Food of Feelings, The

October 1, 2005

They say that when people can remember their previous lifetimes, they tend to focus on two things—the food they ate and their experience of pleasure and pain. When you think about it, that’s how many of us identify ourselves in our present lifetimes. You don’t have to look back to past lifetimes. What we eat, what we feel, those, for most of us, are the raw data of our experience, the things we identify with most closely. Especially now, in our mass-produced society, where so much of what we might take as being “us” or “ours” is forced on us. Our food has all kinds of chemical additives. Our thoughts are pre-processed for us. And no matter how much our feelings may be manipulated by the media, we still really have a strong sense that our feelings are who we are, what we really feel. That’s who we really are. When you look at the Buddha’s analysis of how we relate to our feelings, you see how dangerous that is. Feelings are one of the clinging aggregates, the things from which we fashion our sense of ourselves. And the word “clinging” here, it’s interesting. The word “clinging” also means “taking sustenance.” Our food is our feelings, at least the food for our minds. And you look at the different feelings that go through you in the course of the day, and you realize a lot of them are toxic. If you’re going to feed on them, it’s going to be toxic for the mind. Feelings of sadness, feelings of depression, feelings of anger, discouragement—all these things can really weaken the mind if you feed on them. That’s why a large part of the practice is giving us other food. Other things to feed on, better things to feed on. Conviction can be food for the mind. Persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. And it may seem artificial to create these things, but the Buddha’s analysis of feelings shows that it’s pretty artificial, too. Again, that feeling that our feelings are the raw data of experience, the raw data of who we are. In a final analysis, the Buddha said that there are potentials for feelings that come from past actions. But even our feelings are manufactured in the present moment. Our choice of what to focus on, our putting this together with that, the way we play, kind of connect the dots with our experience. They may be just isolated dots, but we can turn them into a swan or a duck or a cloud, things pleasant or unpleasant. All of that is a product of our own fabrication in the present moment. So as long as we’re fabricating things in the present, we might as well learn how to do it skillfully. That particular is what the practice of concentration is about. In the various analogies you find in the Canon for the different aspects of the path, concentration most often shows up as the role of food. Good food at that. Sugar, honey, molasses, butter. Things that taste good and are good for you. So this is one of the things we have to work on, constructing this path in our mind. How do you construct a path? We find a feeling. Someplace in the body there’s got to be a pleasant feeling that can be associated with the breath. It may not seem like much to begin with, but find something that at least feels fairly pleasant, relatively pleasant, compared to the rest of the body and focus there. Focus in such a way that you don’t destroy the feeling, but you actually protect it. Then regulate your breathing in order to continue protecting that feeling. Stay with it, for this is your ticket out of here. Learn how to have some patience with it. It’s going to take a while for this feeling to develop into something more intense, more pleasurable, more lasting. Fabricating it is a skill. Think back on any skill that you’ve ever developed in your life and you realize that the really important ones are the ones that take time and require your ability to just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. Your ability to push aside any thoughts of doubt or discouragement or frustration or self-recrimination. They don’t serve any useful purpose. Don’t feed on them. Try to feed on your thoughts of encouragement. You’ve got all the raw materials that you need here for the path. It’s simply a matter of putting them together and sticking with it. As in any course of training, you have to be careful about what you feed on. Athletes, when they’re preparing for a game, they have to be careful to focus on certain foods and avoid other ones. In this case, any food that distracts you on the path, any food that saps your energy, you’ve just got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it. Take whatever sense of ease and well-being that you can muster on the path. Feed on that instead. Just because of feeding, you can have healing come up. It doesn’t mean that you have to feed on it, that you have to take it as you or yours. This goes so much against the grain that you have to keep repeating this principle to yourself again and again and again, no matter how intense or real the feeling may seem. Remember, it’s fabricated. Sometimes it’s the remnants of past actions. Sometimes it’s something you put together through old bad habits in the present. But just because a feeling is strong or intense or seems to last doesn’t mean that it’s real. It’s just as fabricated as everything else you experience. So stick with this principle of fabricating what you know is good for you. Feed on what you know is good for you. The more nourishment you get this way, the easier it is to drop all the junk food that you’ve been feeding on. So develop a friendly and nourishing attitude towards the breath. If you’ve ever had a vegetable garden or ever had a farm, you know how the principle works. You look after the feeding of your crops and then you can eat your crops. If you don’t feed them well, then you won’t be able to feed on them. So whatever sense of refreshment and nourishment you can get from the breath, water it, fertilize it, look after it, pick away all the bugs. You’ll find that over time it gives you more than enough nourishment. You start looking back on your old feeding habits and you realize how harmful they were, the kind of food you used to like. It’s like remembering back when you were a little kid and you liked Twinkies and Hostess cupcakes and Oreo cookies and all that kind of disgusting stuff. Now you’ve got better food to feed on. You’ve got a better idea of what kind of nourishment you want. And it really does nourish the mind. You get more and more resilience towards whatever waves of emotion or feeling may wash over you. In this way, this habit we have of feeding on things can actually get turned to a good use. Eventually you build up enough strength in the mind so you don’t have to feed anymore. That’s when the mind is different from the body. No matter how good the food is in the body, eventually there’s going to be aging, illness, and death. As the chant says, this is unavoidable. But food for the mind doesn’t operate on that principle. If you get the food concocted just right, you can bring the mind to a point of strength where it doesn’t turn back. It doesn’t need to be fed anymore. That’s when it can stop clinging. That’s when there’s an end of suffering. So, feed your breath well, and in turn it will give you something good to feed on.

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