

Food for Endurance

December 12, 2021

We live in a world where there's lots of bad news. It seems to come in waves, waves, waves. Even when we don't look at the news outside, just look at the news in our families: Every human being who's born eventually grows ill, ages, dies. If our happiness depends on things outside being just the way we want them to be, this is the wrong place to be.

Fortunately, happiness doesn't have to come from outside. The happiness we need—the happiness that's food for the mind—the Buddha says actually comes from three different sources: One is contact at the senses; another is awareness at the senses; and then the third is our intentions.

In terms of contact, the Buddha says, when you look for happiness there, for the most part you're looking in the wrong place. Although there is one useful area that the Buddha does talk about, and the ajans talk about a lot, too, which is that wherever you live, make sure that it's clean. If you keep the place where you live clean, it brightens the mind.

People talk about going to see Ajaan Mun for the first time. Even though Ajaan Mun lived in the forest, they always commented on how clean the forest was around the area he lived. The area was always swept, everything was placed very neatly. Of course, you might say, "Well, he had lots of time to keep the place clean." But it's striking how it really does have an effect on your mind. You put in a little effort to keep the place clean, then you look around you and it's inspiring.

It teaches you an important lesson: that you really can make a difference in your environment, and what you put in to the present moment can repay you. When we talk about having conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that's what we have conviction in: the fact that our happiness and pain in life come from our actions. Some of the things come from our past actions, but the important things come from our actions in the present moment. So, even though your surroundings may not be as ideal as you would like them, you can always keep them clean. You show yourself that you put something into the situation, and you can really change it. That's an important lesson.

As for the other types of food, consciousness or awareness of the senses goes together with contact.

Then there are the intentions. These are things that come totally from inside. They may be influenced by past actions, but you can train them here in the

present moment to be something new. This is a freedom that's available to all of us, and that we don't take advantage of as much as we should.

Simply in the way we breathe, we can have a sense of well-being in the body. By the way we talk to ourselves, which the Buddha calls *verbal fabrication*, we can totally change our mood. And then in terms of *mental fabrication*—the perceptions and feeling we focus on—we're totally free to perceive a situation in lots of different ways, all of which are true. Then we can ask ourselves: "Which of these ways is the most conducive to keeping the mind happy, keeping the mind acting in skillful ways?" Choose that perception; choose those feelings. Then you can feed on those. That's the food of intention.

It's in this way that we can create happiness from within, because we live in a world where we have to have a lot of endurance. When you hear the word *endurance*, it seems to be nothing but pain, and more pain, and more pain, for a long period of time, but the key to true endurance is realizing that you don't have to focus on the pains. You can focus on the things that are good in the present moment—starting from within.

And if within doesn't seem all that good, there is some help from outside. This is the other aspect of food from sensory contact: We can listen to the Dhamma, we can see the example of other people who have been practicing the Dhamma and are practicing the Dhamma—and it's refreshing to the mind.

Suppose we lived in a world where there was no Dhamma, where all people could think about was gaining wealth, gaining power, with no sense of right or wrong, no sense of generosity, no sense of virtue. It'd be a hard world to live in—not the kind of world you would *want* to live in. But here we live in a world where people teach generosity, where they teach virtue, where they teach getting some control over your mind through meditation. And they not only teach about these things, they also practice these things to show how it's done.

When we think about that fact, then even though there are a lot of undesirable things and people in the world, the fact that there are some people who recognize goodness and teach the way to goodness, can give rise to a sense that this is a good world to live in despite all the ups and downs.

And then, realize though: We can't just listen to the Dhamma, we should also think about it. When the Buddha talks about getting the most out of the Dhamma, he says you listen to it, and then you think about it using what he calls *appropriate attention*. This involves, one, *not despising the speaker*; two, *not despising the Dhamma*; three, *not despising yourself*. In other words, you're willing to listen to the Dhamma, and when you see there's something good in the Dhamma, you remind yourself, "I can do this." The fourth quality is that you

focus totally on the Dhamma. In other words, you give it your whole mind. Listen to it single-mindedly, the Buddha says.

And then, finally, use appropriate attention. Ask yourself, “How does this teaching apply to the suffering I’m undergoing right now? How does it teach me to comprehend that suffering? How does it teach me to let go of the cause? And to let go of the cause, what’s the path of practice I should develop?” Ask those questions, and that’s when you’re listening to the Dhamma in the appropriate way, because you keep bringing the Dhamma in to apply to what’s going on in your mind right now, the way you’re shaping your experience right now.

Then you try to develop whatever qualities the talk recommends in the present moment. If it talks about *mindfulness*, you try to be more mindful. If it talks about *alertness*, you try to be more alert. If it talks about *ardency*, you try to put your heart into doing this well. And the results are bound to come.

So, in this way, there are three sources for happiness, just as there are three sources for discernment. In the texts they talk about discernment coming from *listening*, discernment coming from *thinking*, and discernment coming from *developing* good qualities.

Well, the same three categories apply to happiness: There’s happiness that comes from listening—you realize that there’s still good Dhamma in the world.

The happiness that comes from thinking—when you realize how this Dhamma applies to you. It’s not just Dhamma pointing out to something that’s out there some other time, some other place. It’s pointing right here, right now. So you think about how that’s true, and that can make you happy.

Then you carry out what the Dhamma recommends through developing the mind—and that’s how you find a happiness that’s really solid. Because what does the Dhamma recommend? It recommends the noble eightfold path, and the heart to the noble eightfold path is right concentration.

Right concentration is always defined by the feeling tone—either rapture and pleasure, or just pleasure on its own, or equanimity—all of which are good feelings that you can give rise to from within, totally independent of anything outside. That’s how you make the most of your inner resources.

There’s an incident in Thai history where a neighboring country came in to attack Ayuddhaya, the Thai capital, and Ayuddhaya, even though opposing forces had laid siege around the city, was able to withstand the siege for a long time because within the city walls there were gardens, there were fields, there were wells. In other words, there were sources of food and water inside the city, so they could hold out for as long as they wanted to.

In fact, the only reason why the siege was victorious was because someone inside turned traitor, opened the gates, and let the enemy in. That's a good image for the mind as we live through difficult times. You have to remember that there's *always* difficulty in living in the human world. If we came to the human world thinking we were going to get an easy ride all the way through, we've come to the wrong place.

Even in the best of conditions, there's still aging, there's still illness, there's still death. We have to prepare for these things. But the best way to hold up to those difficulties, the best way to endure, is not simply just to grit your teeth and tell yourself to endure. It's to find happiness from within.

So think of all the fields that you have inside that you haven't yet cultivated, all the wells that you haven't taken water from yet. Take advantage of those, protect those. Don't turn traitor to your own good interests, and you'll be able to endure without thinking about endurance at all. You'll be thinking more about the well-being you're developing inside, the well-being you can manufacture from within, and that can keep you going.

Remember, the only reliable source of happiness is inside, so do your best to look here to find your well-being. That way, whatever happens outside, you can endure without feeling that you're being weighed down.