

## *New Feeding Habits*

*November 24, 2022*

Years back, they had a commemoration for Ajaan Lee's passing. Every year when they would do this, they would invite a senior monk to give the closing Dhamma talk. Some years it would be an ajaan from the northeast, some years it would be a high-ranking monk from Bangkok. That year, it was going to be a high-ranking monk from Bangkok, but a few minutes before the talk was about to happen, he still hadn't shown up. We got a phone call saying that he was stuck in traffic and telling us to go ahead and invite somebody else to give the talk.

So they got one of the forest ajaans to get up, and he talked about how the Buddha's teachings were all about suffering, suffering, suffering. Then, when he had finished, the monk from Bangkok arrived. So they invited him to get up and give another talk. His theme was the Buddha's teachings were all about happiness, happiness, happiness.

They were both right in their way.

The Buddha talked about suffering not to get you depressed, but for you to be realistic in your search for true happiness. And he talked about happiness because true happiness is possible. When he started out on this path, he said he was going in search for what is skillful. For him, that meant what you can do that would lead to true happiness.

He tried many different paths. None of them quite worked. None of them gave him the ultimate happiness he wanted, because he was after a happiness that didn't change, a happiness that didn't die. But ultimately he found it. That's what his teaching is all about—realizing that the way we ordinarily live leads to suffering, but there is a path that leads to true happiness, and we can choose to follow that path. We have that freedom. We're not necessarily stuck in our old ways.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha was so adamant against the teachings of determinism. He wasn't the sort of person to pick fights, but he would go search out people who taught determinism and ask them, "Do you really teach this? Why? You're limiting people. You're leaving them helpless,

bewildered, and unprotected.”

In his teachings, our actions are our choices, as in the reflection we had just now on aging, illness, death, and separation. If you just stopped the contemplation right there with those four things, it'd get pretty depressing. But then he goes on to the fifth contemplation: We are the owner of our actions. We reap the results of what we choose to do. And as he said elsewhere, the range of human action can go very far. It can take you to a point where you even go beyond action and where there's the ultimate happiness.

But basically, the teaching he gives us is that we suffer because of the way we feed. We feed on our emotions, we feed on our relationships, and that just opens us up to more and more suffering. He wants to show you the way to a place that doesn't need to feed. Why? Because it's where you can find true happiness. It's something that lies beyond imagination, but it's something that can be attained. It's going to require that we change our feeding habits. But again, this is something we can do. We can choose to change the way we feed.

The Buddha doesn't have you starve yourself right away. He gives you the path to feed on. The primary factor of the path that corresponds to his alternative food is concentration. But there are altogether five types of food for the mind that can strengthen you, to keep you strong as you practice.

The first is conviction—conviction in your actions, that your actions can make a difference, and that human action can take you all the way to a happiness so intense and so totally satisfying that you're no longer interested in going back to feeding in your old ways.

We tend to think of a life that doesn't have the ups and downs of strong emotions or the intense pleasures of relationships would be very dull and insipid. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He taught that there is a happiness that's so total that you no longer feel the need to feed off of anything else. That's where we're headed. And it can be accomplished through our actions.

This is one of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha and respect him, because he has us respect our own desire for true happiness. And he has us respect ourselves, in that we can make a difference in the way we act, speak, and think. That can lead us to something much higher and better than we've ever found before.

So that's conviction. Being convinced about what the Buddha taught, being convinced of the fact that he was awakened, gives you real nourishment, because it allows you to live in a world where people have found true happiness. If you don't have conviction in that, the world is a pretty grim and dismal place where people are just eating and fighting, and eating and fighting, and then dying, and then coming back and eating and fighting some more. So conviction in the Buddha's awakening changes the world in which you live, and it changes your perspective on yourself and what you're capable of.

As we also mentioned this evening, the Buddha doesn't have you define yourself. He says that if you think of yourself simply as being capable of following his path, that you're responsible, you're competent, and you're going to benefit from following the path—that's all you have to think about in terms of who you are. It allows you to see what you can do that leads to the next strength, which is persistence.

Persistence comes down to seeing that if you have unskillful qualities in the mind—you've had them in the past—you do what you can to keep them from arising again. You know your own unskillful qualities: greed, aversion, and delusion. You know you have them, but you don't really know them, you don't really discern them. Persistence requires that you learn to understand: "Why do I go for anger? Why do I go for greed?" When you come to understand these things, then the next time there's a temptation to go for them, you realize, "No, I don't need to go there."

You understand what the allure is, you understand the drawbacks, and you understand that you can escape from this. You don't have to go down that alleyway again. This is based on learning how to look in a useful way at these things. When they arise, what causes them to arise? They don't last forever, they pass away, but then you dig them up again. So you learn how to prevent yourself from digging them up again by understanding what's their appeal.

