

Brother Phap Hai
Week Three, *The Four Nutriment*s
May 16, 2016
“The Third Nutrient: Intention”



Dear friends: welcome to week three of our course on conscious nutriment. I hope that you enjoyed your last week of practice, experiencing deeply some sense impressions, looking into the kinds of emotions and feelings that arise in conjunction with smells, sounds, and sensations in our body. There are so many things to discover. It's a lifetime journey, isn't it?

For me, one experience that I had in Plum Village when I was a very young novice still lives in me. I remember coming to the meditation hall for one of Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh's dharma talks. He began giving his talk and it was raining outside. Very soon after beginning his talk, he stopped. And with a little smile he shared with us, “You know, it's raining outside today. I don't need to share anything. Everybody listen to the rain. Go and find a place near the window or wherever you'd like and listen to the rain. The rain is your dharma talk.”

All of us monks and nuns and lay practitioners gathered around different areas of the meditation hall and we sat and experienced the rain. It was falling quite heavily and then softly. Big gusts of wind were coming along. I associate Thay's invitation with a deeper kind of invitation. As meditation practitioners, we're invited to listen not only to the rain or to different sense impressions or different experiences, but to listen to life itself. Meditation practice is about opening availability to whatever presents itself to us in each moment. Can we give ourselves permission to listen to each experience of our life as we listen to the rain?

I grew up in a part of Australia with a lot of cane fields, so the image of listening to the rain brings up associations with the whooshing sound of the cane as the rain washes the fields. My house had a tin roof, so the sound of the rain was very pronounced. Can we give ourselves permission to listen to the experiences that we normally call pleasant and the experiences that we normally call painful? Rather than pulling one towards and pushing another away, open a space of availability. Invite them to teach you what they have to teach you. Let them hold your hand and lead you into the discoveries of this lifetime.

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I would like to begin today’s session with a question. As a monastic, I’m often asked questions. The question I get often asked is: “Why are you a monk?” Today I’d like to turn the tables. I’d like to ask you: “Why are you a meditation practitioner? What brought you to meditation? What was the first spark of teaching or inspiration that brought you to this moment in time?” Perhaps it was a book, a sentence you heard, a word, a picture of the Buddha or some nuns or monks, a beautiful piece of artwork or music that brought you to this moment.

Why are you a meditation practitioner? What was that moment in time or that succession of moments that gave rise to this? Then, why are you still a meditation practitioner? Why is meditation still something that’s so important in your life? Hopefully, as we’ve been exploring nourishment you’ve kept circling back to reflect on your meditation practice as a form of nourishing yourself.

This week we’re exploring together the third of the four nutriments, usually described with quite a technical term: volition. Volition means motivation, intention, or aspiration. It’s the energy that moves us forward or puts us in a certain direction. It’s important to understand that aspiration is quite different from having a goal. A goal is something that we see ourselves achieving in the future. An aspiration, intention, or motivation—or to use the technical term of volition—is the energy that colors our experience of this present moment. It’s the energy we bring to this encounter. It’s quite different. It’s not something in the future, but something that can be touched and realized right here and now, depending on the nature of that energy that moves us forward.

There’s a saying that we’ve all heard many times. Be careful what you wish for. I’ll never forget when I was in Vietnam and had the opportunity around for about a month at root temple, Tu Hieu, in 2005. As part of our stay, we went on a traditional alms round in the local village. As we were walking down the street, many of the villagers were gathering to offer us food. Some were offering fruit, cakes or candies, rice, curry, and tofu—all different kinds of dishes. All monastics have a begging bowl, which also has a technical term: the Vessel of Appropriate Measure. We can only accept offerings up to the rim of the bowl, not over it.

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There were so many people gathered to offer food to the monastics on the alms round, so that our bowls very quickly filled up. In that moment, we were receiving the gift from the person and offering them one gift back from our bowl to share the food with others who came later. There were also some young novices and lay practitioners who were following behind. In that way we were sharing the offerings with everybody.

We had been in Vietnam for quite a while at that point. I've lived the monastic life for 21 years now, so I'm perfectly comfortable with any kind of food. However, from time to time, we do miss the things that we're familiar with. After being in Vietnam for quite a while and having rice and noodles three times a day—though it was wonderful to be fed—when I saw and received in my bowl some French baguette and cheese, I thought, “This is amazing.”

As we were walking on the alms round and I had this French baguette and cheese, I noticed myself guarding it very, very carefully. When somebody would offer me food, I would push the baguette down to the bottom of the bowl and then try to give something else from the top. At a certain point I realized this was not a good practice. I'll admit it: though it was a bit heartbreaking, when the next person offered some food in my bowl, I offered them the baguette and cheese. I offered it with a smile, but there was a little ache inside in that moment.

Finally, we arrived at the park where we were going to have our lunch together. I sat down and I had rice, tofu, and vegetables. It was a wonderful lunch. But I noticed myself looking around and wondering which of the monastics received the precious baguette and cheese. I didn't manage to see them.

At the end of the alms round, we were walking out in silence, with our eyes a little bit downcast. As we're walking out of the park, out of the corner of my eye I saw an old gentleman making a beeline towards me. He was walking very quickly, and part of me thought, “Uh-oh. What's going to happen?” He had a pink bag in his hand and thrust the bag right into my hand. We were

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about 200 monastics in the line, but somehow he made his way directly to me, put the bag in my hand, and disappeared into the crowd. I kept walking in the procession and when we got back to the monastery, inside the bag were a number of baguettes and a whole container of French cheese.

That little funny story is one of many reminding me that very often our motivations, whether overt or subtle, give rise to our experience of reality. Remember, we spoke before of reality having both general and particular aspects. Our motivations give rise to our experience of that which we call reality. They give shape to reality.

