

Like an Athlete in Training

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The mind is like the body in that it needs its food. The difference is that the mind doesn't feed off of physical food. It feeds off of contact, consciousness, and intentions. Like right now, we're meditating. We've set the intention we're going to stay with the breath. That's our food right now, and it's good food. It's healthy food, but you want to make sure it's not the kind of health food that tastes awful, and the only thing that keeps you with it is the idea that it'll be good for you someday. You can fix it so that it tastes good right now, too.

Breathe in a way that's refreshing, gives rise to a sense of fullness in the body. Think of the breath as the energy flowing around the body, and ask yourself: Where does it feel good? Where does it not feel good? Focus on the areas that you can make good by the way you breathe, and hold in mind the right perceptions that allow that to happen. For example, be careful not to squeeze the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath to mark the difference between the two.

Think of your experience of the body as being primarily energy. It's not the case that you're trying to pump the breath energy into a solid body. It's more that you allow the breath to flow freely into more energy without any clear dividing line between the two. When you hold that perception in mind, it gives rise to a floating feeling in the body. See if you can maintain your focus on that perception, on that feeling of lightness, buoyancy. This is what gives flavor to your original intention, and it's good nourishment for the mind. This is one of the ways in which you can give rise to a sense of rapture or refreshment in the breathing, as in that verse in the Dhammapada: We feed on rapture like the radiant devas. This is food for meditators.

As you're staying here in the monastery, it's relatively easy to get focused in this way and to content yourself with this kind of food. The problem is when you leave. The world outside is like a big supermarket. I remember, when I first came back from Thailand, I was amazed at how supermarkets had changed in the States. When I was a child, you didn't have whole aisles of cereal. You didn't have all these many, many choices. Now, when you walk into a modern supermarket, it's very tempting just to grab whatever attracts your attention. There's so much. But you realize that if you just grab everything, one, you'll go broke. Two, there's a lot of stuff in there that's bad for you.

So there are two things to keep in mind when you go into a supermarket like that. One is that you have a very clear idea of what you want to get, you focus only

on that, and you get out as quickly as you can. And the second is that you think of yourself as being like an athlete in training. You have a higher purpose in eating than just pleasing your palate.

You should keep the same two things in mind as you go into life outside the monastery, because as I said, sensory contact is a kind of food for the mind, and there's so much out there. If you try to gulp it all down, it'll be bad for you, and your goodness may get destroyed. So, you have to have a very clear idea of what you really want. Tell yourself that you really want perfections, because they're the only things that are of any worth, any permanent worth, as you go through life. Other things fall away. They're so dependent on outside conditions being just right, whereas the perfections can be developed anywhere.

I was talking recently to a student who was concerned about global warming. She was thinking about her grandchildren, what kind of world they're going to experience, and I told her the important thing is to remember that even when things get bad, you can still behave in an honorable way. Virtue is still an option no matter how bad things get. So that's the important thing for the grandchildren: to train them to realize that that's what's really important in life.

Of course, that's true not only for grandchildren. It's true for all of us. We want to behave in an honorable way, so look for the opportunities that come your way: What's the honorable choice? And again, think of yourself as an athlete in training. There's a lot of food out there that comes in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body that's going to be bad for you. Remember that you have a higher purpose in feeding than just pleasing your palate. You want to keep the mind in good shape, which comes down to restraint—both restraint of what comes in and restraint of what goes out.

It's like having a house. You need windows and doors that open and close, so that you let in only the things that should be let in. When it's hot outside, you close things. When it's cool, you can open them up again. You want to make sure that not just anybody can walk into your house—and that you don't go out and grab just anybody who's walking down the street and pull them in.

As Ajaan Lee says, when you look and listen, ask yourself: Who's doing the looking? Who's doing the listening? Who's behind all this? Is it you? Is it your greed? Is it anger? If you allow these things to feed, they're going to take over. Those are the things you need to starve. You want to feed your discernment. You want to feed your virtue. You want to feed your goodwill. These are the things you should try to strengthen.

So look at things that encourage good qualities in the mind. Listen to things that encourage good qualities in the mind. As for things that'll be bad for you, you can close the windows, close the doors.

Be careful what you let out into the world as well, because that's the other side of restraint: restraint in body, speech, and mind. The thoughts that go out looking for trouble: Watch out for them. And of course, with all this coming in and going out, you've got to make sure that what does come in meets with something good going out, so that even if bad things come in, you don't have to suffer. You can keep them right at the edge. Keep them right at the door. Think of the Buddha's recommendation: If someone says something really bad, you just tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And leave it right there. Don't pull it in. Don't elaborate on it. As he said, ordinarily our minds are like gongs. They get hit once, and they reverberate for a long time. Well, put a crack in your gong so that it doesn't reverberate. In other words, create that space that simply says, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear."

What provides all this protection is mindfulness. Remember: Mindfulness is a faculty of the memory, keeping something in mind—in this case, remembering that you're in training. You're trying to strengthen the mind, so you strengthen the qualities that give rise to more conviction, more persistence, more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment. And watch out for the food that would eat away at these things. In this way, you protect the Dhamma inside yourself, which is where it's best protected. You look outside, and sometimes it's hard to see it out there, so you focus your main attention inside. Protect what Dhamma you have with restraint, with a clear sense of priorities, and the very live consciousness that you are in training. You're training to win. So many people are defeated by life. Make sure that you're not one of them.