

Brother Phap Hai
Week Four, *The Four Nutriments*
May 23, 2016
“The Fourth Nutriment: Consciousness”



Dear friends, welcome to Week 4. This is the final week of our conscious nutriment course. I hope that you enjoyed the last week of practicing with motivation, both the large motivation of what brought us to our spiritual life and our meditation practice, and the smaller, subtler, gentler motivations that we bring to each moment of our daily life: an interaction, a decision to go somewhere, and so on. I'm sure you had many interesting discoveries.

Sometimes in the monastery we organize a tea meditation around our cactus plants. They are a special kind of cactus that blooms with a flower only very rarely when the conditions are right. When the flowers do bloom, they're the most majestic flowers I've ever seen. They have a very special fragrance as well that they'll shoot out in this direction, then in this direction, and then in another direction. They bloom for only a short amount of time. It's a very beautiful experience to sit around, follow our breathing, have some candlelight and enjoy a cup of tea waiting for those flowers to bloom. Whenever we do this, which is not that often—believe it or not, we also have some responsibilities in the monastery as well—but perhaps once or twice a year we have this meditation.

When we do this meditation, I'm reminded of the Chinese word for “practitioner”: *dàolù*, which means “cultivator of the way.” I love that phrase so much, because it's so earthy and related to the image of a gardener preparing the soil, planting the seeds, and watering the seeds at the right time and in the right place. In the Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism, or the Mind-Only school to which my lineage belongs, the mind is referred to as a garden. According to our school of Buddhist psychology, in the garden of our mind there are fifty-one energies described as being in seed form. They're divided into what we would normally call positive, negative, and indeterminate. However, we don't want to divide so much into positive or negative. We tend to use terms such as skillful or not-yet-skillful.

For example, let's take an energy that we would normally call positive and consider it in a new light: What is the not-yet skillful or the un-skillful side of happiness? What's the skillful side of a seed that we would normally consider negative, such as anger? What's the skillful side of anger?



We like to look at things in a more holistic way. Since we each have these fifty-one seeds—which are both universal in the sense that there are fifty-one and yet very particular to us—this leads us into the fourth kind of nutriment: consciousness itself.

In the Putamansa Sutra, discussing consciousness as a nutriment, the Buddha uses the striking image of a criminal who’s being pierced repeatedly by swords. In our consciousness, we have seeds that might be quite strong, such as seeds of joy, peacefulness, and mindfulness. We also have seeds that might be big, such as seeds of anger, jealousy, or despair. Each of these seeds exists in our consciousness and has been watered in particular ways either through experiences that we’ve had or through ideas that we feed ourselves.

In a similar way to sense impressions, each of these seeds is stimulated when in contact with an object. Mindfulness is a seed that we can invite when we come into contact with an object. Mindfulness is always mindfulness *of* something. When we look at the seeds in our consciousness with the holistic approach of Buddhist psychology, we don’t try to get rid of something. It’s impossible to get rid of any of these fifty-one seeds. Buddhist practice is all about transformation, not transcendence. One of the great spiritual teachers in my own lineage, Master Rinzai, said the greatest miracle of all is not someone who can walk on the air or on clouds or on water; the greatest miracle is being able to walk on the earth.

Of course, there is the fact of being fully present for our steps, but it’s also walking on the earth of our life experience, being a real human being, which means acknowledging and embracing all different parts of ourselves. What does our anger have to teach us? If we become a skillful gardener, we know that what we normally consider to be waste can make beautiful compost. Perhaps what we call weeds, we realize, in fact, repel insects or predators. What does our anger have to teach us? What is the flip side of our anger? What’s the wisdom aspect of those seeds that we normally consider to be negative?



As a meditation practitioner, particularly with regard to the four kinds of nutriments, we want to become a skillful gardener by engaging in what we call selective watering. If we know what we most want in life and start to recognize the impact that certain experiences have on us on a deep level, then we start to know what we need to do and what is not so helpful to do, in order to continue to realize what we most want in our life and be undivided. We call this selective watering, choosing to water particular kinds of seeds.

For example, if we listen to a particular kind of music, then it may water some kinds of seeds in us that are wonderful—or it might be not so wonderful. It depends on us, but we start to become cognizant of those effects. We start to choose our nutriments on sensory level, aspiration level, and also on the consciousness level, until the levels unify and bring about collective energy of healing and transformation.

As we engage in selective watering, we start to recognize our habitual patterns of response. We have certain stories that we play over and over again. I call them the tracks in the carpet, because my grandparents had shag carpet in their house and, over the course of decades, they developed these pathways to different rooms of the house that they would always walk. All of us have these tracks in the carpet.

Perhaps somebody comes up to you and starts laughing. A particular seed will be stimulated in you. That is a track in the carpet. It's a habitual response, conditioned by experiences you have had. Perhaps it is a seed of anxiety, sadness, or inferiority, or a seed of mirth, joy, happiness, or empathy. Depending on the experiences you've had in your life—your family's experiences, your ancestors, and to an extent your culture's experiences—then there are certain tracks in the carpet, certain neural pathways stimulated with certain experiences. Over time, as we become more aware of the different seeds in our consciousness and how we interact with nutriment in our daily lives, we start to become aware of these patterns of response.



I remember a cartoon. I actually think it was in *Tricycle* a few years ago that a gentleman says: “Samsara, it’s the say damn thing over and over again.” At a certain point, we start to recognize all the different kinds of samsara that are happening for us, and that again and again, we have these different “same damn things” going on—and we become tired. We realize that it’s old and played out.

