

Not by food alone

According to the Buddha, we are sustained by four kinds of food,¹ that is,

- (1) solid food: the food we normally eat;
- (2) sense stimuli: our personal experiences through the sense-faculties;
- (3) mental volition: what we “do” with such experiences; and
- (4) consciousness: our own virtual “world.”

(1) We are basically sustained by **material food** (including drinks). Although in physical terms, it might be true to say “we are what we eat,” it is less true in a spiritual sense. The Buddha basically teaches that what we eat does not make us pure or impure. If merely being vegetarian, for example, makes us pure, then heaven would be populated by goats and cows.² Still, it is good to eat sensibly and moderately, which are helpful in our spiritual practice, too.

It is not so much what goes in through the mouth that matters, but what comes out that reveals the true kind of person we are. It is a good thing to be true to our word (in a wholesome sense), useful communication, unifying speech, and pleasant words: in short, “right speech” or Dharma-inspired (or at least Dharma-based) speech.

We should consume material food in the right spirit. What we are really eating is the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind. Much of what we eat is bulk and fibre. We drink a lot of water, and need it. We need sufficient body heat, but not too much. Our body movements must be regular and proper: we need to purge and pee as nature calls, and we need to exercise wisely.

In fact, if we are mindful of our body with lovingkindness, we would know how to keep the elements (or humours, as they are called in the west) in good balance. We would know when we need a good solid meal, or when we need soft food with a lot of liquid, or something warm to drink, or simply to stop eating.³

Wind is movement: wind is also our breath. We need to take a regular or occasional “breather,” in a literal sense. The breath is a clear indicator of emotional health. When we are negative or unhappy, our breath could be laboured or “stuck,” or it could be rapid and tiring. Our heart-rate, too, races unhealthily. Meditation and simple mindfulness help to regulate and still our breaths and calm our hearts.

Of the four kinds of foods, clearly, only the first, “solid food,” is external, while the rest are “internal” or “non-material” foods. In other words, we should not grow merely in a bodily way (like an ox), but also mature mentally and spiritually (see Dh 152).

(2) The second kind of food that feeds and sustains us is non-material: we are stimulated by our senses, or “**contact**,” that is, the five physical senses and the mind. These are known as “the six senses.” This is what keeps us going after we have taken our material food. After a good meal, we might enjoy watching something on the TV, or listening to some music, or just chatting with someone; or we might go for an easy walk in a fragrant flower garden.

¹ See eg (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Āhāra S = S 46.51/5:102-107 = SD 7.15: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.15-Nivarana-Bojjhanga-Ahara-S-s46.51-piya.pdf>

² See eg Vāseṭṭha Sutta (M 98 = Sn 3.9) = SD 37.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.1-Vasettha-S-m98-piya.pdf>

³ On the Buddha’s advice on losing weight, see **How Pasenadi overcomes his gluttony** = SD 37.13: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.13-How-Pasenadi-overcomes-his-gluttony-piya.pdf>

Here, we are fed by perceptions of what we regard as pleasant, as unpleasant, or as neutral. What we see as pleasant, we tend to like and collect; what we deem as unpleasant, we try to push away; what we are unfamiliar with, we simply ignore. So we try to neatly divide people into friends (those we like), enemies (those we don't like), and strangers (those we don't know).

We need to understand here is that people who are not "fixed" as friends, enemies or strangers – but these are how we perceive them. If we empower ourselves with lovingkindness – learn to accept others just as they are – we will find that this is a good place to start to know them better. The great thing about knowing others better is that we begin to know ourselves even better, too.

(3) The third kind of food that feeds our being goes much deeper. This is what we "do" with those experiences we have described above. Technically, this is known as "**mental volition**" or "karma." When we are drawn unthinkingly to something we like, we reinforce our desiring habit (we fall into a rut of desire). When we are drawn unmindfully to hate something we do not like, we reinforce our hating habit. When we ignore what we are unfamiliar with (instead of regarding them as being impermanent), we deepen our habit of ignorance. These are three "root" habits which are the sources of all our problems and sufferings.

Instead of reacting with greed, hate or ignorance, we should respond unconditionally with love to those we like, with charity to those we do not like, and with curious wisdom to those we are ignorant of. Then our world will be a radiant space that is inclusive of ever more people and beings. This is a world of only friends – friends we enjoy, friends to learn from, and friends we have yet to know.

(4) The fourth kind of food is even more personal and private. It has to do with how our own **consciousness** evolves. We are all streams of evolving consciousness: one main difference between an animal and a human is that we tend to be more self-conscious (we love looking into mirrors). Yet, amongst humans, some are more self-conscious than others.

When this self-consciousness is properly cultivated, we become more keenly and wisely aware of ourselves, others and the world. This is taking a step further than the previous kinds of food. When we regard others with unconditional love, charity, and wisdom, we have then created a better world for ourselves and those whom we meet or communicate with.

This heavenly world is an aura that envelops us wherever we are. We often see this in those people who are out there in the most difficult or most dangerous of situations, trying to help others who need help. We create this heavenly world right here when we give a kind ear or helping hand to others, even when they do not deserve it. This is called compassion: we are moved to action by the pains of others.

Kindness begins like a gentle leaf dropping on the water's surface and making a small ripple that widens, meeting other ripples, and widening into ever bigger ripples, until it touches the shore. We see all these ripples of kindness moving towards us. There is no end of these gentle ripples, because as long as there is water and dropping leaves, there will be ripples: ripples of kindness.

(5) There is a fifth food that I wish to add here, since it is not in the traditional list of the four kinds of food, but the suttas often talk about them. It is said that heavenly beings do not and cannot partake of the kind of material food that we consume. They do not need such food because they feed on **joy**. In our meditations, too, if we do it well, we feed on joy: we *enjoy* our meditation. We enjoy our work; we enjoy our wholesome actions.

To live on joy, we must first learn to breathe and to feel. Learning to breathe means keeping our breath calmly natural, and paying our full attention to it so that all other thoughts fall away, like

onion skin being peeled off layer by layer. To feel means to directly experience the breath, to see the peace that follows. Then we picture ourselves joyfully doing our daily routines, and including more people into this growing radiant joyful circle. It all begins with breathing joyfully.

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