

The Mind's Eating Disorders

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The Buddha treats the problem of suffering and stress very much like an eating disorder. After all, he defines suffering as clinging, and the Pali word for clinging, *upadana*, can also refer to the act of taking sustenance, the way you eat things. And, of course, he's not talking only about physical food. He's talking about mental and emotional food as well. So look at how you feed on things. He gives you a framework for looking at the process. You're clinging to the five aggregates and it's important to realize that aggregates are not things. They're not a pile of gravel weighing you down. They're a series of activities that you get accustomed to doing, and you keep doing them over and over again. And the activities themselves relate to how you feed.

The question often comes up: Why did the Buddha divide things into five aggregates? Why aren't there six or seven? After all, there are lots of different mental processes going on in the mind. But the way you look at your mind really depends on the activity you're engaged in. We're engaged in feeding, and that's the activity we want to focus on. The five aggregates are five essential aspects of the process of feeding as it's directly experienced. When you feed, you're concerned about form, i.e., your body, and if the food is physical food, you're concerned about the object you're feeding on. There's feeling, which is the painful feeling of hunger you have to begin with, and the pleasant feeling of satisfaction you want after you're done. There's also the pleasure or displeasure that comes as you feed on a particular kind of food. There's perception, your perception of what kind of hunger you're suffering from. Is this a hunger for something salty? For something sweet? And then you look out and try to perceive what kind of foods out there would satisfy your hunger, trying to figure out what, to begin with, is edible and what's not.

Then there are fabrications: all the activities you have to go through in order to get that food, starting with the search, and then, when you find it, what you have to do to fix it so that you can actually feed on it. And then consciousness, of course, is the awareness of all these things.

And it's interesting that we feed not only off of food, but also off of these activities that go around feeding. There's a double layer of feeding here. This applies not only to physical feeding but also to emotional feeding: certain feelings you want and then your perception of what would be a good way to get those feelings and then all the activity that you go into in order to achieve the feelings you want. So if you find yourself addicted to something, try to divide the addiction into these things: What's the form, what are the feelings, what are the perceptions, what are the fabrications, what's the consciousness that surround the addiction?

One of the reasons we get the mind into concentration is because it's a good way to feed.

It's a harmless way to feed the mind and at the same time, because the mind is centered right here, you can see these activities clearly as you're engaged in them.

You're sitting here with the form of the body. How do you notice the form of the body? Well, there are the different elements. There's earth, water, wind, fire, and the space around it, the space penetrating it. These are the kinds of sensations that let you know you've got a body here, and it's a useful vocabulary to adopt: thinking about what you feel in the body in terms of heaviness of its solidity, or the energy of the wind, the warmth of the heat, the coolness of the water. You want to learn how to bring these elements into balance. And to do that, of course, you have to differentiate among them and figure out where the imbalance is.

We start with the breath, but we quickly begin running into the other elements, too. There's warm breathing and cool breathing. There are times when you feel really heavy and it's almost impossible to breathe. Some forms of concentration clamp down really hard. If you find that happening, you have to remind yourself that what you're experiencing here is primarily through the breath element to begin with. If it weren't for that, you wouldn't notice the warmth or the coolness or the heaviness. There would be no way of making contact at all. So the breath is there already, just try to perceive it as primary. And don't think that the earth element is setting up a blockade around it.

We want to make this sense of the form comfortable. And to do that, we use the breath. Of the various elements, it's the one the most responsive to the movements of the mind and the one that has the most control over the other ones. It's one of the few bodily processes that we can actually exert some control over just by watching it.

So while you're sitting here, ask yourself: What kind of breathing would be good now? Now, you won't be experiencing just the breathing. There will also be pleasant and unpleasant feelings associated with the breath. So how can you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure? And while you're dealing with this, you're going to be noticing how you perceive the breath. What's the mental image you have of the breath?—how it comes in, how it goes out, where it's coming in, where it's going out. And then you talk to yourself about it: That's fabrication. You ask yourself questions: Is the breath as comfortable as it could be, or could it be more comfortable? Is the breath energy evenly distributed throughout the body or are there parts that are starved while other parts that are too breathy? Try to sensitize yourself to this.

I hear over and over again people say, "What are you talking about, breath in the body? There's no breath in the body, there's just breath in the lungs." That's a huge insensitivity on their part. The breath energy in the body is right here. It's just a matter of learning how to look at it from this perspective. If you do, you learn that you can then create a nice place to settle down here, something nice to feed on.

It's also something to be aware of: That's the consciousness right here.

So this is a healthy form of feeding off all five aggregates. You're sitting here feeding, but

you're not killing anything to be fed. You're not feeding on any physical food, where even if it's vegetarian or vegan, you're required to feed off the work of some farmer someplace. And the pleasure here is a sense of well-being that the mind can feed on without clouding itself. So many of the mind's pleasures really cloud it.

If you derive your pleasure from a particular person, you have to ignore certain things about that person and certain things about the lust that's coming up in you or the emotional hunger that's coming up in you, all of which will blind you to a lot of things. But this is a pleasure with relatively few blinders.

So you're training the mind to get over its eating disorders, and one way is by giving it something better to feed on and a better way to feed.