It may take some time to dig this up because we often have unskillful habits, we know they're unskillful, and we deny to ourselves that we like them, but there's part of mind that likes them. So you want to ferret that part out, because if you can't ferret it out, no matter how much you see the drawbacks, you're not going to be able to really overcome the appeal.

So you make the effort to prevent these things from arising. When they have arisen, you make an effort to make them go away. As for skillful qualities, if they're not there yet, you try to give rise to them; and once they're there, you try to develop them as far as they can go.

We were talking earlier about how unskillful qualities come from the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in your mind, but skillful qualities can come from the same things—the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind. The difference lies in whether you do these things in ignorance or with knowledge. This is one of the reasons why—if you really want to be skillful in terms of the food of persistence—you have to practice mindfulness and concentration, because it's in these ways that you get to really understand what's going on in the mind. You give the mind something good to hold on to instead of the unskillful qualities it's been following.

So these two strengths—mindfulness and concentration—are like food for the mind. They strengthen the mind. You get a good place to stay, like with the breath. You breathe in a way that feels really good. Again, you're free to do this. All of the Buddha's teachings are based on the principle that you have choices available to you in the present moment. Take advantage of them. So, given that nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, why do you let yourself breathe in an uncomfortable way? Largely because you haven't been paying attention. So give the breath full attention.

When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Other parts of the body that feel restricted as you breathe in: Can you loosen up those restrictions? Think of all the joints in the body: the joints in the fingers, in the wrists, the elbows, the shoulders, the toes, the ankles, the legs, the knees, the pelvis, all the joints of the spine. Think of them all loosening up. Wherever there's any tightness, allow that tightness to relax.

And as you breathe in, think of the breath not so much as the air coming in and out through the nose, but as the flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and out. After all, if it weren't for that flow of energy in the body, the air would just stay where it is. The outside air would stay outside; the inside air would stay inside. The fact that the air is coming in, going out, is because of the

energy flow in the body.

So where do you feel that flow? Does it exist only where you feel it right now? You might think of it spreading around, and as you spread it around, make sure it feels good. Then talk to yourself about this. Talk to yourself about what kind of breathing might be better and, if it's already good, how best to maintain it. Once you can maintain it, how do you spread it around? Hold in mind the perception that the breath can go through the entire body. Anywhere there's tightness or tension, it can relax. Or you can think of the body as like a big sponge: As you breathe in, the energy can flow freely through all the little holes in the sponge. Or even better, think of the atoms in the body. They're not totally made of space, but there's a lot of space in there—very little matter, but a lot of space. So the breath can flow through all that space.

So you use these forms of fabrication and you can be mindful to get the mind to settle down. Once it's settled down, there can be strong states of concentration and you can feed off the sense of well-being that comes from the concentration. As you do this, you're getting to understand your mind in terms of the factors of fabrication.

This leads to the fifth food, which is discernment.

There's a real satisfaction when you come to understand the mind—why it's been causing itself suffering, and why it doesn't have to. You can really see that it's not just something you've heard, but something you can see in action. You can change your habits, and you can benefit as a result. You don't have to feed in the old ways you used to feed. There's a real sense of strength and nourishment that comes with these understandings. And they go deeper and deeper until you reach that state that the Buddha said is there—the experience of the deathless—which is the ultimate happiness, something you don't need to feed on. It's that good.

When you come back from that experience, you relate to the world in a different way. You no longer feel so compelled to feed off of things that were going to be bad for you. You still have relationships, you still deal with other people, you still deal with the world at large, but your relationship to the world is different. It's not so grasping, not so desperate. You're coming from a sense of fullness, a sense of satisfaction. That's what the Buddha promises, even with your first taste of this experience. It changes your perspective on your relationship to

the world. You still may be feeding off of things, because the experience is not yet total, but you know that there's a path that can take you to this total experience. That's a lot of sustenance right there.

So you're not simply coming to a state where you're forcing yourself to be non-reactive and accepting. It's more like a state of total satisfaction. And when you're totally satisfied like this, it's like having eaten your fill. You don't feel the need to feed off of anything else. No matter what good or bad things other people can bring you, you don't need to feed because you're already well fed. And when your needs are met like this, it's a lot easier to be compassionate in a genuine way. You don't have to feed off the idea of your being a compassionate person, because that can often get you to do unskillful things. You're in a better position to see what would actually be helpful for other people and, if you can provide it, you're happy to provide it. You don't have to feed off of your generosity anymore. You don't have to feed off your virtue; you don't have to feed off your discernment.

The goal is that good. The path is a good path. After all, learning to be a person of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—these are all good things: good things to do, ennobling things to do—which is one of the reasons why this is called a noble path. One of the other reasons, of course, is that it leads to something truly noble—a happiness that doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else at all.