Feeding on Intentions

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The mind is constantly active. In fact, everything we experience is either an action or a result of an action of the mind. We have our actions in the present moment and actions in the past that still leave their traces in the present moment, shape the present moment. Some actions in the past haven’t yielded their results yet. Others have yielded their results and basically gone away. But the fact that we experience anything at all right now depends also on our present actions. And that’s something you can work on. You can’t go back and change your past actions. But you can change what you’re doing right now to make it more skillful, cause less suffering. That’s what the meditation is all about. It’s focusing on what you’re doing right now. And in the beginning, it’s hard to sort things out. What’s the result of a past action? What’s the result of a present action? But there are some basic principles for learning how to minimize the impact of bad past actions. The first principle is learning how to develop thoughts of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. In other words, you can learn how to apply these emotions wherever they’re appropriate, even in areas where it may seem difficult to apply them. For example, goodwill for somebody who’s being very cruel, equanimity for someone who’s very close to you, who’s suffering. But you have to learn, of course, what goodwill means. It doesn’t mean, “May you be happy doing whatever you’re doing.” It means, “May you learn the causes for true happiness and act on them.” And that’s a thought that you can apply to anybody, especially to cruel people. May they learn to see the error of their ways and stop acting in cruel ways. If you see someone’s suffering, then your goodwill turns into compassion, hoping that the suffering will end. If you see someone is acting on causes that will lead to suffering, you want them to stop. That, too, is compassion. If you see someone who’s happy or is doing things that will lead to happiness, you feel joy for them. You don’t feel jealous. You don’t feel that they’re competing with you to see who can be better. That’s for equanimity. That’s for cases where you really can’t make a difference. You have to learn how not to be irritated, not to be upset by things that you can’t change for the better. So part of our practice is learning how to develop these qualities. The Buddha recommends that you work on them from the very beginning, even though you may not be able to make them unlimited. At the beginning, you work on learning how to tap into them so as to overcome thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty, thoughts of jealousy and resentment, thoughts of irritation, distress. You try to learn how to develop these qualities, draw on them even in times when it’s difficult. The more you’re able to do this, the larger and more encompassing your mind is. And then when the results of past bad actions come, your mind is so overwhelmed by them. It’s like a dirty dish that you wash in some water. If you wash it in just a little tiny tub of water, the whole water, all the water in the tub, becomes undrinkable because the dirt in the dish pollutes everything in the tub. But if you were to take that same dish and put it in a huge river where the water is clean and clear, or in an enormous lake, and washed it, you could still drink water from the lake because the amount of water is so much larger. You want to make your mind large in that way. That’s one way of overcoming the results of past bad actions. So they don’t overcome you here in the present moment. And you can have the mindfulness and alertness to keep on acting in a skillful way. The other way to minimize the impact of past bad actions is by training your mind not to be overcome by pain, not to be overcome by pleasure. This requires more skill, and you’re going to need help. This is the case where you want to learn how to take the breath as your friend. So that when pains and pleasures come, you have something else to hold on to. You don’t immediately go running to the pain or running to the pleasure. You’ve got a good solid foundation where you can stay and watch the pain arise and pass away and not feel threatened by it. Watch the pleasure arise and pass away and not feel compelled to go running after it. Because you see you’ve got something better in here, a sense of ease and well-being that you can sustain with the breath. Now, to make the breath your friend, you can’t just force it to do whatever you want it to do. That kind of friendship is not going to last. You have to learn how to listen to the body’s needs. What kind of breath does it need right now? And it takes a while to get to know those needs, just as it takes a while to make a true friend. You have to get to know the friend in all sorts of different situations and learn that you can rely on the friend regardless, and the friend can rely on you regardless. The friend knows that you have his or her well-being in mind and are willing to listen and not push for your way all the time. And it’s the same with the meditation. We are trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath, but to get it to settle there, we have to get to know it. See what the body really needs. Longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow. The more sensitive you are to what the body needs and what the breath can do for the body, the more solid your friendship becomes. And then you’ve got a good place to go to. As the Buddha said, the reason we go running after sensual pleasures