The Influxes and Mindful Eating

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

In this article, I study one of the methods for countering the influxes in relation to mindful eating. Instructions on proper partaking of food lead me to argue that the employment of mindfulness in contemporary healthcare settings to improve physical and mental health has an antecedent in early Buddhism.

The Influxes

In previous articles in this journal, I studied the three types of feeling (*vedanā*) and their relation to the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*). In what follows, I take up the influxes (*āsava*), another early Buddhist teaching concerned with describing unwholesome influences in the mind. Exploring methods to counter the influxes leads me to a categorization of two types of feeling, which are related to eating.

In early Buddhist thought the influxes, just as the underlying tendencies, carry invariably negative connotations. The destruction of the influxes, *āsavakkhaya*, is a recurrent epithet for the final goal, and one who has reached that goal is designated as *khīṇāsava*, one who has destroyed the influxes. Both usages reflect the importance accorded to the removal of the influxes in the

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early Buddhist soteriological scheme. The discourses regularly mention three type of influxes:

- the influx of sensuality (*kāmāsava*),
- the influx of becoming (*bhavāsava*),
- the influx of ignorance (*avijjāsava*).

These influxes and the underlying tendencies overlap to some degree in content, since the three influxes listed above are similar to the following three underlying tendencies (out of the standard set of seven):

- the underlying tendency to sensual lust (*kāmarāgānusaya*),
- the underlying tendency to passion for becoming (*bhavarāgānusaya*),
- the underlying tendency to ignorance (*avijjānusaya*).

A difference is that the standard listing of the three influxes speaks just of "sensuality" and "becoming", whereas the corresponding underlying tendencies concern "lust" or "passion", *rāga*, in relation to sensuality and becoming.

In later times a fourth influx was added to the standard set of three, found regularly in the early discourses: the influx of views (*diṭṭhāsava*). This influx also has a counterpart in the standard list of underlying tendencies, the underlying tendency to views (*diṭṭhānusaya*).

Given that the list of influxes does not explicitly reference aversion or anger, it is perhaps unsurprising that the early discourse do not directly relate the influxes to the three types of feeling (which they do with the underlying tendencies).

Nevertheless, a relationship between the influxes and feeling can be seen in the "Discourse on All the Influxes", the *Sabbāsava-sutta* (MN 2). This relationship distinguishes feelings into two types. The resultant twofold distinction differs from the usual analysis of feelings into three types, as found, for example, in the instructions on contemplating feelings in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The distinction in the *Sabbāsava-sutta* is between "old" and "new" types of feeling.

By way of providing a background to the instructions concerning these two types of feeling, I first survey the main teachings of the discourse on how to counter the influxes.

Countering the Influxes

The Discourse on All the Influxes presents seven methods that, in complementary ways, contribute to progress toward the final goal of eradicating the influxes. The main implications of these seven methods appear to be:

- viewing things in terms of the four noble truths instead of speculating,
- guarding the sense-doors,
- using one's requisites properly,
- enduring various hardships,
- avoiding what is dangerous and unsuitable,
- removing what is unwholesome,
- developing the awakening factors.

The first of these methods concerns in particular the need to avoid speculations related to self-notions. Instead, one should rather give attention to the four noble truths. This method and its relation to speculative views makes it quite understandable that the influx of views was eventually added to the standard list of three influxes.

The second method, guarding the sense-doors, is of further interest for appreciating the notion of an "influx". According to the standard instructions for guarding the sense-doors, the task is to avoid the "flowing in", *anvāssavati*, of what is detrimental. The verb used here stands in a close etymological relationship to the term *āsava*, influx.

The description of guarding the sense-doors thus documents that the range of meaning of the term *āsava* is not confined to the nuance of an "outflow".[1] Instead, sense-restraint appears to be concerned with avoiding the *influence* of external factors that adversely affect the mind. Hence the rendering of the term as "influx" seems appropriate for conveying the general sense of influence, whether through external factors or through what originates in the mind.

