

Brother Phap Hai
Week Two, *The Four Nutriment*
May 9, 2016
“The Second Nutriment: Sense Impressions”



Dear friends: welcome to week two of our conscious nutriment course. I'm so happy that you've decided to join me again for the second week of exploration.

I hope that you had many interesting discoveries over the past week of practice with edible foods. I wonder whether you discovered how it was to taste the food fully. What experiences, emotions, and thoughts arose as the food was digested? What did you discover about the sources of your food? This exploration is rich, deep, and ongoing, and as we move into this week our exploration continues into subtler areas of nutriment. To begin this week's exploration I'd like to invite you to point to your mind. Many of us, unless we were “zenning” out, probably pointed somewhere in this area (*points to the head*). Now let's all close our eyes together and point to ourselves.

Where did you point? Most of us, unless we're really “zenning” out we probably pointed somewhere in this area (*points to the heart*). I often find that this experience is helpful for us as meditation practitioners, because, while we often want to cultivate this energy of relaxed attention that we call mindfulness, many of us very subtly equate mind with a kind of intelligence and intellectual awareness that is somehow above our ears. We spend much of our lives living above our ears, and yet instinctively when we point to ourselves we point to the core of our being.

As meditation practitioners, we want to infuse the quality of mindfulness into our whole being and our whole experience. We want to bring the full-bodied awareness of mindfulness to each moment of our daily lives: to our step, our breath, the food we eat, the things that we experience through our sense doors. As I was walking down to the meditation hall this afternoon I was surrounded by the smell of sage and the sounds of birds. It was so beautiful, and it was so appropriate because today we enter into the second of the four kinds of nutriment, which are called sense impressions.



Very simply, sense impressions are the things that we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, smell with our nose, taste with our tongues, and touch with our bodies. Of course, it's subtler than that, but it's a good orientation to the general realm of sense impressions. “Sense impression” is a translation of the Pali word, *phassa*, which means “touch” or “contact.” Basically, each of us has what we call a sense base: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. Then we have a consciousness associated with each of those different sense bases, such as the eyes have a kind of consciousness that we call *eye consciousness*, and the ears have a kind of consciousness that we call *ear consciousness*, and so on.

Since our sense bases each have a form of consciousness associated with them, each object that is recognizable to a corresponding kind of consciousness triggers a response. It's like when a hand rises up and the other hand comes together with it to clap. That's the contact. We are surrounded by so many sense impressions each and every moment of our daily life, and only we're only conscious of a certain amount of them.

Sense impressions can feed many things within us. They can feed emotions and feelings such as joy, happiness, and peace, or they can feed emotions and feelings such as anger, depression, and jealousy. The realm of sense impressions is a bit subtler than the realm of edible foods, in which we're dealing with very concrete objects.

Because of their subtlety, sense impressions require a different kind of attention. In our day and age I've noticed so many people coming to our practice centers deeply exhausted. They come to the monastery and they'll say things like “Oh, I feel like I could sleep for 24 hours. I don't even know when I'll be able to get up again.” The other experience that people tend to have when they come to our practice centers is that, after a day or two, “Oh, it's so busy in a monastery. Why is the schedule so full?”



I often share with them we're really not doing anything. We're quite lazy people. We're walking, sitting, eating: nothing too much. Then people start to recognize that, in fact, they're just recognizing the unacknowledged depth of the exhaustion existing already when they came to the monastery.

Much of this exhaustion has to do with the amount of sense impressions that we bring into our bodies and minds, either consciously or unconsciously, in our daily lives. A few months ago I went to the optometrist in Los Angeles, and as I was entering into the mall where the optometrist was there was a sign that said: “Shiny, pretty things this way.” I had to smile a little, because I feel that sums up our current condition. We live in a culture of distraction—it's challenging for us to simply be present with our experience. We're becoming habituated to doing this thing and that thing, and then onto something else, and then we're told that if we're only doing two or three things at once we're doing much less than most people in this society.

