

Suffering and Sustenance
The Center for Mindful Eating
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First Noble Truth: There is suffering. It's a universal truth, no matter what weight, age, religion, nationality, gender or social status. Everyone suffers. We can experience in many ways: as dread, panic and/or an empty, uneasy hunger/dis-ease that something is lacking or missing and that we need some thing or someone to be at ease with life. In actuality, it is unrealistic to hope for a stress-free life; it makes more sense to learn how to deal with the stresses that inevitably arise.

Sustenance: Can be both physical and spiritual. We need both in order to feel full rather than deprived. Physical food helps our body thrive, be strong and healthy; spiritual sustenance feeds the higher aspects of our being that gives us a kind of nourishment that no amount of physical food can provide. Without both our bodies and our psyches wither.

The formula: Increase sustenance; decrease suffering.

Three kinds of suffering:

1. **The suffering of suffering.** This is the obvious suffering caused by physical discomfort, from the minor pain of stubbing a toe, hunger, and lack of sleep, to the agony of chronic disease. It is also the emotional suffering that arises when one becomes frustrated that things don't go your way, or upset about life's injustices, or worried about weight, money or meeting others' expectations.
2. **The suffering of change.** When you do get what you want, you can't hold onto it. Even if things are going great now, it's just a matter of time that great feeling will fade. The richest, most successful and the most impoverished person in the world will eventually lose everything.
3. **All-pervasive suffering.** This is the type of suffering we are most likely not to recognize, yet the most instructive when we do. It's the general background of anxiety and insecurity that colors even our happiest moments. Deep down, we fear that life doesn't offer us solid ground and that our very existence is questionable. From a Buddhist point of view, these doubts are well-founded, and exploring them offers us glimpses of wisdom

Gratitude and Joy as Sustenance

The aim of spiritual life is to awaken a joyful freedom, a benevolent and compassionate heart in spite of everything.

Gratitude is a gracious acknowledgment of all that sustains us, a bow to our blessings, great and small. We have so much to be grateful for.

Gratitude is confidence in life itself. It is not sentimental, not jealous, nor judgmental. Gratitude does not envy or compare. Gratitude receives in wonder the myriad offerings of the rain and the earth, the care that supports every single life.

As gratitude grows it gives rise to joy. We experience the courage to rejoice in our blessings and in the blessings of others. We do not mistakenly believe it is disloyal to the suffering of the world to honor the happiness we experience.

Like gratitude, joy softens and uplifts the heart. We can be joyful for the foods we are privileged to eat, for people we love, for moments of goodness, for nature, for the breath that sustains us, and as our joy grows, we finally discover happiness without cause. We can rejoice in life itself, in being alive.

A Meditation on Gratitude

Let yourself sit quietly and at ease. Allow your body to be relaxed and open, your breath natural, and your heart easy. Begin the practice of gratitude by feeling how year after year you have cared for your own body, your life. Now let yourself begin to acknowledge all that has supported you in this care:

With gratitude I appreciate the people, animals, plants, insects, creatures of the sky and sea, air and water, fire and earth, all whose joyful exertion blesses my life every day.

With gratitude, I appreciate and accept my body as it is.

With gratitude, I appreciate the wide variety of foods available to me.

With gratitude, I appreciate the safety and well being I have experienced.

With gratitude, I appreciate the measure of health I have been given.

With gratitude, I appreciate the life I have been given and bless all beings.

Sense the feeling of gratitude and the fullness of heart it offers. Allow it to open your heart to the joys as well as secrets and sorrows of your life, knowing that with practice (repeating these phrases several times a day), gratitude continues to grow and deepen. If you miss or avoid the practice, make the intention to begin again. As the saying goes, “fall down 7 times, get up 8.

Articles on Health Benefits of Gratitude

- <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amymorin/2014/11/23/7-scientificallly-proven-benefits-of-gratitude-that-will-motivate-you-to-give-thanks-year-round/#68a43be4183c>
- <http://time.com/5026174/health-benefits-of-gratitude/>
- https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain

Transforming Destructive Thoughts into Sustenance

When you notice ongoing, repeated destructive thoughts, including thoughts of self-judgment, criticism, shame, or unworthiness, it is difficult to feel emotionally full. Instead, you're likely to feel empty, depleted and emotionally hungry, all of which “feed” mindless eating. In short, there is suffering, not sustenance.

How do you work with thoughts that increase suffering and undermine sustenance? Make an effort to work with this particular training for a week or, even better, for a month, six months, for the rest of your life.

1. Become aware of the content and rhythm of the voices inside. Make a list of the ongoing, unhealthy remarks, devastating comments and judgments about your body, eating habits, weight and/or about your whole being. What does this critical commentary sound like? What does it feel like? How do they impact your sense of fullness or depletion, sustenance or hunger?

2. Notice how much suffering these thoughts creates. Feel how they overcome your moods and eating habits, how much they hurt your heart and cause pain in your body such as low energy, mindless eating and mindlessness in general.
3. Notice when these thoughts (or inner dialogue) sound the loudest and most persistent. What situations trigger suffering, self-doubt and self-hatred? When you're alone? Social occasions? Meal or snack time? When you're with or without family and friends? Feel how these thoughts leach the feelings of sustenance from not just your body, but from your heart.
4. Try to keep track of the particular phrases and destructive, unhealthy perspective, the judgment, the shame, the self-denigration that deplete or prevent sustenance.

Develop Sustenance by Decreasing Suffering

1. Create an antidote, a phrase or two or three, that completely transforms the falsehood and negativity of these destructive thoughts. Let the phrases be the most sustaining, uplifting words you can find, even if they don't feel true or unrealistic such as:
 - "My body is a precious vessel"
 - "Suffering and sustenance are contained within each other."
 - "I will live and eat with a sense of nobility and dignity."
 - "I will live my life with trust."
2. You can also use the phrases from loving-kindness (metta) practice:
 - May I love and respect myself just as I am.
 - May I sense my worthiness and well being.
 - May I trust my appetites, emotional and physical.
 - May I hold myself in compassion.
3. Let these phrases of kindness sink in; notice how the mind and heart can slowly become nourished and strong. Visualize each phrase as dropping seeds of sustenance into your body and mind.
4. Commit to working with these sustaining phrases you have chosen, even if they sound false! Pay particular attention to those situations that trigger painful patterns and feelings of depletion. Each time you notice the depleting and destructive thoughts, hold the distress. Then inwardly recite the phrases, with all your heart. Do this over and over again. Remind yourself that you're doing this out of compassion, as a way to transform suffering into sustenance. You may need to say them thousands of times before they work.
5. And they will!

Thank you for attending this webinar.

May you be blessed with the power and joys of emotional sustenance.