Intelligent Heart, The

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A couple years back, someone came out with a book on Buddhism called The Intelligent Heart. Two words we don’t normally put together. Intelligence is a fact, or the mind, we think. But it makes an important point. If you look in the Buddhist teachings, they don’t seem to have a very clear delineation between the way we’re doing things, between heart and mind. The Thais have the word for heart and the word for mind, but they use them interchangeably, as if there were no radical difference between the two. It’s important that we learn to put the two together. But for us, they are two separate things. So that our heart is intelligent, our mind is sensitive to the issues of the heart. It’s only when the two are in constant dialogue that we can achieve a balance in our practice. And that balance is important. Otherwise we fall off to one side in which the meditation simply becomes a technical exercise, and you get proficient at it in the same way that a technician gets proficient at, say, fixing a machine, reducing all of the issues of our heart and mind to the kind of mechanics of perception, the mechanics of a technique that you can apply to the mind. And then there’s the other side where the meditation becomes more of an emotional thing. Like the quote we talked about today, sometimes it could seem like the whole purpose of this is to have a good cry and then feel better afterwards. The thing is, we’ve got to learn how to practice that down the middle there, between those two attitudes. There is a technical aspect to the meditation, and there is a more emotional aspect. And the two have to be brought together for them to make any really good radical changes in the mind, radical changes in the heart. Theravada is often portrayed as a very dry and unemotional religion, but there are emotions that light its heart. Sanghvega, Sanghvega is there to give us a sense of the enormousness of the project ahead of us. Basically, what it comes down to is a sense of how meaningful our lives normally are, how petty our concerns are in face of the larger horror of aging, illness, and death. But if it’s stopped there, it would be very depressing. When you look at aging, illness, and death, you go into old people’s homes. You stay around people who are getting old and ill and losing their faculties, and you realize what a miserable way this is to end your life. We like to think a human life would have a nice rounded-off ending, but it doesn’t. It just strays off into loose ends. The mind that used to be able to think clearly can’t even form a clear concept at all. The body that used to be able to do good work lies around helpless. And if we don’t die a slow death from old age, well, there are accidents that happen, diseases that knock us out. Many times, in the midst of something, you’re on your way to an important meeting and, whoop, there you go, that’s it. You’re in the midst of a big project that means a lot to you, and suddenly the heart stops. When you really stop to think about it, life begins to seem very meaningless, very arbitrary. Often we just sort of brush that aside and go on with our normal affairs. But when we do that, we limit ourselves. We put big blinders on our minds and desensitize ourselves to the big issue in life. What was remarkable about the Buddha was that he took on that issue and wanted to do something about it. That’s where the second emotion comes in, pasada, conviction that there’s a way out. In particular, the story that they tell of the Buddha’s decision to leave the forest. It was because, after seeing the old person and the ill person and the dead person, he then saw a forest contemplative, a wandering monk, and decided that if there was a way out, it was that kind of life that was going to provide the way out. With little more than that conviction, he left his home, he left his family, and went out into the forest. It was that conviction that kept him going all the way through, even when he found that the teachers of his time didn’t have a real answer to his question and when severe asceticism didn’t provide the answer. He didn’t give up. He kept looking for something that would work. That conviction, that confidence, the word is also used to mean the clarity of water in a still lake, clean water in a still lake. So it’s all of those connotations together, the clarity, the confidence, the conviction. That’s the other side. That’s the emotional side of the life of a Buddhist meditation, Buddhist practice. So you take the two of them together. Sanghvega, a sense of awe, a sense of urgency that something’s got to be done about this. You can’t just keep on living in your petty way. It’s a big issue that we’re facing here. So our practice has to be a large practice as well. It can’t just be a technique and it can’t just be some emotional catharsis. You’ve got to work down the middle between the two. If we turn everything just into a technique, it turns into a type of attachment, what the Buddha called attachment to precepts and practices. It’s one of the four forms of clinging that lead to suffering. The commentaries often say, “Well, this refers to ceremonial practices, rituals, and other religions.” But when you look at the text, when the Buddha is talking about a particular practice that has to be abandoned for the mind to open up, it’s the practice of jhana, which is actually part of the path. It’s a good thing we have to do, but you can’t treat it simply as a particular technique that’s