

Eating Meditation

How bad can greed get?

Erysichthon, the Greek King of Thessaly, had the temerity to build a banquet hall over the shrine to Demeter, Goddess of Earth's fertility and protector of harvest.ⁱ She cursed him with insatiable hunger. First, he ate everything there was to eat. Then he started on his people and even ate his own family. Still famished he ate himself!

While I was staying at Kanduboda Meditation Centre in Sri Lanka, a man told me that once when out in the wilds, he had got lost and over a period of a few days became so hungry that when he finally caught a pigeon, he ripped it open and ate it raw. He was a meditator!

Hopefully, we will not have to suffer such extreme conditions.

Even so there are other good reasons to investigate of the process of eating:

To distinguish between enjoying and indulging

To distinguish between the body and mind, ie sensation from emotion/thought

To distinguish between a desire and an action: the role of will.

Distinguishing between enjoying and indulging.

We will want to distinguish between enjoying and indulging when we come to realise the suffering that indulgence causes.

The first complication that arises from indulgence is **attachment and compulsive behaviour**. When we indulge some unwholesome but pleasing habit, it means that we are using something to create a certain mental state that we enjoy. It's not the biscuit we want, but the mental state it produces, be it happy or comforting. But this also produces a **dependency** and just like any addict we are compelled to raid the biscuit box. Only a strong act of will and refusal to have biscuits in the house can break the habit. It is precisely at the time we renounce the biscuit that we suffer the strength of that habit and the hold it has over us. But, of course, the potential is always there. Just as the person who gives up smoking and after a long time thinks they are immune to becoming habituated, on surrendering at a party to have 'just one', finds themselves buying a packet. That is, attachment is none other than a dependency on something or indeed someone to create a mental state of happiness

The second suffering is **frustration**. Anger rises when we can't get what we want or what we have is denied us. We live at a time of almost immediate gratification. Consider fast food! Amazon has spent millions on delivery, knowing that to satisfy a customer as quickly as possible is to ensure their loyalty. 'You want some beer (non-alcoholic!). We'll get it to you tomorrow morning!' We can even be angry with ourselves for forgetting to buy tea or coffee. We get angry if the bus, the train, the taxi is late. We get angry if someone doesn't turn up for a meeting. Frustration doesn't help. It just burns us.

The third is **grief**. The misery we feel if we have to diet! The shock we suffer when we lose our mobile. The distress of leaving an expensive hat or bag behind at the restaurant, only to find it has 'disappeared'. But although we believe in possessing things, in reality we can only use them. If a thief has run off with our mobile, for all intents and purposes it is their mobile, no matter how much we keep moaning and complaining about the loss of 'my' mobile. And grief takes on a different intensity when we lose a spouse, a partner, a family member, a friend.

Fourthly, **anxiety** always sits beneath everything we possess. The run on flour, pasta and bewilderingly toilet paper at the start of lockdownⁱⁱ is driven by fear of what may or may not happen in the future. The more we possess the more we fear loss. And the more we have to possess to cushion any blow. A billion pounds to a billionaire are never enough. They must cushion it by moving to towards a trillion. We are afraid of loneliness so build up a coterie of friendships and lots of things to do. We feel insecure so we accumulate excessive insurance or power which manifest in controlling and bullying.

Finally, there is **boredom**. If you remember, Mara, the Evil Tempter, the sensual life personified, sent his three daughters to inveigle the Buddha to return to the 'good life' – sensual pleasure, sexual pleasure and boredom. Boredom is that state where what once gave such pleasure and excitement is now stale, over-indulged and unpleasing. It is an aversive state and to escape it we seek some other pleasure. Variety is the spice of life is the basic motto of the consumerist. Consider the foodies' who chose their holidays depending on variety of restaurants. And just as all the other consequences of indulgence can become mental illnesses, boredom can drive you into depression. Indeed, what would be the purpose of living when there is nothing or anyone who can raise any degree of excitement.

