

Food for Thought

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

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**Some Teachings of
Buddhadasa Bhikkhu**



Translated by Grant A. Olson

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Translator's Introduction

After reviewing this text by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, it became clear that the title and sustaining metaphor of this book would translate well into English. The Thai title — *Ahan chai* — could actually be rendered in several ways: “mind food,” “spiritual food,” or “food for thought.” I chose the last possibility as the most accessible and, if you will, tantalizing title.

This work is a discussion of different kinds of food that is simultaneously intended to be fodder for thought and further contemplation that can lead beyond normal thought. In this text, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu consistently makes a distinction between two kinds of “food” or sustenance — physical and spiritual (or “mental”); through a variety of teachings and examples he discusses what it means to be “hun-

gry" in terms of physical senses and spiritual needs. The overall theme of this work involves showing the difference between the quests for these two different kinds of food and the values associated with and derived from each type of seeking. His similes and metaphors dealing with food are especially clear and useful as teaching devices since they strike so close to home.

Naturally, mixed in with a discussion of these two kinds of hunger are descriptions of what it means to be "full," satisfied, or sated—both in physical and spiritual terms. In English, we occasionally refer to a person who does not know what he is talking about as being "full of it." While this same idiom does not occur in Thai in quite the same way, we can say its meaning fits the spirit of what Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has to say about those people who are solely interested in satisfying their physical desires and impulses at the neglect of their spiritual needs.

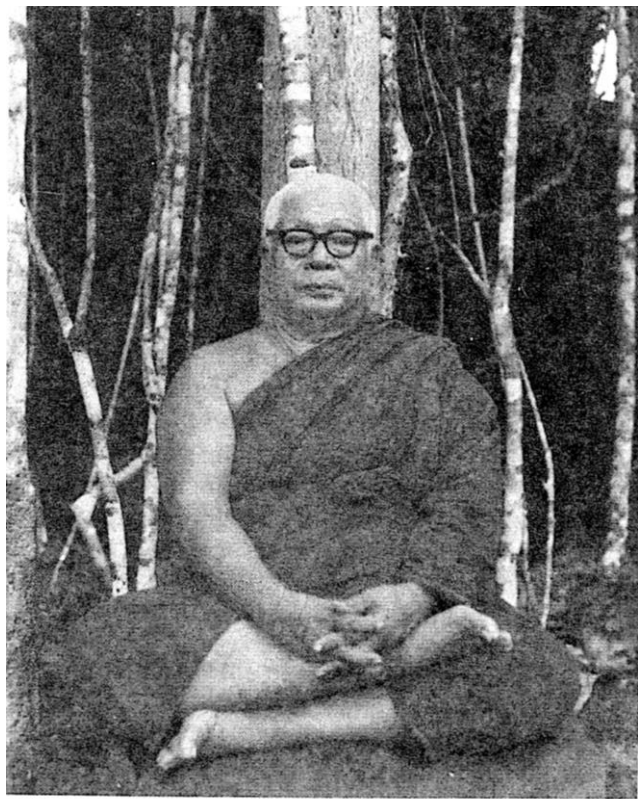
In this text, Buddhist terms appear in modified Theravada Pali forms rather than

the Sanskritic forms that many people might be used to: that is, Dhamma instead of Dharma; kamma instead of karma; and nibbana instead of nirvana.

I would like to thank Buddhadasa Bhikkhu for the great gift of the abundant teachings he has bestowed upon us and all of the time he sacrificed for me on my visits to Southern Thailand. After his passing this last July of 1993, I hope that the republication of this booklet might help in some small way to make his teachings endure. I want to thank Phra Banyat and Phra Sunthorn, Buddhadharma Meditation Center, Chicago, for suggesting that this work be translated into English. Mary Roddy deserves special thanks for her steadfast help and encouragement. I thank Chalermsee, Teal Metta, and all my teachers, who are too numerous to list here.

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Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1

Being full in terms of physical sensations — sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings — is to be full of worldly food; but being filled with the highest joy — which comes from a peaceful mind free from the disturbance of sense-objects — is to be full of the food of the Dhamma.



