Feeding on Right Resolves

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Some of the religions in the Buddhist day—especially those concerned with rebirth—were very much concerned with how you would feed in the next life. Their fear was that you would be reborn and you wouldn’t have much food. In some versions, they would sacrifice food, animals, thinking that you would be reborn and that the smoke would take all that food up to heaven, where it would wait for you. Others had a belief in mystical doctrines where your knowledge of Brahma would provide you with food. There were others, though, who saw that feeding was suffering. The Jains said you could get out of this cycle of feeding by starving yourself to death. The Buddha tried that. He got to the point where he was fainting from lack of food, and he realized that this was not the way. But he, too, saw that feeding was a problem. His solution was to find a state of mind that didn’t need to feed. But to get there required that you fed the mind well. As he said, there are three kinds of food for the mind. There’s sensory contact—in other words, the sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, your experience of the senses, your consciousness of these things—and then there are intentions. We feed a lot off of our intentions. This is one of the reasons why we train the mind, because the Buddha says you need to have good intentions as your food. What do we tend to feed on? Thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, sometimes even thoughts of harming others. The mind can get really fascinated by going over these things again and again and again, like a dog taking out an old dead animal that it’s buried underground, digging it up again, and chewing on it somewhere. It’s pretty miserable food. So we meditate deeply. Give the mind better food. Focus on the breath. Make our intention that we’re going to stay here, and find a sense of well-being in the mind that doesn’t harm anybody at all, doesn’t involve any sensuality, any ill will, any harm. That’s what the Buddha called right resolve. Right resolve leads right into right concentration. But sometimes we find ourselves going back to our old feeding habits. There are people going on a vegetarian diet, and then finally they can’t stand it any longer, and they go back and they find some fast food. Knowing full well that the fast food is bad for them, but still they have this strong craving for it. So as we meditate, as I said last night, there are two activities. One is to keep the mind with the breath, and the other is to consciously cut away any interest in the world outside. In particular, you want to cut away interest in feeding off unskillful resolves. So when thoughts of sensuality come up, you have to cut through them. That’s one of the reasons why we have that chat on the parts of the body. Remind yourself that the sensual pleasures around the body are based on what? You take the body apart, piece by piece by piece, and ask yourself, “What is it here that you really desire?” Do this first with your own body, to be fair. Then do it with the bodies of other people, and see that there’s not much there. You can put it back together again and suddenly decide that you like it again. That can happen. You want to look for this tendency of the mind that wants to find something that it can pin its sensual desires on. Then you begin to realize it’s your hunger that makes these things look like they’d be good to feed on. So are we going to solve the hunger? We’re going to solve the hunger by getting to understand it, and you’re going to meditate more to understand it. That brings your thoughts back to the meditation. It’s like those old stories about people who are extremely hungry and they look at things that are certainly not food at all, and all of a sudden it looks like food to them. That’s the way it is with these things. It’s the same with ill will. We can feed off of our desire to see other people suffer. We’re thinking about the suffering they’ve inflicted on us, and we have to realize that it’s bad for us. It’s like eating junk food. Because that kind of thinking is simply going to stir up your desire to do something unskillful. So we’ve got to replace it with good will, with forgiveness. When we have that chant of good will, “Avaira sukha jivino, avaira honto,” the word “avaira,” means animosity. “Avaira” means no animosity. That’s the Buddhist term for forgiveness. We wish ourselves well. We wish that we have no animosity for anybody. That’s interesting. We wish others well, that they have no animosity. Because the animosity turns around and attacks you. It’s like the kind of food that may taste good, but it gets down into your stomach and can just eat right through your stomach wall. I’ve heard people say that there’s no room for forgiveness in Buddhism because, after all, people have their karma, and you can’t erase their karma by forgiving them. Then you’re not the owners of their karma. It’s not you who decides whether they’re going to suffer or not. But that’s not why we think thoughts of forgiveness. We think thoughts of forgiveness so that we don’t do unskillful things and so that we don’t feed on unskillful resolves. Then we’re not feeding on these things, and the thoughts of going back and doing ill to those other people just don’t occur to us. So both sides benefit. But you have to remember that the forgiveness starts because you need it. Because you’re going to make yourself suffer otherwise if you feed off of ill will. And the same goes for thoughts of harm. Instead of just hoping that harm comes to others, thoughts of harm say, “Well, I’m going to do it.” That’s really bad food. So you replace that with thoughts of what the Buddha calls right resolve, renunciation, trying to find happiness here with the concentration, goodwill, which includes forgiveness, and the hope for forgiveness. Then there’s thoughts of non-harm, thinking, “How can you live in a world where you’re not harming other people?” And it keeps coming back to the path through generosity, virtue, and meditation. You want to make the intentions behind these things, you want to make them food for the mind. You want to make them a source of happiness inside. So it’s important that we look at how we feed ourselves. We feed our minds. When you find yourself getting obsessed with a particular kind of thought, ask yourself, “Someone could take a picture of this, of how my mind looked like when it was feeding this way. What would it look like? What kind of animal would it look like? What kind of human being would it look like? Is that what you want to look like?” Try to feed in ways in which you would be proud to have other people see you. Now, this is your source of food. This is how you nourish yourself. And in nourishing yourself in the right way, this is how you find the strength to do good, both for yourself and for others.

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