

Feeding on Feeding

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There's a saying in Thailand that if you haven't suffered, you usually don't go to a monastery, or you don't go to stay. This is one thing we all have in common: We're here because we see that ordinary pleasures are not enough. We've all suffered in one way or another and we've said we've had enough of that. We want to get past our suffering. Some people have a certain pain in their lives, so that when that particular pain gets assuaged they stop practicing. Other people see that the suffering is built into the way we live, the way we function, so the problem goes deeper than that. Those are the ones who stick around.

And an important part of learning how to put an end to suffering is comprehending it. As the Buddha said, this is the duty with regard to the first noble truth. When you look at the way he defines the noble truth, you realize that the issue is not in learning the words, because he doesn't really define suffering, he just gives some examples and throws it back on you: Where is your suffering right now?

Then, at the very end, he says every form of suffering has something in common with all other forms. It's the five clinging-aggregates: the form clinging-aggregate, feeling clinging-aggregate, perception clinging-aggregate, fabrications clinging-aggregate, consciousness clinging-aggregate. People have often asked: Where did the Buddha get this analysis? Because you don't see it in any pre-Buddhist teachings. He mentions it in his first discourse, explains a little bit more in his second, and the people that were listening gained awakening.

So what was he referring to? Someone once asked me, "Suppose you're looking at a tree. Explain the aggregates involved in the process of looking at a tree." That's a very Western kind of question. We think of philosophy as describing what happens when you look at something. In Indian thought, though, the basic action that they're always trying to explain was eating. I think this is one of the best ways of getting to know the aggregates: to see how the aggregates function in eating. Because it's a very integral part of the experience we all have: We're hungry, we look for food. We've got a body, that's form right there, and the feeling of hunger: That's the feeling aggregate. So we go looking around: That's fabrication. We find something, it looks good: again, the feeling aggregate. But we remember we've seen things in the past that look good, so we have to run this past the other things we've eaten in the past, to see what it lines up with. This is the function of perception, the labels you have in mind, the things you recognize. You come across a red mushroom, it looks good, but you remember that red mushrooms are deadly, so you put it aside. Then you come across other things that may not look so good,

but you remember, “This is actually good food.” There’s that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin says, “Who was the first person who squeezed something out of a cow’s udder and said, ‘Boy, I want to drink that?’” Good question. But this is what we grew up on. So the purpose of perception is to remind us that you can’t always trust your first glance. You have to remember what’s edible and what’s not.

Then, of course, there’s the question that once you found something edible, what do you do with it? There are a lot of things that require a lot of preparation. The Thai translation for fabrication fits in right here: *prung taeng*—this is what you do with food. You *prung taeng* it, you fix it up. That’s what fabrication is all about: how you put things together, the activities that you engage in in order to make something edible. Consciousness, of course, underlies all these things. You’re aware of the form or the feeling, or the perception, or the fabrication.

So this is probably the best way to get a handle on the aggregates. These are the activities you engage in as you go around looking for food. This, of course, relates directly to the clinging part of the aggregates. The clinging also means the act of feeding: You’re feeding off these activities. The body feeds off the food, but the mind gains pleasures out of these activities because it’s found that this is how you survive, this is how you take in parts of the world and make them part of yourself. That’s what eating is all about: taking what’s not-self and making it self. The mind gets pleasure out of the feeling, and the perception, and the fabrication, the whole thing. You can sit here and fantasize about the food that you’re going to fix tomorrow or the food you’re going to eat tomorrow: It’s all part of the same fabrication process. And even before we put the food in our mouth, we’ve fed off of the anticipation, and there’s an enjoyment that goes into actually fixing the food.

Of course, you realize that it’s not always an enjoyable process. Sometimes you can’t find the food that you want, or you come in at the end of the day and you’re really, really, tired, and you’ve got to fix a meal, and there’s no fun in fixing that kind of meal. And yet we keep coming back to these processes because we need them in order to eat.

This is why so much of the meditation goes against the grain, because the Buddha is asking us to reverse the process, to stop feeding off of these things, both the actual physical food and the enjoyment we get out of the processes around the act of eating. Instead of taking something that’s not-self and making it self, he’s having us look at these things that we’ve assumed to be self and reverse the process: Realize that it’s not-self, not just the physical food you take in, but also the activities themselves.

But you can’t jump straight from one side of the equation to the other, which is why we practice meditation. As you get the mind concentrated, you’re learning how to use these aggregates in a somewhat different way: You make them a path. And in the process of bringing the mind into concentration, you’re going to be dealing with the same

aggregates: the form of the body, which is the breath; the feelings of pleasure and pain that you find in the breath; the perception of breath, with which you find that as you manipulate it, you experience the breath in different ways. Then, of course, there's the fabrication: If the breath doesn't feel good, what are you going to do to make it feel better? The same way if you don't like raw eggs, what are you going to do to cook them? Then there's the consciousness of all these things: All of this is your food on the path.

The Buddha makes that analogy very clear in his image of the fortress. Discernment is the wall of the fortress, covered with plaster so the enemy can't get any footholds or handholds on it. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper, who remembers, using perception, who's friendly and who's not, i.e., which activities are skillful and which ones are not. That way you let in the friendly people and keep out the unfriendly ones, the enemies. You act on your skillful intentions and you're mindful not to act on the unskillful ones. The soldiers inside are your right effort, and the food for the soldiers and the gatekeeper are various states of jhana. You gain a sense of well-being as you fix the mind in the same way that you would fix food. As you feed off of that sense of rapture and pleasure, it gives you a lot of energy.

So the Buddha doesn't have you starve. He just teaches you a new way to eat—the difference here being that as you feed on the path and develop the qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, these become strengths. Ultimately, they get so strong that they bring the mind to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. This is the part of the practice that really lies outside of our normal experience. Everything we experience up to this point is a kind of feeding. But to think of the mind that doesn't need to feed: That's something that really stretches the imagination. So it's important that we learn how to keep our imagination stretched in that way. There is a possibility of a happiness that doesn't have to feed on anything at all, doesn't have to ingest anything, doesn't have to fix anything up. That's what we're aiming for.

So you might find it helpful to think of the aggregates in this way. These are the activities that go around feeding in all its various forms. These are the things we're going to have to learn how to let go of. But you can do it only by comprehending them, both by getting very familiar with how you go around feeding on pleasure in the normal way, and learning how to train yourself to feed on pleasure in terms of right concentration. There's a passage in the Dhammapada saying that arahants have comprehended food. This is what it means. You've comprehended the aggregates, you've comprehended the act of feeding. And when you get to the point where you don't need to do that anymore, then they say that your path cannot be traced.

Some people like to think about nibbana as a total wiping out of any kind of consciousness of anything. But if that were the case, the Buddha wouldn't have described

it the way he does: a path that cannot be traced. If it were a wipe-out, it would be very easy to describe. So it's good to get your imagination stretched a little bit and to realize that going beyond this process of feeding, which has been our source of pleasure for who knows how long, would be a good thing. After all, feeding has not only been a source of pleasure, but also a source of pain. To be in a position where you have to feed is painful. It's the Buddha's definition of suffering. You have to comprehend it. Ultimately, the only way you're going to fully comprehend it will be to go beyond it. And this is the only path that will take you there.