

Mindful Eating

(One day Retreat August 1, 1998)

The subject of today's talk is clear comprehension in eating. Our bodies are so meek and mild that they need nourishment everyday. We have to eat everyday to keep ourselves alive. Eating has become a bit part of our lives. People have to spend a lot of time for eating. That means try to find things and cook them and eat them until the dishes are done.

But not everybody eats wisely. Some eat what is detrimental to their health and pay the price with different diseases. We are fortunate that *Vipassanā* teaches us how to eat wisely. *Vipassanā* teaches us that if we pay attention to what activities involved in eating, we will not only improve our health but also we can gain insight into the nature of eating. In the great discourse on *the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Buddha taught clear comprehension. In that section, Buddha taught that we must apply clear comprehension when we go forward, when we go backward, when we stretch, when we bend, and so on. One sentence included there is to apply clear comprehension when we eat, drink, chew, and lick.

There are four kinds of food; soft food, food that can be drunk, food that is eaten by biting or chewing, and food that is eaten by licking. Eating is for food like rice, curry and others. Drinking is for food like rice soup. Chewing is for food hard food like cakes or cookies or fruits. Licking is for food like honey. When we eat honey, we don't eat honey, we don't drink honey but we lick it. If you do not lick, if you try to eat honey, you will get choked. Food like honey and molasses, we eat by licking. So there are four kinds of food. Whatever food you are eating, Buddha said you are to apply clear comprehension. Actually in order to gain clear comprehension in eating, we need to apply mindfulness to eating. Without mindfulness there can be no concentration and without concentration there can be no comprehension. So basically we must apply mindfulness to eating.

The advice given by the Buddha was very short, just one sentence. The monk applies clear comprehension when eating, drinking, chewing and licking. But Buddha must have said more than that although the detail instructions are not recorded in the discourse. The instructions are remembered by His immediate disciples and then these disciples handed down these instructions in the form of what is called miscellaneous teachings. And then commentators wrote the commentaries and they incorporate these instructions handed down from generations to generations to their commentaries.

So in the commentary a more detailed instruction is given. Before we try to understand clear comprehension in eating, first we must understand clear comprehension. Comprehension is correct understanding. And the commentary said that there are four kinds of clear comprehension:

1. Clear comprehension of what is beneficial or what is not, or what is purposeful or what is not,
2. Clear comprehension of what is suitable or not suitable,
3. Clear comprehension of the resort and
4. Clear comprehension of non-delusion.

Clear comprehension of what is beneficial or what is not is try to find out whether in this case to eat something is beneficial for our body or our health. When we find out that it is beneficial, then the second step we must do is to see whether it is suitable to eat that food. If by eating some food we get uncomfortable, then that food is not suitable for us. If by eating some food the unwholesome mental states increase in our minds and wholesome mental states diminish in our minds, then that food is definitely not suitable. We must find out whether the food, although it is beneficial, is suitable or not and only when it is suitable, are we to take it. These two kinds of clear comprehension can be used both in and out of meditation. When we are meditating also, we can use or apply these two kinds of clear comprehension.

The third one is clear comprehension of resort. Clear comprehension means just not giving up meditation while eating. That means eating with mindfulness, or applying mindfulness to the activities involved in the act of eating. That is what yogis do at the retreats. When they eat, they have to be mindful; they have to make mental notes of the small activities involved in the act of eating.

When we eat, what do we do?

Following the instructions given in the commentaries, first we may pick up the bowls or plates or spoons and forks. Then we may put food on the plates. We may take the food in the spoon, then bring the food to the mouth. We open the mouth, and we put the food into the mouth. Then we chew the food and then we swallow it down. The food gets into the stomach and it is digested there. And then it gets expelled from the body. The commentary said that all these activities should be done with mindfulness.

When you look at the food, be mindful of looking. When you pick up bowls, be mindful of picking up or make notes as 'picking up', 'picking up'. And when you take the food into the spoon, you may make mental notes as 'taking', 'taking' and then when you bring the food to the mouth, be mindful as 'bring', 'bring' and you open the mouth, be mindful of opening. When you put the food into the mouth, be mindful of putting, and when you chew, be mindful of chewing, and when you swallow it down, be mindful of swallowing. And you know whether the food is digested or not. When you know the food is digested, then you should be mindful that it is digested and so on. So you eat with mindfulness in this way.

What benefits can you get from eating with mindfulness?

Apart from getting spiritual results, eating with mindfulness helps you to avoid over-eating. Since you have to make notes at every activity, you do not want to eat what more than is necessary. Even eating becomes a burden. You do not tend to over-eat when you eat with mindfulness. When you do not over-eat, you can improve your health and also you can keep your weight down. It is beneficial for people to eat food with mindfulness. When you are eating with mindfulness and paying attention to all these activities, your mind becomes concentrated. When this concentration is developed, you begin to see the true nature of these activities.

So first you practice what is called the clear comprehension of resort. That means you practice mindfulness on eating and activities involved in eating. When the clear comprehension of resort becomes mature, and you get concentration, then you begin to see the true nature.

You begin to see correctly the activities involved. You get clear comprehension of non-delusion. Non-delusion means understanding clearly or understanding correctly. In these activities, what are actually involved are the elements. You are all familiar with the four elements taught in Buddhism:

1. the element of earth,
2. the element of water,
3. the element of fire and
4. the element of air.

Most people are familiar with these four elements. But here the commentaries added two more elements;—

5. the element of space and
6. the element of consciousness.

