Feeding on Rapture

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The Buddha never made a sharp distinction between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. They’re both elements of the path and they both help each other along. Right mindfulness is a prerequisite for right concentration. It’s meant to lead to right concentration. At the same time, the Buddha said that concentration is what purifies mindfulness, makes it clearer, more solid. He often talked about the two, both of them at the same time, to the point where he’s talking about focusing on the breath, focusing on the body in and of itself. It gives a basic form of of right mindfulness. And then he calls that a state of concentration that you can then develop with directed thought and evaluation, without directed thought and evaluation, and on up through the various levels of jhana. There’s also one where he talks about developing right mindfulness, and then at the end he says, “Okay, go do jhana.” That was his typical instruction for meditation, “Go do jhana.” He never says, “Go do vipassana,” or whatever. It’s always, “Go do jhana.” It’s in the process of trying to get the mind to settle down that you develop right mindfulness and make it strong. You need some discernment in order to get the mind to settle down. And, of course, once the mind is settled down, it can see things a lot more clearly. So all these things are meant to be done together. One of your jobs as a meditator is to look after your brood, the same way a mother hen looks after her baby chicks. Make sure that things are in balance. Or, if you have to lean a little in one direction, you want to know why. You want to be able to observe your mind, see what it needs. Does it need to be settled down? Does it need to be steadied? Or are you getting bored? Is the meditation getting dry? In that case, you may want to “Aladdin” the mind, as they say. It comes down to knowing how to care for and feed your own mind. Because the mind is always hungry. It’s always looking for something to feed on. And if you don’t feed it well, you’re going to start going around and looking for scraps in the garbage can. Not only your own garbage cans, but other people’s garbage cans. It becomes a homeless mind. In other words, you look for your happiness through praise from other people or all kinds of stuff that may not necessarily be good for it. And if your food source depends on conditions outside, you’re really in danger. Because conditions outside are inconstant, stressful, and not self. You can’t really control them. So at the very least, you want to develop a sense of well-being inside. The Buddha talks about feeding on rapture. The word bhitti, here, can also be translated as refreshment. Allow the breath to be refreshing. When you’re sitting here doing jhana, jhana is not the focus of your meditation. The breath is the focus. Each breath should be given space. You’re not trying to push it into something. You say, “What would be the best breath right now? What would be really gratifying? What would feel really good and refreshing?” This is where rapture comes from. There’s a sense of refreshment that comes in the body. The breath is nourishing. It’s food. If the breath is tight and constricted, it’s not going to be very nourishing food. It’s certainly not going to be very enjoyable. So just pose that question in your mind. What kind of breathing would feel really gratifying right now? What would feel refreshing right now? And see how the body responds. Sometimes it responds automatically. You don’t have to push or pull it or do anything at all. Other times you have to experiment. You breathe in and out a bit and say, “Okay, now, what would it be like if the next breath were longer, deeper, or shorter, or shallower?” It’s good in the beginning to try long breathing, because that helps air things out inside. But then there will come a time when you feel, “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s let it settle down and see what direction it goes.” You may want to nudge it a little bit here and there, just to make sure that you’re not getting lazy or that the body is going on automatic pilot. The important thing is to allow yourself to get absorbed in each breath as it’s happening. Don’t anticipate the next breath. Don’t keep asking yourself, “When is it going to settle down? When am I going to hear it? When is the sign going to come?” That kind of stuff doesn’t accomplish anything if you sit there waiting for things to happen. You’re not doing what needs to be done. Meditation is a doing. Sometimes it’s a very gentle doing. It seems as if you’re doing nothing at all, just sitting there watching. But that’s still a doing. You’ve made the decision and you watch. You make sure you’re not doing anything else. Other times you have to be more proactive. Questioning what kind of breath would feel good. Once there is a sense of ease and refreshment, what do you do with it? Well, you let it spread, especially the still feelings that come along with the breath. Let those spread first, down through the veins, down through your nerves. Ask yourself, “Which part of the body are you inhabiting?” Where are you in the body? There tends to be one spot where your awareness is stronger than other spots. Remember, you’re not outside the body looking in. You’re inside the body, being totally surrounded by breath energy. Every pore in your head, every pore in your body, has breath energy coming in and going out. It’s all around you. There may be parts that you’re blocking out or making difficult to see. Tense or tight. Because you’ve taken up residence in that part of the body and you’re not letting anything else move in. So think of the breath coming to ventilate you, ventilate everything all around you, all the way down to your feet, all the way down to your hands. And you can make a survey throughout the body. Take the body section by section. What kind of breathing would feel good for this section? What kind of breathing would feel good for that section? Again, you’re looking after your brood here, all the different parts of the body. Make sure everybody gets fed. That way you catch parts of the body that tend