

A Concentration Diet

October 9, 2019

There's a series of questions and answers that the Buddha used to teach the Dhamma to young novices. It starts with: "What is one?" "What is two?" "What is three?" and it goes all the way up to, "What is ten?" For example, "What is four?" The four noble truths. "What is five?" The five aggregates. "Eight?" The noble eightfold path. The most interesting answer, though, is the answer to, "What is one?" And that is, "All beings subsist on food." And here when the Buddha says "food," he means both food for the body and food for the mind.

Food for the mind includes things like contact at the senses, consciousness at the senses, and intentions. Our mind feeds off of these things. This is why when people go into sensory deprivation tanks, the mind starts getting really weird. It's starved for food. And just as food outside can be either healthy or unhealthy, there's also healthy and unhealthy food for the mind. Especially with the intentions: Our mind has a tendency to feed off of unskillful intentions, and even though they might be delicious, they're like some kinds of unhealthy food in that they lead to trouble down the line.

So we have to learn how to eat properly by finding the right kinds of intentions. But even then, as long as the mind is in the position where it has to eat, it's going to suffer. As the Buddha said, suffering is the five clinging aggregates, and the word for clinging—*upadana*—can also mean to take sustenance, to feed. When you're in a position where you have to feed on things, no matter how good they are, you're in an unstable position, always concerned about how much longer your source of food is going to last, dependent on things that are often outside of your control.

The Buddha's solution was eventually to find a state of mind—*nibbāna*—that doesn't have to feed on anything at all. There's no hunger, no lack. And when you don't have to feed, you don't have to hold onto anything. You no longer count as a being. This is why when the Buddha was asked, "When arahants die, do they exist? Do they not exist? Both? Neither?" he wouldn't answer, because we people are defined by our attachments, defined by our desires. When there are no attachments and no desires, there's no definition. We can't be measured by anything. When there's no definition, nothing to measure, there's no proper way to give a description. This is why the image the texts use to explain the Buddha's silence here is of the ocean. It can't be measured as to how many buckets full of water it contains. In the same way, an arahant can't be measured.

But, to get to that state requires that we feed in the meantime. This is why, when the Buddha talked about the practices being like having a fortress in a frontier and he compared various aspects of the practice to different things in a fortress—like mindfulness being the gatekeeper, persistence being the soldiers, discernment being the wall—he compared concentration to the stores of food kept in the fortress. When you get the mind to settle down and be with one object with a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture, that's food for the mind. Your gatekeeper of mindfulness can feed off of that. The soldiers, your persistence, can feed off of that. This is how they get their strength to keep going.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is that the practice is like an engine, and the engine needs lubricant in order not to seize up and burn itself out. The lubricant here would be the sense of pleasure and rapture that comes from concentration.

So the pleasure of concentration is a good thing. Sometimes you're warned that you're going to get stuck on it, that it'll make you go slowly in the path. And while the Buddha did recognize that it is possible to get so pleased with your concentration that you get lazy, he also said that the dangers of concentration are nothing compared to the dangers of not having concentration.

Because when you don't have concentration, then no matter how much you may understand the drawbacks of sensuality, you're still going to go back to sensual pleasures. And it's because people are attached to sensual pleasures that they can kill, they can steal, they can have illicit sex. They lie. They take intoxicants. People don't do any of those things under the power of concentration. Concentration gives you an alternative source of well-being with none of those drawbacks, and it can keep you from hungering for your old ways of eating.

So, learn how to focus on your breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, gives rise to a sense of fullness. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow: any combination of those. When you've found something that feels good, stick with it. If it doesn't feel so good anymore, you can change. Keep on top of the needs of the body. When you're able to maintain a sense of well-being, then you can let it spread through the body. Think of the in-and-out breath connecting with the breath energies throughout the body so that your entire sense of the body gets fed with a sense of well-being, as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

And as for people who say you're stuck on concentration, well, it's a good place to be stuck. Let them say what they want. After all, the Buddha was in concentration when he gained awakening. So you've got good company. Simply be careful to know how to feed off of your pleasure carefully. If you gobble it down—in other words, you get so attracted to the pleasure that you

forget about the breath—that puts an end to your source of food. This happens all too often: You're focused on the breath, there's a sense of pleasure, and you just go for the pleasure, wallow in the pleasure. But the cause of the pleasure to begin with was the fact that you were focused attentively on the breath. That's your foundation. When you abandon your foundation, the pleasure may last for a while but then it stops. And if you keep that up, your concentration practice doesn't really develop.

