Sustenence for a Suffering Mind

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One of the most important skills in focusing on the breath is getting a sense of what kind of breathing really feels best. Then you may not be able to achieve the platonic ideal of the ideal breath, but at least have a sense of breathing that feels good enough. It feels comfortable. It’s nice to stay here. You may develop a sense of refreshment, especially around the area of the heart. You may draw an imaginary line down the front of the body, including the navel, the solar plexus, the heart, the throat. That’s the area where you want to focus most of your attention and try to develop a sense of refreshment there. If you have trouble focusing there, you might try the other approach, which is to start with your fingers, go up through your palms, your hands, up your arms. Just very consciously relax those parts of the body. And then keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Notice any habitual tensing up you might do there. It usually happens either with the in-breath or at the very end of the out-breath. So try to keep everything relaxed all the way through the breath cycle and the next breath cycle. Then when you’ve worked your way up the arms, you start with the feet. Start with the toes, up through the feet, the ankles. Up the legs and then up through the torso. Try to make this your habitual way of relating to the body. As soon as you focus on your sensation of the body, think, “Relax. Open up.” Try to maintain that sense of openness. That’s how the sense of fullness and refreshment can come from the breathing. And you find as you do this that the mind gets a sense of nourishment, because the mind does like to feed. The Buddha analyzes the different ways we feed. Sometimes we feed on just sensory contact or consciousness. Of course, the body feeds on food, physical food. But our main food tends to be our thoughts and intentions. Those intentions tend to come in four forms. One is the intention to feed off of our sensual desires. One of the most interesting points in the Buddha’s analysis of sensuality is that we’re more addicted to our desires than we are to the actual objects of our desires. We really like the process of sitting around and thinking about how much you’d like a certain sight, or sound, or smell, or taste. We can fantasize about food for hours on end. And the mind likes to feed on that kind of stuff. When you actually get the food, it’s in your mouth for a bit and then it’s gone, down the hatch. But we can fantasize about the food for long periods of time. That’s one of our ways of feeding. Another way of feeding is to let the mind feed on our views, identifying ourselves with them. In the old days, it was more metaphysical views. Nowadays, it tends to be more political views. But it’s a very deeply entrenched way of feeding our sense of who we are and where we’re going to find justification in our lives, our sense of “We’re right, somebody else is wrong.” The same with our habits. There’s a right way of doing this, a right way of doing that. And often we hold on to it, not so much because it’s the most skillful way of doing it, but simply because that’s our habitual way of doing things. And then we feed off our sense of self, who we identify ourselves as. And this is something we’re doing all the time. And the interesting thing about all this feeding is that it also involves suffering. You think about it. The fact that you have to depend on something else for your nourishment puts you in a bad position. If we were totally independent, totally self-contained, and we had all the nourishment we needed inside ourselves, life would be very different. We’d be suffering a lot less. Or food were available everywhere. Or if it didn’t involve having to feed off of one another, the world would be a much better place. But here we are. The body needs to feed on physical food, the mind needs nourishment. You put somebody in a sensory deprivation tank and they go crazy after a while. Yet without the food, we die. And with the food, we’re suffering. It seems like a bad set of options. The Buddhist solution is to try to strengthen the mind in such a way that ultimately it doesn’t need to feed, that it is self-sufficient. But it doesn’t tell you to stop feeding all at once. It just gives you better things to feed on, things that actually do nourish the mind. Views you can live by that help you learn to recognize where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering. Habits to develop, like the habit of working with the breath, learning how to get a sense of well-being simply by the way you relate to the breath energy in your body, and learning how to carry that ability around with you. It’s not something you do only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You want to be able to go through the whole day with a sense of the breath energy in the body as your nourishment and as protection as well. There’s kind of an energy field that develops around the body as you learn how to inhabit your sense of the body fully and then fill it with good breath energy. A couple years after my mother died, my father had a new girlfriend who had very strong powers of concentration. She could sit and meditate, and people near her could actually feel the kind of energy field around her. It was kind of like a protection. It was an extreme case, i.e., the people could actually sense it if they sat near her. But it’s good to have that ability to sense it as you fully inhabit your body with your conscious awareness and