

New Feeding Habits for the Mind

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The juxtaposition of those two chants just now—the one that says, “subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation,” and the other that starts out, “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy”: that’s the human predicament. We’re sitting here in this body that’s going to age, grow ill, and die someday, and yet we want to be happy. And we want to be happy in a way that doesn’t cause suffering to anybody else, either. And this—if the mind is constantly weighed down with aging, illness, death, and separation—is very difficult.

Most cruel actions come from people who are suffering. When you see a cruel action, it’s usually coming from the person’s feeling weak, feeling threatened, at his wits’ end. Acts of kindness and compassion come from a feeling of wellbeing in the mind.

So when we look for true wellbeing, true happiness, it’s not a selfish desire. But still, we’re stuck with this problem: the body is going to age, grow ill, and die. Our mental faculties are going to go away. And how are we going to handle that situation when it comes? How are we handling it as it’s encroaching upon us now?

That’s what the fifth contemplation in the chant is about: “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions.” It’s through our actions that we can make a difference.

The Buddha says that there are four kinds of action: skillful actions in the worldly sense, unskillful actions, a mixture of the two, and then the action that leads to an end of action—in other words, the action that leads you outside of the cycle of the world all together.

So this is what we’re working on here as we meditate: First, learning what it means to act. As the Buddha said, action is intention. So we practice meditation to get to know our intentions. One way to do that is to set up an intention in the mind and see what happens as you try to keep it going. Focus your intention on the breath. Say to yourself, “I’m going to stay with the breath for the hour: that’s all I’m going to notice, that’s all I’m going to worry about.” See how long you can make the intention last.

If your powers of mindfulness and alertness are strong, you can maintain that intention. If they’re still weak, and the intention gets lost, you just set the

intention up again. Set it up again and again and again. Don't give in, because if you can't stick with this little intention, how are you going to deal with the larger issues in life? If you don't have the mindfulness and alertness to maintain this much, how will they be able to help you through more difficult situations?

So we're training these mental faculties in the same way that you train the body, strengthen the body. If you want to be strong, you don't go out and buy a new strong body from somebody else. You take your weak body and you exercise it. Exercise is what makes it strong. In the same way, you exercise these qualities of mind that can help make your intentions stick. And you begin to see that as you maintain these intentions with skill, they really do make a difference in the mind because they give it a new foundation for its wellbeing. You don't have to depend on the body; you don't have to depend on people outside you. You've got a skill within the mind that's purely mental, using the body as a foundation, developing mental skills that will make a difference.

Once the mind has this sense of center, it brings a stability and steadiness to your life. You're not constantly subjected to buffeting from forces outside. No matter which direction the winds blow from, you can stay steady and still, and watch to see what's going on around you. Your ability to stay still like this is what enables you to see. If you're streaking through life, all you see is the blur on either side. Only when you stop and stand still can you see not only what's going on around you but also what's going on inside, those very subtle movements of the mind that can cause you to get attached to things that are going to change on you.

You begin to realize that the mind's habit of latching onto the body is not necessarily something it has to do. Its habit of latching onto feelings, or perceptions, or thought constructs, awareness of this or that: it doesn't have to latch onto those things. It latches on because it doesn't yet have the strength to stand alone, doesn't have any better place to go. It's dependent on these things, wants to feed on these things, to see what kind of nourishment they give. And sometimes they give a little good nourishment, but for the most part they're junk food.

Now, as the Buddha says, suffering is the mind's habit of feeding like this. So we try to give the mind something better to feed on: a sense of wellbeing inside, the sense of wellbeing that comes as you learn to adjust the breath, settle down into the breath, make friends with the breath, learn to savor the breath the same way you would good food or good music.

What does this flow of energy feel like as it comes through the body? What kind of flow would the body like to feel right now? Do you know? Can you tell? Most of us live within the body for how many years, and we don't know what

kind of breathing the body would like to do, what would feel good for the body to do right now. So take some time to explore, to get acquainted with it.

As you develop this inner sense of wellbeing and stability, you find that the mind would much rather feed here than outside. There may still be some stress, some slight sense of burdensomeness in having to feed here, but at least it's better than what the mind tended to feed on before. You begin to look back upon thoughts of lust, thoughts of anger, thoughts of greed, and you begin to wonder: "Why did I ever want to feed on those? What kind of nourishment did they provide?" Nothing really solid, nothing really substantial, nothing really healthful at all.

Once you learn how to let go of those things, you learn to stop feeding on things bad for the mind. And when you're not weighing the mind down in that way, when you're not giving it junk food to clog up its arteries, there's a greater sense of lightness, health, and wellbeing. When the mind feels light and healthy like this, it's much easier for you to feel compassionate, not only for yourself but also for people around you. Ultimately you get to the point where the mind is so well fed, so strong, that it doesn't have to feed anymore at all. That's when the mind is totally free.

It's like when you go out camping. One of the big problems in going camping is that you have to carry your food everywhere you go. That puts a limit on how far you can go, how many days you can go out on a particular trip, because you've got to keep your food stores low enough so that you can carry them but not so low that you're confined to one- or two-day trips. Think of how much you could wander around if you didn't have to feed. Many times I've felt I'd like to wander off into the canyons at Zion and disappear—but I can't, because the body has to feed. And as they say, you can't eat the scenery.

But when you put the mind in a position where it doesn't have to feed, it's really free. It's not weighed down by anything, not confined by anything. This is what the Buddha meant by nibbana. The word nibbana comes from a fire's going out. Back in those days they had the conception that fire was trapped by its fuel because it had to keep clinging to the fuel to get its sustenance. But when it went out, it let go of the fuel and was released. It was no longer confined. You couldn't even describe it as existing, non-existing, both, or neither. It was that free.

So that's what the Buddha was talking about with nibbana: The mind doesn't feed anymore. When it doesn't feed, it's not confined to its food source, doesn't have to carry its food source around, isn't limited by where there's food and where there's not. When you look back, you realize that the steps you were following along the practice were precisely that fourth kind of kamma: the kamma that leads beyond kamma, to the end of action, to the end of having to feed.

If you're observing the precepts, practicing concentration, and developing discernment into what the mind needs to feed on, what it doesn't need to feed on, what kind of feeding is good for it, what kind of feeding is bad for it, and then feed it in such a way that ultimately it gets so strong that it doesn't have to feed any more, it can let go. And at that point an entirely new dimension opens up in the mind that you couldn't have even conceived before.

That's ultimately where the practice leads. It takes this mind—which is feeding on the body, feeding on feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness—and tells it that there are better things to feed on. If you feed on these things, you're going to be really sorry because your food source is going to run out on you very quickly. It's going to keep changing—and with that sense of uncertainty and instability in life, how can the mind find any sense of wellbeing? At the same time it turns out that a lot of that food is junk food, which keeps you weak and unhealthy. So you teach the mind better ways to feed through the practice until the path finally issues in a point where the mind is at total equilibrium, doesn't need to feed anymore, and you can let go.

So that's where we're headed. As the Buddha said, the only things he teaches are suffering or stress and then the end of suffering. That may seem like a narrow ideal. What about helping humankind and all the other great issues? He said to straighten out your own mind first and when that's straightened out, when you're really free, the type of help you can then give to people is the best kind of help. There's no hidden feeding agenda, no hidden need to feed on the sense of pride that comes from being a very helpful or very important person, which can actually spoil the help, spoil the compassion. You're operating from a sense of compassion that comes from total freedom, total independence—which is ultimately the only compassion you can really trust.