The Buffet of the Senses

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A student one time in Singapore talked about his meditation as cleaning out the wastebasket. As he went through the day, the course of his work, people were throwing all kinds of trash into his wastebasket. Then when he came home from work, he had to sit down and dump it all out. So I told him the trick. The trick is to have a big hole in the bottom of the wastebasket. Whatever people throw in just goes right through. That way you don’t have to dump things out every day, every day. And you can spend your meditation doing more useful things. The problem with that image, though, is that it makes everybody else the people at fault. And you tend to forget that it’s not just that they’re throwing things at you, but you’re out there actively gobbling things up, placing your mouth right where the wastebasket is. The Buddha talks about different kinds of food for the mind. There’s the food of sensory contact, the food of consciousness, and the food of your intentions. So when you look at something, you listen to something, you should ask yourself, “Exactly what kind of food are you trying to eat here? Is it good for you or is it not? And exactly what are you ingesting?” Sensory contact is very quick. It comes and it goes. So you can’t really take that into the mind. You take a memory into the mind. But it’s the intention. That actually gets swallowed into the mind. That’s your habitual food. And the more you give in to certain intentions during the day, the more you find that they keep cropping up in your meditation. If a simple hunger for entertainment is what’s driving you, then you’re going to have this hunger for entertainment as you meditate. You want more of the same. That’s the intention that’s taking charge of your mind. If you like to be the sort of person who gets worked up about issues, there’s a lot to get worked up about. You look at all the injustices in the world and all the crazy issues that people get worked up about. You can get worked up about those too. The question is, what are you doing to the mind? What kind of mind are you? What are you fostering here by the food that you eat? It’s in the same way that people will develop their bodies in a certain way by the food they eat. People develop their minds that way as well. Generally, if you’ve been eating unhealthy food, you see it in the body. And for some reason we tend not to see it in the mind. Even though it’s displaying itself all the time in terms of our actions, things we do and say and think, it’s telling us what food you’ve been feeding on and what types of hungers you’ve been encouraging, because they keep coming up again and again and again. So if you’re feeling disoriented in your practice or if it seems like it takes an awful lot of time to clean out the garbage of the day, don’t go around blaming other people for throwing things at you. You’re out there gobbling things up. Which means that the training of the mind is not just what you do while you sit here with your eyes closed or while you’re doing formal walking meditation. It’s the way you encounter every sensory contact in the course of the day. You have to keep that question in mind. What are you feeding? Which habit in the mind are you feeding? The mind is getting fed. If you look at something, ask yourself, “Why are you looking?” If you listen to something, ask yourself, “Why are you listening?” It’s all down to the smelling and tasting and touching and thinking about things. What are you hoping to get out of this? And what are you getting out of this? It’s an area that we don’t like to look at. We tend to think of ourselves as perfectly innocent receptors. There’s simply a barrage of things all around us. But we are selective in what we focus on and what we don’t focus on. And that habit of how we focus, what we choose to focus on, that’s something you’ve got to look into. Because if it’s one thing, working at cross-purposes to the meditation, it’s just doing that, making the meditation harder. You’ll complain about the world being this way, the world being that way. Well, your world is a creation of your desire. There’s a certain range of things that become available to you at any one time to look at and listen to. The Buddha’s image is of a figure that’s in a field with lots of seeds. So in terms of your past karma, different seeds are ready to sprout at any particular time. Then you go on watering specific ones. Those are the ones that will tend to sprout first. The water is your craving and your clinging. So you can think of the range of any possible experience as sort of like a buffet that’s being presented to you, and you’re picking and choosing. In the same way, when you’re eating your meal, and you’ll notice this especially as you’re eating one meal a day, that the issue of what you eat becomes very important. You have only so much space in your stomach. So what are you going to put into that space? How much is good for you? What kind of food is good for you? It’s a good topic of contemplation. But you should bring the same care to what you’re putting into the mind. What habits are you feeding? Because if you’re feeding on garbage, you’re not feeding on good things. It’s not that we can have it all—health, food, and junk food. By having everything, we gain more. A lot of things that you choose to focus on actually make your condition worse. So you really are forced to choose. It’s not always the case that it’s one obviously good thing versus one obviously bad thing. But when that is the case, then you’re forced to take note of it. Sometimes it’s, as the Buddha said, a greater happiness versus a lesser happiness. And the lesser one may be the one that’s more intense for a moment, but it doesn’t last very long. As for the greater happiness, it may be more gentle, but it’s something solid and secure. And you need the wisdom—it is a sign of wisdom—to choose the greater happiness. So you have to be selective in how you feed the mind, even more than you’re selective about what you feed the body. Because the mind can get into a lot more trouble than the body can, and it can cause a lot more trouble than the body can. So, for any possibility of success, any possibility of progress, you really have to look carefully at what you’re feeding the mind in the course of the day. Because the same mind that’s getting fed in the course of the day is the same mind that’s sitting down to meditate. If it’s used to feeding its self-doubt or its impatience, or any possibility of success in any unskillful habit, those are the habits that are going to be dominant. So look carefully not only at what you’re looking at, but also at why you’re looking. Because that’s the important part of the mind that’s getting fed—those reasons, those desires, those motives, those intentions around things. That’s where you see karma at work. That’s where you see your freedom of choice at work. And all too often we pretend like we don’t have that freedom. Which means that in our exercising that freedom, we do it in a very sloppy and sometimes even destructive way. It’s like those politicians who say, “Well, we don’t have any choice about this matter. We have to do X.” Or, “Our choices are only between one or two options.” They’re trying to force us into the option that they want by limiting the range of our choices. It’s not just politicians that do that. The mind does that very quickly and very easily. So open your eyes to what you’re looking at and why you’re looking, and look at the possibilities that are there for you. You could be looking in a way that induces a sense of dispassion or a sense of passion. You could be looking in a way that helps further your concentration or destroys your concentration. It’s a choice you’re making all the time. So be conscious of the fact that you have that choice. And you’re more likely to choose well.

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