You're like a person who gets a job and then, as soon as you get your first pay check, you leave work, go off, have a good time, spending all your money, and then you come back to ask for the job back. Now, assuming that the boss is a kind person, he'll let you back. But if you keep that up, just quitting the job every time you get a paycheck, he's not going to give you a raise. And you'll never advance in the company. In the same way, when you get a sense of well-being from just being with the breath and then you wallow in it, forgetting the breath, you get into delusion concentration, which is a dead end. In other words, you're here, but not quite here. You're very still, but if you were to ask yourself what you're focused on, you're not really sure. And sometimes when you come out, you can even ask yourself, "Were you awake? Were you asleep?" and you're not really sure. That's delusion concentration.

It comes from not knowing how to eat, or having no manners in how you eat. A person with manners doesn't gobble food right down. If you know that you get your food because of a service you're providing, you keep providing that service, and your food keeps coming. Here your service is staying focused on the breath, being conscious of the breath filling the body. Try to maintain that sense of full-body awareness. It takes work, but the work you do in the sense of well-being is what keeps you clearly here with the breath. Because as the breath gets more and more refined, if your range of awareness is small then you disappear. It's like falling into an air pocket. You drift off, you've lost your concentration. It may be still, but there's no mindfulness.

So do the work that needs to be done. That way, you'll have a source of food that you can draw on all the time. And as you get used to this food, then you start thinking about other things the mind could be feeding on and you begin to lose your interest. This is much nicer, much less harmful than all those sensual pleasures out there in the world. At the same time, as you develop more refined tastes like this, you get a more refined sense of what's going on in the mind.

This is why concentration is a basis for discernment. That's because you have to be very careful not to be overcome by the pleasure in order to hold onto the perception of the breath. This gets you more and more sensitive to the process of perception, the process of thought-fabrication in the mind. And you can begin to see how these things can contribute a little bit of stress to the

mind. Even a sense of well-being like this can contribute a little bit of stress. And there *is* stress in the concentration. You sense it most as you're getting used to it, but then as you get more and more proficient at doing it, sometimes you tend to forget. But there *is* stress there.

After all, the word "jhana" is related to the word "jhayati," a verb that means "to burn." Pali has several different words for burning, and this is the one for burning with a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. It's still, it's steady, you could read by it much better than you could read, say, by a bonfire. In a bonfire, the flames are leaping around, flickering here, flickering there. It's hard to read by them. But when the flame is steady, you can read by it. In the same way, when your mind is in *jhāna*, you can read your mind. But nevertheless, it's burning. Ajaan lee says it's a cool fire, but it's still a fire nonetheless. You're feeding off of fire.

Then you remember that the meaning of *nibbāna* is that the fire goes out. So there's more work to be done to figure out what in the mind is still causing suffering, is still causing disturbances. It's hard to say "suffering" at this point, but it's still causing disturbance, even in a state of stillness. It's in pursuing that question that you finally get free. But you pursue the question in the framework of the concentration. Some people say, "Well, I've done concentration, now I need to move on to something else." But if you're going to gain insight, it's going to be here. Either right while you're in concentration or when you've just come out.

So give your concentration a lot of time. After all, it is the heart of the path. After the Buddha had been practicing his austerities for six years and saw that they were a dead end, he asked himself, "Is there another way?" And he remembered a time when he was a child and had spontaneously entered the first *jhana*. And something inside him said, "That's the way." So even though when they list the factors of the noble eightfold path, right concentration comes at the end, right concentration was the first one the Buddha discovered. Then it was simply a matter of his figuring out what other factors needed to be added to make it a complete path.

There's one sutta where he says that this is the heart of the path, whereas the seven other factors are its requisites, its supports. And this is it, the mind centered right here. It was right here where the Buddha gained awakening. His mind was in concentration. We know he gained awakening under the Bodhi tree, but that's far away. The place where he gained awakening in his mind was right here in right concentration. So if we get into right concentration, we're in the same place the Buddha was. This way, we give ourselves a chance to see the things he saw, understand the things he understood.

So don't be afraid of being attached to concentration. As the Buddha says, indulge in it. Settle in it. Make it your home. Just be careful that you have manners in how you feed on it. Otherwise, it has no drawbacks at all.