

Feeding on Open Wounds

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We're born into this world in a position of weakness, because we have to depend on the world for our food—not only for physical food, but also food for the mind. The Buddha lists three kinds of mental food: contact at the senses, consciousness at the senses, and then what he calls intellectual intention, which basically comes down to your intentions in general. We constantly have to feed off these things.

For instance, with contact: If we didn't have sensory contact, if we were put into a sensory deprivation tank and stayed for a long time, the mind would go crazy. Without input from the five senses, the sixth sense can begin to go off on its own. And it doesn't have to be as extreme as a sensory deprivation tank. Sometimes you get monks going off into the forest, living alone, and they get kind of strange. With not much coming into the outside senses, the mind begins to feed on itself. One unskillful thought feeds off of another, off of another. That can take it in strange directions.

But when we do have sensory contact, we open ourselves to all kinds of things. We live in a world where all kinds of things can happen: all kinds of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, good or bad. And we're constantly exposed. The Buddha's image is of a flailed cow—one that's been beaten to the point where its skin is all worn off. Its wounds are open. Wherever it goes, the creatures that live in that area are going to feed off its blood, feed off its flesh. If it stands near a bush, the creatures living in the bush will feed off it. If it stands next to a wall, little bugs living in the wall will feed off it. If it just stands in the middle of the air, the bugs in the air will feed off of it. In other words, no matter where you go, you're open to all kinds of things happening. Yet this is where we look for our food. We're feeding off of our wounds.

The image for intentions is similar: a pit of burning embers, and you're immersed in the pit. You're burning on all sides.

The image for consciousness is also similar: a criminal is being speared 300 times a day.

Food for the mind is basically open wounds, and we're feeding off of open wounds. The Buddha says that if we want to find peace, we have to find a state where we don't have to feed anymore. In the meantime, of course, he gives us good things to feed on and he also teaches us how to show some restraint in the

senses—in other words, learning how to look at these things in such a way that we're not wounding ourselves even further.

The good food he gives us is concentration. The two main topics he recommends as a bases for sensory restraint are mindfulness of the body and the immeasurable states of mind that go with the brahmaviharas. With mindfulness of the body, you learn to develop a sense of well-being inside. You sit here just breathing, totally immersed in the body, your sense of the body as you feel it from within. You breathe in, breathe out.

Think of the breath in ways that minimize any tension that would develop when you breathe in, breathe out. If you find yourself tense in the shoulders, it usually comes from the fact that you feel you have to breathe in through a nose where there's an obstacle, that doesn't want the breath to come in. So change your perception. You can think of breathing in from the back of the neck or up from the floor. See what that does. Think of the breath going down the arms, going down the legs. You can either go inside the arms or on the surface of the arms, whatever feels good, whatever minimizes the pressure of the process of breathing, so that the body can feel light.

Then you try to maintain that mindfulness as you look at sights, listen to sounds, smell aromas, taste flavors, sense contact at the body. When you're coming at the input from the senses already well fed, you don't have to feed so much off of the wounds. In this way, you can gain some control over your senses, and not feel like you're being deprived of food. If you just tell yourself, "Don't look, don't listen," the mind will rebel. Instead, learn to say to yourself, "Okay, I'm going to watch when I'm looking at something to see: What's my motivation for looking? What happens to my mind when I look in that way? When I'm listening to things, why am I listening? What is my motivation?" Or as Ajaan Lee would say, "Who's doing the listening? Who's doing the looking? Is greed doing the looking? Is it lust? Anger? Fear? Jealousy?" If those characters are doing the looking, they're going to get strengthened in your mind.

The fact that you can look at sensory contacts as processes depends on your feeling well fed inside. Otherwise, all you can think about is the food you can get from the contacts. But when you're already well fed, then you can look at your process of feeding on other things and you realize you don't want to feed that way because it has a bad effect on the mind.

It's like noticing that you like a lot of sweets. You give yourself something better to feed on, abstain from sugar for a week or two, and then look back at the sweets. You realize, "This would be bad for me. My reason for eating sweets was because I was totally immersed in the flavor. I didn't think about the

consequences.” You didn’t even feel the consequences. They were there, but you ignored them. So you’re learning new feeding habits. And you’re learning how to step back from the wounds you’ve been feeding on.