In some ways, at the beginning of our meditation practice we perform a radical act. We become mono-taskers. We train ourselves to bring our attention to a single thing: to rest with our breath or our step, to rest with the object of our attention. To do one thing at a time in this day and age is a radical act and it's also a luxury. I'm aware of how many responsibilities we have in our daily lives. But we can make conscious choices to nurture ourselves and to bring awareness into different arenas of our life.

As I shared earlier, when there's a stimulus, the consciousness responds. In some sense it's a universal response; there's a sound, and we hear it. But there's also an aspect of sense impression that's very unique to each of us. We each experience things in a slightly different way. When a stimulus arises and sense impression responds, what occurs within us—a split second after the response—is the arising of a feeling. It might be a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, or a neutral feeling, but it is very quick and almost unconscious coloring of that sensation.



Many of us don't even notice this. Some things are very clear to us as painful feelings in terms of sense impressions. For example, if somebody comes into the room and scrapes their fingernails down the blackboard we have a very particular, visceral reaction. Very few of us enjoy that sound. But there are other sounds, tastes, and smells that will give rise to a pleasant feeling.

Again, it's very different for each one of us. One of the very strong associations I have in my own life is with the smell of fruitcake. My grandmother was a cake decorator, so her house was always filled with the smell of fruitcake from the time I was very young until I left home.

Whenever I would visit her, it was almost as if the walls were impregnated with that smell of fruitcake. She made so many of them and had to age them in cabinets in the house. Whenever I smell fruitcake or Christmas plum pudding, I immediately think of my grandmother and I have a whole set of associations with my grandmother, a whole set of memories and feelings that arise with that experience. It's the same way for each one of us with each and every sense impression that we come into contact with, consciously or unconsciously.

A while ago one of our sisters here in Deer Park Monastery had just transferred to the United States from Vietnam. She hadn't met many non-Vietnamese monastics at that time and when she met me she came right up to me, looked right into my eyes and said: "Brother Phap Hai, your eyes are green. My eyes are brown. Do you see the same things I do?" I smiled and thought to myself that it was a very good question. But the answer is, probably not. I probably don't see the same things you do, even if we're sharing the same physical space and experience. What presents itself to my eye consciousness is probably different from what presents itself to your eye consciousness. Is your experience of the color green the same as my experience of the color green? Who knows? We know that the same sectors of our brain light up, but when we each talk about our experience of the color green, or of this moment, or of that meal or of that sound, it becomes so clear that each one of us is at the same time having a very unique response to that stimulus.



This is what we mean when we're talking about the collective or general experience and the particular experience. In fact, in Buddhist psychology there's one concept very important to understand as we begin to embark on this exploration with sense impressions. It's known by a technical term, but don't be afraid. It's called "modes of cognition". We talk about three different modes of cognition. We talk about the thing in and of itself, the flower in and of itself. I have a beautiful orchid next to me. It's very rare for us to be in contact with the flower's suchness or the true nature of the flower, the true nature of this taste, this happiness, or this sadness. This is the thing just as it is, without any stories, interpretations, shades of feeling, or lenses through which we're seeing this flower. Even the word "flower" is a lens through which I channel this experience that's right there.

So that's the first mode of cognition: the thing in and of itself. There are very brief moments in which we're in contact with things just as they are. As we continue to develop that quality of attention that we call mindfulness, we deepen our concentration and insight, which deepens into concentration and insight those moments become more and more but in the beginning this is a very rare experience to see something just as it is for many of us.

The second of the three modes of cognition is the realm that we're most often occupied with in our daily life: the realm of representations. This is what I was speaking about just a moment ago, when I shared how we have a sense impression—a sight, a sound, a taste—and we tell ourselves a story about it, or a feeling arises based on a past experience. It's an interpretation of the experience of what we call a flower, which immediately a representation because I have been told at a certain point in my life that this is a flower. Thus, the flower fits into a certain realm of concepts for me. This is what we call the realm of representations: these little stories, shades, and interpretations.

The third mode of cognition is mere images. These are mental images occurring for most of us in our dream states, when an image just appears to our mind. For some of us, this can happen

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during our sitting meditation, if we notice that we're quite distracted. For those of us with some emotional challenges, there can be quite a predominance of the realm of mere images.

