

# *The Hunger of the Mind*

*October 1, 2012*

The human world is not an easy place to live in. That's because we're all feeding. And it's not just physical food. We feed off emotional food, relationships, power, status, wealth. In fact, the hunger of the body is almost nothing compared to the hunger of the mind. As the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins we'd never have enough for our sensual desires: the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations we'd like to feed off of.

And with each person's mind being so hungry, it's inevitable there's going to be a lot of conflict as our unlimited desires meet up with the limited source of food. The Buddha's image of the world was of a puddle of water that was shrinking, and there were fish fighting over the last bit of water, pushing one another out of the way for that last gulp of water before it all dries up.

So what do you do? You've got the choice: You can just continue feeding, feeding, feeding, or you can step back and look at your hunger. This is one of the purposes of meditation: to give you a place to step back, to give you better food—food that comes from inside, rather than from outside. Food that you don't have to fight off anybody or you don't have to go harming anyone else to get. You learn to get the mind focused in one place. This starts with having a comfortable place physically to focus. This is why we work with the breath. Try to notice: Where in the body do you feel the breathing? Where does it feel comfortable? When you breathe in, which part of the body is getting satisfied by the in breath? Focus on that spot. Where is the satisfaction the strongest?

Don't clamp down on it. Just be there with it and notice when the breath is getting too long, or too short, too heavy, or too light. Work with that.

There's also the pleasure that comes from having the mind being able to focus on one thing and not being forced to jump around all the time. The mind usually has a sense that what it has is never enough. It's sitting here feeding on one thing and it's thinking about: "What's next? Where is the next place? Do I stay here? Or do I have to go someplace else to feed? What's next? Where next? What's next? Where next?" These are the questions that keep driving the mind. And as long as we let ourselves be driven by them, we don't really see how much our habit of feeding is causing a lot of suffering, for ourselves and for other people.

So part of the practice is learning how to step back and reflect on your actions to see what you're doing that, instead of giving a sense of nourishment, is actually causing suffering—or is causing suffering in the act of trying to find nourishment. Instead of feeding off of status and power, we learn how to feed off of generosity and virtue. But in particular we want to learn how to feed off a state of concentration, because when the mind is centered it can put down a lot of its burdens. It's not quite so driven. You're still feeding, but the food is much better: the rapture that comes when the mind settles in. "Rapture" here means a sense of fullness, a sense of complete energy, complete in the sense that the body feels nourished by the energy. Sometimes the rapture is

stronger than that. When you've had enough of that sense of rapture, there's sense of ease. And finally the sense of equanimity that comes when the mind finally has settled down and is fully centered. That's really strong nourishment for the mind.

It also puts you in a much better place to see exactly how the mind is feeding and when it starts going off to nibble on the past or gulp down the future. You see a lot more clearly that the things you normally feed on are not really all that nourishing. The act of having to go out and feed that way, that in and of itself creates a lot of stress, a lot of pain for the mind. So this is an important practice here: giving the mind alternative food.

Let's help pull it out of the rat race, so that when you're dealing with other people, you're not feeding off of them and you actually have more to offer. Your relationship becomes more of a relationship of giving because you've got a wealth of things to give: You give of your time, your energy, your help, your knowledge. That makes the world an easier place to live in because you're not so bound up in the battle among the fishes to get that last little gulp of water.

Ultimately, you can look at the mind in concentration and see that even its act of feeding on concentration is a burden for the mind. That's when you can incline your mind to something that's unconditioned. In other words, you don't have to feed on anything at all. That's the happiness we're looking for. That's the only happiness that's really safe because it saves us from having to fight for our food, or look for our food, or worry about that question of, "What next, what next? Where next can I go?"

You begin to see that the practice all along is one of stepping back and asking different questions. What's driving your actions? And what are the results of your actions? If they lead to stress, is that stress necessary? Some forms of stress are necessary in getting the mind in concentration and working with the path. When you take the precepts, especially the eight precepts, you suddenly find you can't eat in the evening. That's cutting off an immediate source of food. And the lesson is that you've got to look elsewhere for your nourishment. So there is some stress and pain in training yourself in this practice. The extent to which that stress is necessary, you put up with it. Keep at it. But you find there's an awful lot of stress that's not necessary at all. Your mind's just piling on extra stress and extra suffering: worried about this, jealous about that, creating all kinds of mental stories that have no basis reality, and yet you use them to feed on in way that's really unhealthy. The mind can do all kinds of things. But you begin to see when the mind gains a sense of well-being and nourishment from the concentration, those unhealthy ways of feeding are totally unnecessary.

You've got a much better source of food right here. So focus on learning how to enjoy the breath. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing. You might call this an attachment—and it is. But it's a good attachment. You've got to learn how to hold on to good things in order to let go of the bad ones. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the comparison to climbing a ladder up to a roof. You don't just let go of the rungs. You hold on to one rung so that you can grasp the higher one. When you've grasped the higher one, you let go of the lower one so that you can grasp the one that's still higher. You keep going up and up and up the ladder this way. Finally, when you get to the roof, that's when you let go

of the ladder entirely.

So, as long as you still need to hold on, learn how to hold on to something good. It helps get you out of the rat race, the battle of the fishes. And it can take you to a place where ultimately you don't need to feed. You can let go of that question of "Where to feed next, what next, where next?" You realize you don't have to answer that question any more. That's a huge burden off the mind right there.

Because you've found a happiness that doesn't depend on conditions, a happiness that stand outside of space and time, one that's totally secure. You never have to worry about a food source again, because you don't need to feed. The happiness is just there. That's what we're working toward.

So as long as you need to feed, keep feeding right here at the breath. No one else is going to come and try to take it away from you, and you're not taking anything away from anyone else as you breathe, breathe in, breath out. This is your breath. It's totally your territory. So learn to get as much good nourishment out of it as you can.