

Beyond Inter-eating

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There's a series of questions called the Novice's Questions. Apparently they were meant to be a short list of teachings that young novices would study to get the basic ideas of the teaching down. And they'd go in a list like this: What is one? What is two? What is three? What is four? All the way up to ten. And the most interesting question is, What is one?

That's because the answer is: All beings subsist on food. This fact is "one" in the sense that it's something we all have in common—although "food" here doesn't mean just physical food. There's also the food of sensory contact, the food of intention, and the food of consciousness. Our mind feeds on these things.

The question, "What is one?" is the way the Buddha introduces the topic of causality—and it's obvious that subsisting on food is not a positive image for causality. The Buddha's not the sort of person to celebrate interconnectedness, because inter-being is inter-eating. We feed on one another, and it's painful for both sides: obviously for anybody who's being fed on, but even for the person who's feeding. Just the fact that you're dependent on taking these things in all the time is a hardship.

And further, the Buddha says to look closely at the things you're feeding on. What are they like?

When you're feeding on physical food you're feeding on the suffering of others. Even if you're vegetarian, you're feeding off of the sweat of the brow of the people who have to work to get that food eventually to your plate.

The food of sensory contact, he says, is like a constant barrage of insects on the flesh of a flayed cow being subjected to insects. Our sense organs are subject to a constant barrage of little tiny impulses here and there that have an impact on the mind. Sensory consciousness, he says, is like being stabbed with hundreds of spears in the course of the day. And the food of intention is like a pit of burning embers.

None of these are pleasant images, and they drive home the Buddha's point that having to depend on anything in a causal relationship entails

suffering—because causes are undependable, so there's no place in a causal network where the mind can find genuine rest.

This is why the Buddha looked for a happiness that didn't depend on causal factors, that didn't have to feed, something that was totally independent. That was his goal. If you take your own happiness seriously, you realize that this is the kind of happiness you want for yourself as well: a happiness that doesn't cause any harm to anyone, that isn't hounded by the instability of constantly having to feed.

Back prior to the Buddha's time, the sages of India were looking for infinite sources of food. It's interesting to reflect that the main image for their speculations was the image of feeding. In Western philosophy, our main image for speculation is the act of looking. Given all the machinations the brain has to go through to make sense out of the fleeting images that we receive through the eyes, the big question of Western philosophy is how you check the world that you construct out of those images to see if it corresponds to the actual world out there.

In India though, the basic issue was, given that survival your survival as a being requires having to feed, how can you make sure that you feed well, not only in this life, but also into the next life? How can you make sure that there's going to be an infinite, unending source of food? That was the main theme of their speculations.

But the Buddha said that that was futile. There's no such thing as infinite food. There's no guarantee for your food source. The only secure happiness would be a happiness that doesn't need to feed. Now, he realized in the course of his own quest that you can't say, "Well, I'm just not going to feed any more, and that'll be the end of it." He tried going without physical food, but devas came to him and said, "No, if you try that then we'll infuse divine food into your pores." The Buddha felt that that would be dishonest: claiming not to feed and yet getting secret food from the devas. So he tried to subsist on just the least amount of food possible. He starved himself to the point where every time he went out to defecate or urinate he would fall over in a faint.

Ultimately, he realized that that didn't accomplish anything. And when he realized that the path to the end of suffering required that he practice jhana, and that doing jhana required a stronger body, he began eating in moderation again.

So the practice does require food. Not just food for the body, but also food for the mind. And there are two kinds of mental food that the Buddha says are necessary for the path.

The first is the food of what he calls appropriate attention, devoted to trying to develop good qualities in the mind, such as the factors for awakening: mindfulness, the ability to analyze things, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. These require the food of appropriate attention, which means looking at things in line with such questions as, “What’s skillful? What’s unskillful? What, when I do it will lead to long-term harm? What, when I do it will lead to long-term happiness?”

You look at your actions, you look at your words, you look at your thoughts in this light. And if there’s anything coming up and creating a barrier for the mind, you learn to look at that with appropriate attention as well, so that you starve the barriers—the hindrances—and you feed the good qualities of the mind.

Once you’ve got those good qualities going, and the mind is in a good state of concentration, that concentration becomes your second kind of food. The Buddha compares the different levels of jhana to different types of food, all the way through the fourth jhana, which he says is like honey, oil, ghee, sugar. These things nourish the mind.

In other words, even though we’re trying to get beyond causality to a happiness that doesn’t require conditions, we have to use conditions in our practice. Even though we’re trying to bring the mind to a level where it doesn’t need to feed, we have to look at some aspects of the practice as food for the mind.

So it’s important that you look at how you feed your mind from day to day. When your attention slips, where does the mind go off to feed? Where are its typical feeding places? If you could take a picture of your mind, where would you find it sneaking off to feed? Into a kitchen pantry? Into a garbage pail? And ask yourself, are you getting good nourishment from that food? Because a lot of the food for the mind is like junk food. You eat and eat and eat, and it gives a little bit of nourishment and a little bit of pleasure, but it doesn’t really satisfy. And so you eat and eat and eat some more. It’s like those potato chips that they used to advertise saying, “I bet you can’t eat just one.”

Try to look instead for ways of feeding the mind to develop good qualities, what they call the five strengths: the strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the qualities that strengthen the mind. In other words, they provide strength and they are strengths in themselves.

Conviction is conviction in the principle that the Buddha really was awakened. And one of the major things he woke to was the principle of action, kamma: that our lives are shaped by our actions. Our happiness, our pains, are shaped by our actions, the intentions on which we act.