Here lies the distinction between happiness and excitement. True happiness is based of contentment. Excitement that passes for true happiness is based on an insatiable appetite for the new and the thrill. This excitement is what fuels consumerism. The underlying engine is boredom, caused by a lack of excitement, that drives the consumer to seek relief in more excitement. This is none other than the psychology of addiction. Just as a drug addict feels normal when under the influence and abnormal when in need, so the consumer feels they have to buy something and go somewhere, do anything that excites no matter how little in order to feel 'happy'. Retail therapy is no therapy at all. It's an addiction.

'The Second Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering is the insatiable thirst which generates moment to moment becoming, accompanied by obsessive indulgence, *finding fresh excitement now here, now there, namely the insatiable hunger for sensual pleasures, for continued becoming and non-becoming.*'

So what do we have to do?

Firstly, we need to make a **clear distinction between the body and the mind**, between on the one hand sensations and physical feelings and on the other hand the heart-mind - emotions and moods, thoughts and imagination. This is part of the endeavour to undermine the sense of self. That is the sense we have of being one entire, undivided integer; a single uncompounded being, whole and absolute. By drawing apart what the body does through the senses and what the heart-mind does, is to begin to realise that we are but a compound, made up of many pieces all depending on each other to create an embodied 'person'. We being to undermine this delusion: I am what I feel or think I am.

Secondly, we need to **distinguish a desire from an action**. This will give us that chink of freedom where we can change the conditioning we don't want to a conditioning we do want. Remember our personality is but a collection of habits and will always be so. Our work is to rid ourselves of habits that bring any degree of suffering and dissatisfaction and develop those that bring a sense of well-being.

So long as there is only a desire, nothing has actually happened. It remains an idea laced with the energy of wanting. It arises out of a state of discomfort and is itself uncomfortable till gratified. If we are fully aware of a desire we will not be caught up in its demands, but will have the occasion to ask whether it is wholesome, whether it is beneficial to myself, to another or both myself and another. If we determine it is unwholesome, all we have to do is bear with the desire until it burns itself out. In so doing, the habit that it expresses is weakened and will eventually lose all power over us. If a desire is judged to be wholesome, then we empower it. It produces an act of body, speech or mind. This reinforces the habit. In this quite simple way we can change ourselves, though as we discover, it is not easy. We need a highly alert attentiveness, or we are quickly gratifying those habits we don't want and so developing them.

Brahmayu Sutta MN 91.14 (Bhikkhu Bodhi) A passage describing how the Buddha receives food and eats it. Here is described what he experiences.

He takes the food experiencing the taste, though not experiencing greed for the taste.

In other words, just the pleasant sensations.

This is on occasion chanted by monastics at mealtimes:

The food he takes has eight factors: it is neither for amusements or for intoxication (indulgence) or for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of his body, for ending discomfort and assisting the holy (spiritual) life; he considers, 'Thus I shall terminate old (unwholesome) feelings without arousing new (unwholesome) ones and I shall be healthy and blameless and live in comfort.

(My brackets)

Attitude

An attitude is a way of relating. It is not specific to a particular object. So as we undermine greed around food, we are undermining all indulgence for the same psychology applies to everything that delights us. Whether it is a sensual pleasure, art, nature, even people and animals, the same problem of attachment arises. Once we have understood, I repeat, that attachment is a psychological dependency on some object or other for 'happiness', we begin to be more aware of other dependencies and slowly begin to let go of all obsessiveness.

The Buddha tells us 'The taste of Nibbana is freedom'. Freedom from unwholesome desires.

A warning! I once sat next to a monk whom by the look of him, you would presume a true ascetic – hollow cheeked and gaunt. When the delicious fruit salad and buffalo curd was offered, he placed it before him. And while the other monks continued to eat, he simply stared at the bowl. As we were finishing, he picked up the bowl and as quick as lightening spooned it down his throat.