to hold a lot of tension that you’re not aware of. But when you force yourself to go through the body, every part of the body, you have to run up against these things. Breathe in parts of the body that don’t get to breathe very much. And when you get the right touch for this, it feels really good. It feels very nourishing. This is food for you. It’s food for the body. This is how monks who go without food or go on a very sparse diet survive. The breath helps to maximize the nourishment they get from the food. And it provides food for the mind, that sense of ease and well-being that comes welling up inside when you let it, when you know how to allow it, when you know how to keep making space for it so that it keeps on coming. This is how you develop that food source inside, learning how to tap into it, learning how to stay in contact with it as much as you can. Because you’ll find that feeding the mind like this, again, and again, and again, really does make a difference in how the mind feels about other things, the things it used to feed on. It doesn’t need them anymore. This is much more fulfilling, much more satisfying, and it’s much more reliable. You may not be totally in charge of what’s going on inside of the body, but at least you have some skill in making the most of what you’ve got. As for the parts that you can’t make comfortable in the body, just let them be for the time being. You want to focus on this sense of ease and fullness because the mind needs to feed. It’s got work to do. It’s going to have to try to understand pain and suffering, things that require a lot of inner strength. To see these things clearly, the mind needs to have a good, solid foundation. It doesn’t feel threatened by them. This is another thing that the sense of rapture and ease provide, a sense of security. Once you get more and more skilled at this, you develop a sense that you can tap into this when you need it. When events outside don’t go as you’d like them to, or when there’s pain in the body, it’s not quite as threatening as it was before. You’re in a better position to grow curious about it. What is this pain? What is this suffering that I bring on myself? It’s really not necessary. This is how you perform that duty with regard to stress and pain, the one mentioned in the sutta just now. The truth of stress, the Buddha said, is to be comprehended. Comprehending means understanding it to the point where you grow dispassionate toward it. Comprehending is hard to do when, one, you’re identifying with the suffering, and two, you feel threatened by the pain, threatened by circumstances. All you can think of is, “How can I get rid of this? How can I run away from this? How can I push it out of my awareness?” That doesn’t allow the room for comprehending, just looking at it for what it is, trying to understand it for what it is, watching it long enough so you can see where it comes from, where it goes, and what you’re doing to contribute to the connection between, say, pain in the body and a sense of real dis-ease in the mind, or external disappointments and dis-ease in the mind. You create the bridge. These things don’t come barging in at all. You’re the one who takes the basic raw materials and creates suffering out of them. So you want the mind to be in a good position where it can see that. In this way, your compassion for yourself has a much more solid basis, which means that your compassion for other people will have a basis that’s more solid, too. Because ordinarily, what do we do to keep compassion going, especially in difficult circumstances? Sometimes we keep it going simply because it feels good for us, without that much concern for how other people are actually benefiting or not. In other words, we’re feeding on our mood of compassion. If that’s what your food source is, then it’s not really all that dependable. It’s so easy to burn out. It’s a compassionate overload. Or you think you’re doing all these nice things for other people, and you’re actually not helping them much at all. You’re doing it more for yourself. Because the compassion is your food. I actually heard someone say that he didn’t want to be born in a world where there wasn’t suffering because he wouldn’t have a chance to exercise his compassion. In other words, for his sense of inner well-being and self-esteem, he needed people to be suffering. It would be much better if we could put an end to suffering entirely. So compassion isn’t the unmitigated good that we might think it is. It’s a lot better. It’s a lot more effective and a lot more genuinely helpful. If we’re not feeding off, if we have another food source inside, then your attitude towards other people can be out of pure generosity. You’ve got enough to eat inside. Then you’re more willing to look at your compassion to see where it’s helpful and not. When compassion is called for, when equanimity is called for, it’s a lot easier to see these things when you’re not feeding on them all the time. So as you focus on your breath, think of it as food, especially any sense of fullness, gratification that can come as you savor your breathing. Learn to be a connoisseur. Savor your breath. When the mind is well-fed in this way, then it’s a much better position. It’s a much better position to gain insight. It’s a much better position to really trust itself. This is why it’s important that, as you meditate, you’re not here just to observe or to put yourself in a position where you’re not going anywhere with the meditation. You are going someplace. But at the same time, you have to appreciate where you are. Make the most of where you are in finding the potential for ease, in finding the potential for rapture. As John Lee calls it, “Noticing which plants on the side of your path you can eat.” So that you’re well-fed all the way along the path. Savor each breath. This is like the grass along the side of the path. Most people look past it and all they see is grass. But if you look carefully, you can see some really nice little plants. When you know what’s edible and what’s not, you have food all the way along the path. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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