

Feeding on Right Resolve

November 11, 2022

Just as the body needs food and nourishment, the mind needs nourishment as well. The Buddha identifies three different kinds of food for consciousness. One of them is sensory contact: sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations making contact at your eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. Then there's the act of consciousness itself as those things make contact: We're constantly looking, listening, hoping to get some nourishment out of things outside. But it's like popcorn: You can fill yourself up, but it's not necessarily good for you.

The most important forms of nourishment for the mind, though, are your intentions: The way you feed the mind through your intentions is what makes the difference between having a healthy mind and an unhealthy mind.

Health food for the mind comes in the form of right resolve—one of the factors of the path. You resolve on renunciation, resolve on non-ill will, resolve on harmlessness. In other words, you're going to find your happiness in a way that doesn't have to involve sensuality, doesn't have to involve any harm to anybody at all, a way that's in harmony with other people's well-being. So when you're finding happiness by getting the mind concentrated, that's an expression of resolve on renunciation.

We usually think about renunciation simply as depriving ourselves of something, but the Buddha's actually having us deprive the mind's hunger for sensual pleasures. The only way you're going to do that is, on the one hand, to see the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, and then, on the other hand, to provide the mind with an alternative pleasure—the pleasure of concentration.

So, try to breathe in a way that gives rise to concentration, a sense of well-being inside. And here you have free range. You can breathe long breaths, short breaths, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow—any combination of those. You can try experimenting with different types of breathing for a while to see what feels good right now. And think of the breath going deep into the body. For most of us, it's something we sense at the nose, or maybe around the upper chest, and that's about it. Let it go deep down inside.

Think of it spreading down the nervous system, spreading through all the blood vessels of the body, and bringing nourishment to all those places. Sometimes it's good to start out by

going through the body section by section to familiarize yourself with how the breathing process feels in different parts of the body. You can start down around the navel, work up the front of the torso, up the neck into the head, then down the back of the neck, down the shoulders and the arms out to the hands. Then, returning to the back of the neck, you can go down the spine, down to the tail bone, down through the legs, down to the feet—taking it section by section.

You may not feel much of any difference between the in-breath and the out-breath in those areas, but think of them just as being open so that if there *is* breath energy, it can flow. If there's any pattern of tension or tightness, any sense of blockage anywhere, think of it dissolving away. After all, the breath can go through anything—it's energy.

And think of it coming *before* your other sensations in the body. All too often, we feel the solid parts or the pains in the body are there first, and then the breath has to be pushed through them or work its way around them. But just hold in mind the perception that the breath energy in the body is there first. It has priority. It can go anywhere.

Then allow yourself to settle into the sense of whole body breathing in, breathing out, with a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment. This is the expression of resolve on renunciation. When you're sitting here like this, it doesn't seem like you're renouncing much, but you're certainly not thinking about the world outside. You're not thinking about other things, hoping to find happiness or pleasure in this thing or that outside.

That's what renunciation means: It's being wise in your search for happiness, wise in your search for well-being, renouncing the kind of happiness and pleasures that can lead to either harming other people or harming yourself. If you're absorbed in sensual pleasures, then the mind gets obscured. It's not as clear as it could be.

So, that's one form of food in right resolve.

Then there's the food of resolving on non-ill will—in other words, either goodwill or equanimity. When you don't wish anybody ill, this, too, is food for the mind, *good* food for the mind. If you look for happiness in a way that harms other beings, you're going to have to start lying to yourself. Either they're not being harmed, you tell yourself, or they don't matter, all of which is a dishonesty in the mind. This is one of the reasons why this form of resolve goes well together with the practice of concentration. When you're finding your happiness inside like this, you don't have to go feeding off of other people. That puts you in a position of strength.

If we don't feel nourished inside as we go through the day, our food is going to be the

intention to get some pleasure out of what other people say, or of what they do for us. And when they don't do for us what we want, or they do things that we really don't want, it's as if we've gobbled down bad food.