2

The goal of this life is to reach the loftiest levels of what it means to be civilized, both in worldly terms and in Dhammic terms. Life, therefore, requires both worldly food and Dhammic food; if you partake of only one of these, then life is merely half full.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

3

Physical happiness is not that hard to come by, but spiritual happiness is difficult to attain. Physical happiness is easy to see and know, but spiritual happiness is more elusive. Still, there are few people who accept these truths, because they believe that when the physical body is happy, the mind automatically becomes happy, too — and they are convinced that there is no other happiness to be found elsewhere.



4

Physical or worldly happiness has to be continually "drunk" or "eaten" to sustain it. But really these actions should be done only to stop or allay hunger whenever we feel its pangs. As for spiritual or Dhammic happiness, no drinking or eating is required to bring it about.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

5

Those who love physical and worldly happiness say that "the mind resides in the body." But those who love the spiritual happiness of the Dhamma say that "the body resides in the mind." The first group only knows one hemisphere of this world, and the second group knows the whole sphere.



6

Those who enjoy physical happiness stuff themselves until sated. Those who enjoy spiritual happiness overcome their hunger by controlling the senses until they are extinguished and calmed.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

7

The first group increases the things that respond to the needs of hunger and takes this to be happiness; the second group decreases the things that respond to the needs of hunger and takes this to be happiness. The first group feels that the more they yield to craving the better; the second group feels that the more they overcome craving the better.



8

Those who enjoy physical happiness are willing to yield to craving without a second thought. They invite friends and relatives to seek only this type of pleasure, because they don't know any better.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

9

Those who only seek to satisfy their desires do not have a satisfied mind even after desires are met. They still need new and strange things to keep them tantalized. They experience temporary pleasure while eating and, afterwards, a temporary reprieve from their pangs of hunger.



10

Those caught up in the delusions of physical happiness often complain about their exceptionally bad kamma and bad fortune. When they are ill — an occasional and natural occurrence for this body — they protest about their incomparable mistortune. And when they are unsuccessful in their search for elusive good luck, they conclude that there is no justice in this world, only cruel fate.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

11

Those who let the mind become deluded with material things eventually give in to their lower nature and work against the world. They are fraught with a kind of perpetual kamma that they perceive as insurmountable. The best they can do is tolerate their suffering and cuss their bad luck.



12

The gods know full well that those who only seek physical happiness and make merry are deluding themselves, just fantasizing — even though these people have deceived themselves into thinking that this happiness is fashionable and fulfilling.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

13

Some people have to vacillate between crying and laughing several times in the course of each day — their minds constantly expanding and contracting. They go up and down, back and forth, according to the expansion and contraction of their purses and wallets or their ability or inability to get what they want.



14

There is little left of the minds of these people. Whatever they are able to feel, they conclude that "the mind is in the body," that is, the mind is at the whim of the body. Therefore, whenever, they experience complete physical pleasure, they believe that they have experienced the highest "happiness."



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

15

Even though sometimes these people may refer to spiritual happiness, this really only amounts to name dropping in place of their usual references to physical happiness. Their "spiritual happiness" is something completely different from the real thing. How can it be true spiritual happiness when their mind is incessantly vacillating? Whether the mind expands or contracts, both amount to mental suffering and stress and only differ in form.



16

Those who enjoy physical pleasures—wealth, status, fame, and entertainment—experience a certain kind of mind expansion; but as soon as they lose their wealth, are demoted, ignored, or bored, their minds contract. But both of these can disrupt the heart and mind with equal force.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

17

As soon as these people get what they want, they become disturbed! And if they do not get what they want, they are disturbed! As soon as darkness pervades their lives, they think that pleasure seeking is "nibbana." But actually these people have yet to distance themselves from the whole heap of suffering. The happiness they experience is a false one that binds people and immerses them in quicksand.



Those who are endowed with eyes of wisdom truly see worldly, bodily, or material happiness for what it is. They know what happens when you become deluded and only partake of the foods of one realm. Knowing only one realm of happiness is like knowing only one hemisphere of our world.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

19

Those who know this world well pay homage to the happiness of the Dhamma, to the importance of true spiritual happiness. They look at physical and material things as matters of expedience, and they see themselves as people who only put these things to proper use in the search for spiritual happiness.



20

People who know both realms of this world are certain that “the body resides in the mind.” They know that when compared to the mind, the body is insignificant and must still depend on the mind. The mind’s power is always foremost, constant, and of the highest quality. The people who know both realms are certain that it is better to seek spiritual sustenance.



