

Brother Phap Hai
Week One, *The Four Nutriment*s
May 2, 2016
“The First Nutriment: Edible Food”



Dear friends: welcome to week one of our four-week course on conscious nourishment. My name is Brother Phap Hai, and I'm delighted to spend these next four weeks with you, exploring ways of nourishing ourselves.

As I walked into this hall today, I noticed how many doors there are in this meditation hall. There are twelve. As I'm sitting here and looking around the hall, I can see each of them. Me and the other friends who are in this hall right now chose different doors to walk through, but now we're all sharing the same space together.

In our own life of meditation, there are so many doors: dharma doors offered by the Buddha. Sometimes it can seem a little mind-boggling as to which door and which practice we should choose. But the invitation for us as practitioners is to choose one door and to walk through that door and to experience fully the space and the joy that comes with entering into a space of practice.

This month, we have an opportunity to explore what nourishment means in the Buddha's teaching. We have an opportunity to dive deeply into four different areas of our spiritual life and see how they can be informed by nourishment. I'll never forget something from a number of years ago, when I was spending time at Plum Village in France, the hermitage of my teacher, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. He has a number of calligraphies on the walls in his hermitage, one of which reads: “The joy of meditation is our daily food.”

I love that calligraphy so much, because for me as a practitioner many years ago, when I was still learning how to meditate, meditation was a struggle. It was rare for me to experience joy. I felt that I needed to fight. To push through, to battle with aches and pains and distraction and I thought that some day, sooner or later, but most likely later, I would finally get something. So, for me, the first time I saw that calligraphy, “The joy of meditation is our daily food,” it really struck a deep chord in me.



One afternoon, I was sitting next to my teacher on his deck. I was sitting there quite stiff. I felt a little bit shy, a little intimidated sitting next to Thich Nhat Hanh. I felt like a very young child sitting next to a very senior teacher. He sat next to me and he looked over at me and said, “You know, Brother Phap Hai, if you’re going to sit here, make sure you swing your legs.” I realized in that moment that he was not just inviting me to swing my legs physically off the side of the deck—he was inviting me into something much deeper. He was inviting me to really bring my attention to relaxation and to the joy of my practice, instead of being stiff, rigid, and struggling.

This is a very important teaching for us in the West. Our practice can often seem like how I describe my own practice in the beginning. It can seem like a struggle. How is your practice? Do you enjoy your meditation practice? Do you experience your meditation practice as a form of nutriment? If not, why not? What do you enjoy about your meditation practice?

These are all important questions. If we enjoy something, then it becomes natural for us to want to do it. In Plum Village, rather than encouraging new practitioners to follow their breathing or bring their attention to their breathing or their step, we invite them to enjoy their steps, to enjoy their breathing. One time, my teacher invited us to come back to our bodies, to come back to our breath with the same kind of attention that we would give to greeting a loved one after a having not seen them for many years of coming back home. There’s a great joy in that.

The dharma is described as being immediately useful and effective. It's not something to realize somewhere far distant in the future. It’s not something that we will gain after 25 years of practice of hard labor: of struggling, sweating, and fighting. But the dharma is described as being immediately useful and effective right here and now. If we’re practicing lightly, freely, and correctly, we should immediately feel a relief. We should immediately feel lighter. We should immediately feel more centered in our bodies, on our experience. This is one way in which practice is a nutriment.



There are times that we can forget to nourish ourselves. We take care of so many things in our lives. We have so many responsibilities. We have our jobs; we have our home life. We're pulled in so many directions. There are times that our meditation practice can feel like a job, like one more responsibility on our list.

I hope that in these next four weeks together with you to approach the practice in a slightly different way, to approach the practice from the perspective of nourishing ourselves. Of nourishing different aspects of our being, of opening our hearts and coming back home to what's real and alive for us.

We are invited during these four weeks to walk, eat, sit, and breathe in such a way that peace, joy, freedom, and happiness be possible right in that moment. How do you need to walk in such a way that this step can be the freest, most peaceful step you've ever taken? What would breathing be like if this breath was the most delicious breath that you've ever taken? How do you need to eat so that this mouthful of food nourishes every cell of your body? How can we walk, eat, sit and breathe in such a way that we're fully alive during each of those actions? Our meditation practice is not something that we will get to at some point in the future—it is available in each moment of our lives.

