Heart & Mind

March 30, 2010

We are training the mind because it’s the most important thing in our lives. The mind is what shapes our actions, and our actions shape our experience. It’s important to note that the word mind in Pali, citta, covers both what we would call mind and heart in English. In other words, we’re dealing both with thoughts and with emotions, because there’s no real radical difference between the two. If you look at any emotion, there’s going to be a thought triggering it. And if you look at thoughts, there’s usually a feeling, a whole complex of associations that go along with it. So it’s not like we’re simply training the mind to be clever in its thinking. But also to learn how to deal with emotions as they arise. This is where the breath is really useful. Because really strong emotions are basically thoughts that have an impact on the body. So it’s not just something going through the brain, but you feel it in the way of patterns of tension in different parts of the body, the way your heart gets raced. The way you feel cold with fear, hot with anger. These things are directly related to the breath energy, which is why the Buddha has his focusing not just on ideas of right view, but encourages us to reclaim the body as well. So we fill the space of the body with our awareness so we know what’s really going on and can have some control over it. We may not like the idea of controlling our emotions. It sounds heartless. But we’re fabricating emotions anyway. Sometimes we may feel that our emotions are what we really are. But if you look at the matter very closely, you’ll begin to realize that a lot of your emotions come from ideas you’ve picked up from people, fears, expectations that over the course of time you’ve clustered up a lot of different thoughts and associations. Which means they’re habitual, not necessarily natural. They’re habitual. And you can ask yourself, “Are these good habits?” And as with any habit, you can learn to retrain yourself. But we have to deal both with the physical and with the mental side if we’re going to have any hope to have any real understanding about what’s going on. Because if you simply try to think your way around an emotion, it’s not going to work because the body’s screaming at you. So you have to learn how to inhabit the body in a way that you bring awareness to it. As the Buddha said, this process of fabricating emotions, if we do it with ignorance, it’s going to cause suffering. If we do it with knowledge, it actually becomes part of the path. Because there are three things here. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the breath. And breath here is conceived in very broad terms as the energy flowing through the body. It courses along the bloodstream, goes through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin. There are different levels of energy, different levels of subtlety, different ways in which this energy either moves or stays still, but it’s still energy. And it’s important to get in touch with it, because it shapes all the other functioning of the body. And if you can get the breath on your side, it’s a lot easier to deal with a difficult emotion. You remind yourself that no matter how bad your anger may be or your fear may be, you’ve still got the breath and you can still decide that you’re going to breathe in a way that’s more calming, more nourishing. This is why we practice learning how to deal with the patterns of tension in the body, to breathe through them, because a lot of the physical reaction to anger or fear, whatever the emotion, is directly related to those patterns of tension which build up to the point where they seem unbearable and you just have to get them out of your system. Well, this is a much more skillful way of getting them out. You breathe through them. You notice where the tension is, you notice where you can relax it, you notice how you can breathe to restore a sense of well-being in the body. And the more that you fully inhabit the body, the more quickly you can pick up the germs of an emotion. As they begin to go away, they begin to grow. And the more quickly you can pick them up, the less damage they do. You sense there’s a little tension here, a little tightness, and you breathe right through it. Then you ask yourself, “Okay, what was the issue?” This is the other part of fabrication. It’s called verbal fabrication, the way you think about things, the internal dialogue. This is where we re-educate our thoughts and views. We have lots of ways of thinking about things that just simply stir up old issues. This is why it’s good when you’re meditating, to notice that things are coming up which may get normally buried by the day-to-day agitation on the surface of the water in your life. But when the water grows still and there’s not much happening around you, these things will start bubbling up. And in the beginning of the meditation, you’re told simply to breathe through any thought energy. That’s your first line of defense. But it doesn’t mean that’s what you’re going to be doing all the time. Certain thoughts come up and you can notice that they have a holding power on the mind. They keep coming back again and again, and they keep starting to pull on you. So you have to look into that and see, “Why do I believe this?” This is where you