The Heightened Mind

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In one of the more famous summaries of his teachings, the Buddha concluded with the statement that to be committed to the heightened mind. That’s the Buddha’s teaching, the heightened mind. That’s the mind that lies above unskillful influences, either from inside or from outside. The mind is in concentration and protected by discernment. That’s what we’re working on here, to develop a state of mind that doesn’t have to feed off things outside. And this is why we’re under the influence of our own defilements, we’re under the influence of other people’s moods, other people’s actions, because we try to feed on them. We’re not creating our own food inside, and so we have to go feeding outside. And, as we all know, the people of the world are not out there devoting their lives to providing us with good food. Sometimes they say nice things, and sometimes they say horrible things. Sometimes they do good things, and sometimes they do horrible things, which means that our food supply is undependable. Look at what we’ve got coming from within. If it’s nothing but greed, anger, and delusion, that’s garbage food, trash food, junk food. No wonder we’re malnourished and go looking outside. We feed off people’s words. We feed off their actions. So, of course, the state of our mind depends on whether things are good or bad outside. It’s like being totally dependent on imports for your life. It means other people can set the price at whatever price they want, and they can provide us with shoddy goods, and we have no choice. We have no recourse, because that’s all we have. You’ve got to learn how to develop good food from within. The Buddha makes the analogy himself. He says the four jhanas are like different kinds of food. The first jhana is like water, grass. The second jhana is like rice. The third jhana is like beans. The fourth jhana is like honey, ghee, butter. These are good food for the mind. They’re nourishing food, healthy food. As the Buddha said, there’s nothing blameworthy about the happiness that comes from creating a sense of concentration within. The ease and the bliss are harmless, and they’re clear-sighted, unlike the pleasures that can intoxicate us. We get intoxicated with our youth, we get intoxicated with our health, we get intoxicated with life, and we end up doing stupid things. But the ease that comes from a state of concentration is not intoxicating. It can be intensely addictive, but it keeps you clear-sighted, because in order to maintain it, you realize you cannot let yourself depend on outside things. This is how you lift your mind above the ways of the world. So when there’s gain or loss of status, praise or criticism, pleasure or pain, you can keep your mind above those things. You’ve got better food. So when people bring you good food, it’s nice, but you don’t have to feed off it. When they bring you bad food, you don’t need to feed off it. This puts you in a better position. You can live in the world without having to go up and down with the ups and downs of the world. You don’t have to spin around with the world. The mind can be above all that. This means that when you choose to act or speak or think, you’re coming from a much better place, a much more solid place, a much more dependable place. It means other people can depend on you more as well. So this practice of bringing the mind to concentration is not a selfish thing. You benefit, and the people around you benefit as well. You’re not feeding off of them. After all, feeding is an unpleasant process for both sides. If you’re totally dependent on someone else for your happiness, it’s a real burden on that person. Or if you’re demanding that everybody you work with, everybody you meet in the day, provide you with good food, it’s a harassment. So you want to learn how to be independent, how to have your own independent food source. So when you breathe in, think of the breath as food. The pleasure of the breath is food for the mind. There’s a passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, “In a world where people are suffering, we don’t have to suffer. We feed off of rapture, like the radiant gods.” Rapture is food for the mind. So try to induce a sense of fullness, a sense of well-being in the way you breathe. Ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now, and which part of the body needs good breath energy. Sometimes it’s helpful to think about different parts of the body that all need to be nourished with the breath. There’s the center around the heart in the chest, there’s the center in the abdomen, and there’s the center in the head. Each of them receives good breath energy. Can you provide all three with breath energy at any one time? Because once they’re nourished, the sense of well-being, the sense of rapture, can spread out to your arms, to your legs, all over the body. And the need to focus on those three centers is one thing that can help keep you alert, so the meditation doesn’t drift off into sleepiness or delusion concentration. You’re probably trying to find a good, solid basis for your food source, so it can’t be just drifting around. When the Buddha talks about the rapture of the meditation, it’s not something that comes floating by. It has to have its causes. It’s directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought is when you keep the breath in mind and also keep whatever way of conceiving the breath is helpful in mind. Then evaluation is when you check on the results. Is it working? If it’s not working, what should you do? What changes can you make, both in your thoughts about the breath and in the actual way you breathe? This is how you produce good food for the mind, by creating this sense of fullness in the body. Just as feeding is a very direct, visceral process, the food of the concentration should be direct and visceral. Simply pose the question, “What would feel best right now? What would be the most gratifying breath, the most delicious breath you could breathe right now?” And allow the body to respond. And as I said, try to allow that center in the abdomen, the center in the chest, the center in the head, to allow all of them to feel nourished. When all three are nourished, it can actually get overwhelming. Allow yourself to be overwhelmed for a while. After a while, things will settle down. But as with any act of forming, you’ve got to keep at it. It’s not the case that you plant a crop and then you get the result. You get the results of the crop and then you eat them all up and that’s it. You’ve got to keep planting, keep planting, keep planting, because you need more and more food all the time. Because simply concentration is not going to be enough. You have to learn how to maintain it through your discernment. People sometimes wonder how concentration leads to discernment. Well, it’s in the process of trying to maintain the concentration that you’ve got to learn how to understand your defilements. Why is it that some thoughts, when they come in the mind, don’t destroy the concentration? They just float in and float out, no problem. You can maintain your basis, you can maintain your foundation without any difficulty. Other thoughts come in and the concentration is totally destroyed. What’s the difference? The Buddha points out that there are thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty. These destroy the concentration. Greed, anger, and delusion destroy your concentration. So you’ve got to learn how to defend yourself against them. Recognize these thoughts and be on the lookout for them. Be careful not to get involved, because the fact that they simply arise is not the problem. The problem is that you spin them out, weave more thoughts of the same type, weave them into a cloth of a story, weave them into the cloth of an idea about something you want to do, or something you wish you had done, whatever. Then you find yourself off someplace else in another world, not in the world of your concentration. And what kind of food do those thoughts provide? Again, you’ve left your health food and gone off for junk food. So the discernment lies in appreciating the food that comes from the concentration and also being very alert to whatever you need to do in order to maintain it. It’s in the maintaining of the concentration that the need for discernment arises. And as your discernment gains, it gets exercised. Let’s put it that way. You bring out whatever discernment you’ve got and you exercise it. And that’s how it grows strong, just like the body. You can’t sit around and wait for your body to be big and strong before you exercise it. It’s in the exercising that the strength comes. Concentration provides food; discernment provides the protection. In the Buddha’s analogy of the frontier fortress, discernment is the plaster coating on the walls that makes it impossible for the enemy to get a handhold or a foothold. The concentration is your store of food. So I’ve tried to develop these two qualities together to make sure that you’re aware of the fact that your mind can stay heightened, so that when negative things happen in life, you don’t get dragged down. When positive things happen, you don’t get carried away. You maintain your center. You’ve got your good, solid source of food right here. You don’t need to feed on anything else outside. Ultimately, the mind will get to the point where it doesn’t need to feed at all. That’s when it gets really good. But in the meantime, learn how to feed it well. That’s how you keep your mind independent. That’s how you fulfill the Buddha’s teaching of the heightened mind.

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