you’ve allowed the breath energy to be full and refreshing all the time. It’s not only food for you, but it’s also protection for you. In other words, you’re not going out trying to feed on somebody else, feed on other people’s approval, feed even on their presence. That way, you’re less likely to take in people’s negative energy. So this is an important part of the skill we develop on the path, is learning how to feed well. Feed in a way that actually is nourishing for the mind, unlike most of the ways we feed, which tend to be junk food or things that aren’t good but are going to end up disappointing us at some point. There are times when we have a really good relationship going with someone else and both sides are feeding well, and it’s nourishing for both sides. But it’s always destined to end one way or another. It’s either the death of the loved one or, as my mother once said, which is even harder, the death of love. These things are going to happen in life, so you’ve got to be prepared. Even the good things the world has to offer have their limitations. And you really do want to be able to feed well inside, to have this sense of inner nourishment, so that you’re not wounded by the changes of the world. Otherwise you start defining yourself around a particular relationship, and it’s inevitable that when you’re in a relationship with somebody, this doesn’t mean necessarily a partnership, but it can be any kind of relationship—mother and child, husband and wife, friend and friend, teacher, student. There’s always a certain kind of identity that gets built up around the relationship. And you have to learn to see these as just alternative selves in your stable. And if you find that you don’t have to feed on a particular sense of selfhood again, then you can play that role with a lot less suffering, both for yourself and for the other person. So this practice we have of trying to be more self-sufficient in our feeding is not selfish. It’s not running away from the world. It’s actually a way of learning how to live in the world much more skillfully, imposing less of a burden on other people, too. For instance, if you’re trying to really feed off a particular way of defining a relationship with a child, that may not necessarily be the best kind of relationship for the child. Ideally, you should be able to play lots of different roles in relationship to the child. Sometimes when the child needs to be punished, you can take the role of the disciplinarian. Other times when the child needs to be nurtured, you can play the role of the nurturing parent. But if you identify with one or two of those particular roles too much, then it’s hard to play the role that may be actually more skillful at that time. This is why this process of feeding can be difficult for both sides, if you’re too attached to a particular way of feeding. So if you learn how to develop this inner sense of nourishment, it’s not just the breath, but it’s also all the other good qualities that go along with the meditation—the mindfulness, the alertness. The goodwill, the compassion, the empathetic joy, the equanimity—all the good things that come with the meditation. You take these as your food, and then you find that you can actually play the role that needs to be played in that particular relationship, or the roles that need to be played, with a lot more fluidity, a lot more skill. So this is why it’s important to realize that your sense of self-care, your sense of self, is made up of many different selves. And if you can learn not to feed exclusively or excessively on one particular type, you’re going to suffer less. The people around you are going to suffer a lot less too. So the first step in that direction is this skill to develop a sense of well-being inside. That you can gain nourishment from, a sense of stability, a sense of well-being that you can carry around regardless of what the situation outside may be. That way you can trust yourself more and you can slip into your roles a lot more effectively, a lot more quickly, instead of viewing them as who you really are. It’s more like a set of clothing. You can change from one set to another. As need be, and as quickly as needs be. Because you’re no longer trying to eat the clothes. So you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit as you develop this sense of well-being that you can carry around with you as you work with the breath energy in the body, as you try to fill the body with your conscious awareness. The Buddha has an image. Imagine a ball of clay. You throw a stone in the clay, and the stone immediately goes into the clay and penetrates. The Buddha says if you don’t really fill your body with your awareness, fill it with your alertness, outside things can come and have a huge impact on the mind in the same way. Then the alternative image is of a door made out of hardwood. You throw a ball of string at it, and the ball of string bounces off. The door made out of hardwood is the state of mind in which you’re filling the body with your awareness, filling it with your alertness, and the breath energy fills the body as well. Outside things can’t damage you. And the people who need to rely on you can rely on you with a lot more confidence. If you’re a door of hardwood rather than just a ball of wet clay. So when we talk about the skills you take back when you leave the monastery, this is the number one skill. So while you’re here and you have the opportunity, try to work on it as much as you can. And don’t leave it here when you go.

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