Food for the Mind

August 6, 2017

Okay, let’s meditate. When you meditate, you’re creating good food for the mind, giving the mind a good place to stay, a sense of well-being that it can really rely on. Because the nature of the mind is that it’s always feeding, trying to find nourishment with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, things it likes, even things it doesn’t like, it feeds on. And yet if it’s not careful, it’s like a person who’s not careful about what he or she eats. There’s a lot of junk food out there. There’s a lot of poison food. So you want to give the mind good food. This is what we’re doing as we work with the breath. Try to find a way of breathing that feels good inside. And then when you find something that feels good, think if you can let it spread. Because the word “breath” here isn’t just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s an energy flow in the body. It’s two levels of energy in the body. So you ask yourself, “What kind of energy is breathing right now? Is it a tense energy? Is it a lazy energy?” Try to find an energy that’s just right, both in the body and in the mind. And based on that, you can fix your food. When the Buddha talks about five aggregates, he’s talking about five activities that are involved in the process of feeding. And the analysis applies not only to physical food but also to food for the mind. And so, of course, it’s going to apply to the meditation. Often it’s good to think about what those five aggregates are, what you’re doing as you’re trying to feed the mind well here. There’s the form, which is the body. In this case, it’s the breath. If you’re looking for food outside, of course, form is the body that has that stomach that needs to be nourished. Then there’s the form of the food outside, the things that we see that look potentially good that could be potentially something we put inside this form. And then there’s the feeling. There’s the feeling of pain that comes with the hunger, which is what drives you, and the feeling that comes when that hunger is satisfied, the pleasant feeling that comes when it’s satisfied. And then there’s perception. Perception is, on the one hand, you recognize what kind of hunger you’ve got. Is this a hunger for something salty, a hunger for something sweet? If it’s an emotional hunger, is it a hunger for something to get angry about, or is it something looking for somebody to comfort you? And for things outside, is this edible or is it not? You think about when you were a little child crawling across the floor. You come across something, what’s the first thing you do with it? You stick it in your mouth to see if it’s edible. So that’s how you find out over time which things you can eat and which things you can’t eat. That’s your primary engagement with the world. And then on top of that, there’s a second level of recognizing what’s what and what the things mean. Because sometimes you come across an object that you can’t eat, but it’s a sign that there’s something edible there. You see the husk of a coconut. And if you look at the outside husk, you try to stick it in your mouth, you realize you can’t eat it, but you’ve had experience before. You know inside the husk is something that you can eat. So the husk there is a sign. And that’s a perception, too. Then there’s fabrication. Once you’ve got something that you might be able to eat, what do you have to do with it? One, how do you find it? And two, once you’ve got it, what do you do? If it’s a coconut, you’ve got to break it open. If it’s a potato, you’ve got to peel it and cook it. You can’t eat it just raw. All that’s fabrication. And then there’s consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things. The Buddha focuses on these activities. When he says that we suffer, it’s because we cling to them. And we cling to them because they’re so essential to feeding. Some people even say that this is the Buddha’s analysis of what we are. But that’s not true. He keeps saying that this is not what we are. But these are the activities that we latch onto, we hold onto, we cling to them. And in the clinging, they’re suffering. We think we get goodness out of them because they help us to feed, but in clinging to them, we suffer. The Buddha’s cure for all this is not that you just stop doing them. He says you learn how to do them skillfully first. You turn them into a path. Like when we’re doing concentration right now. You’ve got the form of the body. Right now when you close your eyes, what you’ve got is the breath. And you’ve got feeling. There can be feelings of pain in the body right now, but what you’re trying to develop is a feeling of well-being by staying with the breath continually. That feeling of well-being is what we’re going for right now, because that’s what’s going to sustain us. Then there’s the perception of the breath. When you breathe in, breathe out, what picture do you hold in mind of what the breath is doing? As I said just now, you could think of breath meaning just the air coming in and out of the lungs. But you can also think of it as an energy flow. Try to get sensitive with the energy flows in the body to see if they’re flowing well. So hold that image in mind. If you run across a sense of blockage, remind yourself, okay, this is a blockage in the breath. It means that something needs to be relaxed. That too is a perception. Then there’s for fabrication. There’s the way you direct your thoughts to the breath and the way you evaluate what’s going on. This kind of thinking, how can we make things better? If the breath isn’t comfortable, how can we make it more comfortable? If it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? When you maintain it, what can you do with it to get the most out of it? Well, that’s fabrication. Then consciousness is your awareness of all this. This is how you fix food for the mind, good food for the mind. You realize that there’s a lot of potential here in the breath that you may have overlooked before. As you learn more and more about these potentials, you find that you can create a greater sense of well-being. Once you’ve created that sense of well-being, given the mind something to go to feed on, you don’t just feed yourself. You then use that strength to understand as you go through life, where are you feeding on things in an unskillful way? If you’ve got the breath to tap into, you realize you’ve got a better way to feed. You can wean yourself off of all kinds of unskillful kinds of feeding. The opinions you cling to, your ideas of what you need in order to live, your idea about the things you can and cannot put up with. You begin to realize that if you’re feeding on the world outside, there’s going to be a lot of things that’s going to make you sick. Is the problem with the world or is the problem with the fact that you’re trying to feed on it? If you’re feeding well inside, you can be patient and tolerant of a lot of things that otherwise you couldn’t tolerate. It’s like dog food on a plate. If you think that it’s there for you to feed on, you get upset about the people who gave you dog food. But if you’re not interested in feeding at all, then the fact that there’s dog food on a plate doesn’t really mean anything bad to you. You realize maybe this is for somebody else. And as for the intentions of the people who put the dog food on the plate, you don’t have to worry about those. Because again, you’re not feeding off of your opinion of their intentions. So in this way, as you feed well inside, you find you can live with the world in a lot more peace and ease. Because you’ve learned how to avoid junk food, and you’ve learned how to feed yourself with good healthy food inside. So as you go through life and find yourself getting upset about things, ask yourself, “Why am I feeding on that? Why can’t I feed off my breath? Why can’t I feed off of the concentration that I’ve learned to develop?” That way you create a lot more peace in the world around you. It’s in this way that meditation is good not only for you, but also for the people you live with. After all, we live in a world that’s full of all kinds of horrible things. Even just our own bodies all have the potential for aging, illness, and death. What the Buddha is teaching us is how we don’t have to suffer from these things. And when we’re not suffering from these things, we’re not making other people suffer either. At least we’re not adding to their suffering. So we realize that the problem is not so much straightening out the world outside, it’s straightening out our own feeding habits. So that we can feed in a way that’s good for ourselves and places as few burdens as possible on the people around us.

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