Who Are You Feeding Inside

February 19, 2016

The mind needs food just as the body needs food, even though it’s a different kind of food. It’s always feeding on something. The Buddha lists three kinds. There’s the food of sensory contact, the food of consciousness, and the food of your intentions. This is what you feed on as you go through the day. A lot of it, of course, is the contact. You like certain sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas. And the mind can start feeding on them and create all kinds of issues around them. And if it lacks these things, it puts somebody in a sensory deprivation tank. Things get pretty weird in the mind. So we’re feeding all the time, and it’s good to look at what we’re feeding on and who’s getting fed. Think of the committee in the mind and ask yourself which members are getting fed, say, when you’re reading or when you’re looking at a screen of one kind or another. Is it your greed getting fed, your anger getting fed, your delusion, your fear? Are those the members of the committee who want to feed? What’s happening to the wiser members? Are they getting food? This is one of the reasons why we come to meditate and why we come to practice in general, is to nurture better intentions in the mind so that the wiser members of the committee that are concerned with your long-term well-being and happiness get to be nourished. And you can starve some of the other members. I was reading the other day someone really complaining about the Buddha’s image of the way the mind feeds, the way we feed in our relationships. They felt very aversive to that. The complaint being, of course, if they’re aversive to something, it should be removed from the Dhamma. Well, that’s not how the Dhamma works. The Dhamma is the way things are. You look at your mind. Look at people around you, how they’re feeding. Especially nowadays, where everybody has a private screen they can carry around. You see everybody feeding, feeding, feeding, and if you interrupt them, they get really upset. Many people are more attuned to their screens than they are to the people around them. Like those rats they experimented on one time. They found an electrode that they could put in the rat’s pleasure center of the brain. They hooked it up so that they could give a little jolt to their pleasure center any time they wanted to. Well, they just sat with those little electrodes on the charge. They didn’t want to eat anything else. That was all the food they needed. It was the pleasure center getting excited. And they would die because they weren’t getting nourished otherwise. It’s the same with us. We’re getting nourished in all the wrong ways, by our society, by technology. So we have to learn how to pull ourselves away from a lot of those wrong kinds of food and feed ourselves otherwise. Try to get all the good members of the committee fed. This is why the practice is not just meditation. There’s a part of the mind that gets nourished by generosity. There’s a part of the mind that gets nourished by virtue. You want those parts strong. Because they’re going to help with the meditation. Generosity is the part of the mind that likes to give. When you meditate, you’ve got to give a lot of your energy, be willing to make sacrifices. The part of the mind that feels good about avoiding unskillful behavior is the part of your mind that stays away from distractions as you meditate. That’s got to be strengthened in that way. And with the concentration, on the one hand, it gives you an immediate sense of pleasure. So that feeds a lot of the members of the committee right there. Because most of them are voices that say, “I want this pleasure. I want that pleasure. I want pleasure right now.” Whatever the sort. And you can give them a pleasure that’s immediate, right there, here in your body. At the same time, it’s blameless. The members of the committee that prefer to live in a blameless way get to be fed as well. So as the Buddha says, when concentration comes, you indulge in it. He wasn’t the sort of person who would say, “Well, when you hit concentration, be wary of it, and be afraid of it, and try not to like it too much.” He said, “You settle in and you indulge.” The image that comes to mind may not be a very pretty one. But times when I was in Thailand, I’d be meditating and a mosquito would come along. You could see it probing, probing, probing on my arm. It wouldn’t get what it wanted to hear, so it’d pull out and move along and probe in again. Finally it hit something. It never hit a really big vein. It would just sit there, more blood than it would need in a whole lifetime, and just indulge. And sucking up the blood, it wouldn’t want to move. You’d touch it with your finger and it wouldn’t move. With the same kind of attitude in the mind, you find some spot of pleasure in the body, some spot of pleasure in the breath, and you stay there and let it fill the body. The more steadily you can stay there, the stronger the sense of ease that comes. Because a lot of the mind’s suffering is when it gets a little bit of food but then has to move on. A little bit of food has to move on. Or it doesn’t really feel nourished by the food that it gets. Well, here’s something that’s really nourishing for all the good parts of the mind. And at the same time, it throws some food to the members of the mind that just want something instant in terms of pleasure. They get fed, too. In this way, the mind gets nourished in all the right ways. So develop this habit of finding a good spot and staying there, making the most of it. It’s an important part of the skill of the path, to stay on the path. On the path requires food. Think of that image where the Buddha talks about the path as being like a fortress on the edge of a frontier. It needs soldiers, in other words, right effort. It needs mindfulness, the gatekeeper. These need to be fed to do their job. The gatekeeper keeps out unskillful qualities and lets in the skillful qualities. In other words, it doesn’t just sit there and be passively accepting of whatever comes up. Mindfulness has to remind you of what’s skillful and what’s not, and then what to do with the unskillful things and what to do with the skillful ones. That quality needs to be fed. Otherwise, you get tired, and part of the mind will go sneaking off to try to get some sense of well-being in another way. The same with the soldiers, the right effort. If there’s no sense of pleasure or well-being in the activity of getting rid of unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, you’re going to start developing some unskillful qualities to feed off those, forgetting about the skillful ones. So feed the mind well. Feed it right here. When you’ve found something good, just stay right here. Let the mind get nourished. And when the mind feels well-nourished, part of it will say, “Well, what can I do now? What’s next?” That’s a sign that you might be ready. I say “might be ready,” because sometimes it’s just boredom. But there are other times when you know you’ve got the energy now. Notice what your mind’s issues are. And where you’re going to develop discernment out of this really varies from person to person. For some people, it’s right there in analyzing the state of concentration. In other cases, you’ve got to bring up issues you know are issues in your mind. Things like lust, or ill will, or laziness, or your belief that you’re not going to be able to gain an awakening in this lifetime, so why bother? You’ve got to take those on. I guess that now you can take them on when the good members of the committee have been nourished. So that counts as a skillful part of the process. Notice what the arguments those different parts of the mind give for what they want. Then try to see how flimsy those arguments are. It’s a lot easier to see how flimsy they are when you’re well-fed, when your discernment is fed, when your sense of wanting to be skillful is fed, when that particular intention provides food for the mind, the intention to be skillful. When you’ve learned how to feed off that well, then it’s a lot easier to see through a lot of the mind’s arguments for why you should give in to this impulse, give in to that addiction. Because you’re coming from a place of strength, you’re coming from a place of satisfaction. You keep this up until you begin to realize that your conversations with your defilements are beginning to win again. It’s time to get back and feed the strong members of the committee, or feed the wise members of the committee, the members that are part of the path. And however long it takes to get them well-fed, try not to be too impatient. Too many people get a little bit of concentration and say, “Now I’m ready for insight.” Well, maybe they’re not. You have to see what issues you can deal with and what results you’re getting. And if the results are not coming, it’s a sign that your concentration isn’t strong enough. You need more stillness to see more subtle things in the mind. So look at who you’re feeding inside as you go through the day and ask yourself, “Are those the part of your stable that you want to have fed?” Because if you feed the wrong members, they’re going to create a lot of trouble. It might make life difficult for you, make life difficult for all the wise, compassionate members of the committee. They’ll just get crowded out. So be careful who you feed and when you’ve found the right, good source of food. Healthy, skillful food. Allow yourself to indulge in it. That’s not said to be greedy. It’s said to be wise.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/160219_Who_Are_You_Feeding_Inside.mp3>