A Connoisseur of Concentration

May 31, 2013

As you focus on the breath, you want to become a connoisseur of your breathing. What really feels good right now? What would you like to feel in your torso? What would you like to feel down your back? What would you like to feel in your shoulders, your arms, your legs, different parts of the head, all over the body? If you can’t take care of all of them all at once, go through them section by section. Get a sense of what kind of breathing would feel really good right there. And as the Buddha said, allow yourself to settle in and indulge in whatever sense of pleasure you’ve found. I don’t know how many books I’ve read on meditation where, as soon as they mention concentration, they warn you not to get addicted to the pleasure. They warn you that it will deflect you from the path. Well, the concentration is the path. And you want to learn how to appreciate it, because it is a subtle pleasure, and it’s one that requires work. As the Buddha used to say, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. So let yourself get addicted to the pleasure. Learn how to appreciate it. This is really good food for the mind. As long as the mind is going to feed, give it something really good, something that’s really within your power to maintain. Because if you’re not feeding here, where are you going to feed? You’re going to go out and feed on sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, the food that we use to maintain ourselves and nourish ourselves with. It’s not just physical food. As the Buddha said, there’s contact at the senses, there’s your awareness at the senses, and then there are your intentions around the senses. You feed on all these things. Then there’s good mental food and there’s bad mental food. Meditation is a good intentional food. There’s the awareness here, there’s the contact here, there’s the intention. You feed to create this state of well-being. This is your inner space. Learn how to arrange it well. There’s a good place to settle down. There’s a good place to feed. Otherwise you go out feeding off of little tidbits here, tidbits there, and try to gobble down all kinds of things that you want outside. The Buddha really emphasizes the fact that you’ve got to learn how to appreciate and develop this sense of well-being inside, because otherwise you’re not going to be able to pull yourself away from the pleasures of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, the pleasure of taking on an identity out there in the world and feeding off that identity. Because the problem with feeding is that we take it as a pleasure. It’s the basic way we maintain ourselves as beings. It’s our source of happiness. But there’s an awful lot of stress and an awful lot of anxiety that goes into the feeding. We basically get chewed on by the things that we feed on. There’s a stress of hunger for these things, and then when you get the things, they don’t stay with you. And there’s always that concern about how much longer this particular food source is going to last. Your jobs, your relationships, your possessions. These things are always subject to change. And so there’s a natural anxiety. As long as the mind really needs to depend on these things for its happiness, there’s going to be anxiety. So this is why you want to develop a sense of well-being inside that you can feed on. Of course, the concentration itself does have its drawbacks. It’s not totally permanent, but it’s a lot better than the things we feed on outside. And if you can shift your center of gravity inside, then the changes in the world outside don’t have that much of an impact. And you can step back from them a bit. This is why disenchantment, nibbida, is such an important part of the path. Because it’s the feeling you have when you’ve looked at a particular thing you’ve been feeding on for a long time and realized you don’t want it anymore. You’ve had enough of that particular kind of food. Or you’re tired of eating it. Let’s put it that way. I mean, you can live in the world with things that you develop nibbida for, but that’s not that sense of desperation around them. In other words, you don’t have to give up your jobs and relationships. But you don’t have to lean on them so much. You don’t have to be so concerned about their changes. Because you’ve got a better source of food inside, one that’s a lot more under your control. The other issue around feeding, of course, is that when things get desperate, you’re not going to be able to trust yourself to behave in a noble and dignified way. Notice with the hummingbirds. They can sense when the feeders are going down, and there’s that last little bit of film of sugar water on the bottom. Even though they’ve been feeding together, in some cases you’ll see two hummingbirds on one perch, feeding out of the same hole. Alternatively, when they begin to sense that there’s not much left in the feeder, they get really aggressive. And some of them show their true stripes and start chasing everybody else away because they think there’s not much left. There’s always that concern when your source of food is endangered. Are you going to start behaving in ways that you don’t really like, that you don’t really admire in yourself? This is another good reason for wanting to find a source of food inside, something you really can depend on, so that you can depend on yourself and depend on your own ability to maintain your virtue, even in difficult situations. There are a lot of good reasons for wanting to learn how to feed in here. So allow yourself to have this pleasure of being with the breath in a way that feels really nourishing. Because this can bring you a lot of calm. You can look at your life and see the things that you were afraid of, afraid of losing, and you realize, “Okay, I can still live without them. People are perfectly fine.” I was talking to a student who lives in a very, very, very upper-middle class suburb, one of the cities up north. She’s afraid of losing her house. She’s been afraid of losing her house now for the past couple of years. You have to keep reminding her that living in that particular town is not the definition of happiness. There are lots of nice places to live elsewhere, a lot simpler. And you don’t have to deal with all the snooty people you meet in that town if you live someplace else. She and her husband have some friends who live in a alternative mobile home community up in the Sierras, people who practice the Dhamma. And she’s thinking, “Well, we could move there, but then suppose our children try to bring prospective fiancés to visit us. What will the fiancés think?” And I think this will be a great test for those fiancés. These are the kind of people you want in your family, if they look down on you for living in a Dhamma community. Do you want them as your son-in-law? Daughter-in-law? You have to learn how to step back from your situation and see that many times the things that you’re feeding on, you’d be better off if you didn’t have to feed on them. So even though there’s a certain amount of pleasure that comes, a certain amount of nourishment that comes from things you feed on in the world outside, you’ve got to realize that these things have their drawbacks. And it’s a lot easier to see those drawbacks and learn how to be independent of them if you’ve got your alternative source of food inside. So learn how to settle down here. Get acquainted here. Learn how to appreciate what you’ve got right here. Learn how to become a connoisseur of your breathing, a connoisseur of your concentration. That puts you in a much more secure position, a position of strength. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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