The Buddha was a skillful teacher—when I read the texts and the commentaries I am so often touched by his deep insight and the way that he connected with his audience. There's one text in particular that I love, *Questions to Sulpakka: The Discourse to a Young Novice*, which follows a young orphan who was discarded by his family. It's a very long story, but basically this young traumatized boy came into the sangha, was accepted to train as a novice, and was taken under the wing of the Buddha. One of the texts written about the experience of the Buddha and Sulpakka is *The Novice's Catechism*, which simply consists of questions and answers that young Sulpakka had to memorize in order to be ordained.



The very first of those questions is: “What is the one?” The answer is that everything exists through food. Everything exists through nutriment: our joy, peace, happiness, liberation, depression, anger, jealousy. They didn’t fall from the sky. But they all came about because of nutriment. They’ve been fed in some way. In the Samyutta Nikaya there’s a powerful sutra called the *Putamansa Sutra*, or *The Discourse on the Son’s Flesh*, in which the Buddha goes deeply into the four kinds of nutriment.

This sutra shocked me to my core when I first read it. It took me aback. Its images are perhaps more graphic than any other images in any of the other sutras that I’ve encountered so far. I ask myself, “Why did the Buddha give such strong images in this sutra?” Perhaps one reason could be that he wanted to shock us a little. He wanted to wake us up to the importance of nutriment and understanding the importance of the choices we make, their connection to our happiness, freedom, liberation, and joy.

The first of the four nutriments that the Buddha describes in this sutra is edible foods. Basically, edible foods are what we eat. It’s the coarsest form of nutriment. In the sutra the Buddha gives the image of a family—husband, wife, and their only son—trekking very far through the desert. They’re thirsty. They’re desperate. They’ve lost their way. After many days of traveling, they’re faced with a heartbreaking and impossible choice. In the sutra, the Buddha shares that they discuss together and they believe that the only way that they’re going to survive is if they kill their only son and eat his flesh. The couple makes this heartbreaking choice and they eat the flesh of their son with so many tears, so much wailing. The Buddha concludes this image with a question: “Monks, do you think they enjoyed eating the flesh of their son?” Everybody replied, “Well, of course not.”

The Buddha invites us in the same way to look at edible foods as if we’re eating the flesh of our only child. It’s a very strong image. In our day and age, many of us don’t have the opportunity to



look into the sources of our food. Where does this carrot come from? What resources have come together to create this carrot? How much water is in this pound of beef? What chemicals were used to grow this food? What joy is in this food? What suffering is in this food? We have such an abundance of food available to us year-round. There's so much joy in it, but it also contains a certain amount of suffering as well. When we look into edible foods, we can consider all these different aspects.

In the tradition of Plum Village, we invite people to the practice of mindful eating. So much of our eating practice is done while we're doing other things in our daily life. My brother, who works in the corporate world, says that he feels very lucky if he has fifteen minutes to eat a meal. Very often he's eating on the run or in the car. This is our current condition. As we can see from the strong image that the Buddha offers in the *Putamansa Sutra*, edible foods are of prime importance if we want to understand more deeply how to nourish ourselves. When we eat, are we really present for the food we put in our mouth? Can we choose to take a split second to recognize what it is we're placing in our mouth? To take the example of the carrot earlier, can we take a split second to just notice “carrot” and then place the carrot in our mouth and to chew that carrot thoroughly rather than just to gulp it down? Really taste it. Really experience it. Can we notice some of the habit energies we have around eating?

There are so many wonderful practices of eating meditation. Perhaps it might be interesting to notice, when we already have a mouthful of food, that we're chewing. Yet when we already have some nutriment entering our body, we're already reaching out and preparing for another mouthful at the same time. What might that say about the ways in which we come into contact with conditions of happiness in our daily lives? In one thing, we can discover many things.

I invite you this week to find time to enjoy one meal as a mindful meal. Look deeply into the sources of your food. Whether we're vegetarian or still eat meat, we look deeply into the sources of our food and enjoy our meal fully. Let's turn off our cell phones and all other digital devices.

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Let's really be present for the gift of nourishment that we offer ourselves in this moment. Eating meditation can be profound as we look at the food, reflect on its sources, and connect with our beloved ones sitting beside us. It can be deeply relaxing, deeply healing.

Consider the following reflection questions during this week. How does my meditation practice nourish me concretely? How is my meditation practice a form of nourishment? Is it a form of nourishment? Or is it still a struggle? If it's still a struggle, that's okay. Let it be as it is.

Further questions to consider: What do I enjoy about my meditation practice? What do I find brings me back again and again to the cushion? What inspires me? What discoveries have I made? What transformations have I seen?

I hope that you enjoy this week of looking deeply into edible foods. I look forward to our discussion online and to spending the next few weeks together looking at different, subtler forms of nutriment. I wish you a very happy week of practice.