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The nature of the mind is that it likes to feed on things. It feeds on pleasures from outside. It feeds on the support we get from other people. And it can also feed on its own inner qualities. If you develop them. If there’s nothing much there, there’s nothing much to feed on. And when there’s nothing much inside to feed on, then you go out trying to feed on other people, feed on pleasures of various sorts outside. And if you leave your house self-hungry inside, you’re in a bad position. You have to depend on whatever you can find outside. So this is one of the reasons why we meditate, is to develop good qualities inside that the mind can feed on. So it can be independent. If it’s still in a position where it has to feed to some extent outside, at least it has put itself in a position where it can choose. So, what have you got inside here? It doesn’t look like much to begin with. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing, and you’ve got the mind thinking and aware. But when you put those things together, the mind can grow. Otherwise, the more you’re aware of the breath, the more you explore the breath. On the one hand, you find that the breath has a lot more to offer than just keeping the body alive. The way you breathe can have an effect on your health, and it can have an effect on your mental state. Even when the mind is bouncing around, if the breath is calm, after a while it has a calming effect on the mind. The mind can begin to settle down. You can see it work the other way as well. You get upset and angry about something, and all those hormones start roaring through your bloodstream. Your heart beats, the breath changes, and even though the initial impetus that got you angry has gone, and the actual anger has gone out of the mind, you see the symptoms in the body that convince you that the mind must still be angry because there’s all this stuff going on in the body. You aggravate the anger and bring it up again and again and again and again. So we’re trying to take that principle and turn it around. One, remind yourself that even though there may be the physical manifestations of fear or anger or sorrow, it doesn’t necessarily mean that at that moment you’ve got that same emotion in the mind, that same thought in the mind. And if you can consciously calm those manifestations, you find it has a calming effect on the mind. So try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable, easy coming in, easy going out, not strained or tightened or stressed. Think of the whole body being nourished by the breath, everybody getting a part because the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s the energy flow throughout the body. So think of that whole body, all the way out to every pore of the skin, breathing in, breathing out. Then you begin to develop this resource inside, just the fact that you’ve got this breath energy in the body that can be used for good or for not so good. So try to learn how to use it for good effects. Give the mind something good to feed on inside, just this sense of ease in the breathing. It makes it a lot easier to function throughout the day. Instead of having to run around hoping to get praise from this person or a pat on the back from that person or emotional support from somebody else, you can just breathe in, breathe out, and it feels good inside. Carry this sense of wellbeing around so that you’re not out there constantly trying to suck in whatever is out there, hoping that you can feed on it. At the same time, you’re developing qualities of mind. Mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind continually. Alertness, the ability to watch what’s actually going on. Persistence, the ability to stick with something. These qualities, as you develop them, can provide food inside the mind. In other words, when disturbing thoughts come into the mind or disturbing things happen, they happen outside. If you’re mindful and alert, you can keep reminding yourself, “There’s no need to get upset here. Getting upset here, getting riled up by the events outside, is not going to accomplish anything. You don’t have to get riled up.” If you keep reminding yourself of this, it’ll change your sense of the possibilities before you. In this way, these thoughts, this ability to keep something very firmly in mind, become a kind of food for the mind, nourishment for the mind. It’s a protection because otherwise you go jumping on and feeding on whatever it is out there. Of course, when you start feeding on things outside that are not good, it’s going to have a bad effect on the mind. If you feed on things that are toxic, it’ll start toxifying the mind. So you have both the breath here as a provider of a sense of wellbeing, a kind of nourishment, and you’ve got the thoughts in the mind. These are mental strengths that you can feed on. In this way, you become more and more independent. You become your own mainstay. There’s a saying in the Buddhist teachings, “Atha hi yatha no na to.” The self is its own mainstay. But it can be your own mainstay only if you develop the resources you’ve got inside. So that’s what we’re doing here. We’re developing an internal food source. It gets even better when the mind really settles down and can develop a state of consciousness. Concentration brings with it a sense of pleasure, even a sense of rapture, as you can stay with one thing and it feels really good. Traditionally, they talk about concentration as being food for a meditator because it provides that sense of ease inside, a sense of fullness inside. When you have a sense of fullness inside, you’re not hungering after things outside. That puts you in a position where you really can be your own mainstay. Some people might argue, “Well, what is this thing about the self being its own mainstay? What happened to the teaching on not-self?” Well, in making yourself your own mainstay, you’re learning to be very selective about what you’re identifying with. You can identify with skillful thoughts. You don’t have to identify with the unskillful ones. You can identify with skillful tendencies. You don’t have to identify with the unskillful ones. You’re learning that you can be subjective about what you identify with. That’s where the not-self teaching comes in. You realize, “This is something I don’t have to claim as being me or being mine.” You realize that it’s a useful strategy for happiness. Because that’s what your sense of self is. It’s a strategy for happiness. Some of those strategies are useful. And some of them are not. Sometimes they’ve been useful in the past, but they’ve outlived their usefulness. If you have an idea of yourself as being one singular thing, you’re going to be in trouble, because everything that comes up in that singular thing is going to be you or yours, and you’re stuck with it whether you like it or not, whether it’s helpful or not. But if you take the attitude of your sense of self as a series of strategies, and you figure out what’s the useful strategy right now, what are not useful strategies right now, you begin to be more selective. And as the training progresses, you get a greater and greater sense of what is a useful strategy, and a more refined sense of exactly what is a good outcome from your actions, from these strategies. So the things that you have to depend on, on one level, of practice, you begin to realize you can let them go on another one. The reason we tend to balk at the idea of not-self is, given that our sense of self is a series of strategies, it feels like we’re being deprived of our strategies for happiness. What the Buddha is actually doing is saying that there are these other strategies as well, the learning not to identify with certain things. That can also be a strategy for happiness. So what he’s doing is actually expanding your range. The wider your range, the more you can really be independent. It’s important to have this ability to choose what is the right course of action at any one particular time, because that really is food for the mind. That enables you to be more and more independent. Because even when there are good things outside, good people outside to depend on, you can’t always depend on them. As the chant said just now, “I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.” This happens to everybody. The things we like, the people we like, the ones that we’ve learned how to depend on, there’s going to be separation. Even people who provide healthy nourishment for us. So we’ve got to learn how to be independent. We’ve got to learn how to be independent, to have our own internal food source, so that on the one hand we don’t get sucked into a situation where we have to depend on people who are harmful for us. And then even when there are good people around, we learn not to depend on them totally for our happiness, because we’ve got our own inner resources. We have a full range of strategies for dealing with any situation. So we really can be our own mainstay. So that’s what we’re doing here as we meditate. We’re developing a wider range of resources, a better range of food inside. So as long as the mind needs to feed, it can feed on something really good and healthy, and it has a safe food source, one that it can always depend on. When you’ve got this internal resource, it changes your relationship with the world. You can look at situations, you can look at relationships, without that sense of hunger, without that sense of need. That changes the dynamic radically. So keep working at this task of developing your inner resources, working with the breath and allowing that into a resource, exercising your powers of mindfulness and alertness so they can become your resources as well. And you’ll find that they can take you a lot further than you might think.

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