But if you have a sense of well-being with the breath, it's a lot easier to feel goodwill for everyone, even when they don't behave in ways you like, because you're not trying to feed off of them.

And then you think further: This is good food for your intentions as well, because the Buddha never says we have goodwill for other beings because they deserve it; we have goodwill for other beings because *we* need it.

If we want to make sure that our actions are skillful in what we do and say and think, we have to think about the happiness of others. If we don't care about their happiness, we get careless, and then when we're careless in our actions, it becomes bad karma. So this is good food for the mind.

Now, as I said, non-ill will means both goodwill and equanimity, because goodwill is something that can be developed as an unlimited attitude. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha calls it a *brahmavihāra*: an attitude that Brahmās have.

Our human goodwill starts out as pretty partial. We have goodwill for people we like, people who have been good to us, and we have ill will for people who have been bad to us, but Brahmās are above all that. Of course, they live in places where nobody can do any harm to them anyhow, so it's easy for them to have goodwill all around. Here in the human realm it's harder, but it's actually more important. As I said, we can create all kinds of karma, so we want to be careful about the intentions we feed on.

And goodwill is expressed in what sorts of actions? It's expressed through our generosity; it's expressed through our virtue. In the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, the Buddha talks about all that goes into living a life that makes it possible for your goodwill to be honest and sincere.

It requires being restrained. In fact, the Buddha calls goodwill a type of restraint. You don't usually think of it that way. As an unlimited attitude, how is it restrained? It's restrained in that it restrains our greed, aversion, and delusion. And it requires patience, because people will behave in lots of ways that are not in line with what we want.

That, of course, brings in equanimity, because even though our goodwill may be unlimited, we have limitations in terms of our energy, how much we can give in terms of our material wealth, our time, our energy. These things are limited.

So, in cases where you have goodwill for others but you don't have the strength to help them, it's either because of your karma, or because of their karma, or because of a combination of the two.

The Buddha has you reflect: Okay, this is the human world, where we're living with people who have mixed karma. We ourselves have mixed karma; other beings have mixed karma. What that means, of course, is that we have good and bad karma in our backgrounds, and good and bad karma is going to show itself in this human realm. The devas may have both good and bad karma, but for the time that they're in the deva realm, only the good will show. But we're living in a mixed world—so we have to make sure that our goodwill doesn't get mixed.

But we have to realize that even though our goodwill may be unlimited, there are limitations on the help that we can give to others. That's where we bring in equanimity. And we have to learn how to not feel guilty about the fact that we have human limitations. There's only so much a human being can do.

As the Buddha said, you don't want to give to the point where it hurts. You give in a way that doesn't harm yourself and doesn't harm the recipient. That's a wise gift, but it means there will be limitations on your generosity. So you bring in equanimity as part of non-ill will. It's not indifference, it's just bringing the reality principle to your goodwill.

As I was saying earlier, when the Buddha teaches equanimity, he doesn't teach it on its own. In terms of the brahmavihāras, equanimity goes together with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. In terms of the factors for awakening, it goes together with mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, and concentration. In both lists, the context is important.

In terms of the brahmavihāras, you practice the equanimity of a doctor. The doctor wants the patient to get cured, but realizes there are going to be patients you can't cure. There are diseases out there that are beyond anything a doctor can do, but the doctor doesn't give up. Instead of getting upset about what he or she cannot do, the good doctor focuses on what he or she *can* do to make sure the patient has, say, as little pain as possible and doesn't develop any additional diseases. So this equanimity isn't the equanimity that gives up on things—it's the equanimity that puts aside things that are impossible, and looks for the area where you can possibly help.

As for equanimity in the factors for awakening, that's basically one of the factors of

concentration. And as the Buddha said, if you did just equanimity, equanimity—just be the knowing, be the knowing, be the knowing—without making any choice between what’s good and what’s bad, what should be developed, what not, your meditation doesn’t go anywhere. Nothing develops.