might want to be an anthropologist from Mars. Why would I believe this particular thought? Why would I believe that particular idea? Learn to develop the observer that looks at things with curiosity and a sense of their strangeness. Then you can replace ideas that you recognize as unskillful with more skillful ones. In other words, when anger comes up and you tell yourself, “I’ve got to get back at that person,” stop and think, “Well, if you get back at that person, what’s that going to do?” Well, it’s going to create a cycle of revenge back and forth, because they’re going to want to get back at you. What does that accomplish? So remind yourself of that. And you can think about how many times in the past you’ve acted on your anger and your regret at it. So you want to replace thoughts of anger with thoughts of good will, starting with yourself, remembering that you don’t want to harm yourself, which includes, ultimately, that you don’t want to harm other people, and remembering the danger of letting emotions take over. So if the emotion is really strong, it’s like, “I’m not going to act right now. I’m going to wait until things calm down, and then I’m going to say something or do something.” In other words, you learn to think about your emotion in new ways, the ways of expressing the emotion, the ways of dealing with it. You learn to think about that in new ways, realizing that you have other alternatives than the ones that you’ve gotten accustomed to. Then finally, there’s what’s called mental fabrication. Feelings and perceptions. Feelings here are just the feeling tones of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And again, learning how to breathe skillfully in the midst of difficult situations can give you a foundation of well-being inside, so you don’t feel so oppressed, so hemmed in by events, that regardless of what’s happening outside, you can still breathe and you can still inhabit the full space of your body with good breath energy. So you’re acting from a position of strength. At the same time, you’re learning how to change your perceptions, the mental labels you apply to things, the images that come up in your mind. It’s all too often said that when we’re angry at somebody, it’s almost as if we’re putting ourselves on a bench. A judge’s bench, and saying, “Well, this person is good, that person is bad. I’ve got to deal with this in this way. I’ve got the power and the right to deal with it in this way.” The Buddha has you hold a different image in mind. Just think of yourself as a person crossing the desert. You’re hot, tired, thirsty, trembling with thirst. And you come across the footprint of a cow, and there are little puddles, and the cow’s footprints, and there’s the water you need. But if you try to scoop up the water with your hand, you’re going to get it muddy, so you have to get down and slurp it up. It’s not a very dignified position, but you need the water. What are you going to do? In the same way that the Buddha said that when you find yourself really oppressed by other people’s bad habits, bad actions, bad thoughts, bad words, try to focus on where there is goodness in that person. Because your mind needs the goodness of other people, your heart needs the goodness of other people, in order not to wither up and dry. So you have to remember that you’re not endowed with the strength to be a judge, where you’re totally impervious to your views on humanity. Because if you see everybody as bad, it’s going to be hard for you to do good. Or if you see specific other people as bad, it’s very hard to do good to them. You’ve got to realize, again, that they’ve got some goodness someplace. Look for it and use that as nourishment. So again, you’re replacing one set of mental images with another set. This way you learn how to take your emotions apart and put them back together in a more skillful way, realizing that, after all, they are fabricated. So you might as well fabricate them with knowledge, with awareness, with intentions that you really can be proud of and give your full assent to, and find yourself totally helping the helpless and the victim of your emotions. Because again, they’re not a necessary part of your nature. They’re habits that you build up. So you can see that these habits are unskillful, and you’ve got the tools to develop more skillful habits in their place. In particular, working with the breath. Because without this sense of understanding the breath energy in the body and really being in touch with it and being very sensitive to the slightest changes that happen in it, you’re just left with the mental and verbal tools, which are not strong enough to deal with your emotions. You need this physical side as well. So you’re training the heart and the mind together, because they are. Two sides of one thing. The effects of the heart and mind show up in the breath, but you can also learn how to use the breath as a means of stripping the power of some of the unskillful emotions that you find taking over your life. This way the training deals with the whole of your heart and mind, and not just one part. So that your mind becomes your friend and not your enemy. Your heart becomes your friend and not your enemy. Because you’ve learned to understand that from all sides.

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