

Train Your Hunger (The Sea Squirt)

Eveningtalk by Bhante Thanissaro, November 11, 2016

There's a little animal called the sea squirt. It's not very big, and its most complex organs are its brain and its digestive system. After it's born, it moves around in the ocean and finds a spot that it likes, where it senses that the food will be good. Then it stays there for the rest of its life. And one of the first things it does after it's found its spot is to digest its brain, so it's just left with a digestive system, basically to show who's in charge.

This is true not just for sea squirts. They've shown that when the brain makes its map of reality, a lot of the information—in fact the first order of information—comes in from the digestive tract. All the signals about what you're hungry for, what you lack, drive you as you look to the world outside. A large portion of your map of reality is devoted to what's needed inside, in your gut, in your stomach. And you go out looking.

This fits in with the Buddha's teachings on the fact that what defines us as beings is our need to subsist on food. We're constantly looking for the next meal. It's good to keep this point in mind. It's often forgotten.

I've been reading some books on the noble eightfold path, and the general message they give is that we suffer because we have the wrong map of reality: that inside we believe there's a permanent self, and outside we believe that there's a permanent happiness. And because of that wrong map, we make a lot of wrong decisions. We react to the world in the wrong way. So the solution they propose is to see, on the one hand, that there is no self, or no permanent self inside, and that outside nothing is permanent. As a result, you see that there's nothing worth going after, so you just give up, happy to be free from making any effort for any purpose.

And that's supposed to be wisdom. You basically take an equanimous attitude toward things as they arise and pass away, knowing that ultimately everything's going to pass away, and that's it. Well, to give up feeding on the world out there

simply because there's no permanent self, or because nothing out there is permanent, is like saying you're going to stop feeding on food because you realize that your stomach is impermanent and food is impermanent.

That's not going to work. Our hunger drives us. As the Buddha said, it's our primary disease. If we can't get the food we want, well, we'll settle for something else. You see this with the coyotes. You look into their scat and sometimes you find plastic rope. They couldn't get the food they wanted but they found something to stuff into their stomachs. And as long as our hunger is driving us, we're going to keep looking for food, even if it has to be plastic rope.

So the solution doesn't lie simply in changing your map of the world outside or the world inside, to see that there's no permanent entity either inside or out—because that, of course, doesn't take into account the fact that your inside map is not telling you about permanent entities. It's telling you about hunger. And we don't hunger for food because we think we have a permanent self or that there's permanent food. We hunger for food, both physical and mental, because of our hunger pains.

Our reaction to those pains is what we've got to train: We've got to train our hunger to be more discerning as to what's worth going after. We train it through virtue, concentration, and discernment. This will take time. It's like trying to wean yourself off of sugar: It takes a while to grow used to not constantly getting, or going for, the quick hit of sugar. But once you've managed to stay away from it for a while, then you begin to realize that if you go back to eating sugar, it doesn't feel right anymore. It smells funny, tastes funny. It doesn't feel right inside you.

In other words, you have to learn how to abstain for a while. And you abstain largely out of confidence that this is going to be good for you. But you also need some substitutes for the things you're abstaining from. The substitutes may actually be better for you, but it'll take a while to get used to them.

It's the same with the precepts. We abstain from behavior that we might have felt like doing. Before, if we found pests in the house, we'd think it convenient to just kill them. Or to avoid awkward situations, we'd think it okay to tell little white lies. That kind of thing. But now we realize that we've got to abstain from these

things 100%. There may be difficulties, but after a while we get used to the difficulties, and we actually find that we feel better. There's a greater sense of satisfaction that comes from holding to the precepts. And then when you see people engaging in little white lies, it really hits you hard, like the smell of sugar if you've been away from sugar for a while. You realize how unhealthy it is.

The same with all the other little things that would go against the precepts: If you're able to abstain from them, you train your hunger in new directions. Rather than feeding off the advantage of breaking the precepts, you feed off the sense of self-esteem, the sense of well-being, the sense of harmlessness that comes from following the precepts.