Having conviction in that fact is a very strengthening thing. On the one hand, it empowers you. You see that you really can shape your life. There may be obstacles that you have to overcome, but if you stick with this path long enough—the path of skillful action—you will find good results coming. This is encouraging. It helps overcome apathy. It helps to overcome hopelessness. And it focuses your attention on the right place: that regardless of the conditions of your life, if you focus on acting skillfully, things are going to improve.

But conviction also strengthens you in the sense that it alerts you to the fact that there's a danger here as well. If you look at your intentions in your untrained mind, then you realize how precarious a thing it is—depending for your happiness on your own actions.

This is why you really have to be persistent in sticking with this program of trying to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones, like we're doing right here. Your mind has a whole hour to sit here and fantasize about anything you like. You can dig up things from the past, plan for the future, or just entertain yourself in various ways. But then ask yourself: Is that a skillful use of your time? You've entertained yourself many times before. You've dug up the past many times before. You've planned for the future many times before. Does it strengthen the mind? How about being really persistent in developing mindfulness and alertness instead? In other words, how about keeping the breath in mind and watching to make sure the mind stays with the breath, watching the breath to see what kind of breath is easiest for the mind to stay with. After all, as the Buddha said, this path is something that leads us to something we've never before known, never before seen, never before

realized. Which means you're going to have to do things you've never done before.

So put some effort into sticking with the breath. And as soon as you realize you've slipped off, put some effort into coming right back. This doesn't mean you have to strain, but you do have to be meticulous and strict with the mind. As soon as you sense that it's going to wander off, bring it right back. When it's off again, bring it back again. Each time it comes back, try to reward it. What kind of breathing would feel really good this time as you come back to the breath? And then with the second breath, what breath would feel better? Or is there some part of the body that's not being nourished by the breath? Could you breathe in that part of the body? Keep moving around, noticing the parts of the body that seem undernourished, that seem to lack energy, and give them a little dose of energy with the breath. Then if they seem to want more, give them another dose.

As you keep with this, the mindfulness turns into concentration. The Buddha never drew a sharp line between mindfulness meditation and concentration meditation. Mindfulness is the theme, the basic quality that helps you stay with something. And as it becomes firm, it turns into concentration, where the mind is centered but has a broad awareness that fills the whole body.

And it's there in concentration that you can develop discernment. You can start seeing the way in which the mind feeds on unskillful things and you learn to teach yourself the drawbacks of those things. The quality you're trying to develop, the Buddha calls *nibbida*. Sometimes *nibbida* is translated as disenchantment, sometimes as revulsion, but it's basically the word we use for when you've had enough of a certain kind of food. I mean really enough—not just a sense of being full, but you've got to the point where the whole idea of eating that particular kind of food no longer appeals to you at all. You've had enough.

At first, you start your analysis with pleasures that you used to enjoy. You compare them to the pleasure that comes from concentration and you see that those old pleasures just don't measure up. They lack, for lack of a better word, the nobility of the pleasure that comes from concentration, the dignity that comes as you find a pleasure that's totally harmless, that's based on restraint.

As you get more and more accomplished at feeding the mind in this way, there will come a point when, after you've taken care of all the other old ways of feeding, you turn and look at the food you're getting from the concentration. You realize that the concentration is made up of aggregates. The Pali word for aggregate, *khandha*, can also mean masses: just masses of form, masses of feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and sensory consciousness. You've taken these aggregates and you've turned them into your path. Even so there's still a little bit of clinging there. And the clinging also relates to feeding. It's the act of taking sustenance on these things. You've brought the mind to the most refined form of sustenance, the noblest form of sustenance you can take from the aggregates, but there's still clinging, so there's still a subtle level of stress and suffering.

There will come a point there you realize that there are still drawbacks here, because again you have to keep feeding. You can't simply fix the concentration once and feed off it forever. You have to keep fixing it.

This is where the Buddha encourages you to develop all-around disenchantment. Once the mind is strong enough from feeding off the path, it approaches the point where it doesn't need to feed any more. But part of the mind resists the idea of not feeding. You've got to learn how to overcome this last habitual remnant, that habit that you've been indulging in for who knows how long.

So as the Buddha said, once you're accomplished at the concentration, you begin to view it as aggregates, and you view those aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, something alien, something empty, not self—whichever perception helps to strengthen a sense of disenchantment. That's ultimately what will bring the mind to a point where it no longer needs to feed. It drops its old feeding habits. And it finds the happiness that doesn't need to depend of conditions, that doesn't need to feed on anything at all.

For most of us, it sounds a bit scary because we're so used to feeding. It's hard to imagine what it would be like, not to feed. A better way to think of it would be, not *needing* to feed. One of the best analogies I can think of is this: Say that you wanted to wander through the wilderness, but you're limited by the fact that you have to carry your food. The

more food you carry, the heavier it is, and the harder it will be to get to all the places you want to see. The less food you carry, the less time you'll have to be in the wilderness. But suppose you didn't have to feed on anything. You could wander to your heart's content.

The Buddha has a similar image. He says the range of those who have totally comprehended food—which means that they've gone to the point where they no longer need food of any kind for their happiness at all—leave no path. You can't trace their path. As the Buddha says, their path is like that of the feet of birds flying through the sky. Their feet leave no traces at all. That's total freedom.

So this is the direction to which the practice leads. It doesn't aim at interconnectedness, because interconnectedness is unstable and inherently painful: a constant process of inter-feeding.

Instead, the practice leads to freedom. This freedom is more radical than anything we can imagine, but it can be attained. This path we're following as we're sitting here meditating right now: This is a part of the strategy to get there. It employs feeding, for getting your ultimate state where you're so strong you can put all food aside.