This is the quality that emerges, and we call it disenchantment. We realize that doing the same thing again and again is not going to produce a different response. We start to become creative, such that the quality of letting go emerges. We’re ready to let go of a particular conditioned response and try something new. It’s not throwing things away—but rather letting go in this way with an open heart.

One of the things that many of us find difficult to let go of is “my story”: I am this, I am that. It’s a way that we define our experience. If it’s the story of particularly difficult situation, what comes to mind for me is a friend of mine who said: “You know, Brother Phap Hai, what I like to do sometimes is just go into a dark coffee shop dressed in black wearing a hat and sunglasses and smoke cigars all day.” She wallows in her stories. Hopefully she doesn’t wallow in her stories so much anymore. That was sixteen years ago. But that was where she was at that point.

Most of us are not that extreme, but we have certain ways that we define ourselves and our experiences. As meditation practitioners, at a certain point, that energy of letting go, of disenchantment and wanting to try something new, starts to emerge. I shared earlier about being a real human being and embracing all the different parts of ourselves and seeking to understand them. My teacher said to me one time, “You know, Brother Phap Hai, if we’re real meditators, then there’s nothing that’s not a teaching.”

In October last year, I was walking around in New York City. As I was walking around, people were shouting on the street “Fake monk! Fake monk! Don’t buy anything from him! Don’t buy anything from him! He’s a fake monk!” And I thought, “This is so interesting.” I knew nothing



about the fake monk phenomenon: that there are apparently people dressing up as monks and selling things on the street.

I just smiled and took it as an invitation, as a teaching. I remembered when I was in China and our teacher gave a talk advising us, as practitioners, to not sell fake goods in the marketplace or pretend to be something that we're not. Do not pretend to be peaceful, happy, or holier-than-thou. We need to bring all the different parts of ourselves to our meditation practice just as we are. Then our real journey can begin. We're real human beings embarking on a real journey of transformation; we have ground under our feet.

When we look at our situation, it can be very helpful to contemplate the four nobles truths in my own life in light of the nutriments. For example, when I find myself in a difficult situation, I look at the situation, recognize it, and start to contemplate the different ways in which I've nourished this. I don't do this in a self-blaming way, but in a very empowering way by considering how the choices I've made have led me to this moment. I also recognize that this is the real power that I have as a meditation practitioner: the power to choose.

As I recognize how I've nourished the situation, it may not always be a difficult situation. It might be a joyful situation, how I've contributed to bringing this experience into being. When I recognize the impact of the choices I've made on bringing me to this moment, I start to see that there's a path, a way out. We need to start where we are with what we have.

Not so long ago I was invited to lead a day of mindfulness at the Ojai Foundation. As we arrived, we were given a yurt to stay in. Next to my bed, there was a little map that said “Gratitude Walk,” which I thought was very interesting, and upon opening it I saw it was a map of the Ojai Foundation with all of these different sites and shrines that were situated around the property. There were sites such as the deep kiva, the teaching tree, and so on. I was particularly interested to visit the teaching tree, because it's where my teacher gave his first talks in the United States back in the early '80s. I set the intention that the next morning very early I would wake up and I



would embark on a gratitude walk. On the pamphlet there were three very enticing words: “You are here.” An arrow pointed towards a certain point on the map.

Early in the morning I took that map in my hands and I stepped out of the yurt with a lot of confidence. I started to walk and immediately got lost. I retraced my steps back to to the beginning and went another direction, but again, what I was experiencing was quite different from what was on the map. At that moment, the best thing I could say was that I wasn’t experiencing exactly what I would call “gratitude.” I was probably experiencing something more akin to frustration. At a certain point, I realized that I had that map, I had all the information about the different sites around the Ojai Foundation, but that I was trapped in those three words in the arrow that said, “You are here.” In one sense it was true; I was here. But I wasn’t in the *here* that was indicated on the map. I was struggling back and forth, not knowing where I was when, in fact, I was exactly where I needed to be. At a certain point, I put down the map, started to walk and made the journey that I needed to make. Honestly, the sites that I visited around the Ojai Foundation didn’t bear an exact resemblance to the way they were listed on the map, but I visited each of the sites in my own way, in my own time.

In the same way, as practitioners we need to start where we are. The Buddha has given us a road map. We know all the different points on the journey, yet each one of us is in our own unique situation. We all have these unique experiences and unique formations of seeds within us. We need to consider where we are at this moment in time. Which seeds are bigger in us and which seeds are smaller, and make choices and choose practices that speak to us at this moment of our journey.

In this way, we begin to make the authentic journey that’s ours. We’re not trying to make somebody else’s journey. There’s a universal aspect to our spiritual path, but there’s also a very particular aspect as well. What’s the journey that you need to make? What’s the transformation of the heart that you need to make? What’s the wisdom aspect of the seeds within you that you’re being invited to transform and to manifest?

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Looking at our situation at this moment in time, reflection questions could include: “What are some of the ways that I choose to nurture myself? That I choose to nurture my loved ones? What do I most need to get real about? What do I most need to get ground under my feet about? What are some of the issues that I find it difficult to really embrace and to look into?”

I’ve deeply enjoyed spending the last four weeks together with you. I’m so happy that we’ve experienced these four nutriments together, and I hope it’s an invitation for you to embark on your own journey of discovery and reflection on the nutriments. May we all meet many times. Blessings.