In the Dhammapada, one of the most ancient Buddhist texts, the very first verse reads, “Mind is the forerunner of all states.” Here we are again, discovering that the mind gives rise to so many different aspects of what we call reality. In one of the later sutras—well known in the Mahayana tradition—the *Discourse on the Eight Realizations of Great Beings*, one verse reads: “Our mind is always searching outside of itself, and in that way we can never feel fulfilled.” This is one of the inherent natures of our mind. The mind is always searching after different experiences, ideas, or concepts in order to feel fulfilled. We always think that we lack something: that we need someone or some other condition in order to bring us what we’re looking for. In the Buddhist world we call this *tanha*, which means “thirst” or “craving.” We’re always seeking after one more thing that we think is going to fix us.

So what are you searching for? This is another way of asking the question that we asked earlier: “Why are we meditation practitioners?” What are we looking for? Where do we think we’re going to find it? According to some of the commentaries, the Buddha did something quite interesting after his awakening experience. He didn’t say, “Oh, I’m the only person in the world. Nobody can do this. I’m the best.” In a number of the commentaries, he says, “How strange. Each and every living being has this place within themselves that is unobstructed.” Each of us has this unobstructed mind, this place of purity and clearness. In the Mahayana tradition we call this buddhanature.

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This concept is helpful because many of us approach meditation practice with an attitude of lack. We need to fix ourselves. There's something wrong with us. We need to have one more condition in order to finally be okay. Yet here in this story, the Buddha says that underneath all of the difficulties, the suffering, and the confusion, we have this quality of innate goodness. I'm not saying we're not a fixer-upper. We're definitely a fixer-upper project. But underneath all of that we have innate goodness.

As an exploration into motivation, I'd invite you in this moment to ask yourself: “What is it that I most want? What is it that I set my heart upon?” There's no real wrong answer, unless it's something like, “I'm an outgoing Sagittarius looking for a well-balanced Gemini for a mutual vision quest.” What is it that I most want?

When I was a child there was something that I always wanted most. I wonder if you can guess what it was? That's right. It was coleslaw. I couldn't stop thinking about coleslaw. This went on for years. Whenever it was time to prepare lunch, my mother would say, “What do you want for school?” I would say, “I want coleslaw.” She would say, “You can't have coleslaw. It's too hot today. It's summer. The mayonnaise will go bad. You can't have it.” But I would insist. I would beg and plead. I just wanted the coleslaw. She would give in most days, and I'd have the coleslaw. Coleslaw and I had a wonderful relationship. Then, at a certain point, the inevitable happened and I got food poisoning from the coleslaw. Until this day, I haven't been able to have as much joy from the coleslaw as I had in the early years. Each one of us has our coleslaw. So what is it you most want? It's probably not going to be something like coleslaw, or a nice big cup of coffee. But what is the real deep longing in your heart?

Let's see what answer arises. It might be something like, “I want to be peaceful. I want to transform my anger, my depression, my aloneness. I want to be free.” Okay. Whatever answer came up for you, let's take a moment to honor it.

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Now let's go a little bit more deeply, reflecting on whatever answer arose for us. Perhaps it was happiness. I find it very interesting that when we ask ourselves deep questions—“What is it that I'm looking for?” or “What is it that I most want?”—we tend to go immediately towards answers that are very broad and philosophical, such as liberation, enlightenment, or happiness. What does happiness mean to you? What's your experience of happiness, peace, or liberation—whatever word came up for you? What do you mean by that word in your body, in your daily experience? It can be very interesting to share our concepts of whatever word came up for us with others. We may discover that everyone has quite different concepts of what is meant by those words.

This can be helpful for us in another aspect: to recognize our experience of these qualities in this very moment. Perhaps our idea of what happiness, enlightenment, or liberation might be can prevent us from touching those qualities right here and now.

I love to tell the story about the time that my brother came to visit me here. We were separated when we were very young, and so we hadn't seen each other as adults. I said to him, “What would you like to do together during the few days we have?” He said, “Well, the first thing I want to do is to go to Universal Studios.” A part of me died a little inside. As we do in the monastery, I brought this request to the sangha. And I said, “My brother is here. He wants to take me out for the day to Universal Studios.” Secretly I was hoping that they would say “no.” And they said, “Oh, Brother Phap Hai, you should go. You should go. It would be wonderful.” So I went. It had been so long since I went to an amusement park—something like 30 years. I didn't know they took photos of everyone at the end of the rides. My brother has a collection of all of these photos of us on the rides. You see everybody else with their hands in the air smiling, and you see me gripping onto the railing in every one of the photos. He finds it incredibly funny. His experience and his idea of what he calls happiness is quite different from my experience and my concept of happiness.

In the same way, when we consider our motivations—which moves us forward—it's important to go below the words that we use and into our experience. Motivation can be wholesome,

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unwholesome, or indeterminate, and it's important to develop a language and an experience of the energies that we bring into the room of our experience.

The Buddha in the *Putamansa Sutra* used a very interesting image for motivation: glowing embers. We imagine a fire that's almost out, but not quite. With just a little breath of air, it can spring into flames. In each and every moment, there's a motivation or an intention that we're bringing to that encounter, whether it's a conversation, sitting meditation, or driving the car. As meditation practitioners, we want to become cognizant of and conversant with intentionality.

Some reflection questions that can be helpful for us this week are the questions that we used earlier. Why am I a meditation practitioner? What is it that I most want? What is it that I'm looking for? In what ways do my practice, my environment, and my lifestyle relate to my aspiration? In what ways do they not relate to my aspiration? Is there a bit of disconnect?

Looking at these aspects can help us to see more of the importance of aspiration and intention in our meditation practice. I wish you a joyful and successful week of practice.