21

The development and prosperity of the mind is far reaching and continues to evolve until a person attains nibbana — when this liberation is attained it constitutes the highest, most infinite happiness.



Physical happiness leads nowhere. At best, it leads to being full and fat after consuming forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mental images.



No one in the past, present, or future has ever been completely sated by worldly things. This is because the worldly realm requires “dissatisfaction” as the fuel of contentment. As soon as you feel full, the party is over. No matter how much you seek in this way, you will never quench the “fires of craving”; because whenever these flames start to subside, you set out to look for more firewood — with no time left to realize true fulfillment.



24

Foraging for spiritual sustenance is a worthy and honorable activity embodying the most noble ideals — it is more difficult, more admirable, more pleasing to the senses, and more soothing than seeking any physical satisfaction.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

25

The quest for physical happiness leads to war; the quest for spiritual happiness leads to peace. As long as the world continues to worship materialism and is caught up in a search for physical happiness, there can be no hope for peace. You can establish as many League of Nations for peace as you like — it will still not matter.



Materialistic people see the body as all important and are willing to sacrifice everything to fattening it. Spiritual people see the mind as all important and are willing to sacrifice everything to its peace and tranquillity.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

27

Those who seek physical happiness necessarily come into conflict with others, because physical happiness comes at the expense of others or is obtained by depending on other surrounding things and conditions. Wherever there is selfishness, there is conflict.



Wars are clashes of personal interests over differing notions of worldly happiness. World wars arise due to the opposition of the selfishness of nations.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

29

The quest for spiritual happiness does not come into conflict with anyone, because it makes no demands on others, does not depend on others, and only involves sacrifice *for* others.



30

Personal or social conflicts, which often escalate into wars, are not caused by those in search of spiritual happiness — a blazing fire cannot be started with something cool.



The quest for physical sustenance is simple and shallow, and it leads to war; the search for spiritual sustenance is difficult and deep, and it leads to peace. For this reason, most people in this world go with the flow of their instincts or lower natures. Sometimes it appears as if there are only materialists as far as the eye can see.



One day, people will not be able to muster the inspiration nor recall the way to seek spiritual sustenance. In the end, the minds of human beings will be empty except for thoughts of sensuality and selfishness. This is when fire will wash the face of the earth.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

33

There are few people on this earth who are in search of spiritual happiness. However, these few seekers act like a plumb holding the world in check and keeping it from succumbing to the final fires of the dark ages.



34

Those in search of spiritual happiness should be fair to others saying, "We are a balancing force holding you back from running into the fire too quickly. If we were to become like you, you can be sure that the world would disintegrate even faster — this is why we have decided to stay the course of our vocation."



Lord Buddha was the foremost leader of a community of people in search of spiritual happiness in a bygone era. He is known as the "Great One," and he has become a refuge to people in later times because of the power of the Dhamma. The teachings that he propagated have held the world in check and have kept it from disintegration; even those who have never heard his name have still benefited from the principles of his Dhamma.



36

When the world discards the quest for spiritual sustenance and progressively seeks more and more physical pleasure, as people are doing today, Lord Buddha cannot be of any help.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

37

As long as Buddhists still care about the quest for spiritual happiness, we can say that the family line of the Buddha will remain unbroken. This spiritual quest will function like a plumb, giving direction and remaining poised for its own safety and that of the world—even though there are others who detest those on the spiritual path.



True Buddhists must maintain that the body resides in the mind and that spiritual nourishment is more important than physical sustenance; they must care about all doctrines that advocate a spiritual quest. Practicing Buddhism by means of lip service or rituals does not make you a Buddhist. True Buddhists will not become materialistic nor overly nationalistic.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

39

A Buddhist who impedes the progress of others is more dangerous than any non-Buddhist! When the dark ages come upon us, only the true Buddhists will survive due to the merits of their search for spiritual sustenance.



Since the world deals with materialism and the Dhamma deals with freedom from materialism, the two can never be the quite same. It is this freedom from materialism that provides spiritual nourishment.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

41

The body demands worldly food; the mind requires the food of the Dhamma. Those who see the mind as foremost, as the coordinating faculty of the body, consume with moderation for the basic sustenance of their physical being. Aside from this, their time is spent in search of spiritual food.



