

Joy as food

Man must not live by food alone. We are not always or only what we eat. Even if we have the best food, the most delicious meals prepared by the best chefs, we have not really lived. Merely to eat is only to exist, like a well-cared pet in a safe home, or a rooted plant sucking up nutriment from around it. Even if its home is a millionaire's mansion or a royal palace, a pet is still a beast, even if a refined one.

If we feed only the body, especially if we live to eat, then we are merely feeding the animal in us. If we feed the animal too long and too often, we become it: we are it. Why are we stuck in this rut? Because after a while, the eating is no more fun. So we keep on wanting more and more. There is no end to the hunger: we have become pretas, ghosts.

(1) We take solid food to feed our bodies, but we are not just bodies. "Solid" here simply means any kind of physical nourishment, that is, "hard" foods (what we bite and chew), "soft" food (what we lick, taste, or simply mouth), and liquids (what we drink). They are called "physical" foods in the sense that they feed our body.

But we are also **mind**, which needs a different kind of "food," one that is non-solid, non-physical. These non-physical foods are: contact, motives and consciousness.

(2) The mind feeds on contact, here a special early Buddhist term meaning *sense-stimuli*. The mind is fed by what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think – these are *the sense-objects*. The mind makes "sense" of these physical sense-experiences and thoughts. In other words, the mind has thoughts as its *mind-objects*. It creates its own "ideas" of these sense-experiences, which shoot through our minds in all directions without end. We call them "thoughts," or when we are asleep, "dreams."

(3) Our minds are also fed by the motives behind all our actions. We are drawn to what we perceive as pleasurable, we try to push away what we perceive as undesirable, and we ignore what we think is unfamiliar, what does not "ring a bell." So our lust, hate and delusion grow. In fact, every moment we are awake (unless we are having a very good meditation), we are but puppets whose strings are pulled by these three motivational roots, as they are called.

We have free will, so we think. "I choose what I want. I reject what I don't like. I ignore what doesn't matter to me." That's the point: we cannot do anything *but* do what we want, reject what we do not like, ignore what does not matter to us. We do not really have a choice. We do not really have free will.

If we notice ourselves becoming a bit upset here, it just proves the point. We have no choice but to be upset! Or, we might think, "No, I actually like this part!" Again, we have no choice but to like it. Or, "Oh, I don't care either way!" We are compelled by the motivational roots to react in this manner. We don't really have any choice.

What's going on here? We are simply reacting to what we are reading here. We are not watching how we are reacting. If we watch our minds more carefully, more patiently, we would begin to notice how our minds really work. Suffice it to say that we need good mindfulness for this, and this best comes with proper meditation.

(4) Our minds are also fed by consciousness, here meaning our compulsion or urgent drive to *name* people and things. One of the first things we do when we meet someone is to ask the person's name. When we know the names of things (such as gadgets we use), we at once are able to say what they are the next time we hear those names. The most superficial of this mind-feeding is the naming of high-class brands. We falsely think we are high-class, too, just knowing their names or putting them to our bodies. Our prehistoric ancestors did this, too, anyway, mostly to show their status and throw their weight around.¹

So our minds are fed by three kinds of food, and we don't really have much control over them, unless we are really mindful, and this is cultivated through proper meditation. Mindfulness means keeping our minds in the present moment, that is, keeping our attention right here, right now. The positive effects of mindfulness are best seen when we keep our attention on a peaceful mental object such as the breath.

The more we watch our breath in relaxed meditation, the more peaceful our breath becomes. If we do this properly and regularly enough, we begin to feel a deep sense of bliss, which keeps growing and pervading our whole being. We are now feeding ourselves with joy. One great thing about this joy is that it is the inspiration from which great and good ideas arise, and beautiful and joyful things are created. We have become true artists of truth and beauty.

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¹ (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Āhāra Sutta (S 46.51/5:102-107) = [SD 7.15](#).