

Feeding on Ardency

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Consciousness is like the body in that it needs to feed. The Buddha lists four kinds of food: physical food; contact; intentions of the heart, *mano-sancetanahara*; and then consciousness itself.

Consciousness feeds on itself. One act of consciousness feeds on another. This is why the mind is able to observe itself.

A lot of times consciousness feeds on junk food. As we all know, the Buddha said it's because of our feeding habits that we suffer. But you can't just stop feeding—it'd be deadly. Think of the food of intention. One sure-fire way of putting someone into a deep depression is to thwart their every intention.

There's the famous case of William James, the American philosopher. When he was young, he wanted to be an artist, but his father blocked all the avenues in that direction. James began to wonder if he had freewill at all. So he went into a severe and long-term depression. The way he got out of it was to exert his will. His first act of free will was that he was going to believe in free will, to make up his mind that that was what he was going to do. That was his intention, and he'd follow through with it. That's what got him out of the depression.

So the mind needs to feed on its intentions, in the sense that we see that we're actually accomplishing something by our choices, by the things we aim at. As the Buddha said, all our experience of the aggregates is based on intention. It's because of intention that you take the raw material for an experience of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness, and turn it into an actual experience of those things.

So there are many layers of feeding that go on in our experience, and because we can't simply stop feeding, the Buddha's path gives us something good to feed on.

Think of the elements of the path that have to do with intention: right resolve, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. All these are based on intention. Basically the Buddha's giving us something good to intend, something good to strive for.

One of the big ironies about Buddhism, especially its history in Europe, is that very early on it was branded as passive nihilism, a belief there's nothing worth exerting any effort for, so you just might as well give up.

Admittedly, there are people who teach that kind of practice. I was watching a French TV show on Buddhism one time. A teacher was talking about how if you want to find peace, just give up all idea of wanting things to be any particular way, and just go with whatever way they are. The interviewer, who tended to be a very sympathetic interviewer, was puzzled. She asked, "Doesn't that sound like depression, defeatism?" And the teacher being interviewed said, "Oh, only if you think about it."

But you *have* to think about it. When you do, you realize, "That's horrible." It has nothing at all to do with what the Buddha taught. When you look at the duties for the four noble truths, *acceptance* doesn't fit into any of them. When you comprehend suffering, it's not simply watching suffering. You try to understand it to the point of dispassion for it. That requires a lot of understanding.

Think about the Buddha's five-step program for inducing dispassion. It requires a lot of effort. You have to watch things as they're originated to figure out what their cause is. It takes a lot of figuring out. The Buddha gives you guidelines, he gives you pointers, but you've got to see it in yourself. Then you see these things pass away, and you ask yourself, "What's the allure? Why do I keep going back for these things that keep passing away?" This requires a lot of digging.

Especially with our defilements: We don't like to admit to ourselves why we like lust, why we like anger, or why we like envy. Yet they're there. They come up and we hold on to them. There's something in us that finds them alluring. You've got to figure out why.

Then you have to think about the drawbacks, and you have to present the drawbacks to yourself in such a way that it counteracts the allure.

So it's not just a matter of saying, "Oh gee, these things arise and they pass away, so I just might as well give up." That's not how the Buddha taught. True release requires that you really understand what's going on.

The same with the duty for the second noble truth: To abandon it, to let go of your craving, you have to realize: Why is it that you've been following it for so long? And how has it been lying to you? Again, this requires a lot of digging up.

There's the duty with regard for the third noble truth, which is to do the letting go, and to watch it at the same time. But to do that, you have to develop the path. This requires a lot of construction; it does require a lot of using your intentions. And the mind will feed off those intentions as you practice.

This is why concentration is listed as the primary food on the path, but you can also feed off of right resolve, feed off of right effort, feed off of right mindfulness.

Remember, mindfulness is not just watching things coming and going, and being non-reactive. You have to be ardent, alert, and mindful. It's the ardency that makes it skillful—that makes it right.

Mindfulness on its own can be mindful of anything. You can remember lessons you've learned about how to lie. That would count as mindfulness. How to get away with a lie: That counts as mindfulness—lessons you've learned about how to do all kinds of things.

The same with alertness: You can watch yourself doing all kinds of skillful and unskillful things, and it would still count as alertness.

It's ardency that makes mindfulness and alertness skillful. You want to do these path factors well. You want to do them skillfully, in such a way that you can put an end to suffering.

The intention there is what you feed on.

So the path gives you good food and it gives you energy. You're supposed to take delight in the Dhamma, delight in developing, delight in abandoning. Realize that this is really good food for you. Not only good for you, but you learn to see that it tastes good, too.

So we're not here just to be passive, not here just to watch things come and watch things go, and say "Gee, things come and things go, so I'll just give up and not have any ideals, not have any desires, not have any hopes." That's a recipe for depression. So do pin your hopes on doing this well.

There was another strange thing that I heard recently: someone saying that Buddhism has no word for hope. There are actually two words for hope: *Patikankha* is the adjective—things to be hoped for,—and *asa* is the noun for hope.

So do they have the words, and after all, when the Buddha's talking about the third noble truth, he's not expecting that you're just going to sit there and say, "Gees, isn't that interesting. There is such a thing as the end of suffering," and then just leave it at that. He does everything he can to make it attractive, knowing that what he says to make it attractive is nowhere near as attractive as it actually is.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes that point. He says, "If people could actually see *nibbāna*, if those who had attained it could take it out and show it to everybody else, no one would want anything else." It's infinitely to be hoped for. But of course, you don't just depend on empty hopes. You feed yourself with the intentional elements of the path and then you observe.

Here again there's that theme the Buddha talks about, on how to nourish the Dhamma through committing yourself to the path and then watching yourself: this ability of consciousness to feed on consciousness, to observe itself. You can see how well you're doing and figure out, when it's not going well, *why* it's not going well.

So the Buddha gives us plenty to feed on as we follow the path, plenty to hope for, plenty to aim at. It's simply a matter of learning how to relate to the goals he sets for us in a mature way. So develop some maturity in your feeding habits.

Ultimately, when you get to nibbāna, you won't need to feed anymore. It's a different kind of happiness, a happiness that doesn't require feeding. That's why it's safe.

A consciousness that requires that you feed means that you constantly have to look for a new food source. The food sources that we see in the world: Look at them now—drought, floods, pestilence, all kinds of things. It can happen, you know: The day will come when there's not enough food to go around.

Well, it's the same with the mind. When you don't have enough good food to go around, what do you do? You eat all kinds of things. As I've told you, go around the monastery, look at the scat of the coyotes, and you can see at the times when there's nothing good for them to eat, they'll eat anything, just to have something to go through their system, but there's no nourishment there. And it's not just coyotes, anybody who's hungry: If you can't get good food, you'll take bad food.

This is why nibbāna is infinitely to be hoped for: a happiness that doesn't require any food, that's not dependent on any conditions, doesn't require any clinging. And it is possible, but it requires that you take on the duties of the path, take on the duties of the four noble truths. As the Buddha said, he gained his awakening because he was heedful, ardent, and resolute. Notice he doesn't say accepting, non-reactive. He says heedful, ardent and resolute.

So learn how to feed off of ardency, feed off of heedfulness, feed off of resolution. They're all good food, and they can take you to a place where you no longer need to feed.