

Genuine Satisfaction

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Dostoevsky, writing in the nineteenth century, had one of his characters say, “I feel like a person standing on an open field with my skin stripped off, and the wind is blowing sand into my exposed flesh.” It’s supposed to be a very deep statement of existential angst. Fast-forward to 1950s: Carson McCullers, in *The Member of the Wedding*, has a young girl who’s going through an awkward period in life, saying at one point in the novel, “I feel like I’m standing in an open field with my skin stripped off. The wind is blowing sand onto me. What I need is a good ice cream cone.”

This relates to the fact that we come to life with hunger. We identify the hunger, we identify what’s going to satisfy the hunger, and that’s what drives our lives. But if our perception is off, we’re not going to be satisfied. In fact, that’s been our experience. We hunger for food. We hunger for relationships. We hunger for wealth. We can try all kinds of things to satisfy our hunger. But none of these things provide lasting satisfaction.

What the Buddha’s offering is a way to get genuine satisfaction. He said it is possible to find a dimension in the mind that doesn’t need to feed, not because it’s stone cold and insensitive, but because it’s found a happiness that’s totally satisfying. This means we have to look at the way we identify our hungers and try to satisfy them, and then try to train them in the right direction. To begin with, we have to see that true, unchanging happiness is possible and desirable. For this much, we go on faith when we start out, because we haven’t seen it yet. We just have the sense that the ways we’ve been trying to satisfy our hungers in the past haven’t really brought satisfaction. So maybe this is a possibility.

We look at the people who teach this. They seem to be reliable, and they tell us that it’s simply a matter of developing qualities we already have. It doesn’t require anything superhuman. It doesn’t require any cosmic being coming in from outside to do this for us. We’ve got the potentials within ourselves. We’ve got the potential for ardency. We’ve got the potential for resolution: sticking with something. We’ve got the potential for heedfulness, realizing the importance of our actions—that how we act really does make a difference between suffering and not. Those are the qualities that the Buddha said led to his awakening: ardency, resolution, and heedfulness. Those are the qualities we all have in a potential form. So we want to bring them to the practice.

The Buddha has us feed ourselves with good things in the practice. We're fed with generosity. In the beginning, it seems counterintuitive. You give something away but you get fed. On the immediate level, there's a sense of well-being that comes when you know that you have more than you need and you have enough to share. And it feels good to share. You learn to relish that feeling. It teaches you a good lesson: that many things that you're holding on to would give you a lot more happiness if you let them go.

The same with the precepts: There are certain activities that we engage in even though we know they're wrong. We don't feel quite right about killing, stealing, illicit sex. But part of the mind says, "I don't know how I'll survive without them because they do satisfy a kind of hunger." You have to realize that you have a deeper hunger—the hunger not to create trouble for yourself as you search for happiness, and that that hunger can be satisfied in better ways.

Then there's the pleasure that comes from concentration. And again, in the beginning it may not seem all that pleasurable. The mind's doing things it's never done before. It feels like it's being penned in. You have to stay with the breath. You can't go anywhere else. The Buddha compares this to being a wild elephant brought into the city to be tamed. The elephant gets chained to a post and all it can do is try to get away from that post. In the meantime, though, they bring it good food and speak nicely to it. Back in the old days, they actually played musical instruments for the elephants to calm them down. Eventually, the elephants would get used to being with human beings. A lot of their wild and forest ways would get tamed.

It's the same with the mind. You give it some pleasure in the way you breathe. Notice the in-breath. Notice the out-breath. Notice the way you breathe out. Ajaan Lee talks about getting all the bad air in your lungs out each time you breathe out. So, breathe in a way that allows all the bad air to get out. And see what happens as you breathe back in. Learn how to breathe in a way that feels good—that feels good all over. Try to be aware of the whole body and think of the breath as a process affecting the whole body. How are you going to breathe in a way that's good for the whole body? If you make your point of attention too narrow, you may be able to get that point comfortable, but other parts of the body will be starved. So you've got to think of the whole body breathing in and out.

Ajaan Lee talks about getting the breath in one spot comfortable first and then spreading it around, along with your awareness. In my own practice, I've found that it also works to be aware of the whole body first, and then find a spot that's comfortable and maintain that sense of comfort within the context of the whole body. Then let the comfort spread.

