shuddh, shuddh. The Buddha treats us as active beings. He’s simply teaching us how to act in new ways so that eventually we get to a place where we don’t have to act anymore, the karma that puts an end to karma. But be very clear on the fact that the Buddha is telling us how to do things properly. He’s not simply saying, “Well, this is the nature of reality, and do with it as you like.” Of course, he’s not forcing anybody to do things the way he recommends. And some people misread that to think that he maybe wasn’t really all that confident that what he knew was right. But no, the reason is very different. He knew he had found the right way. So there’s no need to force anybody. The only force, of course, is the fact that you’re suffering. And he’s pointing out that you don’t need to. You’re free to keep on looking for food, fixing your food, as long as you want. You can do this on and on and on. You’ve been doing it for who knows how long. Keep on doing it if you want, when there’s an opportunity that you don’t need to do that. It makes sense to give it a try, because there is a lot of suffering involved. Like a hummingbird I saw in the North Rim one time. It was flying from flower to flower to flower, little tiny, tiny flowers with a little tiny bit of nectar in each flower. And you wondered if the amount of energy that was expended was actually compensated by the nectar. But as long as we’re hungry, we keep on looking for food in these ways. This is our problem. Our hunger distorts our vision. We see the world. We see the world through the eyes of hunger. And things that are not really edible suddenly look like you could eat them, because you need something. So the Buddha is trying to take us out of that desperate situation. It’s like someone who’s teaching us how to cook. There are many, many ways that you could cook a particular piece of food. But some ways are better than others. And there are some that you want to avoid entirely. The dangers of overcooking, the dangers of undercooking. That’s our life. We keep falling into those dangers. He’s trying to point out that there’s a way out. You reach something that is not influenced by the eyes of hunger. It’s not seen through the eyes of hunger. The knowledge that comes with awakening has nothing to do with feeding at all. You’ve arrived at a spot where there’s no more hunger. And it doesn’t need to be fixed. It doesn’t need to be kept. You don’t have to worry about how much longer that state of non-hunger is going to last. That’s what he offers. So think about the Buddha’s shoulds. Realize that he’s offering us some really good advice on how to do a better job of what we’ve been doing all along, which is assembling our experience at the present moment, each present moment, as it comes. There’s a way to put that food together. There are skills in eating. They’re all laid out in the Noble Path. So take his advice. He’s offering it freely. And see if what he said is true. He’s not trying to simply describe things to us as if a philosopher might have. He’s trying to tell us how the world is constructed. He’s showing us a way to end our hunger, to end this constant drive to keep on feeding and finding food, fixing food, worrying about when the next meal is going to come from. He pointed out that this drive that was recognized in ancient Indian philosophy is actually suffering. They thought that this is how you found happiness, by finding food. He saw that, no, it’s making you suffer. And there’s a way you can fix your food and eat your food, so that you can come to the end of food, because you don’t need it anymore.

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