

## *Food for the Mind*

*January 2001*

One of the reasons we practice concentration is to make sure that the mind is well-fed, that it has the strength it needs to deal with things.

And that it's also in the proper mood for dealing with things. In other words, if we take on lots of issues in life, after a while the mind gets frazzled. It's responsible for this, responsible for that, does this, does that. It just wears itself out. So when the time comes to deal with the really important things, we find that we don't have the strength.

The really big important issues in life—what we're going to do with our lives, where we're going to find true happiness: We often find ourselves unable even to think through the issues, much less deal with them properly.

So when we concentrate the mind on the breath, we want to do it in such a way that the mind gets nourished, that it gains strength from being focused here and is in the proper mood for dealing with the issues that are going to come up.

Because many of the issues are things we'd rather not deal with. Many of the lessons we learn about ourselves in the course of the practice are things we'd rather not admit. So it's good to have the mind well-fed, well-rested when these issues come up.

It's like criticizing another person. You don't want to go criticize that person when they're hungry or tired or have to go to the bathroom or something like that. You want to wait until they're well-fed and in a good mood. Then you can broach almost any kind of topic.

It's the same with the mind. A lot of the things we're going to learn about ourselves in the course of the meditation, the things that discernment is going to dig up, are things we've kept hidden from ourselves because we don't like to look at them. But as we meditate, we've got to look right into them. If the mind is honest with itself, if it's truthful to itself, it's going to be coming up with issues that were stashed away, sometimes a long time ago. If the mind feels well-fed, well-rested, it'll be in the right mood for dealing with these things, for admitting its own foolishness, its own stupidity, its own dishonesty in the past.

That's another reason why it's so important that the mind gets nourished from the practice of concentration.

The Buddha actually talks about five qualities of mind that nourish its strength.

First is conviction in the principle of karma—in other words, that what you

do is going to bear results determined by the quality of the intention behind your actions.

Then there's persistence. You stick with that conviction. You realize that the law of karma is not something that operates like traffic laws, say, only on Thursday afternoons or only on Saturday afternoons, on one side of the street. It's everywhere, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. So you stick with that conviction at all times.

And in doing so, you find that you have to become very mindful, very clear about not only your actions but also the intentions behind your actions.

In order to see those intentions clearly, the mind has to be very still. This is where concentration practice comes in. And when concentration is strong, discernment develops.

When discernment is strong, the mind is released.

So these five qualities—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—are the qualities that give strength to the mind.

And in particular concentration. There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the mind feeding on the rapture of *jhāna*, or of *jhāna* as being provisions for the mind, food for the mind. So this is what we have to work on most directly as we sit here and meditate: getting the mind into a state of good, solid concentration.

The word for *jhāna* is related to a verb, *jhāyati*, which means to burn. There are lots of different words for burning in the Pali Canon. And this particular one is the one they use for the burning of an oil lamp—the kind of burning that gives rise to a clear, steady flame. And that's the quality we're working on with our concentration: steadiness.

When you start a fire, you have to start small. So you choose one spot in the body and protect that spot. Ajaan Fuang always used the Thai word, *prakhawng*, which means to look after something, to nurture it along a little bit, to protect it at the same time, in the same way that you'd hover around a child as the child is learning to walk.

So you protect this little spot that you've chosen, wherever it is that the breath is most obvious, where it's easiest to stay focused on the breath. You focus just on that one spot there and try to make it as steady as possible. Protect it from outside winds and breezes and drafts that come along. In other words, whatever thoughts that come along that might blow the mind away from that spot, you try to protect yourself right there.

And you realize that, of course, if the mind needs nourishment, it's weak. That's why you start out with something small. You can't tackle something really

big all at once. So as you focus on that one small spot, try to keep it as steady as possible. As Ajaan Lee said in one of his talks, big things start from small things. So you focus on one spot to begin with. Once that spot is steady, then you try to take that quality of steadiness and let it flow throughout the body.

In the beginning, it'll flow only through some spots in the body. Well, that's okay. Just notice where it seems to flow, where it seems to connect up with similar sensations in different parts of the body. Then keep your awareness still with those areas and you'll begin to find that they start growing and connecting even further. In this way, that one little spot that you started out with eventually comes to fill the body. Now, it may have to detour around a pain here or a little something there, but that's okay. Just stay with what you've got. And you find that the mind, once it has a nice, steady sensation like this, a broadened sensation like this, begins to feed on it and gain nourishment from it.

Again, it's like eating a meal. You can't say after one mouthful, "Okay, enough. Let's move on to something else." You have to let the mind feed and feed and feed until it's had enough of its own. You can't make up your mind beforehand when that's going to be enough.

Because sometimes the mind is really tired. It takes days of feeding for it to get back its strength, especially if it's been away from concentration practice for a while. But then you begin to find, as you get more and more consistent in your practice, that the mind needs less and less and less of this feeding. And it starts getting more subtle in its feeding habits. In other words, the state of concentration begins to develop.

But what's important is that you make sure you don't skip over the steps too fast. Because we're looking after the needs of the mind. It's like we're healing the mind, nourishing the mind. You have to give the mind what nourishment it needs. So you try not to take on too much at once. Just start small and then let it grow naturally. But be very protective of whatever sense of steadiness, whatever sense of stillness you can develop.

One of the chants that we chant regularly speaks of having respect for concentration. That's precisely what it means right here. Realize that it's important to have this source of food for the mind. Because if the mind doesn't have this source of food, it's going to go out feeding other places. And its tendency is to go feeding on junk food, which may fill it up a little bit but only for a little short time. You begin to realize it's not really nourished. It's just like going through the motions of eating and digesting, but the body doesn't gain anything from it.

So have a sense of the importance of this little tiny spot that you start out with

—this one spot in the body where you can focus on the breath, notice the breath coming in, going out. It feels good and you can begin to stay steadily there. Look after that. Treat it with respect. Protect it.

Because it's from little things like this that big things grow. That way, the mind will gain the nourishment it needs to tackle bigger and bigger and more important objects, more important issues.

But for the time being, this is what it needs. So give it the food, give it the nourishment it needs.

Learn to treat it with respect.