

## *Feeding While You Work*

*July 23, 2015*

The mind has two modes. There's the active mode when you're actively working at something, trying to change things, trying to effect a change in yourself or in the world around you. Then there's the receptive or feeding mode, where you simply want to *enjoy* without having to do much of anything. As we're meditating, we're trying to bring those two modes together, and it's a balancing act.

We work at the breath, we adjust the breath, we try to be mindful of the breathing. Then some pleasure comes along and we tend to wallow in it, forget the breath, forget all that we're doing. We just want to enjoy our opportunity to have some pleasure, to feed on the pleasure.

That of course destroys the concentration, because the causes aren't there. What we have to learn how to do is to work and feed at the same time.

These two modes of the mind are very much related to the issue of suffering. In the four noble truths, there's a cause and there's an effect. There's either craving and the suffering that comes from craving, or else there's the factors of the path and the freedom from suffering that comes from developing the factors of the path. You want the mind to be in a position where it can see those connections.

As Ajaan Lee once said, if you see causes without results, that doesn't count as discernment. Seeing results without causes that doesn't count as discernment. You have to see the connection, and to see the connection you have to work at things and detect what comes about as a result.

So you focus on the breath and learn to how to enjoy the pleasure at the same time. When things aren't quite balanced, you bring them back into balance again. This requires a lot of attention, a lot of concerted intention.

The best parallels are with manual skills: playing music, creating a piece of carpentry or joinery like a set of drawers. You work and you pay attention to the results of your work at the same time. It has to be a continuous, back-and-forth process.

As when you're planing a board: You plane and then you notice if you're getting the right results. If you putting too much pressure on the plane or if you're not planing at the right angle, then you can make adjustments. It's by seeing the connection that you can actually turn what you're doing into a skill.

The same with music: I was once reading an interview with Alfred Brendel, the Austrian pianist, who was commenting on how when you're playing a piece of music you have to have a sense of the overall arch of your performance, you have to be aware of where you are and what you're doing while you're doing it. You also have to be aware of what you just did so that things are going in the right direction, and you want to have a sense of where you want to go.

All of that relates very directly to the qualities of mindfulness practice. The overall sense of what you're trying to accomplish: That's right view. What you're doing right now: That's an issue of alertness. You want to be alert to what you're doing and the results that you're getting right now as well. You compare that with where you've just been: That's the mindfulness. And where you're going: That's the ardency.

So if you find you're having trouble—you're slipping off and just enjoying the quality of concentration and then finding that you've lost the concentration—try to remember any manual skill you've mastered. It could be music or a sport or anything where you had to develop a continuous awareness of what you were doing and the results of what you were doing and how you could make changes if things weren't going right.

When I said the meditation is a balancing act, it's like someone walking across a tightrope. You never see them just glide motionless across the tightrope. Sometimes they learn a little to the left, sometimes to the right. Sometimes you see that they're about to lose their balance, but they've learned how to regain their balance. The suspense of their walking across the tightrope is part of the entertainment, but also seeing them do it well, seeing them especially when they seem to be losing their balance and regaining it quickly: That's part of their enjoyment and it's part of the enjoyment of the spectators.

So try to be careful and watch carefully when you start adjusting the breath in line with Ajaan Lee's instructions or adjusting it in line with the Buddha's instructions. After all, the breath is an ideal way of seeing the process of fabrication in action: that you're shaping things and you can tell pretty quickly whether you're shaping them well or not.

So be careful. While you're following the breath and trying to make the breath comfortable, there will come times when the comfort is surprising. A sense of ease that opens up a knot of tension, say, in the chest, replacing it by a nice warm glow. Or part of the body that used to be cut off entirely suddenly opens up. It'll be tempting just to go right for that sense of ease.

After all, this is what happens when we fall asleep: The breath gets calmer and calmer and we tend to associate calm breathing with sleeping, a time when we can forget about what we have to do and just rest. But when you're meditating you can't afford to rest too quickly.

This is one of the main problems in meditation, not only dealing with pleasure but also we start developing ideas about what we're looking for in the meditation. The idea that all we have to do is open up to the Oneness that's already there and that's going to take care of everything: That's wanting to rest before you've done the work. It doesn't teach you anything about the relationship between cause and effect, your intentions and the way you fabricate things and the stress that you cause yourself that way. It's just a shortcut to a desire to rest and not be responsible. It's a meditator's equivalent to wanting to get stoned, to get drunk. You have no responsibilities and you feel fine for the time being.

But then you come back, and things are sometimes worse than they were before, because

you neglected the opportunity to learn the lessons that needed to be learned by being skillful, seeing cause and effect as they're happening. This is what the four noble truths are all about, this is what all meditation topics—not just the breath—are all about: seeing what you're doing, where you're causing harm, where you're causing stress, where you're causing disturbance in the mind—and realizing you don't have to do it.

If you don't see that active component in the mind—what you're doing—no real discernment arises. You could be focusing on the unattractiveness of the body as your theme, and the questions would be: What is the perception? What is it that makes one perception attractive and another unattractive? Where does this idea of attractive and unattractive come from? It's not from the body. It's from the mind.

When you're thinking about death, death itself is not the problem, the problem is your attitude to what you're doing right now.

The methods of meditation are all designed to make you conscious of what you're doing and the immediate results you're getting. This is how the Buddha found the way to awakening. He kept monitoring his actions, seeing the results he was getting, and if he wasn't getting the desired results, he'd turn around and look at his actions.

If you want to see subtle things like this, you have to make the mind as still as possible and continuously centered as possible, which in and of itself is not just an exercise in concentration but also of discernment—getting that sense of how to protect your state of concentration once you've got it. There's a lot of discernment involved right there.

So learn to feed and act at the same time. Here we've been focusing on the dangers of wanting to wallow in the pleasure, but the other danger is just acting, acting, acting and not getting any sense of nourishment out of what you're doing.

I was reading just now about some tech workers who feel that eating is a waste of time and so their diets consist of whatever you can mix in water and drink and get back to work right away. As a result, they're going to burn out. The best way is to learn how to feed and work, gain pleasure in the work, because that's where you see the connections.

This is what appropriate attention is all about, this is what right view is all about: seeing the connections between what you're doing, the results of what you're doing, and realizing that you can do it better.

Once you've done it well, maintain what you've got, don't throw it away—because things don't get better unless you value the good things you already have.