

Food for Consciousness

January 14, 2015

As we're sitting here meditating, we're focusing on something that nobody else can know—how our bodies feel from the inside, how our awareness feels from the inside. It's an area that we ourselves don't pay that much attention to, because our attention is too often diverted outside. And for that reason, we don't have much of a vocabulary to describe what's going on inside, as it's felt from within. But it's our most immediate experience. After all, it's on this level of experience that we actually feel the pain and suffering that, as the Buddha said, are the big issue in life. But not only that, we're also experiencing the causes of that pain and suffering from within, too. And even more important, we can manipulate them, we can do something about them from within so as to put an end to suffering.

That's the important part of his teachings. We're not trying to solve our sufferings by changing the world outside. And our practice is nothing that anyone from outside can come in and do for us. Normally, we're doing things right now that are adding stress and disturbance to our awareness. But the fact that we're doing them means that we can learn how not to do them. We do that by learning how to change things from within.

This goes against the materialist idea that consciousness is just a by-product of physical processes, and that physical processes determine everything. From our point of view as meditators, though, that's not the case. If you change your focus, change your object of concentration, you create new experiences for yourself. You can actually create little worlds in here. We're watching the creation of worlds even as we stay here with the breath. On the one hand, we're trying to create a sense of inhabiting this world inside the body; but on the other, we can also see little thoughts running off and it's easy to get sucked into their worlds and go running along with them.

The Buddha has a long description of the various ways in which we create suffering within, called dependent co-arising. It's so long that most people get involved in the intricacies and can't see the forest for the trees. So some of the major features get ignored. Yet one of the most useful features to notice is that consciousness is a conditioned process, but it doesn't need a body to survive. It feeds on conditions, and as long as it's feeding on those conditions it's going to keep going regardless of whether there's a body or not. Some of the conditions are physical, and one of the foods for consciousness is actually physical food. But there are other foods for consciousness as well, and they're enough to keep consciousness going without the body. It's because we cling to these things, we crave these things, that we keep going even when we can't stay here in this body anymore. So it's good to know these processes now so we'll be more in control, not only as we're living our lives in the body, but also when we have to leave the body.

As we meditate, we have to look at the way our awareness feeds on things, what it's feeding on, and we have to learn to comprehend that food, so that—at the very least—we can be selective eaters. At best, we can go beyond needing to feed. There is a level of consciousness that doesn't have to feed, doesn't need conditions. That's where there's no pain or distress or suffering at all. That's the goal of the practice, but if you can't reach that level yet, if you're still on the way there, learn to be selective in how you feed, because feeding well is part of the path.

The three mental kinds of food are contact, intentions of the heart, and consciousness itself. In this last case, one act of consciousness can provide the food for another act of consciousness. After all, consciousness is self-reflective. We can reflect on our awareness, we can reflect on the way we know things, and because of that we can feed off one moment of consciousness to nourish the next. This is why consciousness can keep going and why it has been going on, as the Buddha says, from an unimaginable beginning.

So look right now: What are you feeding on? There are two ways to detect this. One is to notice what you're doing as you try to get the mind into concentration; the other is to notice how you feed on things that pull you away. If you're feeding on the breath right now, there's an intention to keep you here, and there's also the contact, where you feel the breath. How does it feel right now? You can use your intentions to adjust the breath. As the Buddha said, this is probably the best food for the consciousness that needs to be fed, because it's relatively harmless. And it really gives a lot of good nourishment to the mind. It really strengthens the mind.

We need to develop a taste for the good types of food because there are foods for consciousness that are like junk food—whole cupfuls of sugar in a little can of soda or huge amounts of fat in hamburgers and fries. For instance, we feed off our fantasy worlds of lust and anger, and although we get some energy out of these things, it's an energy that, one, wears the mind down, and, two, gets it used to really bad habits. As you feed on these kinds of thoughts, it's very easy for them to move into things you talk about, things you want to act on. And so what you're feeding on is pretty much going to determine where you're going to go because you look for that kind of food more and more.

This is why the Buddha gives us an alternative kind of food, the sense of well-being that that comes from learning how to be centred within, not looking for the kind of entertainment that comes from thinking about the past or thinking about the future. If you're thinking about the past and future a lot, it's not just entertainment. Often it can lead you to regret or pine after the past or to worry about the future. So settle in right here for the time being and learn how to feed off the present moment so that you can get the mind really, really still. Only when it's still can you start seeing these processes a lot more clearly—both the process of feeding on distraction and the process of feeding on the sense of being well established right here, right now.

You'll begin to notice that these processes feed on contact. When you understand contact, as the Buddha said, when you really comprehend it, you comprehend the three kinds of feelings. In other words, you comprehend the way pain comes, the way pleasure comes, and the way feelings of neither pleasure nor pain comes. And to comprehend them means that you see the extent to which there is an intentional element there in the experience of the feeling.

We have lots of potentials for pleasure or pain in different parts of the body, but we have our choice: Which ones are you going to focus on? And how are you going to focus on them? What are you going to do with them? Which ones do you want to develop and which ones do you want to just leave aside? You have to choose, and as a meditator you have to choose well, because there are some pleasures that are good for the mind and others that are not. Some pains are good for the mind, others are not. Some types of equanimity are good, others are not. And you want to learn, “If I focus on this kind of pleasure or this kind of pain, what does it do to the mind, what kinds of actions does it lead to?” If it leads to unskillful qualities, you want to abandon that kind of focus. And you begin to see the extent to which you have your choices here.

