The Garden of the Mind

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Training the mind is like planting and caring for a garden. You first have to clear the ground. In other words, make sure your precepts are good. And make sure the soil is rich. If the soil is sandy, you add more fertilizer. In other words, you practice generosity. Without the generosity of the mind, without the virtue, concentration and discernment are not going to develop in the right way. They can develop, but they don’t show their full power. They don’t give their full results. As the Buddha said, a stingy person cannot attain even the levels of jhana, much less any of the higher attainments. So make sure the soil is good. Make sure that the land is cleared. And then you plant your crops. Plant the plants that you want. This refers to your intentions. You set up the intention. You’re going to train the mind. You’re here for an hour. You’re going to make the best use of this hour. You’re going to focus on the breath. Then you have to take care of that plant. One thing you’ll notice, of course, is that other plants are going to come up. These are the weeds, and you have to cut them out. And don’t be surprised if when you cut out a weed that it comes back. The weeds won’t go until you’ve pulled them up by the root. But as you’re getting started, you just cut things down to the ground level so that the plants you want will have some space. Don’t get crowded out by the weeds. Otherwise you don’t have a garden. You have an empty, vacant lot that becomes full of all kinds of nasty briars. And then all kinds of things can hide in there. So you make sure the weeds are cut away. And be careful that you don’t plant the wrong plants. There are some plants that look nice, but they’re bad for your garden, like putting eucalyptus in your garden. It smells nice, but after a while you begin to realize that it’s killing everything else. Otherwise you develop wrong views about the practice. It’ll kill off your practice. They may seem nice, they may seem harmless, but they’re poisonous for the plants that you want. So you have to recognize what’s a genuine weed and what’s not. Sometimes your ideas of what you’re going to fix tomorrow in the kitchen come in. “Well, that’s eucalyptus. It kills your concentration. And it’s a nice plant. And it’s a well-meaning intention. But this is not the time for that. This is not the plant you want in your garden. It’s going to kill the roses. It’s going to kill all the other plants that you want.” So even good thoughts that are not related to what you’re doing right now, you’ve got to cut them away, too. And then you have to learn how to care for the plant. One of the big lessons you’ve got to learn is that you can’t do a lot of the work for the mind. The mind has its own way of growing in concentration. And it may take more time than you expect. But you’ve got to be patient. Your duty is to water the roots, give fertilizer, make sure no insects crawl on it, make sure the hindrances don’t come crawling over your mind. But the growing is something that the mind is going to do for itself. In other words, you can’t determine that today you’re going to sit and meditate and get a sense of light inside, or things will settle down just the way you want, or you’ll gain this insight or that insight. When you push it too much in that direction, it’s like pulling on the plant to make it taller, or taking a knife to the stems and trying to see where on the stem there’s a leaf that’s going to come out at the end of the stem. You end up killing the plant. Your duty is just to make sure that the conditions are right, and the plant will do what it needs to do. It’s growing on its own. You also have to be careful, though, not to give it too much fertilizer or give it too much water. In other words, sometimes you find that it’s heading in a direction you think is going to be good, and you squeeze it in that direction, try to accelerate in that direction, and it may not be the right place for the mind to go. In other words, you can’t get into some strange trance-like states when you meditate, and they seem good, and you’re going to push yourself in that direction. But we’re not here to get into a trance. We’re here to get the mind to be settled and still, and well-balanced, alert, still, but able to move when it needs to. And there are times when you have to cut off some of the limbs of the plant. For instance, if your concentration is developing into delusion concentration, you’re sitting here and things are still, and all of a sudden you don’t know where you are. That’s an unhealthy limb on your plant. You’ve got to give the mind work to do. If working with the breath and arranging the way the breath moves in different parts of the body, or expanding awareness of the body, if these things don’t help, then you might want to put the breath aside for a minute and work on other things, other topics. In other words, visualize all 32 parts of the body go down through the whole list. In other words, once the mind is settled down, give it work to do right away. Visualize each of the parts. Where is your liver right now? Where are your kidneys right now? Where are your small intestines, long intestines, large intestines? Go through the whole body. Think of the parts that are not mentioned in the list as well. Where are your eyes, for instance, your pancreas, your adrenal glands? Where are they right now? Go