Fixing the Food You Feed On

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Learning to meditate is like learning how to cook. You take stock of your ingredients and you figure out the best thing to make out of them. So what have you got here? You’ve got the body sitting here, you’ve got the breath, and you’ve got the mind that’s thinking and aware. So you want to put those things together in a way that gives you nourishment. This relates to the Buddha’s teachings on karma. What we experience at any moment is a combination of three things—results from past actions, our current actions, and the results of our current actions. We need all three together in order to actually experience the present moment. It’s something we’re going to explore as we meditate, to see how we fix our food at the same time we feed off of it. And so doing, we create the ingredients for the next moment’s meal, the next and tomorrow’s meal. So what this means is that you can’t just make up the ingredients. Sometimes there’s a pain in the body that you can’t get rid of, so you have to work around it. Other times you’ve got some bad habits you’ve got to work around, but it is possible to work around them. In other words, no matter what the ingredients are, you’re going to make at least palatable food. Now as you sit right here, you’ve got the breath, so watch the breath for a while to get to know it. Sometimes it’s helpful to breathe in deeply, several times together. You’ll get a sense of how the breathing is feeling in the different parts of the body and where you notice the breathing. Because when we talk about breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the nose. It’s the flow of energy in the body. So where do you feel that flow? It might be in some unexpected places. But wherever you feel it, focus your attention there and try to be right there with the feeling of the breath. Let it bathe you. Notice what adjustments might be needed. Sometimes it’s too long, sometimes it’s too short, too deep, too shallow. It’s like learning how to be a good cook. How much salt is too much salt? How much is not enough? If you make up your mind ahead of time that it’s going to have to have a teaspoon of salt, and you find yourself with too much salt in it, what are you going to do? You add a little bit, a little bit, a little bit, until it’s just right. In other words, when you’re adjusting the breath, don’t force it too much. Give it a little nudge. A little bit shorter, a little bit deeper, a little bit chattelier, a little bit stronger. Whatever seems to be needed. And after a while you get a sense of, “Given this set of ingredients, this is what’s needed.” As for the thinking, you’re going to have an image of the breath in mind. So try to use that image of the breath as an energy that flows through the body and comes in and out through all the pores. Think of your body like a big sponge. The air can come in and out from all directions. That minimizes the amount of pushing and pulling you have to do. And since you’ve already got some breath energy in the body, don’t think you have to push the breath in or squeeze it in or squeeze it out. The breath from outside comes in and just nourishes and makes more full the energy you’ve already got there. That’s a good perception to hold in mind. Then be alert to how things feel. And you do this again and again and again. This is why it’s called practice. Because your sense of how to put that food together is going to get more subtle and you begin to realize that there are some possibilities in here that you might not have thought of before. The problem is, if you read ahead in the cookbook about all the more advanced dishes you might be able to do, you get impatient. So work with the ingredients you’ve got. When you learn how to put these together in a relatively good way, then try to maintain that sense of relatively okay comfort in the body. It’s the maintaining that allows it to grow. Sometimes you’ve got to soak the beans overnight in order for them to be palatable. In the same way, you’ve got to learn how to stay and just soak yourself with the breath before the mind begins to soften up. This way you’re learning some habits that are good not only for sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the day. Because the sense of the breath energy in the body has a huge impact on your mood. If it feels open, spacious, energized—not too energized, but just right—then it provides a good support for the mind. If it’s tight and constricted, it provides a bad support that starts getting into your mood. Then it’s something you can do as you go through the day. Stop and check in and see how the breath energy is going. And as you get better and better at that, you find you can deal in other activities and have some sense of the breath, some sense of how your body feels and what kind of energy flow is going on, and what can be done to make sure that it’s okay as you go through the day. It provides you with a good foundation, a good support. As you do this, you’re going to start learning some interesting things about the mind. The mind, as the Buddha says, we feed all the time. And feeding is actually a cause of suffering. We tend to like to think of food and eating as a very pleasurable activity. But that’s because we’re hungry all the time. We have lacks. We lack this, we lack that. And the food is what makes up for the lack. If there was no sense of lack, then there wouldn’t be any need for food. You’ve probably noticed that after a big dinner you see another large dinner on a table nearby, and it doesn’t have any appeal. That’s because you have no need. What we’re trying to do as we meditate is get to the point where we have no need to feed. But in the meantime, we have to feed off of what we’ve got. So when there’s a pain in the body, you learn how to deal with the pain so that you’re not feeding off the pain. You’re feeding off your more skillful qualities. You’re feeding off of the better potentials you have right here. It’s not like there’s pain everywhere in the body. If the whole body were pained, then you’d die. The pain tends to be more pronounced, more noticeable in some parts than in others. So one of your first lines of defense is to learn how to stay in the other parts. The mind is drawn to pain like a magnet, but you want to learn how to overcome that sense of attraction. The pain may be in the leg. See if you can breathe through the leg. Stay with the breath where it’s comfortable first. Then ask for the leg. Say, “I don’t have to go there.” Let it go for a while while you lay claim to an area that’s more comfortable. Learn how to lay claim in a way that doesn’t tighten it up. There is a sense of spaciousness, a sense of well-being. Once you’re firmly established there, you can think of that well-being, that good breath energy, radiating out from that spot and going down through the leg, through the pain, and out through the sole of your foot. In other words, you’re not just letting yourself be a passive victim of the pain. You’re becoming a more active shaper of your experience around the pain and through the pain, and holding that perception. The breath energy can go through, and any areas of blockage can be dissolved away. That’s a very useful perception to have. When you really feel confident, then you can start probing into the pain itself. Start looking into the sensation of the pain. What is pain, anyhow? Can you catch it? Can you bottle it? If you try to catch it, you make it worse. Can you watch it without the sense that you have to make it go away or that you have to run away from it? Can you just look at where there’s physical pain and start asking yourself questions about it? Does the pain really have the leg? The pain is one thing. The leg is something else. Your awareness of the pain, that’s something else, too. Are the pain and the leg actually the same thing? Is your awareness of the pain actually pain? The awareness isn’t. Pain doesn’t have any awareness at all. Learn how to make distinctions among these things. And as you do that, the mind is taking a more and more active role toward quick questioning its old perceptions about pain. You don’t have to feed off your old ways of doing things. You’ve learned how to fix new food here in the present moment. So remind yourself that you’re not just a passive recipient of whatever is happening in the present. You’re an active shaper. You cook the food, you prepare the food at the same time that you’re eating it. So as long as you have to feed, try to make something that’s really good. The fact that we’re cooking here is one of the reasons why mindfulness is not just awareness. Often you hear, “Just be with the present moment and that’s it. That’s mindful.” That’s not. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. If you’ve had any cooking lessons, you want to remember them. Either the things you’ve read in cookbooks or the things you’ve learned by fooling around in the kitchen. You came across something good? Okay, remember that. Apply that knowledge the next time around. Because there is that element of intention and the intention is informed by what you can remember. At the same time, we’re doing this not just for the present moment. We’re going to do it skillfully so that it leads to good things in the future as well. After all, tomorrow you’re going to be eating leftovers. So make the original dish good. We’re already shaping our experience as it is and feeding off our experience. It turns out that the path to the end of suffering, which gets us to a point where we don’t have to feed anymore, does however require that we learn how to cook, how to prepare our food well. That requires sensitivity in addition to our mindfulness. It also requires ardency, something you want to really do well. If you give up and say, “I don’t care, whatever,” you’re left with raw potatoes, raw this, raw that, and you can’t eat raw stuff, so you just throw it together in any old which way, and you get sick. As long as there’s a need to feed, the wise thing is to learn how to prepare your food well.

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