Heightened Mind, Heightened Energy

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As we practice, we have to overcome a lot of old habits, our laziness. Sometimes that’s a problem with being discouraged, not believing in yourself. But the mind can turn around. As the Buddha said, it can turn around quickly. That’s because the past doesn’t totally shape us. There’s always an element of something new each present moment. We can make a new choice, a new decision. And this is what we’re trying to do as we practice, is strengthen that new decision that we want to do something skillful consistently. So where do we get the strength to do that? In the classical lists, they talk about how conviction comes before persistence, or how desire comes before persistence. You want it to happen. You have to want the change. And also you have to be able to convince it as possible. Then it’ll be a good thing. But there are other ways of strengthening that conviction in the present moment. There’s a sutta where the Buddha talks about how certain qualities of the mind can counteract your past karma. Especially bad karma. And you can find strength there as well. The first qualities are when you try to develop virtue, discernment. The Buddha says, “Develop your body and develop your mind.” Developing the body doesn’t mean going out and exercising. It means learning how not to be overcome by pleasure. Developing your mind means learning how not to be overcome by pain. So, virtue. Work on your precepts. And work on the general principle that you want to be as harmless as possible in your dealings with other people. This goes beyond the precepts to just being generally observant about what ways you may be acting that harm others. And particularly ways of acting that get them to behave in unskillful ways. You’ve got to watch out for that. But the general principle of virtue is that your intentional actions are going to be in line with the precepts and in line with that general principle of harmlessness. This, of course, requires that you become more sensitive to your intentions. And this will help as you get the mind into concentration, the fact that you’ve learned to watch for your intentions and try to be clear about your intentions. That’s absolutely necessary as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down and be still. Otherwise there’ll be a lot of back and forth and pulling here and pulling there inside the mind. Part of the mind says, “I want to be quiet,” and another part says, “No, I want to go someplace else.” Then, discernment. This starts with something very simple. Looking in your mind to see what’s skillful and what’s unskillful and trying to figure out how to encourage the skillful side and discourage the unskillful side. And learning how to be effective in that. In other words, you can clamp down on your unskillful emotions and deny they’re there, but of course that turns them into the thing. They go underground and they send up their tentacles. So you have to learn how to say no, but say no effectively. This means keeping watch on your mind as you go through the day. And then that business with dealing with pleasure and pain. Actually getting the mind into concentration is going to be your main practice area for learning how to deal with pleasure and pain. You sit here for long periods of time and there’s going to be pain in different parts of the body. One of the first things you’ve got to learn how to do is how to deal with pain. Say, “If the pain is going to have my knee, let it have my knee for the time being. I don’t have to lay claim there.” Then watch out for the mind’s tendencies to put certain labels on the pain that actually make it worse. The question of making the physical pain worse is not nearly as bad as making the mental pain worse. The way the mind talks to itself about the pain. You get yourself all upset. But your analysis of how long the pain has been there, how much longer it’s going to be there, how it’s going to spread, what it might mean, all these things, just put them aside. Learn how to say, “Okay, there’s the pain there, and the talking about the pain is something else.” But the best way of dealing with the pain is to give the mind another, more pleasant place to stay. As I said, let the pain have the knee or whatever. But you’re going to make something pleasant. So you’re working with pleasure. Now the question of not getting overwhelmed by the pleasure, that comes along as the breath gets more comfortable, gets easier, and the mind says, “To hell with the breath. I’m going to go with the pleasure.” And you just wallow in the pleasure. You’ve got to maintain that perception of breath. Keep that in mind. Don’t let the pleasure overcome you. The pleasure can get fairly intense, very intense. And that’s okay. The question is, are you going to stay with the breath, or are you going to forget the breath and go for the pleasure? This is a skill you have to learn. So be very careful as the pleasure comes. Don’t worry that the pleasure won’t do all the good it needs to do. Sometimes you say, “I just need a lot of pleasure right now. I’ve had a really ragged day. My nerves feel ragged, and everything else feels ragged inside me. I need the pleasure to heal all those wounds.” But it’ll do that without your wallowing. You just sit there and be with the breath in a way that’s comfortable, and the pleasure will go through the body. You let it go through the body. And it’ll take care of things on its own. You don’t have to wallow in it to do its work. So these are things you try to develop, to develop your strength and persistence. It all comes down, of course, to virtue, concentration, and discernment, based on your conviction, based on your desire. And then learning how to use these things, use these qualities, so you can be on top of what’s going on in the mind right now. Underlying all this is that teaching on the Brahma-viharas, starting with metah through ubekah, goodwill through equanimity. This is your nourishment. You nourish the mind. Realize, “I can be harmless. I want to wish for the well-being of all.” That’s what the Brahma-vihara has come down