They described that all these elements are involved in these activities. Actually these activities are nothing but the functioning of the elements. When you pick up the bowl, that picking up is caused by the air element. That air element is again caused by your mind or mental activity. You have the desire to pick up, and that is mental activity and then you pick it up. So picking up is caused by the mental activity which is the desire to pick up. When you have the desire to pick up, that desire produces the material elements of air in the body. It is actually the diffusion of these elements of air that we call movement. When we make movements, the air element is always involved. You pick up by the force of air element and then you take the food to the mouth, lifting the food to the mouth, there is also air element. By the diffusion of air element, you put the food into the mouth, again by air element, you open the mouth by air element, you chew the food by air element and you swallow the food down by air element.

When you make these activities, you can see that there is no such thing as the self-eating. It is just the air element doing different functions. It is the air element that picks up the food, that takes to the mouth, that open the mouth and so on. What is involved is not only the air element but the earth element. Earth element has a nature of being receptacle something for some other things. When in the picking up or lifting the food to the mouth, opening the mouth and so on, the earth element is also involved.

When the food after being crushed by the upper and lower teeth, reaches the stomach, it is put there by the air element. When it reaches the stomach, it is cooked and digested. That digestion is by the fire element or element of heat. This element of heat cooks the food and so it becomes digested. After it is digested, it goes down through the intestines. That going down through the intestines is again caused by air element.

The water element keeps the moisture in the food. It keeps the food moistened. Because if it does not function, then the food will become dry because the fire element is there. In order to keep digested food from getting too hard, the water element keeps it moist and wet. In this eating process, we see the four elements functioning. They are doing their different functions that we call eating. In this act of eating we cannot find anything other than these four elements. We cannot find any person or any self who eats but just the elements doing their respective functions.

The element of space is also involved. That means it is like road the for the digested food to go down to the lower entrance. There is nobody who picks up a stick and pushes it forward to the orifice; it is the air element that moves the digested food downward. And for the food to go down, the space element acts as an avenue for it. And all these activities beginning with searching for food and so on, there is the consciousness, there is mind mental activity going on also. In the act of eating we find six elements doing their respective functions. We find just these six elements and nothing else.

When we see that there is no such thing as a person or a self eating, and see actually the six elements functioning together, we are said to gain the correct understanding of the act of eating. This correct understanding we can acquire only when we apply mindfulness to the activities. Through the establishment of mindfulness we gain concentration or quietness or steadiness of mind. When mind becomes quite, it becomes steady. It helps a person to see the true nature.

When there is dirt in the water, we cannot see through it. But when the dirt has subsided or settled down and water becomes clear, we can see through it. In the same way when there are mental hindrances in the mind, we are not able to see the objects clearly. But once these mental hindrances are subdued, once they have settled down, then we begin to see clearly. When these mental hindrances are settled down, we are said to gain a certain degree of concentration. When concentration comes, then the seeing the true nature of things also comes. When we see that there are just these six elements doing their different functions at the moment and no agent or no person is to be found, then we gain a correct understanding of the act which we call eating.

This understanding we can get only through our practice, not through reading books or listening to talks. Since it is our own seeing we have to make effort. Nobody can make effort for us. I wish it were possible. Let the other people do the work, and we get the benefit. So we have to do it ourselves, we have to practice, we have to apply mindfulness to the things we are doing, we have to apply clear comprehension to the activities. That is why in Vipassanā meditation we have to be mindful, we have to pay attention to whatever object is prominent at the moment. When eating, eating is very prominent. These activities involved in eating are prominent and so we have to be mindful of these activities.

It may be difficult for those who have no experience of applying mindfulness to activities in eating. It may even be boring. But in order to see the true nature we have to watch them. We have to be mindful of the objects. It is through applying mindfulness that we gain concentration and it is through concentration that we gain the correct understanding of these activities (here, correct understanding of eating process). Once we understand the eating process, once we understand that this process is nothing but the six elements functioning together, then we can avoid attachment to eating or to food.

When we can avoid attachment or craving for food, we are said to abandoning the mental defilements momentarily. This momentary abandonment will lead to temporary abandonment and this will lead ultimately to total abandonment when enlightenment is reached. In order to gain enlightenment we need to see the true nature of things, we need to be

dispassionate towards all conditioned phenomena. In order to be dispassionate towards all conditioned phenomena, we need to see their true nature. In order to see the true nature we need to observe, we need to apply mindfulness and clear comprehension. Eating is one part of our lives. Just by applying mindfulness when we eat, we can go deep into the nature of eating. We can understand that there is nothing we can call a person or a self who eats but just the functioning of the elements. We get this correct understanding through direct observation of the activities involved in eating. Now let me read to you the explanation given in the commentaries about the clear comprehension of non-delusion. It says: "Internally there is no self which eats, the receiving of the alms bowl occurs due to the the diffusion of air element resulting from mental activity. Through the diffusion of that same air element resulting from mental activity the hand is placed in the bowl." That means you put down the hand into the bowl because in eastern countries we eat with our hands. In order to eat you put down your hand into the bowl and you pick up rice and you make it into something like a ball and then you bring it to the mouth and put it into the mouth. Through the diffusion of that same air element resulting from mental activity the hand is placed in the bowl. The food is formed into a lump. The lump is lifted to the mouth and the mouth is opened. There is no one who opens the jaws with the key or device. It is again through the diffusion of air element.