No Need to Feed

November 27, 2003

Thanksgiving is a good day to reflect on how the Buddha said that eating is suffering. We like the idea of eating, but when you eat too much, you suffer. When you eat too little, you suffer. If you look for your happiness in eating, you’re bound to suffer. In the Four Noble Truths, he says, “If you look for happiness in eating, you’re bound to suffer.” He defines suffering as the five clinging aggregates. That word “clinging” can also be translated as “feeding,” the things we feed on in order to find happiness. If you’re looking for happiness in form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness, you’re going to suffer. As you feed, you suffer. You take these things in and you find that they don’t give you any real nourishment. So the whole purpose of the practice is to make the mind so strong that it doesn’t need to feed. Because as long as we’re feeding, not only is the act of feeding in and of itself suffering, but look at the things we feed on. Many times they’re actually toxic. They look good in the beginning. They taste good. But as they get into your system, they start eating on you. In other words, if you didn’t eat them, they wouldn’t eat away at you. Think of all the things that eat away at your mind, the things you don’t like about what the people on the other side of the hill are doing, what people in your office are doing, what people in the government are doing. When you let that get into your system, it starts eating away at you. The trick is not to eat it first. It’s like food that has parasites in it. If you don’t eat the food, the parasites are not going to start eating away at your intestines. So what we do in the first course of the practice is to give ourselves something better to eat than our normal preoccupations. This is why we focus on the food. We focus on the breath. You find that as you focus on the breath, you can provide an awful lot of nourishment for the mind. It’s important that you don’t do it just when you’re sitting and meditating, but all the time. When you’re feeding the mind with the nourishment of the breath, it strengthens the mind and, at the same time, you’re so full of the breath that you don’t want to feed on anything else. So when disturbing things happen outside, things that would normally give rise to aversion happen outside, you’re not bringing them in. Otherwise, when your habit is just to feed on everything that comes in terms of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, you’re going to gobble down all kinds of problems. And then you complain that you’ve got a stomachache or that your intestines hurt. So we give the mind something better to feed on, so that when poison comes past, we’re not the least bit tempted to feed on it. You see, it’s something separate. You can watch it just go right past without taking it in. You can note, “Yes, that’s not a very good thing,” and maybe you can decide to do something about it, but it doesn’t get into your system. Years back, Ajahn Fuang asked me to translate one of Ajahn Lee’s books, “Frames of Reference.” After a couple of weeks, I finished the first draft, and one evening I went up to see him, as I normally did every evening to fix his tea. Sometimes we’d sit around and he’d ask questions or I’d ask questions. That day there was somebody else sitting there, another monk, who didn’t particularly care for me. He felt I was getting too much of Ajahn Fuang’s attention. I made the mistake of mentioning to Ajahn Fuang that I’d finished the translation. So he turned and looked at me, and he said, “Well, that’s your business and not mine.” Fortunately, I was staying with the breath at the time, so I could watch those words go right past. I remember noticing, “Those are pretty strong words, but they didn’t go in.” And the monk smiled. But as soon as Ajahn Fuang noticed that the words didn’t go in, the next thing he said immediately was, “Well, in that case, we’ll find a sponsor to print the book.” This is what happens when you learn how to feed on the breath and keep feeding on the breath all the time—your sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, a sense of strength that comes from the breath. It can be so satisfying that the other things in the world that would normally get into your system and start eating away at you just can’t get in. You don’t feel like gobbling them down. So that’s your first line of defense against allowing these things to eat away at you. You don’t eat them. You don’t take them into your system. You’ve let something get into your system. Then you’ve got to get it out. We often hear that, especially with anger, the Buddha says that you want to develop thoughts of goodwill in order to counteract the anger. But actually he says more than that. I don’t know about you, but I’ve found that many times it’s simply that thinking thoughts of goodwill is not enough to get the anger out. You’ve got to use other techniques as well. The Buddha himself says that you use all of the sublime abidings—not just goodwill, but also compassion, sympathetic joy or appreciation, and equanimity. Equanimity being the quality we develop when we look at everything in terms of cause and effect and realize that whatever there is has a cause, and whatever we’re going to do has an effect. So we have to be very careful about what we do in reaction to things. The Buddha once said that if you act out of anger, you’re doing precisely what your enemy would like you to do. Notice the psychology of that statement. He’s not telling you to have goodwill for your enemy. He’s telling you to think about, “Do you really want to satisfy your enemy? Well, no.” That’s a different kind of psychology altogether. You’re focusing your attention away from the enemy and back at yourself. You’re harming yourself when you act on the anger. So at the very least, remind yourself that when anger comes in the mind, you don’t want to act on it. You don’t want to speak under the power of the anger. You want to learn how to pull yourself out of the anger, separate yourself from it. The first step is to look at the object of the anger. You’re making a three-way separation here. The object, the anger itself, and the mind that’s watching. So you look at the object. Exactly what sets you off? Something that somebody did. Take that for an example. You say, “Well, they did that because they think this