Expanding Your Awareness

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The mind in concentration, the Buddha calls the enlarged mind, or the expanded mind. Mahagatanga-cittam, expanded mind. There are two ways you can expand it. One is through developing the sublime attitudes. May all living beings be happy. May they be free from stress and pain. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained. All living beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir. We apply these thoughts to everybody, all living beings of all kinds. There’s one chant that specifically directs you to think these thoughts in specific directions. First to the east and then west, north and then south. Northeast, southwest. Southeast, northwest, above and below. All ten directions. Sometimes that’s a useful exercise. You’ve got yourself sitting right here in the middle. Now think of all the beings off to the east. Wish them good will. Now think of all the beings off to the west, and so on around the directions. They say that Ajahn Mun did this three times a day, right after waking up in the morning, right after waking up from his midday nap, and before going to bed at night. It helps keep everything in perspective. You realize that what you’re doing here as a meditator is in a larger context. You can think of all the beings that you’re dependent on for your food, your clothing, your medicine. You realize there’s been a lot of suffering. Some beings gave their lives, and not willingly. Other people had to help in the transport of these things, in the preparation. It finally gets to you, simply because you’ve got this body that needs these things. They say in the suttas that one of the most important motivations for people to practice is that the higher your attainment in the meditation, the more the results will spread to the people who supported you, the beings who supported you. This gives a lot to the old idea that arahants are practicing just for their own good. One of the reasons they practice to become arahants is so that the fruit of the merit that comes from supporting them will be great. So one way that you can show goodwill to all beings and really help them be happy is to sit here and practice, to work on your mind. Another way of expanding your awareness is to keep it expanded through the body. That’s when we work with the breath energy in the body. When you get a sense of comfort, think of it seeping out through all the channels of the body in whatever way it’s going to go. If you try to force it, of course, you create more problems, but allow it to spread. Think of it spreading out, leaking out your fingers, leaking out your toes, all directions. You get a sense of ease flowing out through the pores. This kind of expanded awareness helps keep your concentration grounded, the concentration that comes from the four sublime attitudes. You can get a little amorphous sometimes, so it’s good to have a grounding right here in the body. When you have the combination of the two of them, then you’ve got the ideal state of mind for working on awakening. Some of the texts talk about developing the seven factors of awakening based on goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, appreciation, and equanimity. Others talk of the factors of awakening being based on this enlarged state of awareness in the body. They’ve got the foundation right here. And even in day-to-day life, these two forms of expanded awareness are really good, really helpful. So you’re working on restraint of the senses. That can get a sense of being really confined at times. You can’t look at this, you can’t look at that without having to think of the other side. But looking and seeing and everything becomes a real chore. Well, part of the practice is to realize it’s just that. If you’re going to look in a responsible way, you have to take responsibilities for the mental states that are going to arise from the way you look and the way you listen. Before, we tend to be pretty irresponsible in our looking and our listening and our smelling and our tasting and our touching. One reaction as you try to get responsible for these things is you feel that you can’t look here, you can’t listen to that, and all of a sudden you feel very confined. This is why it’s useful to develop these expanded mind states. One is so you don’t have that feeling of being confined, and the second is that these expanded mind states make it possible. Keep your priorities in mind. When you focus on looking at things in such a way as to give rise to lust, or give rise to anger, or give rise to greed, you narrow your awareness down to very small details, the little things that excite lust, the little things that provoke your anger, and you lose sight of the larger picture. Secondly, the reason you’re trying to feed off those things is because there’s a sense of dis-ease in the present moment. So you keep those sublime attitudes in mind as a way of keeping the larger picture in mind, and keep your awareness suffusing the body as a way of creating a sense of ease so you don’t have to go looking for gratification in sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, either liking them or disliking them. You’ve got good food right here. You don’t have to go feed in the garbage piles. And when your awareness is all around, you start seeing things in the mind that you didn’t see before. You catch sight of little motions in the mind out of the corner of your eye that you’d miss if your awareness were too narrowly focused. So this practice of expanding your awareness and keeping it expanded is a really important part of the practice. It provides nourishment for the mind in all kinds of ways and keeps your perspective straight. That your meditation, if you do it properly, really is a gift not only to yourself but to everybody around you. That kind of nourishment helps keep the practice going.

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