

Feeding Off the Future

November 19, 2013

The reason we're meditating, training the mind, is because the suffering that stabs at the mind is the suffering we create for ourselves by the attitude we bring to things. Now this doesn't mean that the world outside is all perfectly okay and that the only problem is that our minds are poorly trained. The world outside can be pretty miserable. People do cruel things, heartless things, thoughtless things. They take advantage of one another. It's not a pretty sight out there. But you can't feed on that.

When the Buddha points to the act of clinging as being the suffering, as being part of the cause of suffering along with craving, the word he uses— *upadana*— can also mean to feed. The mind feeds on all kinds of stuff. The question is, "How are you feeding? Why are you feeding in that particular way?" Sometimes it's because you have a lack of skill. What we're trying to do as we meditate is give the mind better places to feed. Ultimately, we want to get to a point where we don't need to feed anymore, but until we get there, the mind needs its nourishment.

Because the path is not a short one. As the people for whom the path is short, the Buddha taught them a long time ago. We're the leftovers. But we shouldn't let ourselves get discouraged by that fact. Just realize that it's going to take time, and we need all the good nourishment we can get to keep going.

The factor of the Buddha's path that's most directly related to nourishment is concentration. You learn to feed off a sense of well-being, even rapture, refreshment, that can come from being with the breath and allowing the comfortable breath sensations to spread through the body. You want to be able to tap into the sense of nourishment that comes from within, as often and as consistently as you can. But that's not our only nourishment.

There are actually five qualities the Buddha talked about as strengthening the mind. They start with conviction: conviction that our actions really do make a difference. We have to hold onto this belief because there are times when we'd like to do some really unskillful things, and the mind is telling us all kinds of unskillful things, and we have to be able to say No, because if we give into that temptation, there's going to be suffering down the line. Conviction is what keeps us from giving in—because there are times when you can't immediately tap into any nice concentration on the breath. That's when you need something else to keep you going. And part of it is knowing there's going to be good food down the line.

It's like when you're traveling across a desert. You can be weak and hungry. But

if you're convinced that there's good food, or at least some kind of food—our experience in the desert recently was there wasn't any good food for monks, they eat at the wrong time—but at least there's some food to keep us going. When you know that there's food coming down the line, you can more easily put up with hardships, tighten your belt a little bit. And learn to keep yourself in good humor by remembering that you won't be starving for long, you won't be hungry for long. There will be an end to this suffering.

There's that story of the British explorer who went across northern Canada. He was the first Englishman, as far as we know, who actually gave himself over to a band of Dene to guide him across the Northwest Territories. Later he wrote up his experiences, and he said one of the remarkable things was that the days when they were hungriest were the days that they joked the most to keep themselves in good humor. Rather than allowing the different members of the band to focus on how hungry they were, they kept laughing and joking. And that made the hunger a lot easier to take.

So you've got to figure out some way to encourage yourself, to keep the mind in a good mood. This is why gladdening the mind is an important step in the meditation. And one of the ways you gladden yourself is reminding yourself that your actions really do make a difference. You're not here just stuck in a bad situation where there's nothing you can do about it. Even though there may be limitations on what you can do, you always have the opportunity to do the skillful thing, say the skillful thing, think something skillful. And that will be your food down the line.

Even though the refreshment and the nourishment and the rapture may not be coming immediately, the simple fact that you're convinced that there will be something good coming down the line gives you energy right there.

Because the mind is not like the body. The body can't feed off of anticipation but the mind *can*. And that's what gives it the strength to keep going. So conviction is an important way of nourishing the mind.

This leads to persistence. When you have that kind of nourishment from conviction, it makes it easier to stick with something. Because, again, the path doesn't always give its rewards immediately or as quickly as we'd like it to. But that doesn't mean it's not going to give the rewards. Simply that we have more work to do than we thought and that it's going to take longer.

So you try to draw on your resources. Combine your conviction with mindfulness. Mindfulness is what reminds you of what's skillful, what's not skillful, what happens when you act on skillful intentions, what happens when you act on unskillful intentions. You want to keep that in mind—along with anything

else you can remember that gives you energy and gives you nourishment. For instance, you can think about times in the past when things looked bleak and then all of a sudden they went well.

It's also good to remind yourself of times when you let yourself feed on unskillful thoughts or engage in unskillful activities, and of the bad results that came about. You want to keep that in mind as well too, as a warning that spurs you on. This is why mindfulness is said to be like a goad. It's not food all the time. Sometimes it's a goad—it sticks in you. But at least it gives energy.

The real nourishment, of course, comes from concentration. That's another one of the strengths—that, combined with discernment. Discernment is where you see where you're weighing yourself down unnecessarily. Again, think of yourself traveling across a desert. If you've got a huge load on your back, you need to take it off your back and sort through it: "What here is going to be necessary and what things can I have to leave behind?" If you load yourself down with everything you think you need, you find that you can't go very far. So you've got to learn how to trim down your load. When your load is lighter, it's easier to walk long distances.

So look at where you're weighing yourself down with unnecessary problems, unnecessary unskillful thoughts. And if the unskillful thoughts keep coming up in the mind, you've got to remind yourself: You don't have to play along with them. If you play along with them, that's when you're carrying them. If they just happen to come in through the force of old karma, okay, they're there and you don't have to get involved with them. That discernment right there— realizing you don't have to carry these things, you don't have to get involved— can lighten your load considerably.

So if, as you're sitting here meditating, you find that other thoughts are coming in and don't seem to go away, give them just part of the room, and you go to sit in another part of the room. They can chatter as much as they want, but you're not going to get involved in the conversation. You're going to stay here with the breath. Because the fact that they're chattering is not destroying your breath. The breath is still there. You can focus on it as much as you like. It's just that you have to be careful. Don't give in to the temptation to straighten out those members of the committee, because they'll pull you in.

Like the tar trap that the Buddha talked about: When they used to catch monkeys, they put tar on a stump. The monkey comes up and sees something soft and black, wants to figure out what it is. So he touches it with one hand: that hand gets stuck. So he uses the other hand to pull the first hand off: that gets stuck. He uses one foot to pull it off: that gets stuck. The other foot: that gets stuck. And then finally bites it: his mouth gets stuck. And that's the end of the

monkey.

In other words, there are some kinds of thoughts that, the more you chase them away, the more they come back and ensnare you. So one of the ways in which discernment can lighten your load is to remind yourself, “Okay, the thoughts may be there, but I don’t have to feed on them, I don’t have to get involved.” And if you don’t have the immediate pleasure that comes from the breath—although it is very useful to have that skill that you can tap into some pleasant breathing whenever you need it—but if for some reason you can’t, keep yourself going with the conviction that you will have the chance to settle down at some point. And you’ll have really good food then.

As I said, this is one of the differences between the mind and the body. The body can gain energy only from things that it’s already eaten, but the mind can gain energy from anticipation—and from the realization that you have extra resources that you may not be using properly. So, try to lighten your load and focus on what things can make you strong right now. What kind of thinking can make you strong? Where in the body is there a little excess bit of energy that you haven’t tapped into yet? Feed on that.

So, as you go through the world, you’ll see that there are times when it’s a really unpleasant place, but you don’t have to let that fact weigh the mind down. If you do, it makes it harder to go on the path. Use it as encouragement, as a spur to remind you that you’ve got to get across the desert. And make use of whatever resources you have that you can think of, that you can take with you—so you can finally reach the oasis where the mind can let down its burdens and have a sense of true well-being.