

## *Escape from Inter-eating*

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When I came back to the States after 14 years in Thailand, I noticed that people were coming to Buddhism for something very different than what they were coming for in Thailand. Over here, they were coming for some reassurance that interconnectedness was a good thing—something to celebrate, something safe and secure. Over there, people came to Buddhism for protection. They had a very clear sense that to whatever extent we are interconnected, it's dangerous, and we need protection from it.

They were the ones who knew the teaching better, what it was good for offering. After all, as the Buddha points out, interbeing is inter-eating. In *The Novice's Questions*—questions about what is one, what is two, what is three, all the way up to what is ten—the most interesting of the questions and answers is, “What is one?” And the answer is, “All beings subsist on food.” Now, “food” here can be physical food or mental food. But this is the Buddha's basic teaching on interconnectedness: that we're feeding on one another. It's not a matter of light being reflected off of mirrors, or of jewels reflecting other jewels. It's beings feeding on one another.

One of the obvious dangers of living in an interconnected world is becoming food for somebody else—like the virus right now. It's decided that it wants to feed on human beings. But the Buddha saw there are other dangers. There's the danger of being in a position where you have to feed. Part of it, of course, is the karma of feeding on others. But the other part it is just simply being in a position of hunger and dependency. It's very unstable, very unreliable, very uncertain. There's a lot of suffering that goes into that.

So he taught us to be heedful of both dangers. This is where his teachings on heedfulness go beyond the ordinary. Ordinary teachings on heedfulness say that if you're going out into the wilderness, you learn how not to be prey of whatever big animals are out there, prey to whatever diseases are out there, or whatever hardships you might run into. But the Buddha's teachings go deeper. As long as you're in a position where you have to feed, they tell us, you're in danger wherever you are. And the real dangers come from inside the mind.

But the possibility of going beyond danger is something that's also beyond the ordinary. It's not just a matter of physical survival. It's finding a true happiness that's beyond this process of feeding and being fed on. So the Buddha's heedfulness is more radical both in sense of the dangers it sees and also in the

sense of the safety it offers. As he said, heedfulness lies at the base of all skillful qualities. Whatever skillful qualities you want to develop in the mind come from realizing that without those qualities, you're in danger.

Like right now, we're meditating because we realize that an untrained mind is a dangerous mind. It can create a lot of trouble that's totally unnecessary. It's like having an untrained animal in your house. You never know what it's going to rip up or where it's going to make a mess. So to train the mind, you sit here moment-by-moment, breath-by-breath, watching the mind as it stays with the breath because the movements of the mind are important. And you don't really know them until you see how they begin.

This means that we're not here just to rest or get some stress reduction. We get the mind still so that it can see itself clearly and see the subtle movements of thought. Now, you'll be dealing with two kinds of thought. Some of the thoughts are actually related to the concentration to get the mind to settle down. Directed thought and evaluation are part of the first jhana as you adjust the breath and adjust the mind so that they fit together. When everything is snug, you can put those thoughts aside. This is when you can be fully on the lookout for anything else that would come in and disturb that stillness.

One useful way of dealing with thoughts is try to see them as energy. In other words, you don't get involved in the content. You just notice that when a thought begins to appear, there'll be a stirring right at the border where the mind and body meet. Then there are a series of steps in which you decide whether it's going to be a physical stirring or a mental stirring.

If it's a mental stirring, then a label gets placed on it. It's a thought about what: past, future, this person, that person, this issue, that issue. Then you run with it. As a meditator, you want to catch it at the point where it's just energy. Or even if it's gone beyond that point, you want to reduce it to energy. Try to find where in the body there's a corresponding pattern of tension and see if you can breathe right through it.

The more quickly you can do this, the better, because the more you'll see. You want to get so that you can do this with any thought that comes up, because once you can reduce it to just breath energy, you're looking at it on your terms. You don't have to move into the terms of the thought. You see it as a process, and you begin to see, "Why would the mind slap that particular perception on that stirring? What is it hoping to get out of it?" Sometimes when it slaps a perception on, it just drops it. It's not interested in it any further. Sometimes it gets fascinated and takes it further. Why?

These are the things you want to see because this process of thinking or talking to yourself is one of *the* big issues we do in ignorance. And that's what leads to suffering—why we end up clinging and feeding on things. So be heedful of the danger in thoughts because they can lead you to do and say and think all kinds of unskillful things. They can keep you entangled. Even skillful thoughts can keep you entangled. So you have to be alert to dangers on all sides.

But the protection the Buddha gives is precisely this tool for taking things apart so that you're not fooled by them. They begin to lose some of their allure. As long as we see them as alluring, we're going to want to feed on them. We keep making more and more of them to feed on. But if you can develop some dispassion for them, then you ask yourself, "Why bother?" You see the pointlessness of it all. But it's not the sense of pointlessness that comes from depression, because the Buddha gives us the good news that heedfulness, as I said, can provide a safety that's beyond the ordinary.

When the Buddha describes the thoughts or the perceptions that go together with dispassion, they speak of inclining the mind to something that's peaceful and exquisite, something better than its old feeding habits. So dispassion is not just giving up on the world, saying, "Well, there's nothing there to attain, so I might as well not bother." It's more raising your standards for what you will accept as happiness.

You've seen the limits of fabrication. You realize that the processes of fabrication require feeding. You want something that doesn't require feeding, something more peaceful, something safer and more secure. And you're confident that there must be something of that sort. That's why you let go.

The Buddha was pretty amazing. He didn't have that assurance. He was totally exploring on his own. We, however, have his word and the word of all the noble Sangha that when you let go like this, there is something that more than repays the letting go. Some of the epithets for that "something" are the ultimate security, a harbor, refuge—a place where the dangers of the world can't find any footing.

So we practice heedfulness. We develop heedfulness, alert and alive to the dangers that are all around us and the dangers that are in us, but also with the confidence that there is an ultimate security that goes beyond even the relative security of being able to survive from day to day to day.

And even though we may not be there yet, that possibility can give us encouragement on the path. Whatever the difficulties, they will more than be repaid if you stick with it.