

## *The Food of Feelings*

*October 1, 2005*

They've said that when people remember their previous lifetimes, they tend to focus on two things: the food they ate, and their experience of pleasure and pain. And when you think about it, that's how many of us identify ourselves in our present lifetimes. You don't have to look back to past lifetimes. What we eat, what we feel: Those, for most of us, are the raw data of our experience, the things we identify with most closely—especially in our mass-produced society, where so much of what we might take as being us or ours is forced on us: Our food has all kinds of chemical additives. Our thoughts are preprocessed for us. But no matter how much our feelings may be manipulated by the media, we still really have a strong sense that our feelings are what we really feel. They're who we really are.

Yet when you look at the Buddha's analysis of how we actually relate to our feelings, the things from which we fashion our sense of ourselves, and the word clinging, here, it's interesting to note that the word *clinging* also means *taking sustenance*. Our feelings are our food: the food for our minds. If you look at the different feelings that go through you in the course of the day, you realize that a lot of them are toxic. If you feed on them, it'll be toxic for the mind. Feelings of sadness, feelings of depression, feelings of anger, discouragement: All these things can really weaken the mind if you feed on them.

That's why a large part of the practice is giving us other food, better things to feel on. Conviction can be food for the mind, as can persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. It may seem artificial to create these things, but the Buddha's analysis of feeling shows that it's pretty artificial, too—the belief that our feelings are the raw data of experience, the raw data of who we are. In the final analysis, the Buddha said there are potentials for feelings that come from past actions, but even our feelings are manufactured in the present moment. Our choice of what to focus on, our putting this together with that, the way we play connect-the-dots with our experience: They may be just isolated dots, but we can quickly turn them into a swan or duck or a cloud. Things pleasant or unpleasant. All of that is a product of our own fabrication in the present moment.

So as long as we're fabricating things in the present, we might as well learn how to do it skillfully. That, in particular, is what the practice of concentration is about. In the various analogies given in the Canon for the different aspects of the path, concentration often shows up in the role of food. Good food at that. Sugar, honey, molasses, butter: things that taste good and are good for you.

So this is one of the things we have to work on to feed ourselves well: constructing this path in our mind. How do you construct the path? Find a good feeling. Someplace in the body there has to be a pleasant feeling that can be associated with the breath. It may not seem like much to begin with, but find something that at least feels fairly pleasant, or relatively pleasant, compared to the rest of the body, and then focus there. Focus in such way that you don't destroy the feeling but instead you actually protect it. Then regulate your breathing to continue protecting that feeling. Stay with it, for this is your ticket out of here.

And learn how to have some patience with it. It's going to take a while for this feeling to develop into something more intense, more pleasurable, more lasting.

Fabricating it is a skill. Think back on any of the skills you've ever developed in your life and you realize the really important ones are those that take time and require your ability to just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. They require your ability to push aside any thoughts of doubt or discouragement or frustration or self-recrimination. Thoughts like that don't serve any useful purpose, so don't feed on them. Try to feed on thoughts of encouragement. You've got all the raw materials that you need here for the path. It's simply a matter of putting them together and sticking with it.

As in any course of training, you have to be careful about what you feed on. Athletes, when they're preparing for a game, have to be careful to focus on certain foods and avoid other ones. In the case of our training here, any food that distracts you on the path, any food that saps your energy, you've just got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it. Take whatever sense of ease and well-being that you can muster in the path, and feed on that instead.

Just because a feeling comes up doesn't mean that you have to feed on it, that you have to take it as you or yours. This principle goes so much against the grain that you have to keep repeating it to yourself again and again and again: No matter how intense or real the feeling may seem, remember that it's fabricated. Sometimes it's the remnants of past actions. Sometimes it's something you put together through old bad habits in the present. But just because a feeling is strong or intense or seems to last doesn't mean that it's real. It's just as fabricated as anything else you experience.

So stick with this principle of fabricating what you know is good for you. Feed on what you know is good for you. The more nourishment you get in this way, then the easier it is to drop all the junk food you've been feeding on.

So develop a friendly and nourishing attitude toward the breath. If you've ever had a vegetable garden, ever had a farm, you know how the principle works. You look after the feeding of your crops, and then you can eat your crops. If you don't

feed them well, then you won't be able to feed on them. So whatever sense of refreshment and nourishing you can get from the breath, water it, fertilize it, look after it, pick away all the bugs, and you'll find that over time it gives you more than enough nourishment. You start looking back on your old feeding habits and you realize how harmful they were. The kind of food you used like—it's like remembering back to when you were a little kid, and you liked Twinkies and Hostess cupcakes and Oreo cookies—all that kind of disgusting stuff. Now you've got better food to feed on. You've got a better idea of what kind of nourishment you really want, and it really does nourish the mind. You get more and more resilience toward whatever waves of emotion or feeling may wash over you.

In this way, this habit we have of feeding on things can actually get turned to good use. Eventually, you build up enough strength in the mind so that you don't have to feed ever again.

That's where the mind is different from the body. With the body, no matter how good the food is, eventually there's going to be aging, illness, and death. As our chant says, these things are unavoidable. But food for the mind doesn't operate on that principle. If you can get the food concocted just right, you can bring the mind to a level of strength where it doesn't turn back. It doesn't need to be fed anymore. That's when it can stop clinging. That's when there's an end for suffering.

So feed your breath well. And in turn, it'll give you something genuinely good to feed on.