The Heart Leaps Up

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It’s important to remember as we practice that this is an eightfold path. It’s not a onefold path. The Buddha never promised that simply by being mindful, being alert, or being concentrated would do the job. Simply having a right view is not enough. The same holds for all the other right factors of the path. Just one factor on its own doesn’t do all the work. You have to bring them all together as you practice. And, of course, you’ll emphasize one factor more than others at a particular time. But it’s important that, as you emphasize that factor, you bring in as many of the others as you can. There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when the mind gets concentrated and you try to incline it towards putting an end to self-identification or putting an end to ignorance, you find that the mind may not necessarily leap up, or, as he says, the heart doesn’t leap up. So there you have right view and you’ve got right concentration, but the heart still isn’t leaping up. The element of leaping up is actually an element of right effort combined with right view. We actually try to generate the desire to point out to yourself that if you can’t do that, you have disadvantages of holding on to a particular self-identity. And this is a combination of concerted effort and also it takes time for the mind to mature in this direction. Because as you get into a particular state of concentration, the mind may not necessarily leap up. You first have to settle in, indulge in it. You have to enjoy it, see it as something really good, before you’re going to be ready to go beyond it. That’s another principle we have to be alert to. Being careful not to push things too much or too fast. The mind has its own rhythms, it has its own pace at which it’s going to mature. So you have to take that into consideration as well. That’s part of right effort. And the maturity also comes with developing all the factors of the path as you practice right speech, practice right action. Practice right livelihood. And you get more and more sensitive to not only the blatant forms of wrong speech, wrong action, and wrong livelihood, but some of the more subtle ones as well. You see that simply the fact that you exist as a being places a burden on other beings, other people. We all have to feed in order to exist as beings. This is one of the basic insights the Buddha taught even to little novices to get them started on this contemplation. As we come into the world, we just feed whatever is given to us. We don’t know where it comes from, but we know what things taste good, what things don’t taste good, the things we like, the things we don’t like. There’s a very strong passion that develops around that. It’s because we suffer from hunger. Being a being requires hunger. We have to eat. And even though eating can take the hunger away for a little while, it never really banishes that hunger. It just staves it off for a little while and keeps coming back, coming back. So it involves hunger, it requires hunger. If you weren’t hungry, you wouldn’t eat. So you look at all the ways that we try to gain a livelihood so we can stay alive and keep on eating. And yet you have to realize that it’s a form of suffering, not only for the beings that have to provide the food, but also simply for the fact that you have to keep on eating. So you combine that insight with the right resolve that you don’t want to be harmful. And when it really hits home, that your continued existence as a being involves harm of some sort, that’s when the mind begins to incline more and more to going beyond self-identity. This doesn’t mean that we try to annihilate or bring about annihilation. It’s simply that we try to let go of that sense of our self-identity, of who we are, which, as the Buddha freely admits, is easier said than done. It’s a form of renunciation. Renunciation is not something that comes automatically to everybody, or to anybody, but the Buddha himself said that his mind didn’t even leap up at the idea of letting go of his sensual pleasures and practicing jhana until he had thoroughly contemplated the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, sensual passions, and that element of desire that would induce his heart to leap, to find that it was strong enough. So you have to bring in all the elements of the path for a liberating insight to arise. You can’t hope it’s simply noting or simply scanning the body. Any mechanical process like that is going to bring about true insight. It’s really going to enable you to let go. The same holds true with concentration. The Buddha never said that concentration automatically leads to awakening on its own. You have to bring in this quality of insight, along with the stillness, along with the calm. Insight is not something separate from the jhana, but it’s a maturing of the jhana experience. As the Buddha describes it, you learn how to ask the question, “Well, how should I look at fabricated things?” And the answer, as you look at them, is, “Impermanent, stressful, inconstant, stressful, not-self, empty, void, alien, a disease.” Any of the aspects that gives rise to dispassion, disenchantment. The word for disenchantment, nibbidha, can also be translated as revulsion or disgust or distaste, which, again, is related to this process of eating. You realize that you’ve been feeding on all these things all the time, if not physically, then emotionally or mentally. Then comes the point when you realize that you’ve had enough. This requires all eight factors of the path, all eight folds of the path, to mature the mind in this direction. It finally does leap up. It’s the abandoning of this “I-making” and “my-making” that we do so much. It finally breaks through ignorance. If not, we just stay stuck on the path. That’s not a bad place to be, on the path. But if you’re stuck on the path, it means that you’re not practicing all the factors, and they’re not in proper balance yet. The Buddha’s image is of holding on to a branch that has sap. Your hand gets stuck to the branch. In the same way with the concentration, you’re going to get stuck to the concentration. And it’s normal that this is part of the practice. Again, you have to indulge in it and enjoy it, so you really get settled into it. So there will be an element of attachment. But to wash away the sap requires the solvent of discernment. And the discernment is not just an intellectual understanding. It’s something that comes with the whole heart. The part that’s feeding all the time finally realizes it’s had enough, and you really do have the desire to let go. So keep this in mind, that the process of meditation is a maturation. A simple mechanical mindfulness exercise or concentration on its own can’t do all the work. It has to be nurtured. As the Buddha said, “Concentration nurtured by virtue has a great reward.” Discernment nurtured by concentration has a great reward. When the mind is nurtured by discernment, that’s when it gains release. The word “mind” here can also be translated as “intent,” which is largely focused on the concentration, getting the mind to be still. It has to be further nurtured by the discernment, which is quality both of the mind and of the heart, so that the path leads to its intended goal, beyond something that you simply do. It’s a whole different dimension. There’s no need to feed at all. It’s something hard for us to get our minds around—not feeding. But as the Buddha promises, it’s there, totally without hunger, totally without blame or harm. The happiness that’s full and complete and perfect in every way.

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