The Buddha gives another analogy. He says the six senses are like different animals. If you don’t have that post of mindfulness immersed in the body, it’s like taking the animals, tying leashes to their necks, and then tying the ends of the leashes together. The animals will pull in different directions. You’ve got a crocodile that wants to go down to the river. You’ve got a bird that wants to fly up into the sky. You’ve got a dog that wants to go into a village, a hyena that wants to go into a charnel ground, a snake that wants to go into a hole, and a monkey that wants to go up into a tree. They pull and pull and pull in different directions and, as the Buddha says, the strongest one ends up dragging all the others—in which case it would be the crocodile that drags everybody else into the river. They all drown.

But if you’ve got the mind firmly established, inhabiting the body with a sense of well-being, it’s like having a post firmly planted in the ground. You tie the leashes of those animals to the post, and then pull as they might, they’re not going to go anywhere. They end up lying down next to the post. That’s the role of mindfulness immersed in the body.

The Buddha also recommends, in the same passage, that you develop goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, equanimity toward all. You need all of those immeasurable attitudes, because as you’re looking and listening, you’re going to see people doing all kinds of things. They’re harming themselves, harming one another. Think of the Buddha’s image of the world. After he gained awakening, he surveyed the world and saw that everyone was on fire with passion, aversion, and delusion. They were running around, setting one another on fire. On the one hand, he felt compassion, but on the other hand, he had to feel equanimity, realizing there was only so much he could do to change what people are doing.

You notice that when the Buddha taught, he didn’t say he was going to teach everybody, that he was going to ferry all beings off to nibbāna. He was a teacher of those willing to be trained. He was realistic about his capabilities. He spread goodwill to those he couldn’t train, but he also had to be equanimous about that fact. This is where all the brahmaviharas go together as a set. When you can develop these attitudes, then you can look and listen and taste and touch, smell things, and you’re much less likely to get irritated. If there’s irritation, then there’s resentment, from resentment, the mind gets stirred up.

So notice, restraint is not simply a matter of being quiet and mindful. It also requires having the right attitude, having right view about things. After all, you don't want to just go gobbling down your wounds. It's a weird image, but that's what we do. We feed avidly off our open wounds. As we practice, we're trying to get the mind to a place where it doesn't have to do that anymore. And the good news, of course, is that it can be done. xx

This evening I was hosting a Zoom meeting. One of the participants said, "It sounds like we're devaluing birth here. It sounds like we just want to avoid being reborn. I don't want to accept that kind of teaching." I said, "Well, look. What's happening when you're being born? On the one hand, you're not only causing yourself a lot of suffering, but you're also causing suffering to others—those who are inconvenienced by your presence on Earth. And you're constantly feeding. If you can't get your food in good ways, you're going to start getting it in bad ways. You can't really trust yourself."

But the Buddha isn't telling you to just run away. If you're going to leave the world, he says, you've first got to develop all the good qualities of the mind: your generosity, your virtue, your ability to find pleasure outside of sensuality, your discernment, your persistence, your endurance and forbearance, your truth, your determination, your goodwill, your equanimity. As you develop these good qualities, you benefit, and the world benefits as well. It benefits even more when you pull yourself out of the feeding chain and leave good things behind.

It's not as if samsara is a place that you're getting out of, running away and abandoning the people stuck in that place. Samsara is a process. And it's a process that involves suffering, not only for you, but also for the people you depend on. It's an addiction. But we can learn how to overcome that addiction. As we pull out of the addiction, everybody benefits. Because it's not that we're not running away to nothing. We're abandoning an addiction so that we can awaken to a state where there's so much well-being that you don't need to feed on anything.

When you see all the pain and hardship that goes into feeding, and when you think about the fact that you're feeding off of wounds, you realize that the Buddha's path leads to something that really is desirable—something that's good for everyone.

So learn how to feed yourself properly with mindfulness immersed in the body; develop the brahmaviharas so that you can be restrained and not so eager to gobble down whatever the world has to offer. When you don't gobble it down, you can be more discriminating, more discerning in what you do eat, what you do focus on. That way, you don't have to gobble down poison along with what's good.

As the Buddha said, nibbāna is true health. When you think of the health of the body, you realize how precarious it is. But the health of nibbāna is solid and unchanging, because it's not dependent on anything at all.