That helps to pull your identification away from these pleasures and pains—because, for most of us, we identify with our feelings more than with anything else. That, we think, is who we really are. “How do you *really* feel?” people will ask. But when you begin to see that feeling is a fabricated process and there’s an element of choice, then the sense that this is the “real you”—or what you really feel deep down inside or you really crave deep down inside—no longer seems so compelling. You begin to pull away. You’re not a sucker for pleasures so much anymore. And in that way, the drive to feed off contact gets a lot weaker.

As for the intentions of the heart, again, you’re focusing on intention right now: your intention to stay with the breath. But you’ll notice that other intentions, other urges, will pull you away. You want to learn how to comprehend them, and in comprehending them, the Buddha says, you learn to comprehend craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming—i.e., your desire or thirst to take on an identity in a particular world of experience—or craving for non-becoming: You decide you don’t like the identity you have and you want to destroy it to find something else. And, as the Buddha notes, in the craving for non-becoming you take on a new kind of becoming.

These becomings can happen on the macro level and on the micro level inside the mind. You want to see what's driving them. There's a desire behind all these things. Your sense of identity is based on the things you want. If you desire alcohol repeatedly, you become an alcoholic, and the world you live in becomes one where alcohol is a big issue. It's composed primarily of the things that help you gain alcohol and things that get in the way. Anything irrelevant to the alcohol fades away into the background. If you desire status, then the question is what other people think about you, and how you can look good in their eyes. Their eyes suddenly become an important part of your world. And you become the kind of person that's craving to look good in other people's eyes. Is that the kind of person you want to be?

All too often, we have a desire and we don't reflect on what this desire is making us, what kind of people we're becoming as a result of following the desire. As the Buddha said, one of the things you should reflect on every day is this: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" What you're becoming is all based on the desires you feed on. And when you can see that these desires and becomings give only a little bit of pleasure but a lot of pain, and they have a lot of drawbacks, you can draw back from your identification with them.

Then there's the food of consciousness itself. One of our biggest fears is that with death, consciousness gets wiped out. And so whatever kind of consciousness we can find, we'll just keep going and going and going for it. It keeps landing on things like a body, or feelings, or perceptions, or fabrications—what the Buddha calls the five aggregates. These are the five activities that the mind employs around feeding. For instance, there's a feeling of pain: You feel a hunger, you want to find something to satisfy it to have a more pleasant feeling of fullness. Then there's the sense of the form of the body that has to be fed and at the same time gives you the means to search for food. There's the perception of what kind of hunger you have, and of what food you need to satisfy the hunger. Then you look around trying to find things that fit in with that perception. Then there are all of the activities, the intentions to go after that food and make it edible—those are fabrications—and finally there's the consciousness that feeds on all these things.

You want to look at these processes to see how they involve a lot of feeding, how there's a lot of suffering because of the feeding, and how it doesn't really accomplish much because it's an endless process. Think about the feeding of the body. You put things into your stomach to fill it up, but they don't stay. You have to go round searching for these things, and your drive to eat, your craving to eat, can take you to a lot of undesirable places. Well, it's the same with this craving in the mind—the craving of consciousness for more feelings, more perceptions, more fabrications. When you comprehend that, the Buddha says you comprehend what he calls name-and-form, in other words all the kinds of things, physical and mental, that the mind can be feeding on.

When you really comprehend these things and have had enough of them, that's when you realize that there's another kind of consciousness, as I said, that doesn't need to feed: no more desires to be anybody in any particular world. When those cravings go, then you can open up to this other level of consciousness. And you realise that the Buddha was right. This really is the end of suffering. There's no hunger there at all, no suffering, no stress. That's the ultimate goal.

In the meantime, though, you want to learn how to be more selective in how your mind feeds, and realize that you have choices. All too often, we're driven by our old habits: the habit of the mind that likes to engage, say, in lust or in anger, the habit of the mind that's afraid it won't be something so it just keeps creating more and more and more identities—and then complaining about the suffering that comes as a result. At least try to be as selective as you can in what you're going to feed on, because there are some states of mind that, like the state of concentration, really are harmless, peaceful, nourishing for the mind. You want to focus on those. And this is another aspect of the Buddha's description of suffering and the causes of suffering as they're felt from inside: You choose to take on identities, you choose to inhabit different worlds, but you can also choose not to if you want.

This becomes especially relevant as the body ages and death approaches. You can fully identify yourself with this person in this body and suffer an awful lot as a result. Or you can become aware of that aspect of consciousness that doesn't have to identify here, doesn't have to identify with the processes, but can simply watch them as processes.

That's a skill that's really worth developing because it lessens your suffering—and we're doing it as we're meditating here. You see the process of distraction and you can pull out. You can see the mind going for something and decide, "I don't want to go there," and you can drop it. You get to step back from all the whispers and shouts and murmures and other things in the mind that say, "No, no. You can't meditate, you shouldn't meditate, you've got to do this, this is who you are, if you're not this, who are you? You're nothing." Don't listen to those. There's a lot more to the mind, there's a lot more to consciousness than who you think you are and where you think you are. Be open to that possibility, because it opens up a lot of freedom inside your awareness, inside this awareness as it's experienced from within, right here, right now. That possibility can free you from a lot of pain and suffering.