Feeding Off of Others

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There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha comes across a woman crying in a cemetery. She’s lost her son. He was still young when he died. And he asked her, “Before he was your son, do you know where he came from?” “He came from you don’t know where.” “Now that he’s gone, where has he gone? You don’t know where.” Just that much shook her. She realized how arbitrary our loves can be. Our connections, our families. We come from who knows where, go who knows where. We have a brief time together. And this is where we try to find our nourishment. It’s an aspect of a relationship we don’t like to think about, but we do internalize the people we love. In other words, we feed on them. They become a part of us. Then it’s all ripped away. And the Buddha talks about the fact that you can’t easily meet someone who hasn’t been your mother, or your father, or your brother, or your sister, or your daughter, or your son, in the long, long time you’ve been wandering on. He’s not saying it to get sentimental about everybody else. He says when you think about this, it’s enough to give you a strong sense of sanghvega and want to find release. And even before we’re separated by death, there are a lot of times when relationships just die. Someone you’ve been feeding off of suddenly doesn’t know how to play by the rules of the game. Because most of our feeding is mutual. You tell your friends, you tell your loved ones, “Essentially, I’ll let you feed off me if you let me feed off you.” As long as everybody feeds politely, we’re okay with the arrangement. But then when somebody doesn’t play along with the rules of the game, that’s when you realize how much, one, you’ve been depending on feeding off of them, and two, how miserable it is to be fed off of. So we can’t escape. That’s why the Buddha said, “Suffering is in the feeding.” His word for clinging, the definition of suffering, upadana, also means to take sustenance, i.e. to feed. And when we’re feeding off of somebody else, are we really feeding off of them, or are we feeding off of our ideas of them? When you desire somebody, the Buddha says, “Is the desire focused?” On their body, on your feelings about the person, on your perceptions about the person, on your thought constructs? Are your desires focused on simply the desire to crave? Will you talk to yourself about someone else? Our relationships are very strange. We feed off of other people, and yet there’s a separation. There’s a famous German philosopher who once said that the world is made up of monads. By that he meant these little beings that really know nobody else but themselves. They have their own inner world, and nobody else can know anybody else’s inner world. And these are the people that we’re trying to find sustenance from. Think about it. Your breath that you’re focusing on right now, can anybody else feel the breath the way you feel it? The person sitting next to you may hear you breathing, but that’s about it. Of course, if it’s really loud, you should tone it down a bit. But your sense of the breath is yours. Your sense of the body as you feel it from within is yours. Your sense of how you feel your own mind is yours. There’s a wall between you and other people, even people very close to you. You can’t really sense them from the inside. So when we’re feeding off of other people, a lot of times we’re feeding off of our imagination about them, our thoughts about them, our feelings, our perceptions. And so no wonder it’s a very unstable situation. This is why the Buddha said you need to find better things to feed on. He offers you the path. There’s a social aspect of the path as you practice generosity and as you observe the precepts, in which you will be feeding off of your interactions with other people. You’re doing it, though, in a very skillful way. When you get to the meditation, it’s purely an internal affair. There will be influences that come out from your meditation. As you become a more stable person, other people around you will appreciate that. But by and large, it’s you dealing with yourself inside. If you’re not able to do this, remember the Buddha’s other image, talking about how all the water in the oceans is less than the amount of tears that you’ve shed over a separation. Even the best relationships have to end. And then we go our separate ways, not knowing who’s going where. And it’s that where you want to find your sustenance, in that ocean of tears. The Buddha offers you another ocean there. He says that when you gain awakening, you end your hunger, not because you’ve suppressed it, not because you’ve denied it, but because you’ve found something so totally satisfactory that you have no need for anything else, no need further to feed. A person like that, he says, is totally undefined, cannot be measured in the same way that the ocean can’t be measured. And that’s total freedom. That may sound lonely to us. Especially if we’re used to finding our most satisfying food in relationships. But then when you realize that relationships are so arbitrary and so ephemeral, you walk down the street, you walk past someone who may have been your mother in a previous lifetime, and there’s no interaction at all. You get a strong sense of how unpredictable the whole thing is. How insubstantial it is. And so when the Buddha talks about nibbana, we have to give him the benefit of the doubt. The Jamma Habba talks about this. He says if people who’ve experienced nibbana could take it out and show it to everybody else, nobody would want anything else. Every other market in the world would go empty. But unfortunately those who have attained nibbana can’t show it. But they all say with the same voice that this is the ultimate happiness. And it’s totally satisfactory. Nothing is lacking. So try to take the Buddha at his word. And when you realize that there is the possibility of this happiness, then the fact that our relationships with one another come and go, and so easily, doesn’t weigh so heavily on the mind, or on the heart. This is what we are training here. Both heart and mind. In Pali the word citta covers both. It’s going to get your head around the idea that dispassion, really is a good thing. Get your heart around the idea that dispassion is a good thing. And you’ll be heading in the right direction.

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