Humane Mind, Intelligent Heart

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The Pali word citta means both heart and mind, and that’s what we’re training as we meditate—both the thinking processes of the mind and the feelings of the heart. And all that we learn to take these things apart. There’s the pleasure and the pain and the pain of feelings and the fabrication of thoughts. They usually go together. When there’s a strong emotion, it’s both a feeling and a thought. Concentration practice is a way of taking care of both sides, of healing both sides, giving the mind a place to rest and giving it good things to think about that are actually healing for its feelings. You might think of it as the goose that lays golden eggs. You want to feed it well, take care of it, make sure it doesn’t have any diseases, and it’ll just keep on laying the golden eggs. The insights that you want are the gold. You want to make sure you don’t get too eager for the insights that you want. It’s to the point where you try to open up the goose, get the gold out, because that kills the goose, and then there’s no more gold. So in the Buddha talks about caring for the mind, there’s both the insight side and the tranquility side. There are factors for awakening. There are the calming factors, and then there are the energizing factors. And you need both. And you need to learn how to read the symptoms of your body and mind to figure out what you need right now. Because the way you think is also going to be affected by the state of the body. When you’re feeling sick, when your energy level is down, it’s hard to think clearly. And so you need a meditation that gives you more energy. When the mind is too active, you need a way for calming it down. And calming it doesn’t mean just forcing it. You have to think your way, sometimes, into getting the mind to be willing to settle down. Because it will tell itself, “I have all these other things I have to think about. People I have to be responsible for. People I have to worry about. Other responsibilities. I just can’t let the mind be still.” Or the voice that says, “Remember that image of the man with that turban on fire, or his hair on fire? I’ve got to be really quick. And in a hurry to get this meditation work done.” And so you have to learn how to counteract those thoughts. Yes, we do want to be heedful, and we do want to be responsible. But we have to understand that heedfulness sometimes means being very careful, very meticulous, looking after the mind. Being responsible means also looking after the mind. If you don’t look after your own mind and you’re only concerned about looking after other people, you begin to wear out. You begin to feel frazzled. Your thinking isn’t as clear as it should be. And part of you feels oppressed by the responsibility. So it’s important to learn how to think about the way you run your mind, the way you look after your body, that gives space for the mind to be in concentration. It’s that phrase we chant just now, having respect for concentration. Realizing that if there’s anything good that’s going to come out of the mind, it has to come from a quiet mind, a still mind. And then learning how to think in ways that encourage that. One passage where the Buddha divides thinking into two sorts. There’s just regular thinking and there’s objectification. Objectification is the kind of thinking that causes conflicts, that comes back and attacks you. You turn yourself into an object, and once you’re an object, you’re a living being that needs food, you need your territory, you need your space, you need all these requisites. You start laying claims to the world and to other people. But of course the other people, they’re busy objectifying themselves, too, and they may not like your claims. So there’s a lot of conflict there. And just taking on an identity, you have to worry about where your food is going to come from, where your clothing, where your shelter, and not just physical food, but also mental and emotional food. That kind of thinking is the kind of thinking that creates trouble. And particularly while we’re meditating, we just want to do the type of thinking that looks at things in terms of processes, this process of action and its result, karma and its result, your intentions and their results, looking at them as processes. That kind of thinking can be useful up to a point. And part of that thinking includes the ability to tell yourself how to stop thinking, or how to put down a thought when you realize that it’s going in the wrong direction, pulling you away from your concentration, raising questions that you’re not ready to answer yet. Of course, this doesn’t mean you don’t realize or raise any questions at all. But whatever questions do come up, you have to learn how to read what they’re doing to the mind. Some questions actually help you understand things and put down a lot of your old, unhealthy, unskillful habits. And other questions just pull you away. Sometimes you have issues of your life that you’ve got to think about. And you have to ask yourself, “Exactly how much am I ready to deal with those things?” Well, you try to make the mind as quiet as possible. Pose the question in your mind and then just put it down. And while you’re quieting the mind, you