

## *Food Insecurity*

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When the Buddha says that suffering is clinging, he's basically saying that suffering is feeding. Now, for a lot of people that's very counterintuitive. They would agree that if you're being fed upon—in other words, if you're the food—there would be suffering. But for a lot of us, feeding is the big pleasure in life. They say that people in concentration camps and prisoner of war camps get tired of talking about sex very quickly, but they can talk about food all the time. It gives them what little pleasure they can find.

But when you get in a situation where there's a lot of food insecurity, you begin to realize this: Having to feed is a really precarious place to be. This need to feed is what keeps the mind anxious: Where is the next meal coming from? Is it safe? Can you guarantee there's going to be food? As long as you feel secure about the answer, the mind is at ease. When you begin to realize that it's very tenuous, this network of systems that have to work in order to keep us fed, then you see the mind casting around, and as long as there's the possibility for some other source of food, it's going to keep on casting around. Even when we have food security in terms of physical food, we have lots of food insecurity about mental food.

Think of all the different kinds of clinging. There's clinging to sensuality; clinging to views, usually about the world; clinging to ideas about how things should be done; and clinging to your sense of self. These are the things we feed on, and from this feeding we create our states of becoming: the worlds of experience in which we move, where we're going to find our food, and our sense of what has to be done within those worlds, what opportunities they open, what opportunities they close. As the Buddha pointed out, once you get to this stage in dependent co-arising, you're suffering because it's such a precarious place to be.

So you have to get the mind more and more interested in finding the way out and having confidence that there *is* a way out, so that its thinking can go in that direction. Otherwise, its thinking is constantly around sources of food out there in the world and your ability to find them. You get a disease in the body, and the mind can very quickly go to, "Maybe it's fatal. Maybe it's going to paralyze me. Maybe it's going to do this, do that, make it impossible for me to feed the mind's desires for pleasures." This mind is constantly asking the question, "What next? What next?" It's a very anxious mind.

The only cure for that is to develop some confidence in the path, that the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue, the practice of meditation will feed

you better. So look into these practices. To what extent are you not yet fully confident in them? What can you do to develop more confidence? Turn your thinking in this direction.

The Buddha talks about the different motivations that people have for giving, for example, and the different attitudes they take toward giving. In each case, they're talking to themselves. The passages in Pali quote things that people might be saying to themselves as they're giving, starting with "I'm going to get this in the next lifetime" all the way up to "Giving makes the mind serene. Giving is an ornament for the mind." The sense of confidence, the sense of well-being will grow as you get to the higher and higher levels of motivation.

The same with the attitude: You talk to yourself, telling yourself that "Something's going to come of this generosity that I'm developing." You have to talk to yourself while you're doing these practices to get the full benefit out of them, because they're giving you training in what? Directed thought and evaluation, turning your thinking to a positive direction so that you get more and more confident that even if the body begins to fall apart or if the social system outside begins to fall apart, things of real value are still there.

Think about King Pasenadi when the Buddha asked him, "Suppose four mountains were moving in, one each from the four directions. Given that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?" And Pasenadi had the good sense to say, "What else could I do but Dhamma practice, skillful practice?" That's where your true security lies. Even though you're still feeding as you're on the path, you're feeding on something that's a lot more secure, so even when this body and this world—in other words, the state of becoming you're in right now—begin to fall apart, you have the confidence that you've got something of value to hold on to.

The same with the precepts: You've got to talk to yourself, because there are times when it's going to be tempting to break the precepts. You remind yourself of the good that comes from holding to your principles—the sense of well-being, the sense of self-esteem that comes when you can look back on your actions and realize you didn't harm anybody. Even though you might have been able to get away with breaking the precepts, you said "No."

As for the meditation, it gives you more precise practice in directed thought and evaluation. You're thinking about the breath. You're realizing that if you really want to find a way out of here, this is where you look. As you breathe in, as you breathe out, you're dealing with bodily fabrication. This is one of the fabrications that come right after ignorance in dependent co-arising. People often ask, where is the weak link in dependent co-arising? Well, every link is a weak link

if you look at it right, but for the one that's immediately next to ignorance, if you want to see ignorance, look at how you're breathing. Look at how you're talking to yourself about anything in the present moment, but particularly about the breath. Look at how you're developing comfortable feelings through the way you associate with the breath, and at the perceptions you use to keep yourself with the breath.

