

## *Chewed Up by Your Food*

*October 9, 2010*

I read a story recently about a Siberian tiger that had gone out in search of a poacher. The poacher was found really badly mangled, and the forensic people went in to check out the case. They had to come to the conclusion that the tiger was actually stalking the poacher. Apparently the poacher had wounded that tiger several months before, and now the tiger had come back to get its revenge.

It's a good cautionary tale. Many times the things that we hope to feed off of end up feeding off of us. The places where we look for our happiness or nourishment tend to chew us up.

The Buddha says as much. He talks about how suffering boils down to the five clinging-aggregates. You've got the form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, fabrications and consciousness clinging-aggregates. And the word for "clinging," *upadana*, can also mean sustenance. We try to feed off of these things. Particularly, we try to feed off the pleasure that these things have to offer. We look for pleasure in physical things, we look for pleasant feelings, pleasant perceptions, pleasant things to think about, or pleasant ways of thinking, pleasant things to be conscious of. That's where the mind looks for its sustenance. But the Buddha also has us reflect on the fact that we get chewed up by form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. So the places where we hope to feed end up chewing us up and spitting us out.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, think about a sensual pleasure you had last week: Where is it now? It's gone. And the memory of pleasure is not necessarily a pleasant memory. Sometimes all you can think about is that you're not going to get that pleasure back. Or you might start thinking about the things you did in order to get that pleasure, which were not necessarily skillful. That can eat at you. And our thoughts, as we've seen many times, can eat us up. Especially when we think about the stupid and thoughtless things we've done in the past, or ways in which we've suffered in the past.

And it's funny how the mind can feed off of these things, even though they're unpleasant. Yet it goes back to them. It gets some miserable pleasure out of them, but then it ends up getting eaten up by these things as well. It's like eating infected food. You swallow it down, but then you're swallowing down the germs in the food, and they start eating away at your gut.

So what do you do? One: You've got to learn how to eat uninfected things. Give the mind better nourishment—at the very least, the kind of nourishment

that's not going to eat away at you. This is what the path is all about, because when we're practicing the path, we're taking those aggregates and relating to them in a new way. We're using them as a path. We still feed off of them, but we try to feed off of nourishing forms, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. We focus on the breath: That's form. We focus on the sensations of the body: That's form. We try to work the breath through the body so it gives rise to pleasant feelings: That's feeling. We have to hold the perception of breath and body and mind, because otherwise the mind will wander off into other worlds. You need to use perceptions to be mindful, to stay with the breath, to keep remembering it, so that you don't lose your frame of reference.

There's a very close connection between mindfulness and perception. You have to keep remembering, you have to stay with body, body, body, or breath, breath, breath. And as it turns out, perception is related not just to mindfulness, but also to concentration. You hold one perception in mind. Here again, it's the perception of breath. At the same time, you're conscious of all these things.

So you're taking the aggregates and you're putting them together in a way that makes them healthy. They turn into health food—the kind of food that doesn't turn around and try to feed off of you or chew you up, that actually strengthens you.

When the mind is concentrated, it settles down with the perception of breath, and you start thinking about the breath energy, and realize it goes throughout the whole body. As you breathe in and breathe out, the breath sensations can be detected anywhere in the body, if you're really sensitive. The breath energy permeates throughout the body, and you want to take that as a basis for allowing the pleasure that comes when the mind begins to settle down to spread smoothly, so that you're not squeezing, or pulling, or pushing on the different sensations in the body, just allowing them to be. Let them develop a sense of fullness.

That pleasure is nourishing. It's not like the pleasure of sensuality, which, as they say in Thai, may be good for your mouth but bad for your stomach. The pleasure of form in concentration is a kind of food that is nourishing all the way through. So you've got the form and the feeling together with perception.

And then there's the fabrication, which thinks about the breath, works with the breath, evaluates the breathing, how well the pleasure is going, evaluates the point where the pleasure is full enough, so you don't have to evaluate much anymore, but just keep focusing on the breath sensations, and staying there with this expanded sense of awareness.

It's when you're nourishing the body with good breath sensations, and you're nourishing the mind by allowing it to settle down and expand, so it's not forced to

run around worrying about this, and finagling that, that the mind can do what it does best: simply be aware. This is a good food for the body, good food for the mind. It's nourishment.

The Buddha often compares this to medicine, in the same way that good food can be medicinal, good for your health. This kind of pleasure, this kind of nourishment, really does strengthen you. Sensual pleasure actually makes you weak, because the mind keeps looking for things to be a certain way, and gets upset when they're not that way, and develops all kinds of bad habits around its desire for pleasure. But if you develop the mindfulness, the alertness, the ability to direct your thoughts in the right direction, evaluate things in the right way, you develop the skills that are useful for finding a sense of well-being, finding nourishment even in difficult situations. And that's strength right there: the ability to be independent, so that things outside don't have to be a certain way for there to be a sense of well-being in the mind.

This is how this good food develops the strengths of the mind: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. This way, the mind, more and more, can stand on its own two feet. And unlike the body, the mind—when it feeds off mental food, off the food of the path—eventually reaches the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. With the body, you always need to keep it well fed. But the mind can reach the point where it grows independent of food. It's like the arahant whose path can't be traced. As long as the mind is looking for food, you can trace its path as it goes checking its a trap lines. But when it no longer needs to feed, it's like the path of birds through space: It can't be traced. It's not feeding off of anyone, and nobody is feeding off of it. That's when the mind is really free.

It's hard to imagine because we're so used to feeding off of physical food and mental food. But it's good to open your mind every now and then to think about these possibilities. Because the more you're open to the idea, the more likely that the possibility really will become an actuality for you.

So always keep in mind it is possible to become totally free. This is the Buddha's guarantee, the guarantee of all the noble disciples. And it's up to each of us to test that guarantee for ourselves.