Food for the Heart

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The Buddha lists four kinds of food for the mind, four kinds of food for consciousness. One of them is physical food. It’s what keeps your consciousness with a body. The other three are mental. There’s contact with the senses. We feed on that. Consciousness itself. You feed off the fact that you are conscious. Then you want to keep on being conscious. That leads to the fourth kind, which is the food of intentions. We feed off our intentions. Good, bad, indifferent, whatever comes up, we gobble them down. That’s the food you have to watch out for. This is why we’re trying to train the mind in concentration. Give it one good thing to think about. And tell yourself for the time being, anything else is off-limits. Of course, once you say that to the mind, it’s going to want to go for the things that are off-limits. Try to find ways of strengthening your intention to stay here. That’s why we work with the breath. Try to use different perceptions of how the breath runs through the body and see which perceptions give rise to a sense of ease. Sometimes your body feels like a mass of rubber bands. Okay, hold the perception in mind of having a knife. Wherever there’s a line of tension from one part of the body to another, just cut it. Cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. Anything that forms, just keep on cutting. Any thoughts that come up, just cut through them. See if that perception helps. The question is, what are you going to be feeding on? Then we’re holding on to that one intention that you really do want to train the mind. We talk about the committee of the mind. That’s the member of the committee that you want to have take charge. In the beginning, it’s like a newcomer. You move into a town, you don’t know anybody. You don’t know who’s skillful, who’s not, who’s tricky, who’s not. And so you’re going to be making alliances with some committee members that turn out to be disappointing. But you have to have the attitude that you can keep on learning. This is one of the aspects of the mind, that consciousness that always finds something to feed on, keeps on going, going, going. We think about it, the Buddha says, we’ve been going through countless aeons. An aeon is the lifespan of a universe, like the universe we’re in right now. Its lifespan is one aeon. And he said, people who can remember back 40 aeons have a short memory. So it’s been a long time. We keep on going, going, going. And you ask, “Dad, ask yourself, where are you going?” Because all too often we just focus on, where do I want to go right now, right now, right now. And you don’t think in the long term. This is one of the paradoxes of the practice, that so much emphasis is placed on being in the present moment. The fact that you could die at any time, so you’ve got to do the work right now. But you also have to prepare for the future. Which means, of course, that dying doesn’t cut off the future. So you focus on developing the qualities that are good right now, and will be good on into the future. Even if you die. You have to ask yourself, what are you training yourself in? Sometimes we train ourselves in greed, aversion, and delusion. We don’t think of it as a training. But every time we go for those things, we’re strengthening them. And they’re pretty blind. Stop and take stock. Where do you really want to go? Do you want to go to happiness? Well, the Buddha lays it out, what you have to do. And you have to trust him. There’s a saying that you hear often in the forest tradition, that you can actually trust the Buddha more than you can trust yourself. Because the Buddha saw things in the long term. So what really leads to true happiness? And we tend to have very short-sighted minds. So give him the benefit of the doubt. Lots of other people have done that. And they’ve come back saying, yep, he’s really worthwhile. It’s really worthwhile following him, trusting him. Of course, he doesn’t say you should blindly trust him. Give his teachings a try. Work on your virtue. Work on your generosity. Really basic things. Because they provide you with the food for your concentration. Remember, the intentions are the food. And so you want to develop good intentions. You want to be generous. It’s a good intention to be virtuous. And when you’re feeding off of good intentions, it’s a lot easier to look at the intentions that come springing up in the mind that are not so good. Realize that you don’t have to be defined by them. They’re there. And you’ve probably identified with them many, many times in the past. But you don’t have to. Think of yourself as being free to choose your identity inside. And even though that new identity may seem weak, you can strengthen it to keep feeding it, feeding it with more generosity, more virtue, more mindfulness. So eventually your intentions do become firm. That’s the Thai way of translating samadhi, what we translate as concentration. We translate it as tang chai man, which means your intent is firm. So if you’re having trouble keeping with your concentration object, go back and look at the other foods that would lead you there. Being generous, being virtuous, being mindful. Feeding off the intent to want to develop the right view. Your views may be shaky right now. But wouldn’t you want to take as your working hypothesis something that has worked for many, many, many people? So do your best to figure out what right view is and apply it. And if it doesn’t get applied well, figure out what went wrong. There’s a certain resilience that the Buddha wants you to develop as a practitioner. When things don’t work, you don’t let yourself get discouraged. Well, look at him. He tried everything. The only path of practice he didn’t seem to have tried was one that says, “Well, your actions don’t mean anything.” Of course, that’s not a path of practice that you can follow and test. Because the idea that you could test your path of practice would mean that your actions have to mean something. But he talks about all the different austerities he went through in his previous lifetimes. And, of course, the six years of self-torment that he went through in this lifetime after having developed formless states of concentration and realized they didn’t work. And now he realized that even the torture, self-torture, didn’t work. A lot of people would have despaired at that point. So when you contemplate the Buddha, that’s one thing to think about. He didn’t despair, no matter how bleak things may have seemed. And whatever pride kept him going in his austerities, he was able to give that up, too. Because think about it. As he mentioned, he didn’t see anybody who had been as austere in his austerities as he had been. So just that reflection contains an element of pride. But he said, “But this is worthless. Why be proud about doing something that’s worthless?” So he dropped that. And in dropping his pride, he was able to think of a time when he’d gotten into righted concentration when he was young, spontaneously. And he asked himself, “Could that be the path?” Well, it could. Why was he afraid of it? Was there anything blameworthy about it? So he was willing to go back and start eating food again. And the few people who had been with him, imagine he’s alone on his practice, but just a few people to support him, and even they abandoned him. So that must have been pretty bleak as well. All alone, totally alone. But he found that within him, there was the strength to keep on going. So when you think about his life, that’s one thing you want to think about. As he said, he developed his path, he found the path to awakening through developing qualities that we all have in potential form. Resolution, ardency, hatefulness. Even when he hit rock bottom, he was resolved not to give in. So you want to have that same kind of determination. This is what it means when we talk about recollecting the Buddha. Thinking about the lessons we can learn from his life, and not see him as superhuman. He was, after all, a human being. But he showed what human beings can do. You might say, well he was a very special human being, which is true, but he made himself special. And we can make ourselves special as well. Just try to think in these terms. We live in a world where most people have forgotten the Buddha, or he represents something, who knows what. But if you really read about his life, you see that it really is a challenge. But it’s also a great affirmation. Every time he talked about his path of practice, it was to encourage people that it is possible to do this, no matter how unpromising you may seem to yourself. Everybody has that quality of what we call the luminosity of the mind, which is your ability to step out of your mind-states and see them clearly. And that’s what you need to practice. That’s something within all of us. It may be obscured, it may be weak, but it’s there. He’s not saying that you’re innately pure or innately good, but the mind is innately aware. So if you make that your intention, to make the most of that awareness, that’s good food. And if you find that your concentration is weak, as I said, go back and feed on the food of generosity, feed on the food of virtue. Find your sustenance there. Feed on your recollection of the Buddha. Because his message is probably the most encouraging that you can imagine. It is possible, through your efforts, to put an end to suffering. Here’s so much said about how the Buddha was pessimistic, life was suffering. But what’s pessimistic about a teaching that says, well, one, he didn’t say that life was suffering, he said there is suffering, and he identified what it is. Something you’re doing. But it’s something you don’t have to do. And it’s a path of practice for developing the qualities of mind that change you as you practice. So you become capable of knowing that. That’s the most hopeful of lessons. So feed off of that. Because that’s the kind of food that can make you strong. you

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