to, wishing for the well-being of all. That’s simply how that wish gets applied. When people are already happy, you’re happy for them. When people are suffering or creating the causes for suffering, you have compassion for them. This includes people who are doing really harmful things. They’re going to suffer down the line for that. So you have to have compassion on them. But then there are going to be areas where you can’t stop them from doing the harmful things, or there are people who are suffering in ways that can’t be stopped. That’s where you have to have equanimity. You have to be able to apply this in all cases, even in cases where there are people you love. Because you’ll actually be able to be more helpful to them if you can have some equanimity for the things that can’t be changed. So you can focus on the things that can be changed. With all these sublime attitudes, it takes practice to be able to apply them in all situations, or wherever they’re appropriate, because we have goodwill for it. Some people, but not for others. We have compassion for some and not for others. We’re joyful for some people’s happiness and not for other people’s. And there are some people, when they’re suffering, it’s perfectly okay, but there are others where it’s not. Our minds are partial. And it’s because of that partiality that we can’t trust ourselves. We’ll start doing unskillful things based on our partiality. It’s one of the reasons why the meditation is not translated as love. The Buddha was very suspicious of love, he would say. He talks about how there’s love that’s based on love, love that’s based on hatred, hatred that’s based on love, and hatred that’s based on hatred. And it’s all pretty arbitrary. Somebody you love, someone acts nicely to that person, then you’re going to love the second person. Somebody you love, someone mistreats the person you love, you’re going to hate the person who’s mistreating the person you love. So that’s hatred based on love. Then there’s love based on hatred. There’s somebody you don’t like, and somebody else does something nasty to that person, you’re going to like the person who did the nasty thing. And then hatred based on hatred. There are people you hate. Somebody does something nice to the people you hate, you’re going to hate them. It’s all very arbitrary. This is how we live our lives. Most of us are driven by our partiality. What the Buddha is trying to teach us is to learn how to be impartial. And it starts with goodwill. Goodwill for all. And this is really nourishment for the mind, our realization that we can think these thoughts. We can put the mind in a position where it gets beyond its partiality and its likes and its dislikes, and it can think about the goodness of all beings, the happiness of all beings. And that lifts the mind up, gives us energy. This is why in the forest tradition it’s used as a framework for the practice. They say that Ajahn Mun, every morning, as soon as he woke up, spread goodwill in all directions. In the afternoon, when he woke up from his midday nap, he’d spread goodwill in all directions. At night, before going to bed, he’d spread goodwill in all directions. This is the framework for our practice. It’s the framework for the teaching as a whole. After all, when the Buddha gained his awakening, what did he do? He taught beings how to put an end to suffering. That’s an expression of goodwill. He’d found something really good and he wanted to spread it around, share it with everybody who’d be willing to learn. So that’s the framework for this practice that we’re doing. We’re looking for happiness, but we’re also looking for happiness in a way that’s not going to cause harm to anybody else. As I said, this requires going against some old habits, especially the habit that wants to look for pleasure wherever it can be found, regardless of the long-term cost, or regardless of the impact it’s going to have on other people. There was a book a while back on positive psychology. It was written by a psychologist who was trying to be scientific, and so he was saying that he was going to study happiness regardless of whether the happiness was found in a moral or an immoral way. But that’s missing a huge part of the definition of what it really means to be happy. If your happiness depends on somebody else’s harm, it’s not going to last. They’re going to do what they can to put an end to it. If you really want to be happy, you have to think about other people’s happiness too. So in this way, we’re lifting ourselves above our ordinary default mode, above our old habits. Because what are old habits? We go for the pleasure, we try to run away from the pain. That’s a habit we’re trying to go against, learning that we can be with the pain but not suffer from it. We can be with the pleasure but not wallow in it. We can take the well-being of all beings into account as we look for our happiness. That’s lifting the mind up. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha gave his prasi of the teaching to the Arhats, the 1,250 Arhats who met that day in Makkha-bhuja, he ended by saying, “Devotion to the heightened mind.” That’s the teaching of the Buddhists. You’re trying to lift your mind up. Technically, the heightened mind means concentration, but it also means lifting the mind above its partiality towards pleasure and pain, lifting it above its partiality for the people that you love and the people you hate. Thinking in larger terms in this way gives a lot of energy to the mind. Otherwise, you’re constantly concerned about who’s mistreating you and who’s not respecting you and who’s not whatever. It’s just me, me, me, me, me. And it gets narrower and narrower and narrower. And your energy just runs out. Or you can broaden the mind, lift the mind up. You find that there’s a big source of energy right here in the present moment that can keep you going. So keep these teachings in mind as you’re sometimes struggling with the effort that’s required for the practice. Think in those larger terms. Those larger terms will lighten the mind and make whatever task is required a lot easier.

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