of me or they think that of me.” How do you know? It was your assumption. That actually sets you off more than actually what they did. Even though you may not be able to think of any other way of interpreting what they’ve done, still notice the fact that you made that assumption. Once that assumption got planted in your mind, then it started eating away at you. Sometimes you’re living with someone and they do something that strikes you the wrong way, and you focus on that. Then you forget all the other good things they’ve done for you. In a case like this, you want to step back and look at that one action in the context of all the other things that another person has done or said. Even if that person has done nothing but evil, then you have to have compassion for the person. The person is really digging himself down into a hole. Notice the pattern in all these cases. The anger and the aversion tend to arise because you’re focused solely on a few little details. Then you develop tunnel vision. All you see are the details, those particular details and perhaps other little details that confirm the idea that you really ought to be angry here. You really ought to feel aversion. What you do to get out of that is to open up your mind, develop a more all-around vision so that it includes not only what that person has done at that particular point, but other things. And also look at what you’re doing. Remember that nobody else can burn you nearly as much as you can burn yourself. Nobody else can harm you as much as you can harm yourself. As the Buddha once said, “No matter what an enemy might do to an enemy, the mind that’s not trained can do more harm to itself.” So that focuses your attention back inside. Exactly how are you harming yourself? By focusing on a particular issue. Is this an issue where you can make a difference by what you do or say or think? What’s the appropriate time? What would be the best place to do or say or think? Those things. If it’s something where you can’t make a difference, you’re wasting your time. Because there are other issues that are more oppressing, where you really can make a difference. You don’t want to waste your strength on things where you can’t make any difference at all. Again, it’s easier to do this when you haven’t gobbled down the thing that you don’t like. If it’s already gobbled down, this allows you to spit it out. You realize you don’t really want to go there. It accomplishes nothing. So we have two lines of defense. The first line is to give the mind a good place to stay, a good place to feed, right here at the breath. You want to learn to notice the way you breathe in and out. Exactly where does it create tension in the body? Where does it create a feeling of things being squeezed or pinched off? Realize you don’t have to pinch things off. One thing you might notice is on your out-breath. The out-breath, when it goes on too long, starts pinching things off in the body. So try not to breathe too long. Don’t breathe out to a point where it’s putting a pinch on that sense of fullness in the body. When you do this, you find from the in-breath to the out-breath, and then on to the next in-breath, there’s a sense of fullness that stays there. The longer it stays there, the more inclined you are to feed on it. It’s a good place to stay. There’s a sense of well-being that wells up from within the body. As long as the mind still has to feed on things, feed on this. That way you don’t gobble things down. If there’s a sense of mindfulness and you’ve gobbled it down, learn how to spit it out. Of course, the problem is that your whole mind tends to get consumed. There’s the object and the anger and the mind itself, and they all seem to be one big glob. If you tried to spit it out, you’d be spitting out your whole mind. That doesn’t work. So try to separate things out. It’s like chewing on some fish and realizing there’s a bone in the fish. Or chewing on a vegetable and realizing that some sand got into the vegetable. What you want to do is spit out just the bone, just the sand. So separate things out. Chew around a little bit and say, “Okay, where is the object? Where is the anger? Where is the awareness?” Try to separate those things out. Where is the action that you’re planning to do based on that anger? Separate that out as well. Once you’ve separated them out and contemplated the object for what it is in and of itself, in the context of goodwill or compassion or sympathetic joy or the basic principles of equanimity, then you can spit it out. It won’t keep eating away at you. Ultimately, of course, as the meditation gets really good, you start to realize that you get the mind to a point where it doesn’t have to feed anymore, where you don’t even need to feed on the path. But in the meantime, until you’ve gotten there, the path is here as your food. The path is here as your nourishment. It’s good nourishment, healthier for you than even anything that the Oregon Board of Health or the California Board of Health or Organic Standards could promise you. It comes with a 2,600-year-old guarantee. This is good food for the mind, healthy food for the mind. It strengthens you and strengthens your qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. When these things get really strong, they yield in awakening. You get to a point where there’s no longer any clinging, no longer any need to feed. So until you get to that point, you have your choice. Where are you going to feed? Sometimes it even helps to have that picture in your mind. Where is your mind nibbling right now? Is it a place that you would like to—if you could make the mind into a picture, would you like to have that picture blown up and shown to other people? Would you like to look at it yourself? If not, turn around and feed on the breath. Feed on mindfulness, concentration, discernment. After all, nobody’s forcing the mind to feed in any particular place. You have the choice. Just don’t forget that choice. And if you have forgotten it, work on it. Get the utensils you need in order to get that poison, get that unhealthy thing out of your system before it does major damage. Work with the breath so you can find more ways to make it really interesting food, satisfying food that can provide every need you have for giving the mind a sense of inner well-being. (crickets chirping)

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