

Feeding on the Breath

July 25, 2012

The mind's basic habit is that it's constantly feeding. Just as the body feeds on physical food, the mind feeds on sensory contact, its awareness of things at the senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas—and its intentions with regard to these things. It's always trying to fix its food. So right now let's fix our food with the breath.

This is good food for the mind. It doesn't give rise to a lot of greed, aversion, or delusion. In fact, as you're feeding here in the present moment, you've got a good reliable source of food here. The mind's in a good position where it can start observing things about itself, all the processes that are going on in this process of feeding. And when you understand the way the mind feeds on the breath, then you can start understanding the way it feeds on other things as well.

So try to breathe in a way that's comfortable, that gives you a sense of well-being, and learn to think about the breath in a way that makes it interesting. Think about the different ways the breath energy can flow through the body and try to observe how the breath is flowing right now. Decide whether it feels good or not. If it doesn't feel good, you can experiment. Fix new food. In other words, breathe in different ways, think about the breath in different ways that help the breath energy to flow more smoothly, so that the body feels energized by the breath, and the mind feels it can settle down with a sense of well-being.

As you do this, you learn many important things about the mind. One is that the mind is not passive. It doesn't just sit there and react only when some impulse comes from outside. The mind is actually actively out there looking for things, looking for something to feed on. And when we don't find anything we like to feed on, we feed on the fact that we're disgruntled, that we're upset.

That way, the mind starts feeding on itself in an unhealthy way. This is why the Buddha recommended as a first step in practicing meditation that you try to develop as much equanimity and patience as you can. As he taught Rahula, try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Make your mind like water. Water can wash away all kinds of disgusting things, but the water doesn't react. Fire can burn disgusting things, wind can blow disgusting things

around, but they don't react. They just do their thing. So this is the attitude you have to take toward things that are not good food for you—and not only unpleasant things. There are a lot of pleasant things out there that are also not good food for you. Just remind yourself: This is no place to eat. This is no place to feed. And don't get worked up over the fact that you can't feed on these things. Give yourself something better to feed on.

Otherwise, when you go into an unpleasant situation, you start feeding on the fact that “This is really unpleasant. I can't eat here. There's no nourishment for the mind, nothing I really enjoy.” And from there, your sense of discontent just spreads out, out, out, to cover all kinds of things that you're displeased about. You start feeding on that sense of displeasure. And although the mind gets a little bit of pleasure out of that kind of feeding, it's not really nourishing.

When you go into an unpleasant place or an unpleasant situation—dealing with unpleasant people or whatever the unpleasant thing may be—remind yourself that you've got a better place to feed inside. You can feed on the breath, you can feed on the sense of well-being you can create in the body. That's much healthier.

As for the things that would pull you away from the breath, try to be like fire toward them. Be like earth toward them. In other words, you know that this is the way the world is, and that it's not food. There's no reason to react. This applies to things that are physically unpleasant and also to words that are unpleasant as well. When people say unpleasant things, remind yourself that that's not food. And it's interesting: Here again, the Buddha has you reflect on the elements of the body. When you have a physical body, these are the kinds of things you're exposed to. You have ears and so there will be pleasant and unpleasant contact at the ears. When you can learn how to depersonalize things this way, it's a lot easier to take them.

That's what he recommends. Someone says something really unpleasant and you can remind yourself: “An unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear.” And leave it just at the ear, where it can fall away. But how many times have we ever thought that way? Usually we're out there feeding on it already, taking it into the mind and chewing on it, and then we're upset that this is miserable food.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like something somebody spit out, and then you pick it up and you chew on it. The fact that it tastes horrible: Whose fault is that? Just leave it at where it was left, at the unpleasant contact. Depersonalize the whole thing because, after all, this is the way things are

in this physical world, this human world that we inhabit. There are going to be unpleasant sounds.

And learn how to fabricate good things to feed on inside instead. This is why the Buddha never taught bare awareness. He taught that the mind is constantly fabricating, so learn how to fabricate good things. The only thing that's not fabricated is nibbana. Until you reach that point in your practice, you're going to be fabricating, so learn how to be conscious of the process and learn how to do it well. And remember that this process of fabrication is very closely related to the process of feeding on all the aggregates from which we make our sense of self. And they are parallel in the process of feeding physically.

Form would be the form of the body and also the form of the food we want for the body.

Feeling would be the feeling of hunger we feel when we lack something, and the feeling of fullness we get when we've eaten our fill.

Perception has to do with our ability to perceive what kind of hunger we have, and then to perceive what out there in the world around us would satisfy that hunger: what's food and what's not food; what's food for this particular hunger or food for some other hunger.

Fabrication is the process by which we go about searching for food, finding it, fixing it, so that we can eat it.

And consciousness is our awareness of all these things.

These are all active processes, and fabrication underlies all of them. It's the mind's desire to feed, feed, feed that keeps us making these things. If we make them in an unskillful way, we're going to suffer. Even if we do them in a skillful way, there's still some stress and suffering, but it's a lot less.

And it can actually provide the path that we want. When we get the mind to settle down, we've got the form of the body. We've got the feeling that comes when we stay with the breath, the feeling of ease, as the mind settles down with the breath, along with the perception of breath that we hold in mind, the mental picture that we have of where the breath flows. Then there's fabrication in the way we adjust the breath, learn about the breath, explore the breath. And then there's the consciousness that's aware of these things. We learn to feed on these things instead of the general garbage that we otherwise tend to feed on outside.

So it's all an active process. When we're on the path, we engage in the process but we try to do it as skillful way as possible. That's how we learn about what the mind is doing. At the same time, we can cut back a lot of

the suffering that we otherwise cause ourselves. Because, as the Buddha pointed out, it's not the bad things out there in the world that make you suffer. It's the way you try to feed on them: That's why you suffer. Even the good things out in the world, when you try to feed on them, make you suffer, too.

The best things to feed on are the factors of the path, as we chanted just now: everything from right view all the way through right concentration. They provide good food for the mind—particularly right concentration. It's a sense of well-being that gives us genuine nourishment.

And as we get the mind to settle down, we learn about the mind. We begin to see its feeding habits a lot more clearly.

So start looking at the breath as your food, in the well-being, in the fullness you create inside. It's food for the mind that you can provide for yourself at any time. That way, when you live in situations where there's no really good food around you, you don't have to starve. And you don't have to start feeding on unskillful thoughts inside. You carry this sense of well-being into every situation with you and you've got all the good food you need.