The Buddha compares the different levels of jhana to different kinds of food. So what kind of food are you going to fix for yourself tonight and how are you going to feed off it? And notice: If you try to gobble it all down, you've lost it. In other words, once the mind gets to a level of stillness, you try to grab onto it, and the grabbing, of course, is going to squeeze the breath and there you go: The stillness isn't there anymore. Or if you look down on concentration in general, saying, "This isn't good food, I want insight, I want something higher than this," the mind's going to stay really hungry, and when the mind is hungry it goes back to its old feeding ways.

One of the strangest things you hear in meditation circles is that concentration is dangerous and you don't want to get stuck on it. Well, people who don't get stuck on concentration go back to getting stuck on their old sensual ways of feeding because the mind has this need to feed all the time as long as it's not awakened. So the question is, are you going to be feeding skillfully or not? And if you can't create a nice sense of jhana food right here, right now, the mind's going to slip off to its old ways of feeding.

So even though this isn't the ultimate goal of the practice, it's an important stage on the way there. As the Buddha once said, if you can't access this kind of pleasure, there's no way you're going to let go of the pleasures of sensual pleasures. No matter how much you may know about the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, you just keep coming back, coming back to them, because you don't have anything else to feed off of. Or you start feeding off unskillful emotions. Or you may decide you've got some attainment of something, so you feed off the pride around that.

So having a good sense of concentration, a good sense of the breath and how to work with the breath, is how you feed the mind and put it in a position where you can look at what other more subtle eating disorders you may have.

This is where the Buddha gets into the four different kinds of clinging. There's sensual clinging to begin with: your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Notice, the pleasures themselves are not the problem. The problem is that you like to fantasize about them again, again, and again, or reminisce about them again and again. That's an eating disorder.

Or you're stuck on certain habits, certain practices. These can be skillful or unskillful. As we're practicing, of course, we do have to develop skillful habits, but we also have to realize that they're a means, they're not the end. Unskillful clinging to habits and clinging to practices is the attitude that "If I obey all the rules, I'm going to be a good person and that's all I have to do—just do what I'm told," or "I have my certain way of doing certain things that have got to be done that way."

It's like a person who has to have a particular type of food cooked in just a certain way. Like that cartoon with Calvin and his mother: Calvin insists he wants his sandwiches cut diagonally with the crusts removed and he wants a certain kind of bread. But his mother doesn't do it that way, and he goes all berserk. A lot of us are like that: Things have to be just a particular kind of way and only then will we be happy. They have to be done like this, done like that—and that's an eating disorder, too.

Then there are views, certain views we have about things that have nothing to do with the practice. Again, we do have to use views in the practice. We need right view in order to practice, but outside of the practice there's a belief that if you look at things a certain way, simply the fact that you have a particular view or have a particular opinion makes you good, makes you better than other people. Again, we're not here to be better than other people or to cling to the view. We're here to use the view so that we can understand suffering and get beyond it.

Then there are views about what you are, who you are, your self. Here again, these are things we have to use in the practice, but if you hold onto a particular view and don't realize it's a means, you've got problems.

It's like trying to eat your utensils: eating your forks, your knives, your spoons. These are things meant to be used for a purpose, not to be eaten themselves. Sensuality doesn't have much use as a utensil. You need a certain amount of sensory pleasure, you need a certain amount of food, clothing, shelter, medicine as you practice. This is why we have those reflections on the requisites every night, every night. Other chants get varied, but that one is the same every night because it's a big issue. If we're not careful, we get really obsessed with the food we eat, obsessed with the clothing we wear, obsessed with where we're staying. It turns into sensual passion, sensual fascination, sensual obsession. So we reflect on how much is really necessary, what's just right. And actually, we don't really need all that much. When we can see that, we can focus on these other utensils that we've got to use and learn how to use them as utensils: how to use your forks, how to use your knives, how to use your spoons instead of just gobbling them down.

That way you can see, once the mind gets still, how you're using a view, what the results of the view are, what habits you have, what practices and precepts you have, and to what extent they're really useful for clarifying the mind, to what extent you're creating problems out of them, what you identify with, what you have to learn how to dis-identify with, and in what

order. We don't just throw the self out. We find that we've got lots of selves in here, and some of the selves are useful while some of them are problems. You have to learn how to sort them out.

So there's work to be done once the mind is settled and still. It requires digging around, uncovering different layers of feeding, different layers of unskillful habits. But it's work that can be done, and we can learn how to overcome this eating disorder where we want to be well fed and yet the mind is constantly creating suffering for itself over the way it eats. And not only that—it creates suffering for others, too. Ultimately what we want to do is find a state of mind that doesn't need to feed, at all. It's just there, without requiring any conditions.

It's interesting that when the Buddha introduces the topic of conditionality to young novices in the Novice's Questions, he uses the image of feeding. Everything that requires conditions in order to keep it going, he says: Look at it as a kind of feeding.

Thinking about that, you begin to realize we have lots of eating disorders, not just the obvious ones, and the universal ones a lot more subtle than the obvious ones. But the Buddha gives you an analysis of the problem and the tools for solving the problem, a range of vocabulary for understanding the different things that are going on, and a recommendation for what to do with them, so that the mind can get strengthened. Give it the good food of concentration, a sense of well-being that comes from generosity and virtue, and the mind gets stronger and stronger. Give it conviction in the practice. That strengthens you. Make it persistent, be mindful, develop concentration so that you can develop the discernment that sees these things clearly. This is how you strengthen the mind to the point where it finds something inside that doesn't need to feed, and that's when all your eating disorders, subtle and obvious, will end.