cannot allow yourself to think about it. You really want to get away from it for a while. And then, at the end of the meditation, allow the question to come up again and see what the mind has to say. Now, there’s no good guarantee that out of the quiet mind comes wisdom. But if something seems good, if something seems to make sense, if you feel right about it, well then put it to the test. This is what it means to learn how to look at the mind as processes, cause and effect. Then you get to know the skillfulness of the cause by being able to evaluate the effect. It may sound a little bit too analytical, but remember, we’re doing this for the purpose of true happiness. This is what the heart really wants. So we’re trying to use all of our mental abilities, analytical abilities, to bring about the heart’s true desire. So it’s not just an intellectual exercise. You’re learning how to bring your heart and mind together. Because the division between the two is really artificial. When they’re sharply divided, your life is going to be a mess. Your emotions pull you one way and your thoughts pull you another way. But you can learn how to get them to work. You can use your understanding to clarify your emotions. And you can test your sense of well-being to show yourself how well your thoughts are working, how much you really understand what you’re doing. The same holds true for dealing with physical illness. You’re sitting, you’re breathing. You’re trying to think, at the same time that your brain feels a little bit under a fog. Fortunately, you don’t have to do a lot of abstract analysis. Just work with the breath and the different parts of the body. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing is going to be helpful? Where are the diseases in my body? Which parts of the body are not getting enough blood circulation? Which parts of the body need to be soothed? Which parts need to be invigorated?” Pose these questions in the mind and then start experimenting. Remember that story about Ajahn Lee treating himself for his heart attack with the breath? Of course, he had strong powers of concentration that he’d already developed. But still, that story shows you what the breath can do. And by working with the breath, you help keep the mind from focusing on how it doesn’t like being ill or any other thoughts that would add to the problem. Knowing that you have something to do makes all the difference in the world. It’s like the men in Shackleton’s expedition. They had to abandon their ship and they were trudging across the ice, putting their boats in the water and not knowing really where they were going to end up. Things looked pretty hopeless. But they knew that there were certain things that they had to do. There was a certain discipline they had. So they focused on the discipline. So instead of thinking about how inevitable death was going to be, they knew you have to keep up your spirits, you have to keep focused at whatever work you’re doing. And that’s how they all got through—focused on what they could do, where they could make a difference. So the work of concentration is a healing work. And as with all healing processes, you have to do what you can. Now, you can’t determine ahead of time that health is going to come or the solution to a problem is going to come right at the time you want it. But you know that you have something you can do. You can work directly with the causes. One of the main causes of the health of the body is the breath. One of the main causes of the health of the mind is its ability to be clear, to think when it wants to think and to not think when it doesn’t want to think. To be alert and mindful. As Jhan Li once said, it’s like having a medicine dissolved in a solvent. The solvent here is the breath and the medicine itself is the mindfulness and alertness. And you can use this medicine to treat your mind or you can use this medicine to treat your body. And as with some medicines, sometimes it’s like a cream. For a rash on your skin, you put the cream on and then you’ve got to let it stay there. Otherwise it can’t do its healing work. So when the mind does settle down and there’s a little voice that says, “Okay, what’s next?” You say, “Well, this is what’s next. More of the same. More stillness.” And part of it will say, “Well, what are you going to learn by just being still?” You learn the skill of being still, because other things are going to come up and they’re going to challenge the mind. And if you don’t have any discernment, you’re not going to be able to maintain this stillness. So it’s not that stillness is something radically separate from insight. There are the insights that are needed in order to maintain the stillness. You’ve got to learn those. And you learn that the mind has a lot of tricks it can play on itself. You learn all the different tricks, all the different ways the mind deceives itself, so that when insights do arise, you’re less likely to be deceived by them. So this is how you get the heart and the mind to work together. So they can be one and the same thing. That’s the Pali way. Or the way Citta indicates. You make your heart intelligent and you make your mind humane. And when they work together, they can do wonders.

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