Now, of course I may be judging him very wrongly, but it seemed to me that he was afraid to enjoy the food for fear of indulging. Such an attitude if taken to all we enjoy would turn life into a sour grape. As always in our spiritual practice we have to tread the narrow path between direct enemies and subtle enemies of virtues. Here between indulgence and self-mortification. The pleasures and joys of life are a human birth right. But they come and go like everything else. What are we actually holding onto?

In conclusion

Since our personality is made up of a compendium of habits, our psychotherapeutic task is to liberate ourselves from their control, but not the habit itself when it is wholesome. After all we have to eat! So our task when it concerns anything which is pleasurable and enjoyable, is to begin to experience what it is like to enjoy and not indulge. Just enjoy!

Our insight task is to see clearly how we create suffering. Suffer the renunciation of unskillful desires. Arrive at unalloyed joy.

The Practice

Tea Break

The process of drinking a cup of tea and eating a biscuit. This is where biscuits can be a path to liberation from all suffering! Noting words are suggested.

Distinguishing between the body and the mind

Sit with the tea and biscuits before you and feel the desire.

Remind yourself of how the food has come to be in your hands. Raise gratitude. *Intending to drink.*

Take it slow and raise the cup to your lips. *Lifting, lifting.* Take a sip and hold it in the mouth to taste.

Tasting, tasting. Bury your attention into the taste, the feel of the tea.

Intending to swallow. Swallowing, swallowing. Stay with the whole process.

Then feel the afterglow. That's the mental state as a learnt reaction to taste of tea. *Comfort, comfort, or, joy, joy.*

Distinguishing desire from action

Take the biscuit. *Holding, holding.* What are you actually feeling? *Hard, hard.* What do you see? *Round, buff, beige?*

Remind yourself of how the food has come to be in your hands. Raise gratitude. *Thankyou.*

Feel the desire to take a bite. Stay with it. What is the feel of a desire? *Desiring, desiring.*

Know you could put it away into the tin. But don't give in to the desire for austerity! In this case eating the biscuit is wholesome, a spiritual exercise.

Intending to nibble. and be aware of that moment of decision when the power of the will activates the desire. *Raising, raising* (biscuit to the mouth)

Tasting, tasting. Follow through just tasting. The texture, the taste.

Become aware of the mental state. *Happiness, happiness. Gratifying, gratifying.*

Wait till the pleasant taste has all but gone and there is but a sloopy mush in the mouth.

What's the reaction? *Disliking, disliking. Disgusting, disgusting.*

Intending to swallow. Decide to swallow. Feel the afterglow. *Happiness, happiness. ?*

Distinguishing enjoying from indulging

Repeat until such times as there is just tasting, just swallowing. All the overlay of 'excitement' has gone.

Stay with the afterglow. Stay with whatever feelings arise?

Reflection

When finished, ask yourself – as I lost the excitement and equanimity replaced it, was I enjoying it as much?

Don't be surprised to find yourself saying you did not 'enjoy' as much. Therein lies Mara. The excitement comes from indulgence, but that brings the suffering.

The more we practice, letting go of indulgence, the more we will begin to appreciate just eating with equanimity. The more we will come to feel those indulgent feelings are gross.

A young man came to meditate with us at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara. He returned the next week to tell us he couldn't listen to heavy rock anymore!

Seeking excitement is more often than not seeking the same experience that made us excited. If we had an amazing pizza, we would want a pizza that will give us the same 'wow factor'. It will distort the experience of the pizza we are eating. We will be laying on to the present pizza that memory of the 'amazing one'. We will both be disappointed, and we will fail to appreciate the pizza we have – which may have been an even better pizza. I remember this happening to me with sticky toffee pudding.

Mealtime at Satipanya

Reflections

Wisely reflecting, I eat this food not to indulge sensual pleasure or to seek comfort. Being mindful of every mouthful, I shall undermine unwholesome habits and develop appreciative joy.

