

To Comprehend Food

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The Buddha once said that if you could really comprehend food, it would take you all the way to non-return, the third level of awakening. Of course, “comprehend” here means understanding it to the point of dispassion, where you have no passion, aversion, or delusion around it.

So how do you go about comprehending food? First, there’s that reflection we often have about how you eat simply for the sake of maintaining the body so that you can practice. It’s not for beautification, not for putting on bulk, not for entertainment.

Try to develop that attitude toward your food. Each time you sit down, you need to ask yourself, how much do you really need? You have to think about the food in a way that makes eating not the wonderful thing it always seems to be. The body responds very positively to food. But just think about it. What are we eating? Things that come out of the dirt. And even if you’re vegetarian, there’s a lot of effort, a lot of labor that goes into getting that food to you. Think of all the farmers who have to work hard under the Sun. And it’s not guaranteed that their crops will be successful. Then the food has to be transported, it has to be stored, it has to be cooked. Then everyone has to clean up afterwards. Then your body has to digest it.

Think about the process of digestion. If you were to take the food that you chewed, before you swallowed it, and spit it out, you wouldn’t be able to put in your mouth again. Yet when it’s already in your mouth, you can swallow it. Then the body works on it. If you were to take the food at any of the steps in the process of digestion and try to eat it again, you couldn’t do it. Yet that’s how our body lives. The body needs the food broken down in that way so that we can survive, so that we can take the nutrients out of it. Then the body gets rid of all the excess, all the parts we can’t digest. And that’s another whole production there. We build sewer systems, sewage tanks, compost toilets. It’s a lot of labor, just to keep this body going.

Think, in comparison, about Kurt Vonnegut’s vision of Mercury. The beings that live on Mercury are little harmoniums. All they have to do is tap into the vibration of the crystal that the planet is in his vision. They feed off vibrations. We’re not just feeding off of vibrations. We’re feeding off of a lot of people and other beings’ suffering.

So what're you going to do with that food, what are you going to do with the energy you get from the food? When you think about eating a lot of food, a really good, big meal, you can think about it as putting yourself in debt—more than you would if you ate just a little bit.

What's the right amount? The right amount is just enough to keep the body going. You realize that you want to get beyond having a body. As Ven. Ananda told the nun that time, we practice so that ultimately we don't have to consume food, but we need food in the meantime so that we can practice.

So learn to have the right attitude toward it, because the Buddha is not trying to get you averse to food. That contemplation on the foulness of food is for people who are just really, really stuck on how great food can be. They've got to have some very strong medicine to counteract that attachment. But if it gets to the point where you're averse to food, that's not right, either. But you do have to think about the implications of eating.

That's because contemplation of food connects with contemplation of the body. This is another big attachment. The problem with the body, of course, is either lust or pride or the simple fear that you don't know what you're going to do if you don't have a body. At the moment of death, when you're evicted from this body, you're going to do anything you can to find another one. That can mean that you'll be hovering around the body.

I've told you that story about the woman who saw the spirit of the person hanging around a body that was waiting to be cremated. And as Ajaan Fuang said, there are a lot of those. They're so fixated on the body that they can't go on to anything better. You don't want to be in that position, but then what would be better? You get another body, and what happens? You're open to all kinds of pains.

Here, we have to depend on other people. That's if you're lucky enough to get a human body. You have to depend on other people, and then what are other people like? As Sartre once said, other people are hell. You try to develop a good relationship with them and it's totally up to them whether they want to be good to you or not. Other people are totally beyond your control, and yet you're dependent on them. It's not a good position to be in.

On top of that, once you've got a body, as Ven. Sariputta said one time, this body leaves you open to being wounded by sticks and stones and other weapons. It gives you ears with which you can hear all kinds of unpleasant sounds from other people. So it's not an unmitigated good, having a body.

You want to contemplate these things over and over again, so that you get a very strong sense that if the time comes to go from this body, you don't want to

latch on to another one. After all, even divine bodies have their drawbacks, and even though heaven can be pleasant, you can't stay up in heaven forever. If you get used to the pleasures of heaven, it's like those people who live on yachts. Everything gets done for them. But then suddenly they can't live on the yacht anymore, and they're spoiled. All they can think about is how pleasant it used to be, and how hard it is now.

So as you think about this, the whole purpose of this is to decide, "I don't want to come back at all." And fortunately, the alternative is not nothingness. The alternative is total freedom. As the Buddha said, if you see nibbana as having any negative aspects, that's wrong view. Nibbana is positive all around, from every angle. When nibbāna is possible, you have to ask yourself, which of your attachments here is really worth the trouble it entails?

The problem with nibbana, of course, is that you can't see it. And there's always that question, is it really true? As the Buddha himself said, just because it's mentioned in the scriptures doesn't mean it's true. But as he also said, at the very least, leave it open as a possibility. Don't close off the possibility. But still, you have to make a lot of sacrifices if you want to make that your goal. This is why it's good to think very strongly about the drawbacks of coming back to having another body, coming back to eating human food again.

Think about what human food is like in the eyes of the devas. It's like that incident in *The Once and Future King*. Merlin the magician has an owl, Archimedes, that talks and can engage in very intelligent conversation. But he still eats mice. When the time comes for him to eat, he's very embarrassed that human beings eat their human food while he has to go back and eat dead mice.

Well, have that attitude toward human food compared to food of the devas. You have to eat it, but it's just there to get by, so that you can practice, so that you can do some good with this body by being very clear-eyed about the drawbacks of having a body, and not wanting to come back.

So when you contemplate food, contemplate the body, it's not to hate these things. It's just to have a strong sense of having had enough.

The Buddha uses the word *nibbida*, disenchantment. Disenchantment is the word that's also used to talk about when you've had enough of a particular kind of food: You've eaten enough and you've simply had enough. You can't stomach the idea of having any more. But it's not aversion. It's more a sense that you've outgrown it, as when you've outgrown your childish habits. You've outgrown your childish games, because you see there's nothing of any substance there, nothing of any real value or interest.

The food has its value in that it keeps the body going. The body has its value, in that it allows you to practice so that you can get to something better. If you can see these things purely as a means to a higher end, then you're heading in the right direction.