To Purify the Heart

February 12, 2023

When I first went to stay with my teacher, John Fuyang, I began to suspect that he had some psychic powers, that he could read people’s minds, he knew something about what would happen in the future. He seemed to detect that I was interested in that. So one night he reminded me, “You know, all these other things are just games. The real purpose of the practice is to purify the heart.” When he said that, it spoke to me. This was something of value that transcends cultures. It wasn’t Thai, it wasn’t Western. It was a human desire to have a heart that’s pure. As the Buddha pointed out, it’s something that we can do through our efforts, even though we have lots of impurities in our hearts. We can clean them. We can clean them out. Attain something that doesn’t have to depend on anybody, doesn’t have to use clothing, food, shelter, medicine, all those things that we need normally as we’re born into this world, and which create burdens on ourselves and other people. It’s possible to cleanse our hearts so that we don’t need those things anymore. In line with what the Buddha calls a “noble search.” The search for what doesn’t age, doesn’t get born, doesn’t age, doesn’t get ill, doesn’t die. And he sets forth the path on how to do that. Like right now, as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath. And John Lee, my teacher’s teacher, once said, “The breath is your home base as a meditator.” This is where you should always go, I noticed as we’re coming down the hill today. The squirrels running away in front of the car, trying to get back to their holes. Of course, they were putting themselves in danger in doing that. But at least they had a sense of where their safe place was. You should have a sense that the breath is your safe place. When you’re not sure of what you should think about something, when things are uncertain, go into the breath. Learn how to make the breath comfortable, so this is a good home to be in. The same way that you would decorate your house, furnish your house, so that it’s a comfortable place to stay. As the mind gets still, you can see things a lot more clearly inside. So when the mind does go off into directions that are not quite so clean and pure, in other words, in terms of greed, aversion, delusion, fear, jealousy, you can detect these things quickly and then do something about them. But it’s important that you maintain this sense of values, that this is what you really want in life, because the world has so many other values that go in other directions. There’s a story in the canon. The Buddha’s been staying, spending the rains retreat near one of his cousins. His name was Mahanama. And at the end of the rains retreat, Mahanama learns that the Buddha’s going to be leaving. He’s concerned. How is he going to look after his mind with the Buddha’s away? Because having the Buddha there every day, every day, had him thinking about the Dhamma, had his mind imbued with all the qualities of the Dhamma. So the appeal of the world, got farther and farther away. He was afraid that when the Buddha wasn’t there, his old worldly thoughts would come back. So he went to ask the Buddha what to do. And the Buddha recommended, he said, there are six ways of cleansing the mind. Make the easier your preoccupations as you go through the day. That way you keep your mind thinking about the Dhamma, keep the values of the Dhamma in mind. That way you can keep the values of the world at bay. First, he said, observe the precepts. In particular, he recommended observing what they call the Uposatha precepts from time to time. The basic five precepts are no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants. These are the precepts that make us human. But if we want to lift our minds above the human level, we add the other precepts, what they call the Uposatha precepts. In other words, you take that third precept against illicit sex and you turn it into a precept against any sex at all. And then you add three more precepts on. One, not eating afternoon or before dawn. Two, not watching any shows, listening to music, decorating the body with perfumes and scents or ornaments of any kind. And then finally, no sleeping or sitting on high luxurious beds or seats. When you add these precepts, you’re bringing in the principle of restraint of the senses. Because we tend to look for our happiness in terms of nice sounds, nice sights, nice smells, nice tastes, nice tactile sensations. And the Buddha wants us to look elsewhere for our happiness. So we place some boundaries on these things. Place a boundary on our eyes so we’re not going to be watching shows. A boundary on our ears so we’re not going to be listening to music. Boundary on our nose, we’re not going to be putting on scents or perfumes. Boundary on our tongue, we’re not going to be eating afternoon. Boundary on the body, you’re not going to be having any sex, you’re not going to be lying on high beds, luxurious beds. When you place restraint on your five senses this way, you’re going to have to look for your happiness in the mind. Look for your happiness in the development of meditation. And then to make sure that you maintain your values and don’t get overcome by the values of the world, the Buddha recommended six recollections, themes you can keep in mind, to deal with any defilements that may come up. For instance, the defilement that says, “Oh, this dharma is nothing really special.” Well, you think about the Buddha, the kind of person who found this dharma. He wasn’t your ordinary kind of person who just sat around thinking. about things and writing about his ideas. He’d put things to the test. He almost starved himself to death, trying the path of austerities, realizing that that didn’t work. But then he didn’t give up. He had already seen that there was no lasting happiness in pleasures of the senses, and there’s nothing that’s accomplished by austerities. So what’s left? Well, finding pleasure in a state of mind that’s not involved in sensuality at all. In other words, inhabiting the body inside what’s called the pleasure of form. How your body feels from within, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And you can adjust your breath to give rise to a sense of ease, to give rise to a sense of rapture, refreshment. Look for your happiness there. And then he didn’t stop there. He said, “What’s the use of these states of ease?” He realized that you can gain knowledge, and most importantly, you can gain knowledge into why greed, aversion, and delusion arise in your mind, and how they don’t have to. That was