Investigative Eating Meditation - An Explanation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:37

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

This is a talk about eating meditation, or using the process of eating for purposes of becoming fully liberated.

The first thing to consider is: how bad can greed get?

Erysichthon, the Greek king of Thessaly, had the temerity to build a banqueting hall over the shrine of Demeter, goddess of earth's fertility and protector of the harvest. In Rome, she became Ceres, from which we get the word "cereal." She cursed him with insatiable hunger. First, he ate everything there was to eat in his kingdom. 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 good meditator.

Hopefully we will not have to suffer such extreme conditions. Even so, there are other good reasons to investigate the process of eating: to distinguish between enjoying and indulging; to distinguish between the body and the mind—that is, sensations from emotions and thoughts; and to distinguish between a desire and an action, the role of the will.

We will want to make the distinction 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're 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 on us.

But of course the potential is always there. Just as a person who gives up smoking and after a long time thinks they're immune to becoming habituated, on surrendering at a party to have just one, finds themselves buying a packet. Attachment is none other than a dependency on something—or indeed someone—to create a mental state of happiness.

The second complication is the suffering of frustration. Anger arises when we can't get what we want or what we want 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, of course. We'll get it to you tomorrow. 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 when we have to diet. The shock we suffer when we lose a mobile. The distress of leaving an expensive hat or bag behind in a 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 of the loss of "my mobile." And grief takes on a different intensity when we lose a spouse, partner, family member, or friend.

Fourthly, there's anxiety, which always sits beneath everything we possess. The run on flour, pasta and, bewilderingly, toilet paper at the start of the lockdown was driven by fear of what may or may not happen in the future. The more we possess, the more we feel loss. And the more we have to possess to cushion any blow. A billion pounds to a billionaire cannot be enough. They must cushion it by moving towards a trillion. We're afraid of loneliness, so we build up a coterie of friendships and lots of things to do. We feel insecure, so we accumulate excessive insurance or power, which manifests in controlling and bullying.

Finally, there is boredom. If you remember, Māra—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, overindulged and unpleasing. It is an aversive state, and to escape it we seek some other pleasure.

Variety is the spice of life—this is the basic motto of the consumerist. Consider the foodies who choose their holidays depending on a variety of restaurants. And just as all the other consequences of indulgence can become mental illness, boredom can drive you into depression. Indeed, what would be the purpose of living when there is nothing and no one who can raise any degree of excitement?

Here lies the distinction between happiness and excitement. True happiness is based on contentment. Excitement that passes for true happiness is based on an insatiable appetite for the new and the thrilling. This excitement is what fuels consumerism. And the underlying engine is boredom—caused by the 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 or go somewhere, do anything that excites, no matter how little, in order to feel happy. Retail therapy is no therapy at all. It is an addiction.

The Second Noble Truth states that 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 do? Well, first of all, 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 with its emotions and moods, thoughts and imagination. This is part of the endeavour to undermine the sense of self, the wrong view of self. This 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, we begin to realize that we are but a compound made up of many pieces, all depending on each other to create an embodied person. We are beginning 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 until 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, well then we empower it. It produces an act of body, speech, and 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.

In the Brahmuya Sutta, there is a passage describing how the Buddha receives food and eats it. Here, he describes what he actually 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: "Food I take has eight factors. It is neither for amusement nor for intoxication, indulgence, or for the sake of physical beauty or attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of my body, for ending discomfort and assisting the spiritual life. I consider thus: I shall terminate old unwholesome feelings without arousing new unwholesome feelings, and I shall be healthy and blameless and live in comfort."

Now, what we are developing is an attitude, and 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 appears in relation to everything that delights us—whether 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 that the taste of Nibbāna is freedom. It is freedom from unwholesome desires.

Now, a warning. I once sat next to a monk who, by the look of him, you would presume a true ascetic—hollow-cheeked and gaunt. When the delicious fruit salad with 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 lightning, spooned it down his throat. Now, of course, I may be judging him very wrongly, but it seemed to me that he was afraid of enjoying 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 that 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 birthright, but they come and go like everything else. What are we actually holding on to?

In conclusion then, 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. Our insight task is to see clearly how we create suffering. Suffer the renunciation of unskillful desires, arrive at unalloyed joy.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your careful, attentive eating you will liberate yourself from all suffering.

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