It is difficult to see the way to freedom from materialism, because normally no one wants to think that he has become a slave to materialism. There are many people consuming and using material goods to raise their status and impress friends; they believe that they are the masters of these goods and that they are already free of them. No one thinks of the variety of sorrows that come from attachment to materialism. These sorrows are due to the influence of material goods that have overcome the mind; they trample over the mind according to their whims.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

43

The mind loses all possibility of tranquillity when its stupid owner gets involved in materialism, which poisons the mind. The truly tranquil mind cannot come into being because its owner has neglected to nurture it with the special food it requires.



44

All of the lower instincts invite us to ascend the throne and proclaim the desires of the mind; thus overcome by the lower instincts, the normal state of mind, or what we can call our higher nature, cannot manifest. People continue to busy themselves in search of sustenance according to their lower senses, or that which we call the "physical."



Whenever a person lacks spiritual sustenance, even at a basic level, he cannot thrive well enough to be able to see or maintain any ideals pertaining to spiritual happiness. Life is gloomy and sorrowful without completely knowing why.



46

Mere babes cannot think for themselves about these matters. Only the study of Dhamma can help us initially. The study of the Dhamma as a discipline of knowledge is one of the basic foods for the mind; the second step involves digesting this knowledge for yourself; and then the attainment of joy and tranquillity follows. You can be said to be fully developed when nibbana is manifest and applied to daily life.



Studying the principles of the Dhamma helps us to first realize that we have two facets to our body: the bodily form and the Dhamma-body. Our body develops due to our parents' care — we grow due to a number of factors, such as vegetables, proteins, and other nourishment — but the Dhamma-body concerns the overall health of our physical form, our speech, and our mind. Both of these aspects of our being are the foundations of freedom; they sustain and nourish all kinds of growth.



Studying the principles of the Dhamma helps us to gradually come to the realization that if we nourish only our physical being we are fattening up only one aspect of our lives, while the other aspect — the mind — remains malnourished. The end result is that the body is the picture of health, while the mind is foggy, melancholic, and thin.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

49

As children, our melancholy hardly ever surfaced because we had people looking after us and we were not yet fully grown and able to experience the full force of all our senses. As soon as we are fully developed, melancholia arises more frequently because we are out of balance — the body has developed, but the development of our Dhamma-body has not kept pace with it.



In summary, the study of the principles of the Dhamma helps us to know that we should practice the Dhamma for the good of our Dhamma-body, otherwise one-half of our being will be dead. Once we know these principles well enough, we nourish the mind with knowledge, and this becomes a foundation for spiritual practice; these principles constitute proper views, the light of the dawn in the initial stages of our practice.



51

The study of the principles of the Dhamma is a major factor in controlling and overcoming the senses; as the senses are overcome, increasing tranquillity and realization are experienced. Tranquillity comes from stilling the senses; realization of the truth comes from opening the curtain of sense-related frustration that has obstructed your view for so long.



According to Buddhism, we overcome the power of the senses by abstaining from evil and performing good deeds instead. After this, we try to find a way to purify the mind and keep it free from the root causes of depression, revealing the easily and not-so-easily seen — including all bad habits that serve as a catalyst in the incessant formation of bad habits.



To put this another way, overcoming the power of the senses is accomplished by bringing actions and speech under control, which is called "ethics"; bringing the mind under control is called "concentration"; and using a trained mind to attain deep, difficult truths and understand them with clarity is called "wisdom" — a wisdom that is able to channel the senses in a proper direction only.



54

Controlling the senses gives the mind a break and stops it from being bombarded by impressions; we can cease being controlled by impressions, whether good or bad. The deep rest that comes from gaining control of the senses serves as food for the mind, food that will sustain us in our efforts to attain higher levels of spiritual practice.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

55

A person can experience penetrating insight into disturbances and delusions, into phenomena that could overcome the mind because it could not keep up with them. This insight severs the roots of all types of delusions: it does away with doubts related to misunderstanding, misguided infatuations, hatred, and confusion. It makes the mind supremely bright, calm, and tranquil.



Merely studying the Dhamma yields speculation or hypothetical knowledge based on reasoning; penetrating insight occurs in the minds of those who have experienced truth in the course of their studies. True practice of the Dhamma involves piercing the curtain of ignorance.



Isn't it amazing how mentally disturbed people can treat their own disorders by opening up being willing to listen to the teachings of other people — they can continue to treat and observe themselves, until they gradually overcome their condition.