The third method turns to the requisites of a monastic, which are robes, alms-food, resting place, and medicine, offering advice in relation to each of them. In regard to the requisite of alms-food the two types of feeling are mentioned, which I explore in more detail after having completed my survey of the seven methods.

The fourth method requires that one patiently endures the vicissitudes of climate and various kinds of discomfort; the fifth is about avoiding what is dangerous, such as wild animals and perilous places.

The sixth and seventh methods are concerned with meditative cultivation of the mind, requiring that one overcomes what is unwholesome (sixth) and cultivates the factors of awakening (seventh).

Food Reflection

Returning to the third of these seven methods, the Discourse on All the Influxes (MN 2) offers the following

reflection for countering the influxes when partaking of food: [2]

> Wisely reflecting one partakes of alms-food: not for entertainment, not for intoxication, not for the sake of beautification, and not for becoming attractive, but just for the support and sustenance of this body, for keeping it free of harm and for supporting the celibate life: 'Thus I terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings, and I will be healthy, blameless, and live at ease.'

In this way, even an ordinary activity like eating can be turned into a practice that leads onward to the final goal of full liberation by eradicating the influxes. The task here is mainly to partake of food with the motivation of providing sustenance to the body rather than for the sake of entertaining the taste buds.

The distinction drawn between old and new feelings can be fleshed out with the help of the commentarial exegesis given in the Path to Purification, the *Visuddhimagga*.[3] According to its explanation, the expression "old feelings" refers to hunger and the reference to "new feelings" concerns discomfort resulting from overeating.

Keeping in mind the situation of a Buddhist monastic in the ancient Indian setting helps appreciate this indication. As wandering mendicants, Buddhist monastics lived in a situation of constant uncertainty of their next meal. One day an abundance of food might be offered, but the next day they might receive very little.

Being prohibited from storing any food overnight, there could naturally be a temptation to stuff oneself and overeat, when occasion allows, in order to suffer less if food on the next day's begging round should be scarce. Hence the need to beware of creating the new type of feeling that would result if one were to yield to this temptation.

Eating Mindfully

The overall concern of the Discourse on All the Influxes is the monastic path to awakening. This is evident in the reference to "alms-food" in the passage quoted above, and in its mention of living the "celibate life" (*brahmacariya)*. This does not mean, however, that the need to know proper measure when eating was not also thematized in instructions given to lay disciples.

An illustrative case can be found in a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* that reports a visit paid by King Pasenadi to the Buddha (SN 3.13; a translation of the discourse can be found below in an appendix). The king had greatly overeaten and was panting. Seeing him in this condition, the Buddha is on record for pronouncing the following verse:[4]

> People who are constantly mindful
> Know their measure with the food they have gotten.
> Their feelings become attenuated;
> They age slowly and guard their longevity.

Similar to the food reflection for monastics, the verse refers to feelings. The idea of attenuating feelings can be understood in light of the notion of overcoming old feelings without giving rise to new ones. Taken together, the point appears to be that the reasonable concern to quell feelings of hunger should not get out of hand to the extent that it triggers feelings resulting from overeating.

A significant contribution made by the above verse is the clarification that mindfulness is required. The same would be implicit in the standard food reflection, since the presence of mindfulness could indeed ensure that the body is appropriately sustained, without this becoming an occasion for intoxication.

This requires, as the verse explicitly states, "constant" mindfulness. If mindfulness is continuously pre-

sent during the meal, we will indeed notice clearly when our measure has been reached, when we had enough and it is time to stop eating further. Moreover, a fairly constant presence of mindfulness will also help ensure that we chew properly, instead of gulping down the food and reaching out for the next spoonful before the present one has been properly assimilated.

Noteworthy is the overarching concern in the verse with this-worldly benefits. Even though King Pasenadi was a disciple of the Buddha, the verse does not refer to the central doctrinal teachings of early Buddhism, nor does it evince a clear-cut and explicit relationship to progress to awakening (unlike the food reflection in the Discourse on All the Influxes). Instead, here the central purpose of mindfulness practice is quite clearly an improvement of health.