If these things are done in ignorance, they're going to lead to suffering. If they're done in knowledge, they're going to lead to the end of suffering. You want to be confident in that, because when the Buddha talks about comparing the different aspects of the practice to different parts of a fortress, concentration is the food. With concentration you've got bodily fabrication (the breath), verbal fabrication (directed thought and evaluation), and then mental fabrication (perceptions and feelings). You put them all together in the right way, and you've got good food inside. That's what provides the nourishment on the path. Give rise to feelings of pleasure, feelings of rapture—what Ajaan Fuang calls the lubricant of the engine of the path.

Once you can do these things in knowledge, then the knowledge begins to spread through all the other factors of dependent co-arising, too, so that the whole series becomes part of the path: your acts of attention, your acts of intention, the way you relate to sensory contact. You're coming from a position where the mind is feeding on better food, so it doesn't have to go out and feed on bits and scraps and go dumpster-diving in the world. You can relate to your body in a better way, you can relate to your thoughts in a better way, because you're finding your food here at the spot where the mind and the body meet with the breath, so there's less of a need to go out feeding on those other things.

Of course, there's always that worry that if you haven't gotten far enough along the path, what's going to happen to you when you die? You have to remind yourself that the only way you can guarantee something good is by focusing more and more and more on the path.

It involves an act of will to change the way you talk to yourself. You can get people to be generous, but if they don't know how to talk to themselves about it, they can come up with all kinds of strange ideas. You can get them to observe the precepts, but again they may resent it and feel hemmed in by those rules. You can even get people to meditate, and they talk to themselves in the wrong way. They start saying to themselves, if they get the first jhana, "Here I've got the first jhāna, but these other people don't have the first jhana." The Buddha describes that as a sign of a person of no integrity.

So the simple practice of generosity, virtue, and meditation is not enough. You have to learn how to talk to yourself as you do these things, develop the right attitude, and if you find your mind sneaking off and getting worried about other things, you have to take it in hand and bring it back. After all, it's been spending how many lifetimes worried about where the next meal is going to come from, both in terms of physical food and in mental food. That's why it's constantly asking deep down inside, "What next? What next? What next? What do I have to watch out for next?" So while you have the strength to practice generosity, virtue, and meditation, apply that strength also to talking to yourself as you do these things so that you can appreciate the goodness that can come from them.

The Buddha's teachings give you all kinds of examples for how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, what perceptions to hold in mind, even what feelings you should try to develop. In breath meditation, he says to develop feelings of pleasure, feelings of rapture. This is one of the big ironies about the way mindfulness is taught these days, where they say that the Buddha taught, "Just be with whatever feeling comes up, whatever mind state comes up." He never says that. Consciously try to cultivate feelings of rapture and pleasure: That's what he says. Cultivate mind states that are gladdened, concentrated, released.

It does require an act of will to steer these things around. You see this when you look at the Pali word for ignorance—*avijja*. It doesn't mean only "not-knowing." It also means "lack of skill." Remember that the four noble truths—which form the knowledge that replaces ignorance—have their duties. You can know that and just let it pass. Or you can know that and say, "I'm going to take on those duties": an act of will that requires that you talk to yourself about the dangers of not taking on the duties.

So here the Buddha's giving us examples of how we apply these different kinds of fabrication with skill, with knowledge. But as he said, he's the one who points the way, that's all. We're the ones who actually have to follow it. We realize that part of this journey requires giving ourselves encouragement all along the way. His Dhamma talks give us encouragement. They instruct us. They rouse us. They encourage. They urge us. But we also have to learn how to instruct, rouse, urge, and encourage ourselves.

So when you find yourself falling off to the side of the path, pick yourself up. Dust yourself off. Remind yourself that this is a good path. As the chant says, *adikalyanam majjhe-kalyanam, pariyosana kalyanam*: The Dhamma is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. It's a good path all along the way. Whatever's required to make you want to follow it, talk to yourself in that way. As long as the mind has energy to think, think in ways that are

positive. Try to find food in the path itself. Let that be your nourishment. This is a source of food that once you get used to it and get skilled at preparing it, you find is a lot more secure than the food offered by the world. That way, even if you're not all the way to the end of the path, a lot of your food insecurities can be put aside.