So, it’s going to require mindfulness. It requires that you analyze what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, and when you see that something’s unskillful, you bring in the persistence to abandon it. If it’s skillful, you bring in the persistence to develop it, so that you can give rise to sense of *pīti*, as it’s called in Pali, which can be translated as rapture, refreshment, fullness. It’s basically the nourishment that keeps you going, and brings the mind to calm and concentration.

Of those seven factors, there’s one sutta where the Buddha points out three in particular that are important: persistence, the concentration, and the equanimity. Persistence is the most active of the factors. Concentration and equanimity are more passive. The Buddha compares meditation to the work of a goldsmith. The goldsmith puts the gold in the fire, then brings it out and blows on it, and then looks at it. Or sometimes he looks at it first, and then blows on it until all the impurities are gone.

If the goldsmith simply put it in the fire and left it there, the gold would burn. If he simply sat there looking at the gold, nothing would happen. If he simply blew on the gold, nothing would happen. In the same way, he said, putting the gold into the fire is like the persistence you bring, the effort, the ardency you bring to the practice, wanting to do this well.

Here it’s interesting to note that when Ajaan Lee’s talks about the factors of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency in his discussion of right mindfulness, he points out that ardency—the persistence—is the factor of discernment and wisdom.

It’s the same when you understand the four noble truths: The wisdom lies in seeing what should be *done* with those four noble truths. If something qualifies as suffering, you don’t just sit and look at it. You try to comprehend it: “What exactly is this? Where is it coming from? Where is it going?” With craving, you don’t say, “Okay, I just accept the craving coming and going,” you actively try to abandon it to the point where there’s no more nostalgia for craving.

The cessation of suffering is something you want to realize, and you do that by developing the path. If you know the four noble truths but just let the knowledge sit there, that’s not really wise. So it’s the desire to put forth the right effort: That’s where the wisdom comes.

So persistence is putting the gold in the fire. Concentration is blowing on it, cooling it

down. Equanimity is looking at it. The good goldsmith does all three, at the right times, and the good meditator does all three at the right times. It's in this way that you nourish the mind well, and your equanimity gets balanced.

As for the third type of right resolve, being resolved on harmlessness: Harmlessness here means basically the same thing as compassion. When you see that other people are suffering, you want to help—but here again you need to have your equanimity. There are times when you want to help other people, yet they're beyond your help.

Again, look at it as karma. Some people have the karma that no matter how many people want to help them, the help just doesn't get through. Or in some cases, you may have the karma that you can't help that particular person, but maybe somebody else can. You don't take that as a sign that you're bad; it's simply that you don't have the right karma with that person. When you have this attitude, it's a lot easier to live in the world and not feel depleted, and to not let your nourishment get wasted away.

So you're nourishing the mind here with breath energy, you're nourishing the mind with a sense of well-being that comes from a concentrated mind, you're nourishing it with goodwill, and you're nourishing it with equanimity. This is how your mind stays healthy and strong, and—as Ajaan Fuang used to say,—“Your goodness doesn't break.” This is important, because sometimes we give, give, give, give, give, and then we break, and then we don't give at all. You have to learn what your strength is. That's actually an expression of goodwill, too.

Think of yourself as a marathon runner. You don't just run as fast as you can. You pace yourself. And even healthy food for the mind is something that, if you gobble down too much all at once, it's not good for you. Pace yourself in your concentration; pace yourself in your goodwill.

Pacing yourself in concentration means that when you have an opportunity like this to meditate full-time, you go for it. When you have to go through the day where you have other responsibilities, you learn how to take what we call your pocket jhana: that little bit of concentration you can maintain, a sense of well-being that you can maintain as you go through the day. And you accept that, okay, given your circumstances, given your responsibilities, this is as much as you can do—but you can still nibble on it all day long. The only thing that's keeping you from nibbling on it is your own lack of skill in maintaining the sense of well-being as you go through the day. So learn how to feed the mind well. That way, your goodness stays strong and can grow.