The *Saṃyutta-nikāya* discourse continues after the above verse by reporting that Pasenadi offered a regular payment to a young man, present on this occasion, asking him to memorize this verse and recite it every time the king took his meal. As a result of being regularly reminded of the advantages of mindful eating, the king gradually lost weight and expressed his indebtedness to the Buddha for benefitting him in the present as well as in the future.

In this way, the Buddha's verse on establishing mindfulness to counter overeating successfully brought about a weight-reduction in King Pasenadi.

This Pāli discourse has two Chinese *Āgama* parallels that proceed similarly. A minor difference concerning the verse spoken by the Buddha is that, instead of a reference to aging slowly, the two Chinese parallels mention good digestion as an outcome to be expected from mindful eating.[5] In fact the term *jīrati* in the verse can mean either "to age" or "to digest", so that this difference is probably merely one of interpretation.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs)

The discourse to King Pasenadi shows that already in the ancient Indian setting instructions on mindfulness were delivered with a clear aim at mundane health benefits. Not only is the Buddha on record for devising a Mindfulness-Based Intervention to reduce overeating that successfully achieves weight-reduction, the narrative even involves a mindfulness-trainer who receives regular payment for delivering instructions in this Mindfulness-Based Intervention. This episode, in the way it has been documented in the early discourses, provides a precedent for contemporary Mindfulness-Based Interventions that are similarly concerned with health-benefits.

Needless to say, weight-reduction is only a marginal aspect of mindfulness in early Buddhist thought. The overarching concern of mindfulness practices is indeed for the sake of progress to liberation. As the presentation in the Discourse on All the Influxes shows, the whole topic of eating (in this discourse not even related to weight reduction) is only a single aspect of one of the seven methods to counter the influxes.

The marginality of the role of mindfulness in this respect may well be why, to the best of my knowledge, the implications of the instructions to King Pasenadi have so far not received the attention they deserve.

The discovery of this antecedent to current mindfulness-based interventions puts into perspective a fairly common impression that the contemporary employment of mindfulness for health care involves a radical departure from Buddhist thought, perhaps even a misappropriation of religious thought for secular purposes.

For example, in his ground-breaking monograph on different aspects of the contemporary spread of mindfulness in secular settings, *Mindful America*, Jeff Wilson argues that: [6]

> The teachings set forth in the new Western literature on mindful eating represent a radically new application of Buddhism (though it is usually presented as if it were traditional).

Such impression and similar criticisms are quite understandable, particularly in view of some of the undesirable developments that have resulted from the current mindfulness-hype. However, as far as authentic interventions in a clinical setting, in education, etc., are concerned, the instruction to King Pasenadi should help to allay such suspicions. The verse on mindful eating and its effect would make it clear that it is in line with what the texts convey to have been the Buddha's own attitude if mindfulness is employed in such a manner.

Appendix: Translation of SN 3.13[7]

[The Buddha] was dwelling at Sāvatthī. At that time King Pasenadi of Kosala ate a potful of rice. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala, replete and panting, approached the Blessed One. Having approached and paid respect to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. Then the Blessed One, realizing that King Pasenadi of Kosala was replete and panting, one that occasion spoke this verse:

> "People who are constantly mindful
> Know their measure with the food they have gotten.
> Their feelings become attenuated;
> They age slowly and guard their longevity."

Now at that time the brahmin youth Sudassana was standing behind King Pasenadi of Kosala. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the brahmin youth Sudassana: "Come, my dear Sudassana, memorize this verse in the presence of the Blessed One and recite it to me when my

meal is served. I will arrange for a hundred coins as a perpetual daily grant to be given to you."