So different people will find that the steps go in different orders. The important thing is to have a sense of well-being and then allow it to slosh around the whole body; connect it with whatever good sensations are already there. Let them crowd out the uncomfortable sensations or dissolve them away. As you do this, you're feeding yourself with good food right here. When the mind is well fed like this, its hunger for a lot of unskillful things will lessen or go away.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha's talking about how the Jains, who were really into self-torture, liked to accuse the Buddhists of being devoted to pleasure. He says that there are some ways in which that's right and other ways in which it's wrong. If you talk about being devoted to the pleasure of killing, stealing, illicit sex, devoted to the pleasure of indulging yourself in sensual pleasures, indulging yourself in sensual plans, he said those are not the pleasures we're devoted to. We're devoted to the pleasures of the four jhanas, the four stages of right concentration, because those pleasures actually lead to awakening. They teach you how to feed yourself in a new way, in a way that's less harmful for the world around you and that's less harmful for yourself.

When the mind feels well fed inside, it's going to see things in a different way. When they've mapped the brain, they found that there's one part of the brain that gives you your basic map of reality, how you see things. And some of the nerves that go directly to that part of the brain come from your gut. In other words, your picture of reality is going to be influenced by what's going on inside the body, inside your digestive system, inside your muscle memory or muscle awareness. All these things feed into the brain first and then feed into the mind. And they shape the mind, as the Buddha said, with feelings and perceptions.

Feeling and perceptions are the things that shape our mind. It's how you manage a feeling of hunger that's going to determine what you see. How you identify the hunger, how you label the hunger, and then how you label things outside: All of this shapes the way you're going to approach reality. And all of this tends to happen before we even hit sensory contact. It's because of these things that happen before we're aware the senses—if they're done in ignorance—that we're going to suffer.

What we're trying to do here as we meditate is to bring some awareness to the process. This is one of the reasons why right view is the first factor of the path, because right view is what counteracts the ignorance that would set these processes in motion. You have to see simply how the way you breathe, how you perceive things, shapes everything else. We can do that in a way that causes less suffering. And when we do the shaping with awareness, then it all becomes part of the path.

Right view is what makes a difference between actions that form a wrong path and those that form a right path for the end of suffering. So try to get in touch with your hungers. It was hunger that drove you to be born here in the first place. You couldn't stay where you were before, so you set out looking for another place, another identity to take on so that you could continue going with your cravings and your clingings. That's how you got here.

And this is considered one of the relatively good levels of being. We look around the world right now, and things look pretty miserable, but at least we have the opportunity to practice now. We have the opportunity to look at our hungers and learn how to step back from them because we've got a different kind of food here—the food that comes from getting the mind to settle in.

From here, we can look at the hungers that normally drive us and realize that we don't have to follow them. There's better food. It's like realizing that some sorts of food taste good but are going to corrode your insides, and having the good sense not to eat that kind of food anymore. Now, this doesn't mean you have to starve, because the Buddha does provide you with this better alternative food.

So take strength from this food, because this is what allows you to follow the path that reaches that point where, as the Buddha said, there's genuine satisfaction: even more satisfying than the satisfaction that comes when the mind settles in and feels at home here in the present moment. This just a step in the right direction. But it is the right direction

As I said, until you've found that dimension that the Buddha's talking about, where there's genuine satisfaction, it's always going to be something you take on faith. But that faith will enable you to make some sacrifices you wouldn't have been able to make otherwise. Think about the act of giving. In the beginning, you may think, "If I give things up, I'm going to be poor." But then when you actually give them up, you find that you're richer. It's a different kind of wealth; a different kind of food for the mind.

As you go along the path, you'll find that there are a lot of things that you've been holding on to that you really, really treasure. But then you begin to realize you'd be better off without them. The conviction that there have been people who've followed this way before us and they've come back saying how genuine satisfaction comes from learning how to let go: Let that article of faith, or that article of conviction, be one of the perceptions that shapes your view of what's going on. It'll lead you on to a point where you find something that satisfies hungers you didn't even realize you had and it reaches a level of satisfaction you never believed possible.