

What is One

July 13, 2017

In the Canon, there's a brief catechism called the *Novice's Questions*. It's a list of basic Buddhist concepts lined up from one to ten. The questions are: *What is one?*, *What is two?*, all the way up to *What is ten?* And the most interesting one of the lot is: What is one? And the answer is: All beings subsist on food.

As long as you're a being, you're going to need food. And of course when the Buddha is talking about food here, it's not just physical food. There's also the food for consciousness, which in some cases he divides up as physical food, contact, feeling, and consciousness itself. In other places, he identifies the food for consciousness with the other aggregates: form, feeling, perception, and fabrications.

It's only arahants who don't need to feed on these kinds of food. They feed physically, but their minds no longer need to feed, because they don't identify themselves as beings. To be a being, you have to be clinging to something, attached to something. But arahants have no attachments, no clinging, so they're not even defined as beings. When they pass away, you can't even define them as existing, non-existing, both, or neither.

But as for us, we're still feeding because we're still beings. We're beings on the way to awakening. The Buddha himself, before his awakening, was called a Bodhisatta—he was a being on the way to awakening. While we're on the path, we need food. And concentration is the prime food we use. Because otherwise, if we don't have this food, we're going to go off nibbling on all kinds of other things. All the different members in the committee of your mind have their ideas about what would be good dinner tonight, what the food should be, how it should be fixed. And a lot of the discussion in your mind is about how you're going to feed.

So when you learn how to meditate and get the mind into a state of well-being—finding an object you like, learning how to maximize the sense of pleasure through your directed thought and evaluation—you're adding a new item to the menu. And you want to learn how to develop a taste for this. That means, for instance, when you're working with the breath, try to breathe in a way that feels

really, really satisfying. It's not just in-out, in-out. Ask yourself, "Where are the most sensitive parts in the body right now? Can you breathe for their sake? And what kind of breathing would feel good for them?" You may have a personal preference for longer breathing, but that particular part in your body might like some shorter breathing. So pay attention to what it needs. And then, when you've satisfied that part of the body, look for other parts of the body that are especially sensitive.

The more you can hit your sensitivities like this, the more satisfying the food of concentration will be. Then you can use it to deal with other issues as they come up—the other proposals for what you want to feed on right now. If there are sensual desires coming up in the mind, one of the first ways of dealing with them is to notice, when the desire comes: Where do you feel the tension in the body? Often there's a tension in the back of the hands. Well, breathe in a way that feels really good in the back of the hands—any place where there's tension developing. That way, as part of your negotiations with the members of the committee, you say, "See, here's a better food. It's right here; no trouble at all." Whereas the food of sensual desire can cause a lot of trouble.

It's the same with anger. If you're quick to get angry about things, you have to be quick in learning how to feed the mind and feed the body with the sense of well-being that comes from concentration. Otherwise, you start feeding on the anger, and it ends up harming you, harming other people. It's like the kind of food that may be good as you eat it, but it's going to cause trouble further down in your digestive tract.

Sleepiness, torpor: That's another kind of food—one that we really go for. In some cases, the body really does need to rest. But in a lot of cases, it's just creating one more issue unnecessarily. Something interesting may be coming up in the mind—something, however, that one member of the committee doesn't like to be revealed, and so it makes you sleepy. Or just plain old laziness comes in and you latch on to any sign in the body, any sign in the mind, that you're getting sleepy, and make that an excuse to stop. In cases like that, the best kind of food for you is good, heavy breathing, deep breathing—whatever breathing you find energizing.

It's the opposite with restlessness and anxiety. The mind has no place where it can settle down in the present moment, so it goes hunting outside for anything,

whatever. When it's anxious about things, it can say, "Look, I have to worry about this. If I don't worry about this, I won't be prepared, I won't be protected." This is where the food of concentration on its own is often not enough. You have to supplement it with the food of discernment, which tells you that whatever is going to happen in the future, you don't really know the details of the danger ahead of you. But you do know that whatever the dangers, expected or unexpected, you're going to need a lot of discernment, you're going to need a lot of alertness, you're going to need a lot of concentration, patience, endurance—all these good qualities, to see you through. And this is how you develop them, by meditating. Not by sitting here worrying.

And finally there's uncertainty. The mind can feed a lot on that. Part of it might be the part of the mind that doesn't want to practice, doesn't want to give up its desires, its cravings. And part of it is just a genuine lack of confidence in yourself.

In the first case, you've got to pry around and see, "Why would I not want to find true happiness?" Because this is one of big issues among the committee members: how to be happy, what would make you happy. And they hold onto their ideas of what would make you happy. So you've got to point out to them the drawback of those ideas. Desire for wealth, desire for power: These things can bring a lot of suffering in their wake. And here the Buddha is offering you a totally harmless kind of food, a totally harmless kind of pleasure. Do you really love yourself? If you do, you'd go for the harmless; you'd avoid *any* kind of harm.

As for lack of confidence in yourself, ask yourself, "Can I be with this breath?" Well, yes. "How about this breath?" Yes. In the beginning, content yourself with small victories. As the Buddha said, even just a fingersnap of the desire to be skillful is, in and of itself, meritorious. Sometimes we're even afraid to want the path, because we're afraid that we're committed to more than we can handle. And the part of the mind that's not ready to be committed keeps pulling you back. But you can keep reminding yourself, "I'm not totally committed yet. I just want to think this thought: that it would be really good to find a path that puts an end to suffering, to find a path that I am capable of following, and have some confidence in myself." Learn to feed off these small victories, so that they get larger.

And turn your attention back to the breath, so that you have something even

better to feed off. Keep looking for those sensitive spots inside. Try to nourish them with the breath, so that you associate the practice of concentration with a sense of real, visceral well-being. That way, the mind will be more and more inclined to want to go in this direction.

It's as when you're trying to change your diet for the body. Sometimes you try to change from all the greasy, bad food that you've been enjoying to something healthy, and part of the mind resists. It likes the grease; it likes the sugar; it likes the salt. But if you learn how to fix your health food really well, then you begin to realize, "I actually feel better this way, and it tastes good." So you've got to learn how to be a good cook of your breath, basically.

Show some imagination in how you deal with the breath—like that image in the Canon of the wise cook who notices what his master likes: whether it's salty or sweet or alkaline, bland, spicy. Try to figure out what your mind and body would like to enjoy right now, would like to feed off of right now. And see what you can do with the breath to provide that.

A similar principle applies with the other meditation topics. If you're doing *Buddho*, think of the whole body as being energized by the word *Buddho*. As I was saying today, think of every cell in your body going *bud-dho, bud-dho* together, so that it's not just a mechanical exercise. It's much more organic—you're feeding the mind; you're feeding the body. That way, you've something good to offer when parts of the mind want to go off and have a late midnight snack, gobble down some junk food. You say, "Look, I have something better, right here, right now. And it's not going to cause trouble tomorrow morning. You're not going to have any diarrhea from this, any digestive illness." This is food that's good all the way: good from your mouth all the way through your system.

That way, you have another answer to that question of what is one. You have a mind that's one, with one object. And it's happy to be there. Because it finds that this is the best food there is.