

Feeding the Mind

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Where is your mind feeding right now? Where is it hoping to get its happiness? This is a very basic question of the meditation. The whole issue of feeding, taking sustenance, is a major issue in the Buddha's teachings.

There's a series of questions called the Novice's Questions. They start out with, "What's one? What's two? What's three? What's four?" All the way up to ten. Four is the four noble truths, five is the five clinging-aggregates, and so on up through ten. The most interesting question, though, is, "What's one?" Some teachers might answer that there's the oneness of the world, or the oneness of the underlying principle of all things.

But the Buddha's answer was something totally different. "What's one" is "All living beings depend on food." The oneness of the world, the interrelatedness of the world, is through the process of eating. Because how do we relate to each other on the most basic level? We eat one another, on all different kinds of levels: not just as physical food but also as emotional food and mental food. It's enough to make your heart sick.

We're often told that the interrelatedness of being is something to be celebrated. It's a Good Thing, and the purpose of the meditation is to get in touch with that sense of interrelatedness. But if you look at how the Buddha taught about interrelatedness, you can see he took a totally different tack.

There's a point where he reminds the monks that it's hard to find someone who has never been your mother, who has never been your father, brother, sister, son, daughter. Why is that? Because the process of transmigration has been going on for such a long, long time that everybody you meet has been related to you in some way.

Now, instead of looking at that as something to celebrate, he says it's enough to make you want to get out. Because all relationships end in loss. And from the sorrow that comes from that loss, he says that the amount of tears that we've shed in that long, long time is more than the water in the oceans.

Then there's that passage where he talks to the monks about the various types of food there are. There's physical food, the food of contact, the food of intentions, and the food of consciousness. He asks, how are you supposed to regard these things?

In each case, it's nothing very positive. The fact that you're born with this body that constantly needs to have food stuffed down the throat or else it's going to die,

and before it dies, it's going to suffer all kinds of hunger pangs: That's a major weight on the mind.

As soon as we're born, we cry. We're hungry. A lot of life is devoted to just that one process of finding something to eat, to keep this body going. And what we eat dies. Even if you're vegetarian, there's a lot of suffering that goes into creating food, getting food ready to stick in your mouth.

The Buddha says that whenever you eat, you should think about the story of the husband and wife with their one baby son. They're going across the desert and they don't take enough provisions to go with them. Halfway across the desert, they run out of provisions. What are they going to do?

They decide, well, rather than having all three of them die, they kill the baby son and they make dried meat and jerky out of him. Then they feed on that and get across the desert so that at least two of them survive rather than all three of them dying. It's a pretty horrendous story, but the Buddha says you have that attitude toward your food when you eat: This is your son; this is your child. So you eat the food just for the sake of survival, because that's what's required—not for intoxication, not for playfulness, not to put on bulk or to make yourself beautiful, but just to keep the body going.

As for the food of contact, that's sensory contact. The Buddha says you should think about a cow that's been flayed: Wherever it goes, it leans on a wall, and all the little insects and other beings on the wall will eat away at the cow. If it leans against a tree, all the insects in the tree will eat away at the cow. Wherever there's contact, you're being eaten away.

The food of intention is like a pit of burning embers. The food of consciousness is like a criminal who's being speared with spears: a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, and a hundred spears in the evening. Constantly being attacked.

These are the things the mind feeds on. This is where it looks for sustenance. And the process of taking sustenance: That's suffering as well. The word for sustenance, *upadana*, also means clinging. Wherever the mind clings, that's where it's feeding. And the process of clinging, the Buddha said, is suffering. The process of having to depend on other things like this: That's suffering.

Interrelatedness is no fun, because the system that we're dependent on is just so much out of our control. We're lucky if it works for our happiness for a little while, but it always keeps changing because we can't control it. There are so many factors working together that it's a chaotic system.

So what's the way out? Well, if you try to deny interconnectedness, you starve to death, physically. Or mentally you start suffering as well. So the issue is to learn

how to feed more skillfully. Provide better food for the mind. This is what we do when we meditate. We try to find a source of happiness that doesn't have to depend on other things. The mind can be reliant on itself. That's the idea.

We start by depending on the breath. Feed on the breath. Learn how to savor the breath. Give the mind something better to feed on than its usual food. If your happiness depends on things outside, it's causing trouble for other people, trouble for yourself, so find a better happiness. That's the basic principle of the meditation.

If you learn how to savor the breath, you realize there's a lot to feed on right here: just the sensation of the breath coming in, going out. As you get more and more skilled staying here, learning how to work with the breath, finding what the breath can do for the body, you begin to realize that a lot of things you used to depend on emotionally outside, you don't have to depend on anymore.

It's as if the breath is health food for the mind. We've been eating junk food for who knows how long. No wonder the mind is thin and famished and in a bad mood. But now you start feeding on health food. The mind starts getting stronger, more self-reliant. Ultimately, you get to the point where you don't have to feed anymore at all. That's when it's really good. The hunger is no longer there, because the mind has been well-nourished on good food and it's gotten so skillful in its feeding that it finally realizes it can get along without feeding at all.

So always keep this issue in mind: Where is your mind feeding right now? What is it eating? Where is it taking its sustenance? Try to think of taking a snapshot of your mind as its sneaking something out of the refrigerator that it knows it shouldn't be eating. Or is it making sure that it eats nothing but good healthy food? Because that's what's going to make all the difference in the world.