

Everyday Feeding Habits

June 5, 2014

When you stay at the monastery, things are peaceful—relatively. Nothing much pulls you in. But when you leave, there are lots of things that seem to pull you in to disturb your concentration and your center that you've been working on so hard while you've been here. But you have to realize they're not doing any pulling.

There's that conversation in the Canon where the question arises: When a black ox is yoked to a white ox, is the black ox the yoke of the white? Or is the white the yoke of the black? Of course, the answer is no. It's the yoke that's keeping them together.

In the same way, sights are not a yoke on your eyes. Your eyes are not a yoke on the sights. Passion is what yokes these things together. The same applies to your ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In other words, the disturbance comes from within. We all know that remark by Ajaan Chah: You're sitting here meditating, and there's a noise. The noise is not disturbing you; you're disturbing the noise. You're the one making comments on it. The comments are the things that are actually destroying the concentration.

That conversation of the yokes goes on to say that you've got the case of the arahants, who can live in the world without being yoked to anything even though they see sights, smell aromas, and hear sounds just like the rest of us do. The difference, of course, is that they don't have the passion to go out and feed on these things.

So as you go through the day, try to notice what you're nibbling on, what you're feeding on. Which desires and attitudes cause you to latch on to certain sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations either to get lusting or hungering for them or for more, or feeding on the anger you feel when you run into things you don't like? Keep turning around to look at the problem inside.

This is not to deny that there's a lot of injustice in the world. A lot of things need to be straightened out. But your responsibility is here: the extent to which you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering as you go hungering for things. You need some protection because sensory input comes in very strongly. But again, the real problem is the mind's opening its mouth to take all these things in.

So you want to be able to maintain your concentration because. After all, if you find yourself feeding on things outside or on attitudes that are really unhealthy inside, you've got to give yourself something better to feed on. This is

why we practice concentration: so that we have a sense of stability, a sense of being centered and self-sufficient as we go through the day. It's like having your own food, water, and shelter.

Or it's like going on to the moon. To survive on the moon, you've got to have all your requisites with you. You need your spacesuit. You need food. You need your oxygen. In the same way, if you realize that the world is a pretty alien place, then you're more likely to know that you've got to plan as you go through the day. Otherwise, you think everything's going to be wonderful: This is going to happen, and that's going to be this way, and this is going to be that way. And of course, it's not that way. Or if it is that way, how much longer is it going to stay that way?

You've got to go into the world prepared to be self-sufficient. So look at your food. How's the breath right now? You may have tried out Ajaan Lee's various ways of playing with the breath. Well, there are a lot more. One time when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, I tried to get him to write his own breath meditation manual. He said, "Ajaan Lee did a really good job already. Why should I add to it?" I said, "But you know so many little tricks that are not mentioned there." He said, "Oh, that's just miscellaneous stuff."

I wrote some of his meditation tricks down in *Awareness Itself*. But one of the main points is that you've got to learn to use your own ingenuity, because it's your breath. You've got to get in touch with that sense of the energy flow in the body and the extent to which you're pushing and pulling it out of shape—as you experience it. To what extent is it damaged, and to what extent do you have to do some repair work?

Always try to start with the areas that feel pleasant or okay before you go moving into the areas where things are not okay. And when you go moving in, don't leave your original base. If the area around the heart feels good, stay there. Think of the energy and your awareness spreading out from that spot. Don't leave that spot. Think of it radiating out like the light of this candle at the front of the room. The candle flame doesn't move around to the different spots in the room that it's illuminating. It just stays there in its one spot, and the rays of light go out from it. Try to develop an awareness like that, so that you're coming from a position of strength.

And think of the energy not only in the body, but also around the body. There's a cocoon that protects the body—unless you've torn it open one way or another. If you have, ask yourself how you can heal the wounds. Think of the breath moving all around. That's like your spacesuit.

The food is the sense of well-being that comes as you work with the breath. It can either be rapturous and energetic, or it can be more calm and easeful. Even

equanimity in concentration is said to be a very subtle form of pleasure. That's the food that keeps you going. Of course, you'll find that, out of the force of habit, you will sometimes drop this food and go for something else. You have to ask yourself, "Why?" This is where insight comes in. Concentration doesn't solve all the problems. You've got to have some insight into why you go for these things. What meaning do they have for you? Do you want to nibble on something because you think it's good? Or do you nibble on it because you think it's dangerous, and you've got to ward it off?

A lot of that comes from the fact that we're not confident enough that the concentration is going to provide enough food, enough nourishment. But your nibbling also comes from misunderstandings: the idea that you're going to gain something important by going out and nibbling on these thoughts of lust, thoughts of anger, or thoughts of jealousy and resentment. You're got to look into these things to see where you're getting some sort of satisfaction out of them, and what a miserable satisfaction it is. It's only then that you realize you're not gaining any genuine nourishment out of it.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a dog chewing on a bone that has no meat, and no flavor aside from the taste of its own saliva. In other words, you keep commenting on this issue or that issue and running over and over and over it again in your mind. But what are you getting out of it? It's just your own saliva. When you've decided you've had enough of that, that's when you can let go.

We all have character traits that we don't like about ourselves. But the question is why you keep hanging onto them. There's something in there that you feel you gain some nourishment from. You gain some sense of self-justification or whatever. It's only when you see that this is why you go for it, and it's pretty miserable, that you can let it go. You find that when you stop feeding on these defilements inside, you no longer feel any need to feed on things outside, either. The cause all comes from here. It's the passion from here that creates the yoke that ties you down to things inside and out.

So have a very strong sense of your center here. There's that passage in Luang Pu Dune where he says that when the mind goes sending out for things or rushing out toward things, that's the cause of suffering. How are you going to know when the mind is rushing out unless you've got a good, solid reference point inside so that you can sense its movements? Otherwise, everything is all very fluid and sloshing around inside, and you really don't know what's happening or what's going where. But when you have something solid inside, then you can sense the movements.

So try to keep this center as solid as possible. That's what's going to give your discernment the opportunity to look into your feeding habits and do something skillful about them.