through the whole list. Add as many parts as you want. Just get a really good sense of what you’ve got here in the body. Because in some cases the mind doesn’t have enough work. It just drifts off. So give it work to do. And then if it feels like it’s ready to settle down again, try to settle down with the breath again. Go back and forth like this until you really are ready. The mind is more alert, more awake. If you find that going through the 32 parts of the body is not enough, you can try the exercise that Ajahn Fuang gave to one of his students one time. He said, “Pull out all your hair.” Imagine that. And then replant each one, one, one, one at a time. That’ll fill the whole hour. In other words, if the breath is too calming and too soothing for you as a topic, give the mind work to do. That way you cut off that limb of delusion concentration. Just keep caring for this plant. The plant will do its growing on its own. And learn to notice when it’s growing in the right direction and when it’s growing in the wrong direction. For instance, sometimes as you’re meditating, a sense of light will arise inside. The light is a sign that the mind is settling down. Now, not everybody has this. Some people’s minds can settle down and be very, very still and there’s no sense of light. But other people get the sense of light. And it’s tempting to go right for the light. Ajahn Mun, when he was first meditating, tended to have this. It took him a long time to realize that just following the light and following whatever visions came up in the light was getting him nowhere. So in general, he was quite strict with the students. Don’t go for the light. If anything, play with it first to make sure you get it under your control. But don’t leave the breath. If you leave the breath, you’ve lost the cause. That’s another thing you may have to cut off if you find that you are leaving the breath because of the light. Say, “I’m not ready for this yet,” especially if the light is not steady. The only time you want to play with the light is if it’s steady, and then you can imagine it going away. And then you can imagine it coming back. Moving far away from you, coming up close. Getting large, getting small. You want to have it under your control before you bring it inside. As you bring it inside, think of it filling the whole body. That way you unite the light together with the breath. The body will feel refreshed, and you’re back where you belong, with the breath again. But if you find it distracting, just pay it no attention. Your real business is here with the breath. People don’t gain awakening in their visions. They don’t gain awakening in things like that. They gain awakening by seeing the movements of their mind, the decisions the mind is making. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha put so much emphasis on the teaching of karma. Because it’s our intentions, our little tiny intentions in the present moment. Those are the things that build up our sense of who we are and where we are in the world. If you can learn to take those intentions apart, and the only way to do that is to see them clearly, the only way to see them clearly is to get the mind really still, then it’s possible to break into another dimension. So you don’t see those in visions. You see them in the movements of the mind as it’s relating to its object. So take good care of your garden. Plant the right plants. Keep the weeds out. Make sure you treat the plant properly. Don’t pull on it. Don’t give it too much water. And if you find it’s developing in the wrong way, developing branches or whatever, learn to lop them off. Now, some of the plants in the garden are going to be annuals. In other words, the flowers that will grow for one year, give seeds, and then die. In cases like that, if you want to pick some of the flowers and take them inside, that’s fine. Don’t kill them, because otherwise you won’t have any seeds for next year. What this means is a sense of pleasure that comes up as you meditate. Don’t just go wallowing in it, gulping down the pleasure, because then there won’t be any seeds for continued concentration. Use up whatever little concentration you had because, again, you’ve left the breath, in this case for the pleasure. So let there be the pleasure. Let it do its work. And as it does its work, it’ll give you the foundation for further and further concentration. So if you have experience working with gardens, think of the various ways in which being a gardener is a useful way of approaching the problems of the mind, realizing that there are some things you can control and other things you can’t. But you’re trying to make the circumstances as good as you can. Let the mind grow, and keep watch over it as it grows. At some point, you’ll get the garden you want. This is where the analogy breaks down, because gardens are born and they die, and you plant them again and they die again. But when the mind has really reached the end of the path, it reaches something that doesn’t die. And then you don’t have to do the gardening anymore. And that’s where it gets really good. You can continue growing gardens for other people as long as you’re alive, but you realize that what you found here is much more satisfying. It’s like you’ve found a fruit. You’ve got this tree in the garden that gives a fruit. That’s the fruit of the deathless. And all that work was worth it.

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