going to get you there without taking on the larger issues of your mind, the larger issues of your heart. For that, you keep reminding yourself of the big issues, the aging, illness, and death, that’s in store for you. If you don’t get your mind in good shape, you’re really going to be in bad shape when those things begin to hit. You see the difference between people who’ve been practicing and those who haven’t. As Death approached, as I said, with Ajahn Suat, he commented to me the last time I saw him that his brain was sending him all sorts of strange messages, but he had the mindfulness to recognize them as strange messages. He also said, “But that thing that he got through his meditation, that hasn’t changed. That was still there.” Compare that to someone who hasn’t been practicing as their mind begins to go. They see snakes in the dining room, dogs in the living room, evil people out on the property, and believe 100 percent that their perceptions must be true. All sorts of things can haunt the mind of a person who hasn’t trained the mind, hasn’t learned to look at its thoughts simply as an observer, without getting tied up in them, hasn’t learned to look at its emotions without getting tied up in them. So the technical part of the practice is there to serve the larger issue of being able to negotiate aging, illness, and death and not suffering. So try to keep both of these dimensions in mind, both the dimension of the heart, as we conceive it as something separate, and the dimension of the mind. Learn how to bring them together so that your heart does become an intelligent heart. Learn when to interfere with what’s going on in the mind and when to simply watch. If you can’t figure out anything, just be very patient. Learn to have the patience of just sitting there and watching what’s going on until you begin to notice something that gives you a handle on the situation. We have the technique of the breath. We have the technique of dealing with the breath, and that can give you a foundation. But just that simple technique is not going to take care of everything. You have to use your own powers of observation. Keep your gaze broad so that it encompasses both the mind and the heart in a singular field of vision. So the meditation of the mind, the meditation of the heart, doesn’t veer off into simple technicalities, and it doesn’t veer off into mere emotionalism. The emotional side has to be there, and the active side of the mind, analyzing, has to be there as well. It’s important that we learn to bring the two of them together so that this heart-mind of ours does come back together. The breadth of that vision, the all-inclusiveness of that vision, is what leads to real wisdom, and real discernment. So you see where you’re placing your hopes for happiness, and you can gauge whether this is something that’s intelligent or not. Several weeks back, I was teaching in Laguna Beach. We raised the issue of how to find true happiness, and that there were gradations. Some forms of happiness were wiser than others. Someone who was very new to the practice immediately objected, “How can anyone dare pass judgment on what he finds as happiness?” That was his objection. And in a world where actions didn’t have consequences, no one would have a right to pass judgment in any way. And even in a world where actions do have consequences, it’s not the question that we’re passing judgment to make you feel bad, make a person feel bad, but simply to say there may be something better, maybe some wiser way of looking for happiness, a more intelligent way of looking for happiness. It means bringing the heart and the mind together, working together on this project, rather than simply demanding on the independence of the heart, “I’m going to find happiness where I want to find it, and nobody can tell me any better.” That attitude goes nowhere. People can simply get stuck in their ways. End of discussion. And yet they still go ahead and they suffer. So the Buddha’s purpose is not to pass judgment on people, but to say, “Look, you’re causing yourself suffering, and it’s a big issue, and you don’t know how much suffering that’s going to be.” But here’s a way out. It involves developing qualities that we tend to associate with the mind—mindfulness, alertness, clarity. Also qualities associated with the heart—compassion, goodwill, sympathetic joy, sanghvega, that sense of awe, conviction, pasada, that sense of confidence. Get them all working together on this path, and then you find that they develop the mind and the heart in ways that make a radical difference in both. If you’re working on only one side, the difference is not all that radical. It touches only part of you. What you want is something that you can really give your whole life to because it transforms your whole heart and mind and leads to a happiness that isn’t even limited by that conjunction of heart and mind. It’s even bigger than that. So as we work on the technicalities of meditation, always try to keep the larger picture in mind. When you sense the importance of the larger picture, realize that a lot of it has been the solution to the problem of sanghvega. The problem of aging, illness, and death lies in being very, very careful about how you approach the present moment so that larger picture doesn’t blur off into vagueness and the technicalities don’t become ritualistic. This is how you keep your whole practice in perspective, and how that larger perspective keeps your practice on course.

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