Feeding Your Own Mind

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Living in the human world, it’s hard enough dealing with our own defilements. But we also have to deal with the defilements of the people around us. There’s an old French saying that if you’re tired of seeing fools, go off and live alone and break your mirror. Because we all have our own foolishness. That’s an important part of the practice, to be open to the idea that we have our own foolishness, just like everybody else. In fact, if you can’t admit your own foolishness, you’re never going to get any progress in the Dhamma. Jon Swat used to like to translate the word avicca, which we normally translate as ignorance or unawareness, as “stupidity.” But what he meant was that we should see things that are going on in our own minds. We don’t see. We ignore them. As a result, we keep on creating suffering for ourselves. So whenever you’re irritated by the behavior of people around you, remember, one, it’s going to happen. This is part of the human race. No matter where you go, there are going to be people who do things, even well-meaning people, who are going to be doing things that irritate you. So the Buddha gives instructions on how to deal with irritation. Basically, it comes down to seeing the good that there is in that person. They may be saying things that are irritating, but they do things that are good. Or maybe they be saying and doing things that are irritating, but you have to look at their intention. Maybe they’re intention is good, is well-meaning. One of the analogies he gives here is of a person coming along who’s thirsty and hot and tired and finds some little mud puddles in the footprints of a cow. He knows that if he tries to scoop up the water with his hands, he’s going to get the mud along with it. So he very carefully has to kneel down and just lick the water up. He’s trying to disturb the mud as little as possible. In other words, try to be selective in what you focus on and the other person’s behavior. This doesn’t mean that you don’t register their unskillful behavior. You notice it because there are times when you have to be careful when you deal with a particular person, knowing how much you can trust the person, how much you can’t trust the person. That’s important. But if you’re going to start feeding on what you don’t like about the person, then you’re feeding on the mud. Remember that analogy. It’s not just any old person walking along. There’s someone who’s hot and tired and thirsty. We all are hot and tired and thirsty. We need nourishment, and part of our nourishment is the goodness of other people. If someone is totally delightful, the Buddha gives an example of someone who’s hot and tired and comes along and there’s a big lake with trees on the banks. So you jump into the lake and swim around and then can rest under the shade of the tree. Those are the kind of people you like to hang around because their company is nourishing. But you have to deal with a lot of people who are like the mud puddle in the cow’s footprint. A little bit of water, but still you need all the water you can get. Otherwise, if you go scooping up the mud, who’s to blame? It’s a fact of human nature that there’s going to be people who do things and say things and think things that are not skillful. This is the nature of the human race. Everything’s all mixed together. You yourself have these qualities mixed together inside. Nobody ever said that you have to be careful that some sorrow that’s wandering on is going to be a delightful process. There are always going to be difficulties along the way, but you learn to focus on the good things, both in yourself and in other people, because that gives you nourishment. If you spend all your time thinking about the bad points of other people, you can start excusing unskillful behavior in yourself as well. This is a pattern you see all the time. People who say, “Well, everybody else cheats and everybody else lies and everybody else is in it for themselves.” After a while, you start thinking, “Well, I’d be a fool not to be in it for myself as well.” But then you think about that cartoon in The New Yorker, two female dogs dressed up, standing in a bar. One of them says, “They’re all sons of bitches.” Of course, what are the dogs? So try to focus on the good points of other people. See them as an opportunity to learn. When you see unskillful behavior in other people, turn around and look at yourself. Do you have that unskillful behavior in yourself as well? When you see them do something skillful, again, turn around and look at yourself. Could you do that kind of skillful behavior too? Focus on what’s nourishing. Don’t focus on the junk food that other people offer up. This human life is dry and we’re hot and we’re thirsty. Remember that the Buddha’s Dhamma is open-eyed, going points inward, something for you to bring inside. So if there’s irritation, don’t focus so much on the irritant as your inclination to feed on the irritant. That’s the problem. Why do you want to feed on things like this? What is the gratification you get? A few days ago, I was talking to a Zen student on issues