The brahmin youth Sudassana said "Yes, your majesty" in assent to King Pasenadi Kosala, memorized this verse in the presence of the Blessed One, and recited it when a meal was served to King Pasenadi of Kosala:

"People who are constantly mindful
Know their measure with the food they have gotten.
Their feelings become attenuated;
They age slowly and guard their longevity."

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala gradually established himself in taking no more than a normal measure of rice. Then, at another time when his body had become slim, King Pasenadi of Kosala stroked his limbs with his hands and on that occasion uttered this inspired utterance: "For both purposes the Blessed One has had compassion for me: for the purpose of the present and the future."

Abbreviations:
MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*
SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*
Vism: *Visuddhimagga*

[1] The sense of an "outflow" suggests itself from AN 3.25, where the term *āsava* stands for the discharge from a festering sore and thus for something that flows out. This sense has been considered problematic by some scholars, leading them to propose that the term is a maladapted borrowing of Jain terminology; for a critical reply see Anālayo 2012: "Purification in Early Buddhist Discourse and Buddhist Ethics", *Bukkyō Kenkyū*, 40: 67–97 (p. 80ff).
[2] MN I 10: *paṭisaṅkhā yoniso piṇḍapātaṃ paṭisevati: n'eva davāya, na madāya na maṇḍanāya na vibhūsanāya, yāvadeva imassa kāyassa ṭhitiyā yāpanāya vihiṃsūparatiyā brahmacariyānuggahāya: iti purāṇañ ca vedanaṃ paṭihaṅkhāmi navañ ca vedanaṃ na uppādessāmi, yātrā ca me bhavissati anavajjatā ca phāsuvihāro ca ti.*
[3] Vism 33: *purāṇañ ca jighacchāvedanaṃ … navañ ca vedanaṃ aparimitabhojanapaccayaṃ.*
[4] SN I 81: *manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane; tanu tassa bhavanti vedanā, saṇikaṃ jīrati āyu pālayan ti.*
[5] Translated in Anālayo 2018: "Overeating and Mindfulness in Ancient India", *Mindfulness*, 9: 1648–1654 (p. 1649).
[6] Wilson, Jeff 2014: *Mindful America, The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (p. 112).
[7] SN I 81: *sāvatthiyaṃ viharati. tena kho pana samayena rājā pasenadi kosalo doṇapākaṃ sudaṃ bhuñjati. atha kho rājā pasenadi kosalo bhuttāvī mahassāsī yena bhagavā ten'upasaṅkami; upasaṅkamitvā bhagavantaṃ abhivādetvā ekamantaṃ nisīdi. atha kho bhagavā rājānaṃ pasenadiṃ kosalaṃ bhuttāviṃ mahassāsiṃ viditvā tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ gāthaṃ abhāsi: manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane; tanu tassa bhavanti vedanā, saṇikaṃ jīrati āyu pālayan ti. tena kho pana samayena sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadissa kosalassa piṭṭhito ṭhito hoti. atha kho rājā pasenadi kosalo sudassanaṃ māṇavaṃ āmantesi: ehi tvaṃ, tāta sudassana, bhagavato santike imaṃ gāthaṃ pariyāpuṇitvā mama bhattābhihāre bhāsa. ahañ ca te devasikaṃ kahāpaṇasataṃ niccabhikkhaṃ pavattayissāmī ti. evaṃ deva ti kho sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadissa kosalassa paṭissutvā bhagavato santike imaṃ gāthaṃ pariyāpuṇitvā rañño pasenadissa kosalassa bhattābhihāre sudaṃ*

bhāsati: manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane; tanu tassa bhavanti vedanā, saṇikaṃ jīrati āyu pālayan ti. atha kho rājā pasenadi kosalo anupubbena nāḷikodanaparamatāya saṇṭhāsi. atha kho rājā pasenadi kosalo aparena samayena susallikhitagatto pāṇinā gattāni anumajjanto tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi: ubhayena vata maṃ so bhagavā atthena anukampi, diṭṭhadhammikena c'eva atthena samparāyikena cā ti.