the Buddha’s special knowledge. But it took someone who’s really true, honest, truly dedicated, wise, pure, compassionate. That’s the founder of this dharma. So you’re thinking these ways, so that when anyone else comes and tells you, “Well, so-and-so is really bright, so-and-so is really smart,” you have to ask yourself, “Well, they were nearly as wise as the Buddha.” If you really care for your true happiness, you want to take the best example of wisdom there is, follow that example. And keep reminding yourself, we’re lucky that we live in a world where the memory of a Buddha is still alive. Because there’s so many worlds where they may have had a Buddha and they’ve forgotten about it, or they haven’t had a Buddha at all. And there’s no clear principles for how to find happiness in a way that’s solid and lasting. Which brings us to the second recollection, which is recollection of the dharma, the teachings the Buddha gave. These are teachings that have standed the test of time for more than 2,000 years. As the Buddha said, it’s not that he made these up. He discovered principles that have been there all along. These are principles that are timeless. Every now and then you hear the belief that the time for nirvana has passed, nobody can attain right concentration. But as the Buddha said, these are timeless principles. And we can live our life by timeless principles instead of living by the latest fad or the latest piece of news that comes to the media. Because what we need is something to get our minds out of what the media has to say. Because who knows who’s putting those stories in the media, why they’re putting the stories, why they’re explaining things the way they do, what their purpose is. We look back on the news of 20, 30 years ago and realize how much was distorted. We can tell ourselves it was probably distorted today. No matter where you look. Because it all comes out of defilement. But the dharma is something that comes out of a pure mind. And the principles are timeless, always true. So you want to keep living your life by something that’s always true. Because other people have done that to this day as well. This is where the third recollection is, recollection of the Sangha. Sometimes we think about the Buddha and he seems awfully far away. It was a long time ago. But then we have examples who’ve been alive during our lifetime, people who’ve devoted themselves to the practice and have found that what the Buddha taught was true. It is possible to find a deathless happiness inside the mind. And they’ve been able to teach it to others. But other people can do this and they’re human beings, close to our time. Why can’t we do that? So these forms of recollection are to remind ourselves that these principles of the dharma really are true and they’re still true today. And these are the principles you want to keep as your values as you go through the day, regardless of the values of the people around you. These are the things you want to hold to. The remaining three recollections are to give yourself confidence. Because sometimes as you’re practicing the results are coming slowly and you want to tell yourself, well maybe I don’t have it in me. And the Buddha says there are recollections that to remind you that yes, you do have some goodness. You have the goodness that makes you eligible for practicing even further. These are recollection of your generosity, recollection of your virtue, realizing that you have been generous in the past, you have been virtuous in the past. These are sources of self-esteem. These are sources of confidence. The sixth and final recollection follows on those two. Recollection of the devas. These are heavenly beings. And we don’t sit around thinking about heavenly beings. What we think about is the qualities that make a human being into a heavenly being. And we can reflect on the fact that we have some of those qualities too. Starts out with conviction, conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Virtue, generosity, learning the Dhamma, and discernment. The ability to see what’s going on in your own mind. See when something unskillful is arising and realizing you can do something about it. Seeing that something skillful has arisen and you try to maintain it. These are all qualities you have. So you can take comfort in the fact that you do qualify to be a heavenly being. This is especially important as death approaches. Sometimes people start thinking about the bad things they did in life. And the minds get more and more pulled down by that. You don’t want your mind pulled down at a moment like that. You want to pull it up. And one way to pull it up is to remind yourself that you do have the qualities that would qualify you. Now as you reflect on these things now, your virtue, your generosity, these qualities of the devas, you don’t want to just sit on your laurels and say, “Well, I’ve done these good things in the past.” The fact that you’ve done these good things in the past should spur you on to decide you want to develop them even further. You have the opportunity to do that. These are the things that are important to look back on in life. All too often we look back on pleasures that we miss, or pleasures that we used to have but are no longer here, or pleasures that we wanted in the past and never got. And the mind gets absorbed by those things. You want your mind to be on the good things you’ve done and the good things you still can do based on what you’ve done already. That lifts the quality of the mind. And it’s in this way that you cleanse the mind of its discouragement. You cleanse it of its laziness. You cleanse it of its tendency just to fall in line with what other people are doing and thinking. You try to live your life in the light of the fact that there has been a Buddha. He’s left his dharma. The members of the Sangha are still alive to show that the dharma still works. When you can keep those things in mind, then you can maintain the values that purify the mind. Now see the purification of the mind, one, as possible, and two, as desirable. And three, something you can do. That’s how the heart is purified. The Buddha never makes a clear distinction between heart and mind. Every emotion has its thoughts. Every thought has its emotions. So as we purify the heart and we purify the mind, our thoughts are purified, our emotions are purified. And we can find a dimension inside where ultimately we go totally beyond the need to feed on anything at all. That’s when the heart is really pure.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230212_To_Purify_the_Heart.mp3>