These are all modes of cognition, but the one that we're most often working with through our sense impressions is the realm of representations: the stories that arise when we come into contact with an object.

I have a very funny story about this. I think we learn better through stories and through jokes, and I'm certainly happy to be the brunt of a couple of jokes. Last year, I had the chance to go to Plum Village. It's been about seven years since I've spent time there; I've been based here in Deer Park for quite a while. When I was at Plum Village, I was so deeply in love with the spring. It had been so long since I'd seen the buds bursting from the trees and the flowers coming up from the ground. In the upper hamlet at Plum Village, there's a lake that in the summertime has lotuses. As I was walking around the upper hamlet, I noticed two ducks always floating around this lake together. It didn't matter the time of day or the weather; they were always together, floating around the lake. I was enchanted by them. I would spend about fifteen minutes each time I walked to the dining hall just sitting by that lake and thinking to myself how wonderful nature is. Look at how the ducks are so deeply connected together, how they love to spend time together. I sat there and I enjoyed it, and after a few weeks I noticed some of the other monks walking by and smiling a little bit as they went to the monks' residence.

Towards the end of my stay, I went to one of my older brothers and said, “You know, Brother, I've been enjoying so much looking at these two ducks on the lake. It's just so lovely. I don't have a chance to see these things very often in our dry environment at Deer Park.” He burst into laughter and said, “You know, it has brought the brothers so much happiness and so much joy the past two months to watch you sitting by the lake and enjoying these two Styrofoam ducks that are floating around the pond.” It was in that moment that I realized I had spent all of this time telling myself a story about these two ducks that I was seeing.

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This is what we mean when we talk about the realm of representation. It's true that these were images of ducks and not actual ducks. I was telling myself all kinds of stories about the experience I was having with these images. Each one of us, when we taste or hear something, on a very subtle level we make an interpretation. Very often, that interpretation brings about happiness or brings about something like sadness, despair, or depression.

In the *Putamansa Sutta*, which is the discourse on the only son's flesh that we're using intermittently through these four weeks, the Buddha gives us another strong image for sense impressions: a cow with no skin, no protection, being bitten by flying insects. The Buddha invites us to reflect on our relations with sense impressions in the same way.

This is a very important reflection for us to engage in, particularly if we notice ourselves exhausted in daily life. Where do we put our attention? What are we engaged in? Where do we put ourselves physically as we go through our day? What sounds do we hear? What tastes do we seek out? What do we look at? What media are we feeding into our consciousness? If we reflect on sense impressions as nutriment, then we know certain nutriments give rise to certain experiences.

One of the most important things that we can do for ourselves this week is to engage in what I call a technological sabbatical. This sabbatical can be one minute long, an hour long, or a day long. I invite you to turn off your mobile device for a minute, ten minutes, or fifteen minutes. You will be okay, and the world will be okay as well. It's become such a habitual response to check our phone when they go off: we have to know what the message is. We've never been more connected and yet more disconnected from each other and from our own experience than we are at this time.

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A technological sabbatical can be one way to slow down the amount of distractions, the amount of “shiny pretty things” that we get pulled into on a moment-to-moment basis. I invite you this week to take a period of sitting meditation in which you bring your attention to the things that you’re hearing, seeing, smelling, and sensing with your body.

As you become more comfortable with this exercise, notice what feelings emerge when you come into contact with a stimulus. At the end of each day, you might want to take a couple of moments to reflect on the sense impressions that were particularly strong for you. There might have been some sounds, smells, or physical sensations. What are the strong sense impressions that you’ve experienced today, and what’s your relationship with them in this moment?

Each day this week, try to bring a bit more attention to one or another of your senses. Perhaps today you focus more on what you hear, and tomorrow on what you taste, and then the next day on what you smell. This can be a very interesting practice.

One final reflection exercise that could be helpful this week is to consider, along with the shades of feeling, what are the stories or interpretations you tell yourself about your experiences? In this way, it will be a transformative week of exploration for us. I wish you a joyful week of practice.