I eat only to sustain and nourish the body, thinking thus:

I will allay hunger without overeating so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.

This offering brings me health, long life, strength and happiness.

May the merits of my practice support the happiness, health, long life, rebirth in the heavenly realms and ultimately the Awakening of those who have kindly provided this food.

Mealtime Investigation

Reflection before eating:

the preciousness of human life : the singularity of the body
image passage of food – the tasting : the swallowing, the digesting and - the evacuation
how this is an opportunity to eat with appreciation and joy and not to indulge

Consider the food on your plate:

Mother Earth and her fruitfulness : the farmers and labourers
The distribution and workers : the cook and the donors

Food tastes so much sweeter for the honey of gratitude.

Continuing Investigation

- *Clear distinction between the physical process of tasting, chewing and swallowing from mental process of emotional feelings, comments, judgements – and desire.
- *Clear distinction between desire arising from natural appetite and desire arising from greed – seeking to develop a happy mental state dependent on tasting.
- *Clear distinction between indulging and enjoying.

Reflections at the end of the meal.

Let gratitude arise again for the gift of food.
Goodbye! I shall not taste this food again ever.
This is one less meal I shall have to eat in this life.

Tips

Go slow! Relax! Take your time. The slower the more we see.
Do everything gently. Treat plate and cutlery as precious items.

Slowly : Gently : Quietly

*The Buddha 'takes his food experiencing the taste,
though not experiencing greed for the taste' M91.14*

From Sutta Central : A.Sujato

When receiving rice, he holds the bowl neither too straight nor too bent, neither too close nor too loose.

So odanaṃ paṭiggaṇhanto na pattamaṃ unnāmeti, na pattamaṃ onāmeti; na pattamaṃ sannāmeti, na pattamaṃ vināmeti.

He receives neither too little nor too much rice.

So odanaṃ paṭiggaṇhāti nātithokaṃ nātibahuṃ.

He eats sauce in a moderate proportion, and doesn't spend too much time saucing his portions.

Byañjanaṃ kho pana bhavaṃ gotamo byañjanamattāya āhāreti, na ca byañjanena ālopaṃ a tināmeti.

He chews over each portion two or three times before swallowing.

Dvattikkhattuṃ kho bhavaṃ gotamo mukhe ālopaṃ samparivattetvā ajjhoharati;

But no grain of rice enters his body unchewed, and none remain in his mouth.

na cassa kāci odanamiñjā asambhinnā kāyaṃ pavisati, na cassa kāci odanamiñjā mukhe ava siṭṭhā hoti;

Only then does he raise another portion to his lips.

athāparaṃ ālopaṃ upanāmeti.

He eats experiencing the taste, but without experiencing greed for the taste.

Rasapaṭisaṃvedī kho pana so bhavaṃ gotamo āhāraṃ āhāreti, no ca rasarāgapapaṭisaṃvedī.

He eats food thinking of eight reasons:

Aṭṭhaṅgasamannāgataṃ kho pana so bhavaṃ gotamo āhāraṃ āhāreti—

‘Not for fun, indulgence, adornment, or decoration, but only to sustain this body, to avoid harm, and to support spiritual practice. In this way, I shall put an end to old discomfort and not give rise to new discomfort, and I will live blamelessly and at ease.’

neva davāya, na madāya na maṇḍanāya na vibhūsanāya, yāvadeva imassa kāyassa ṭhitiyā y āpanāya, vihiṃsūparatiyā brahmacariyānuggahāya: ‘iti purāṇaṅca vedanaṃ paṭihaṅkhāmi navaṅca vedanaṃ na uppādessāmi, yātrā ca me bhavissati anavajjatā ca phāsuvihāro cā’ti.

ⁱ The Romans also honoured her as Ceres (cereal).

ⁱⁱ For a deeper reason concerning the connection between faeces and death: The Denial of Death by Ernest Becker