New Feeding Options

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Just as the body feeds on physical food, the mind feeds on mental food. It feeds on thoughts, emotions, energy. As the Buddha explained, the fact that we have to keep feeding is the main form of suffering. The Pali word for clinging can also mean taking sustenance. You take sustenance from food, or fire takes sustenance from its fuel. We cling to things, hoping to get some nourishment out of them. We think it’s good for us, but it’s simply the fact that we have to hold on to things and that we’re hungry all the time. That’s suffering right there. And then there’s the worry that we’re going to run out of food sometime. The simple fact that we have to keep on needing to feed, that’s the essence of suffering. But the Buddha doesn’t tell us not to feed at all. We’d starve. We’d die. The mind would die in a sense that it would lose all energy. So instead, he gives us something better to feed on. He gives us new options for feeding. We feed on generosity, we feed on virtue, and we feed on the meditation. That’s good food for the mind. When you’re generous, it gives you a sense of strength, a sense of well-being, a sense of self-worth, that you really are a worthwhile human being. You have something to share. You have the kindness, you have the compassion, that you’re not just holding on to things all the time and gobbling them down yourself. You’ve got things to share with others. That creates a sense of well-being and a sense of freedom. And you can feed off that well-being, you can feed off that sense of freedom. Similarly with virtue. There are times when you could get away with doing something that would harm somebody else, but you realize you’d rather not. And there’s a sense of dignity that comes from that, a sense of self-worth. That, too, can be food. But the mind also needs something more immediate. That’s why we focus on the breath, the breath being the energy and the body. As you breathe in, notice where you feel the flow of energy in the body. Do you feel it mainly in the chest? Do you feel it in the abdomen? Do you feel it down your back? Do you feel it in your face? Focus your attention there. Some spots of the body tend to be more sensitive than others. Try to find a spot that’s really sensitive and really does respond to changes in the breath. So you notice that when the breath is too light, when the breath is too long, when the breath is too short, when the breath is just right, when it feels good breathing in, when it feels good breathing out. That’s a type of food for the mind right there, because the mind deals very much in energy like this. Our most immediate experience of the body is in the energy of the body. When you sit here closing your eyes, how do you know that you have a body here? Well, there’s an energy flow. There’s an energy buzz. How does it feel? If it feels tight, think of it relaxing. If it feels blocked or obstructed, think of that blockage dissolving away. Try to get really sensitive to the energy in the body. A lot of our problems are that we allow the energy to get unhealthy, and then we’re sitting here feeding on unhealthy energy and it makes the mind miserable. The mind has this habit of just feeding on anything that comes its way. We’re like little children who haven’t figured out yet what’s food and what’s not food. You see a marble and you put it in your mouth. You see a piece of dirt and you put it in your mouth. You see a piece of bread and you put it in your mouth. Some of that is food and some of it’s not. So an important part of the practice here is learning how to get a sense of what the mind can feed on and what it can’t feed on, or what it can feed on and get healthy and strong, and what it feeds on and makes it weak and miserable. Learn how you relate to the energy in the body. And start exploring different ways that might be healthier. This is why we have books on the topic. You can read a John Lee talking about the breath energy flowing down the spine. What is that like? You read him sometimes talking about having the breath energy flow up the spine. Okay, you’ve got a choice. Which kind of energy do you need now? He talks about having energy suffusing out through every pore. There’s a sense of spaciousness in the body, where all the nerves get energized. In some passages he talks about the breath energy flowing around outside the body, kind of like your aura. The whole body is filled with energy. The body is in a cocoon of breath energy. Some people can sense that very clearly. Other people have trouble. Notice where you do sense the energy in the body, and notice how you work with it. Notice where there have been areas in the body that you’ve shut off, you’ve clamped down, so the energy doesn’t flow. Notice where you feel exposed, where you feel unprotected in the energy. We’re talking today about people feeling exposed or basically having just those two options. Either you just clamp down and shut everything off, or you open up and you feel exposed. Well, there are other alternatives. This is one of the important parts of the practice, is learning there are other alternative ways of dealing with the problems of life. When we have anger, we usually feel there are basically two ways of dealing with anger. Either you express it, you act it out, or you suppress it, bottle it up, hold it up inside. Of course, when you bottle it up like that, what is bottled anger like? It’s not bottled wine. It explodes. Maybe it’s bad bottled wine. But there are other alternatives. You can breathe through the tension in the body that builds up. Then there is anger. It’s one of the skills we learn here. When you notice there’s tension, how do you allow it to relax and dissipate out? How do you open the channels in the body that go out, the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, that allow negative energy to just flush out of the body? How do you protect yourself from negative energy without, at the same time, feeling it? It’s like putting up a shell. One of the ways is learning to think of the energy in the body like a big screen, like the screen on a window. There are spaces between the wires, and anything negative coming toward you can just go right through. You don’t have to be affected by it. You can try practicing this. If you ever find yourself meditating in a place where there’s a lot of noise, just let the noise be, but also have your spot that you’re inhabiting. You’re with the wires and the screen. As for the spaces, that can be for the noise. There are lots of different ways of dealing with the energy. You can have a sense of strength without having to clamp down or hold things in or shut things off. Spreading your awareness to fill the whole body is also very important. If there are parts of the body that you’re not aware of, all kinds of things can develop there. It’s like a part of the house that you close off. Dust can gather there. Rats move in and they build their nests. Mold sets in. Sometimes other people can invade your space. They move into the energy of your body. You may have noticed that sometimes after a conversation with someone it’s very difficult. You walk away and you feel like you’re carried in their energy with you. You’ve got to learn how not to allow that energy in. It’s not an act of kindness to take on their negative energy. They still have their negative energy, but then you develop some of your own that doesn’t really help anybody. And when you carry negative energy around like that, you’re less able to help other people with their problems. So try to develop a sense of your awareness filling the whole body. You lay claim to your territory. And then you can be aware of what’s going on. You’re not closing down. You’re not in denial. But at the same time, you’re not exposed. This way you learn to feed off of good energy in the body. All the Buddhist teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path have to do with teaching the mind a new way to feed, giving it health food, nourishment, and delicious food. Try to breathe in a way that feels delicious, that feels gratifying. You’ll find it a lot easier to stay with the breath. And you’ll find that when the mind is better fed like this, it’s a lot happier, a lot stronger. It doesn’t have to keep gobbling down everything that comes its way. When you’re well fed, if you see some bad food that somebody offers you, you can say, “Oh, it’s delicious.” As the Buddha said, if someone insults you, it’s like they’re offering you food. And if you take the insult and get into a big argument over it, you’ve swallowed their food, now you’re sick. If they want to insult you, just let it go past. If they want to pull you into their issues, just let it go past. You don’t have to take their stuff. You’ve got better food inside. Just remember, you have these options. Many times we limit ourselves by thinking it’s either x or y, either one of two things, and neither one is really very good. Remember, there are other options. There may be pain in the world, but you don’t have to suffer from it. There may be difficulties, but you don’t have to carry them around. There may be bad food on the plate, but you don’t have to eat it. Because you can create your own food inside.

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