Even more so with concentration: You're totally retraining your hunger. You're finding that there is a sense of well-being that can come simply from sitting here focusing on the breath, allowing the breath to get comfortable, allowing that sense of ease and well-being to spread through the body. As you get more skilled at it, you find that you can tap into it whenever you need it.

Then you can turn around and look at the food that you got, say, from sensual desire or ill will, or any of the hindrances—restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, sleepiness. All the hindrances are a kind of food, but they're bad food. Junk food. Now that you see you've got a better source of food, a greater sense of well-being, you get more picky about your search for pleasure, your search for happiness, the things you want to feed off of. Remember that, as the Buddha said, we suffer in clinging, and the clinging is another word for taking sustenance. It's another word for feeding.

As for discernment, the Buddha says there are five things that you need to know if you want to discern the escape from this feeding cycle. Even though there may be some satisfaction in getting certain hungers satisfied, with a lot of them you realize that the effort that goes into them and the costs they entail are not worth it. And that's what discernment is all about: learning how to let go by passing judgment on which ways of feeding are worth the effort and which are not. After you've fed the mind well on concentration, you begin to look at all the other things that would pull you out of concentration, and you see that there's greed or aversion or delusion involved in going after those things. So, to get past them, the

first step is to see, when the greed or the anger comes, how does it come? What's its origination? What's causing it? Then the second step is to see, when it goes away, how does it go away? But you don't just stop there though, just watching it coming and going away.

Once you see the cause, the third step is to ask yourself, "Why do you go for that? What's the allure? What's the flavor? What's the sense of being fed that you get off of that?" And then the fourth step is to compare the allure with the drawbacks. "If you feed off this, what are the long-term consequences?" It's a lot easier to see this in all fairness when you've fed the mind well with concentration, because otherwise it's going to go for whatever hit it can find. And it's going to lie to itself about what the allure actually is. But when the mind is still, you're more likely to see the real allure; when it's well fed, you can see that the allure is very meager compared to the drawbacks. That's when you can drop it. You develop dispassion for it, which is the fifth step: the escape.

And in addition to dispassion, you develop disenchantment, *nibbida*, which means the sense of having had enough of a certain food and not wanting it anymore. That combination of disenchantment and dispassion, that's the escape.

And when you can apply this analysis in an all-around way, eventually even to your concentration, you're not escaping just to equanimity. You really escape from all the ways you've fed, even on equanimity. The mind opens to another dimension where there's no hunger, where there's happiness, a sense of well-being that doesn't require that you feed.

So you don't overcome your hunger for things simply by denying it. You find something better to feed on. But you have to train the hunger to appreciate that, because without the training in virtue, concentration, and discernment, the mind won't appreciate it at all. It's got to be put into a position where it can see the drawbacks of its old ways of feeding, and realize that there's something better.

So the way to let go is not to just deny your hunger, it's to train your hunger to make it more discerning, to ask yourself deep down inside, "What do you really want out of life? What would really be satisfying?" And notice how the answer to that question is going to change as you develop more virtue, concentration, and

discernment, as your hunger gets trained to the point where it's no longer needed.

So instead of digesting your brain, you get your intelligence to take over until it puts an end to your need for a digestive system. You find a happiness that's totally free from hunger, free from the need to feed, and that's when you let everything go—not out of defeat, out of victory.

That attitude of giving up on consuming the world because you say, “Well, it's not permanent, and I'm not permanent, so I might as well give up looking for happiness”: That's basically saying that there's no true happiness to be found through fabricated things, so just give up on the whole idea of happiness and just be equanimous. That's defeat.

As the Buddha said, though, one of the names for the noble eightfold path is unexcelled victory in battle. You battle the ignorance that's been guiding your hunger, and you come out with something much better. You've learned that you can use the processes of fabrication to create a path that leads to something unfabricated. And that's genuine victory. We struggle in the world because of our hunger, but when we find something that doesn't require feeding and totally satisfies the hunger, then there's no more need to struggle. As the Buddha said, better than victory over thousands of other people is victory over yourself—and this is how the victory is won.