is because we don’t see any other alternative to pain. Pleasures have their drawbacks. They don’t last. Many times, to gain them, you have to do unskillful things. You get something good, other people see it, they get jealous, and they try to take it away from you. Your mind gets inflamed, gets intoxicated. There are all kinds of dangers to sensuality, and most of us don’t like to hear about them because most of us don’t see that there’s any other source of well-being or happiness in life. So we think the Buddha is being a spoilsport, looking at the world in too negative a way. But actually, the reason he has his focus on the drawbacks of sensuality is because he wants to offer us something better. But we’re not going to go for the better pleasure until we see the drawbacks of the unskillful one. It’s like someone who’s grown up on junk food is not immediately going to take to health food. They miss the salt. They miss the fat. They miss all the chemicals that were put in there to get them addicted to the junk food. And they’re going to have to see the problems that come from a diet of junk food. You have to watch those movies that show what happens to people who spend a whole month super-sizing everything. Well, that study they did years back, when they showed how much fat there was in the typical meal from fast food restaurants. They had these test tubes and they filled them up with the amount of fat that you would get from a Wendy’s burger or from an In-N-Out or whatever. And you thought of all that fat going into your system and clogging up your blood vessels. And you begin to realize, “Maybe I don’t want to eat that.” And if you’re more favorably inclined to sprouts and other good, healthy food, and as you get more and more used to the healthy food, you begin to realize you really prefer it. You go back and eat some junk food and one bite and you realize, “No, I don’t want to go back.” And it’s the same with sensuality. You have to keep driving in the point of all the drawbacks that come from going for sensual pleasures, from allowing your mind to be inflamed with sensual desires. And at the same time, you want to train the mind in concentration. The more skilled you get at the concentration, the more reliable a friend you become to your breath. The more you realize you’ve got a really true friend here, not like the old friends, the cravings that would pull you out to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. This will take time. But it’s an important way of reordering the priorities of your mind. Sometimes you hear people saying, “Well, if I can say no to the pleasures of concentration, then it doesn’t really matter about lesser pleasures like sensuality. If I say no to the higher pleasures, the lower ones will be taken care of.” Well, it doesn’t work that way. The mind needs pleasure of one sort or another. And just because a pleasure is a high or superior sort of pleasure doesn’t mean you’ll automatically see that it is higher or superior. It’s not the case that you’ll be more attached to it. Most of us still like to go for a junk food. So it takes time and energy. You have to have a sense of conviction in what you’re doing, that taking the breath as your friend is going to help you through all sorts of troubles, taking sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations as your friend. Your friends won’t be able to do that. So here’s your opportunity to get to know the breath, to see what the body wants in terms of breath energy, what will feel soothing when you need to feel soothed, what will be energizing when the body needs energy, which parts of the body will benefit most from being energized, which parts will benefit most from being soothed. If you have a pain in a particular part of the body, what kind of breathing will help with the pain? Does it help to breathe directly into that spot or through that spot? Or do you have to avoid that spot for the time being and work around it? These are things you have to learn, just as you have to learn the proclivities of your potential friends. When can you trust them? When can you not? What kind of sense of humor do they have? How good-natured are they? How do they respond to different ways of your acting and speaking? All the other types of sensitivity that you have to develop as you develop a friendship applies here with the breath. But as you find the friendship develops, then you’ve got to support it so that when pains and pleasures come—physical pains, emotional pains, physical and emotional pleasures—you realize you’ve got something better here. You don’t go running out for those things. You don’t go trying to gobble them up. When you don’t try to gobble them up, they don’t overwhelm you. And that way, the effects of past bad actions recede further and further away from the mind, as you develop more and more skillful intentions and strategies here in the present moment, so that your present good karma can help push away the effects of past bad karma. So this is how we take advantage of the fact that we are experiencing primarily the actions of the mind and the results of those actions, and learn how to direct all those causal processes in a truly wise direction to the end of suffering, to something that is, as Jon Munn once said, “lies beyond action.” Something that we haven’t experienced yet, but is a possibility. But to go beyond action, first you have to master the processes of action. Learn which actions are your friends, which things are your friends, which ones are not. And you begin right here at the breath.

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