

## The Practice of Mindful Consuming

**When we stop feeding our cravings we discover that we already have everything we need to be happy.**

-Thich Nhat Hanh

The human mind is always seeking fulfillment. Seeking in ignorance can cause unwholesome actions to dominate our activities. Practitioners, however, continually remember the principle of having few, simple and wholesome desires.

The Buddha said that craving is like holding a torch against the wind; the fire will burn you. When someone is thirsty and drinks only salty water (unwholesome desires), the more one drinks, the thirstier one becomes. If we run after wealth, for example, we think that a certain amount of wealth will make us happy. But once we have that amount, there is still seeking for fulfillment; we think we need more wealth. This is seeking in ignorance. There are people who have a lot of money, but still are not fulfilled, still are seeking. The Buddha said that the material and psychological objects of our ignorant craving is like a bone without flesh. A dog can chew and chew on that bone and never feel satisfied. We all experience moments when we feel lonely, sad, empty, frustrated, or afraid. We try to satisfy our discomfort with entertainment or a maybe food. We buy things to relieve our pain, despair, anger, and depression. We find a way to consume, in the hopes that it will stop the uncomfortable feelings. Even if a TV show isn't interesting, we still watch it. We think anything is better than experiencing the malaise, the ill-being in us. We have lost sight of the reality that within us already are the conditions we need for our own happiness.

Each of us has our own idea of happiness. It's because of this idea that we run after objects we desire. We sacrifice our time and, in some cases, destroy our bodies and our minds. The Buddha asks us to look deeply and realize that we have more than enough to be happy right here and now. This realization can help us release our craving, anger, and fear. The more we consume out of discomfort and ignorance, the more we bring in the toxins that feed our unwholesome states. We instead can focus on two things to return to mindful awareness. First, we can look deeply into the nutriment that is feeding our craving, examining

the source. No animal or plant can survive without food. Our unwholesome craving needs food to survive. If our craving persists, it's because we keep feeding it. Once we have identified what feeds our unwholesome craving, we can cut off this source of nutriment, and our craving will wither.

The second practice is mindful consumption. When we end our consumption of things that feed our craving, ignorance, and wrong perceptions, we will be nourished by the many wonderful things around us. Understanding and compassion are born. Joy becomes possible. We transform our own suffering.

### The Four Nutriments

The Buddha spoke of four kinds of nutriments, the four kinds of foods that we consume every day. Our happiness and suffering depend very much on whether what we consume is wholesome or unwholesome.

#### THE FIRST NUTRIMENT: EDIBLE FOOD

The first kind of nutriment is edible food—what we put into our mouth and chew, swallow, or drink. Most of us instinctively know what food is healthy for our bodies and what food isn't, but we often choose not to think about it. Before eating, we can look at the food on the table and breathe in and out to see whether we are eating food that is making us healthy or making us sick. When we are away from home, whether we are eating a snack on the go, dining at an event, or grazing on something while at work, we can pause and decide to eat only the most nourishing food. This is mindful eating.

Mindful eating can begin with mindful shopping. When we go grocery shopping, we can choose to buy only food that feeds our well-being. We can use the cooking of this food as an occasion to practice mindfulness. At the table, we can be silent for a moment. We can practice breathing in and out and give thanks for the healthy food in front of us.

#### THE SECOND NUTRIMENT: SENSORY IMPRESSIONS

Sensory impressions are what we consume with our eyes, ears, nose, body, and mind. Television programs, books, movies, music, and topics of conversation are all items of consumption. They may be healthy or toxic. When we talk with a good friend or listen to a dharma talk, the seeds of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness are watered in us, and we are nourished. But an advertisement or media

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entertainment can touch the seed of craving in us and make us lose site of our peace and joy. Without mindfulness, we are vulnerable. With mindfulness, we can be aware of what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. Our mindful awareness can help us change the focus of our attention and be nourished by the wholesome and positive things around us—these things feed our compassion and joy.

#### THE THIRD NUTRIMENT: VOLITION

The third kind of nutriment, volition, is also called aspiration or desire. Every one of us has a deep desire, and we are nourished by that desire. Without desire, we wouldn't have the energy to live. That deepest desire can be wholesome or unwholesome. When Siddhartha left the palace to follow a spiritual path, he had a desire to practice and to become enlightened in order to help people suffer less. That desire was wholesome, because it gave him the energy to practice, to overcome difficulties, and succeed. But the desire to punish another person, to acquire wealth, or to succeed at the expense of others, is an unwholesome desire that brings suffering to everyone.

#### THE FOURTH NUTRIMENT: CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness here means collective consciousness. We are influenced by the way of thinking and the views of other people in many ways. Individual consciousness is made of collective consciousness, and collective consciousness is made of individual consciousness.

It is our collective consciousness that determines how we live in the world. If we aren't mindful and we live in an environment where people around us are very angry, violent, or cruel, we become very much influenced by the normalization of anger and cruelty. Even if we intend to be compassionate and kind, we can't help but be influenced by the collective consciousness. If everyone else around us is consuming material things and giving in to craving, it is more difficult to maintain our mindful awareness. Most of us don't live in an environment where people are peaceful, compassionate, and open. But we can be mindful of creating a community around us that fosters these qualities. Even if it is only our house or our block or our small community, we need to surround ourselves with wholesome people.

The Buddha said, "If you know how to look deeply into the nature of your craving and identify the source of nutriments that have brought it in to you, you are already at the beginning of transformation and healing." Every kind of ill-being has been brought to us by one or more nutriments. Looking into the nature of ill-being in terms of the four nutriments can lead us onto the path of mindful consumption, which is the

path to well-being.

#### MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

More than two thousand years ago, the Buddha offered guidelines called the Five Wonderful Precepts to his lay students to help them live peaceful, wholesome, and happy lives. I have translated these precepts for modern times as the Five Mindfulness Trainings, because mindfulness is at the foundation of each of them. The First Mindfulness Training focuses on reverence for life; the second on generosity and right livelihood; the third on true love and sexual responsibility; the fourth on deep listening and right speech.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training, focusing on health and healing through mindful consumption, says: "Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness." We can make a decision to follow this training and commit to not consuming anything that brings toxins into our body and mind. Mindful consumption is the way out of craving, not only for us as individuals, but also for the whole world. The only sustainable way for human life to continue is if we consume less and become content with fewer possessions. Once we are able to live simply and happily, we are better able to help others. We have more time and energy to share.

Mindful consumption means looking deeply into your desire to consume, as it arises, staying with that desire until you have some insight into its origins and the intention at its base. We can look deeply into the nature of money or material possessions and see that they will not bring us any more happiness than is already available to us. The more we look deeply, the more clearly we see, and reality reveals itself to us bit by bit. When we see reality as it is, there is no craving, no anger, and no fear.

Running after our cravings has brought us a lot of suffering and despair. Committing to mindful consumption is committing to our own happiness. It doesn't cost anything at all. This is why I say that mindful consumption is the way out of suffering.

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