of conflict in Buddhist communities. I mentioned the fact that if you have a negative mind, resolving conflict among meditators is a lot easier than resolving conflict among people who don’t meditate, because they’ve learned how to deal with their anger while they’re sitting alone. It makes it easier for them to deal with it when they’re dealing with other people. He was surprised, because in his training in Zen, they don’t deal with anger, apparently. They’re just told to drop everything and be one with everything, realize their innate awakened nature, which is kind of a shortcut to trying to get around the nitty-gritty of dealing with your anger. He was under the impression that people in Theravada simply allow the anger to be fully sensed in the body, allow yourself to fully experience it, embrace your anger. I said, “Well, it goes beyond that, because you’ve got to look at your anger, see how it comes, why you feed on it, and what kind of gratification you get from it.” At that point, he was surprised. Apparently, the idea never occurred to him that the reason we feed on anger is not simply because it’s an old bad habit, but we get gratification out of it. It’s like any addiction. There’s got to be some gratification, otherwise we wouldn’t do it. Even though it’s minimal, there’s something inside that we really like. So when irritation arises, focus on why you like to feed on the irritation. That’s the real issue. It’s because the feeding is the cause of suffering. Or it actually is the cause of suffering, as the Buddha said. The five clinging aggregates are suffering. The word “clinging” can also mean sustenance, the act of taking sustenance. It’s the fact that we feed that we suffer. We feel a need to feed, and we feed on all kinds of things. Not just pleasant things, we feed on unpleasant things, because in some twisted way, it gives us gratification. So we’ve got to learn how to watch ourselves and see exactly where does that gratification come in, whether it’s a sense of superiority, or whether it’s evidence of a storyline that we’re constantly beleaguered by fools or beset by fools, or whatever the storyline may be that you’re trying to keep going. Ask yourself what genuine good you get out of feeding on these things, feeding those agendas. When you can see that there is the gratification there, but it’s pretty paltry, that makes it a lot easier to let go, to stop the feeding. That’s the cessation of suffering, is when you stop feeding. First, you learn to feed only on good things and drop your burden. Learn to feed on the sense of ease that comes from concentration, the sense of clarity that comes from developing a discernment. This is your food along the way. There’s that sutta where the Buddha compares the practice to establishing a fortress on a frontier area, and the qualities in the practice that are the food are the four levels of jhana. You can feed off the rapture, the pleasure, the equanimity. And as you get more adept at feeding off these things and more used to feeding off these things, just turn around and look at the old way you used to feed on greed, anger, and delusion, the way you still feed on greed, anger, and delusion. After a while, you begin to realize that it’s pretty miserable food. Sneaking off into corners, feed only on the stuff that you’d be ashamed to have other people see you feed on. When the mind is well fed with good things, then you can let go of your old feeding habits. Then you can concentrate on finding more and more refined ways of feeding, more and more refined things to feed on, until ultimately the mind is so strong, having been fed good things, that it doesn’t need to feed anymore, because there’s nothing it needs to sustain. The deathless is something that doesn’t need to be fabricated, it doesn’t need to be gussied up, it doesn’t need to be kept going. It’s there. Once you hit that, you begin to realize your old habits of having to make a sense of “I,” make a sense of “me,” that needs to create things that need to be created. That needs to feed off things. All of that becomes unnecessary. You learn how to drop all those habits, see them all as not-self, something you don’t want to identify with. That’s when you become truly free. So we’re working on freedom. Freedom is just another word for “no need to feed.” Several years back, we were planning to go to a Tudung in the Zion National Park, and we were stymied by the fact of how to figure out how to get food for the monks. Of course, the ranger there said, “You can’t eat the scenery.” He said, “Constantly what keeps you tied down is the need to feed. If you didn’t need to feed, you could wander all over Zion Park and never have to worry about anything at all.” It’s the same with the mind. If you can train the mind to the point where it doesn’t need to feed, then you’re totally free. So watch out for your feeding habits. Those are the things you need to focus on. That’s where you have to focus your training. And don’t get distracted by the fact that other people don’t know how to eat, because that’s not where your real responsibility lies.

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