People who realize that they are hung up on one of life's problems — and are incessantly being dragged down by delusion (at a base or subtle level) — can overcome this problem by thinking for themselves and asking advice from others who know. Once people have correctly assessed the situation, they can completely overcome their problems, receive clear insight, and experience true happiness.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

59

Penetrating insight comes as the result of surmounting difficult problems; and this insight is a form of spiritual nourishment that comes from the confidence we experience after having successfully solved our problems. This kind of insight is of a higher order; it is more valuable than the resources of a clever salesman, and even materialists will admit that this insight constitutes happiness.



True artists seek happiness by knowing themselves and successfully attaining difficult goals. Artists are not satisfied with the money or prizes they receive — these things are the possessions of businessmen.



Nibbana is the result of penetrating insight; it provides the spiritual sustenance that comes from completely penetrating all of life's problems. At its initial stage, this penetration can be called embarking on the Path, beginning the way.



When the mind is progressively fed and nurtured to the point of attaining nibbana — having eliminated all stains and misguided tendencies — it continues to be nourished by the taste of nibbana. Peace is the flavor of nibbana! And the peaceful mind provides sustenance for other things!



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

63

Peace means the tranquillity that comes from a mind that has attained nibbana or a condition of openness and emptiness that constitutes freedom, a going beyond all things: beyond body and mind, and beyond all the laws limiting body and mind. It is something that no one can put limitations on, except in a hypothetical sense.



When we bathe, we experience the freshness of the water. When the mind attains the final goal, it experiences the tranquillity of nibbana. This tranquillity is a special, spiritual food of the highest order.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

65

As soon as we partake of the highest penetrating insight, all mental obscurities are sloughed off, and the tranquillity of nibbana is experienced. It is difficult to make this generally understood; it is a taste difficult to describe. Even though I would like to tell you about it, I am not exactly sure how to put it.



Don't talk frivolously about the taste of nibbana — even the taste of solitude or the initial stages of concentration are difficult to describe and pin down. This is because these flavors are strange, exotic, and different from those usually experienced by worldly people.



Those who have never tasted something sweet cannot describe what it is like — they can only go around saying “sweet, sweet.” This taste is difficult to explain, just like the taste of nibbana. The taste of nibbana is many times more difficult to explain than the tastes on your tongue — and similes and hypotheses still do not help to convey it.



Those who have never tasted sweetness should not contend that it does not exist in this world. They should look for some sugar to taste in order to find out for themselves what sweetness is all about. Similarly, those who have yet to attain nibbana should not deny its existence. They should strive to taste it for themselves.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

69

The sea and the land meet and are only separated by a fine line. Fish, however, cannot know or imagine what life on land is like. Nibbana is like an island of refuge, but there are very few people who make the supreme effort to swim to it. The same is true for birds caught in a trap — very few ever escape the grasp of the hunter.



70

Those who become immersed in the world and drown in it only realize the material world and its desires, which we have called physical or mundane sustenance. When you only know this one dimension, you refuse to believe that the land or the transmudane exists — just like a fish.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

71

Getting up on land involves eating the spiritual food we have been talking about. These days, there are very few people who are interested in this spiritual food, because few know that there is "land" or even think of climbing up on "land."



There are many levels of spiritual food with many different tastes. Therefore, at any given time it is only natural that people will go around tasting and getting their fill of different things. We can see, however, that there are some people who do not over indulge in this world in the same way that their peers do.



Let us imagine that we are at the seaside: Some people are out there drowning, while some people's heads bob up and down managing to stay above water as they search for the shore. If we expand our view of people in this way, we can see that some are looking for the shore, others can see the shore, others are swimming towards land, some are very close to the beach, others are standing in shallow water, and some have made it ashore and are able to walk on the beach and sit comfortably. What group are you in? No one can answer this better than yourself!



74

As long as the flavor of Lord Buddha's words lingers, there will always be some people who have had more than enough material food, are fed up and bored, and will begin searching for a higher quality of nourishment. These spiritual people will continue to encounter some form of "mind-food" and ponder its flavor anew. There are many higher paths to take after getting your fill of the world.





The goal of this life is to reach the loftiest levels of what it means to be civilized, both in worldly terms and in Dhammic terms. Life, therefore, requires both worldly food and Dhammic food; if you partake of only one of these, then life is merely half full.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu