Gladdening

May 18, 2024

We’re here to train the mind, but we have to remember that when the Buddha talks about training the mind, he uses the word citta, which covers both what we think of as the mind and what we think of as the heart. Training to have a good heart as well as a good mind. The heart comes in our daily life. You can sit here and you can think thoughts of goodwill, but primarily when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, it’s a matter of training the mind side, trying to understand cause and effect in your mind, first with the eye of getting the mind to settle down. What would provide the mind a good place to settle down? What kind of thinking would help you settle down here with a sense of well-being? Focusing on the mind as you settle down. The first thing he says is that once you’ve sensed the state of the mind, you try to gladden it. There are ways you can gladden it while you’re sitting here, but there are also ways you can gladden it as you go through the day. One of the ways of gladdening the mind is living in a harmonious community and doing what you can. To make it harmonious, going out of your way for other people. Even though Theravada is supposed to be selfish and mean and not thinking about others, it’s certainly not the way the Buddha taught. There’s a famous story about the monk who was sick and nobody was tending to him. The Buddha and Ananda happened to be on a tour of the monk’s dwellings and found the monk lying in his own filth. So they cleaned him off, got him fresh robes, and put him on a bed. After they cared for him, the Buddha called the monks together and said, “Do you know about that monk who’s sick over there?” They said, “Yes.” “Well, why don’t you help him? He doesn’t do anything for the other monks.” The Buddha said, “You have no family now. If you don’t care for one another, who’s going to care for you?” He went so far as to say, “The merit that comes from being the attendant to the Buddha, you tend to the sick. You look after one another.” That’s the kind of community we want. That’s the kind of community that’s conducive to people being able to gladden their minds. They’re glad they’re here to meditate. It’s one of the ways you act in the world outside, as you go through the day, with your chores. And your other activities. Think about ways in which you can create harmony in the group. We look at the world outside and there’s so little harmony out there. Everything seems to be designed to aggravate people’s dissension, conflict. And if you can’t find harmony in a monastery, where are you going to find it? And it doesn’t just happen on its own. Everybody has to pitch in. Hold harmony as a value, as an ideal, with a sense that in creating harmony you’re not only helping other people, you’re helping yourself. You can look back on the day and realize, OK, you helped this person, you helped that person. Sometimes there’s special satisfaction in helping one another secretly. In other words, doing something for someone else. It’s kind, thoughtful, without them necessarily having to know that you’ve done it. There’s a special joy in that. And that’s the goodness of the heart. Once you have the goodness of the heart, then it’s a lot easier to feel good about yourself meditating, as you find that in developing the goodness of the mind and understanding how things happen in the mind, that it’s going to take time. And it can sometimes get discouraging. You try one way of breathing, it doesn’t seem to be that comfortable. You try another way, that’s not comfortable either. And you try another, and your mind wanders off. If you come at the meditation with a sense of good-heartedness, it’s a lot easier to deal with setbacks and deal with frustration and deal with obstacles. Because you’re coming with a sense of inner worth. Now, assuming you have that sense of inner worth, then the next question is, when the mind doesn’t settle down, when the mind needs gladdening, what do you do? The first thing, of course, is playing with the breath. See if you can get the mind interested in how the breath affects the body and how your ways of thinking can affect the breath. When you breathe in, breathe out, what mental picture do you hold of where the breath can come in, how it comes in, how it courses through the body? Is that a good picture? Could you think of something else that would be better? Play with that for a while. And when you’re focused, where do you focus? Sometimes it’s easy to get sleepy as you meditate because you’re focused on one spot. So tell yourself, as you start out, you’re going to make a survey. Focus here for a while, focus there for a while. A good place to start is around the navel, but John Lee also recommends you start in the back of the neck. The important thing is that you be systematic as you go through the body. And you can do it as many times as you like. If there’s a spot in the body where the breath energy seems to be stuck or blocked, you might want to spend extra time there to see if you can come up with a way of thinking about that spot that opens it up. One way of thinking about it, of course, is that the body is made out of atoms, and in atoms there’s a lot of space. Between atoms there’s a lot of space. A while back someone gave me a book called The Zoomable Universe, and going from page to page to page you would start from the galaxies and then go down smaller and smaller and smaller. When it got to the atom, there was page after page after page. There was an electron and then there were many pages of nothing until you got to the nucleus. So there’s a lot of air, a lot of space. The breath can go through that. Where it seems blocked, tell yourself what’s probably blocked is the blood. You’re focusing on the liquid element or the liquid property of the body rather than the breath. And so it feels like it’s pushed up against something. The breath doesn’t have to be pushed up against anything. It’s only if there’s one contradictory current of breath, then there would be any conflict. But you can think of all the different breath energies in the body working together, breathing in together, breathing out together. Everybody’s happy together. Again, the principle of harmony. See what that does. Then there are times when being with the breath just doesn’t cut it. The mind has trouble getting interested in it. It has other interests. Okay, what are its interests? Trying to figure out which defilement is pulling it away, and then work on counteracting that defilement directly. So it’s thoughts of lust. You can analyze, okay, what is the object of your lust? And is the object of your lust totally beautiful, totally attractive? Well, no. You’re putting on blinders, focusing on that detail, this detail. But there are other details that you could focus on that would be very discouraging for lust. But then sometimes the problem isn’t so much the object of the lust, it’s you’re enjoying the thinking, the narrative of your fantasies. Then you have to ask yourself, how realistic is that? And when you’re with another person, how much can you trust that the other person really is totally enamored of you? There’s that famous scene where King Vasenade is in the palace with his wife, one of his queens, Mallika, one-on-one. And in a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Of course, he’s thinking that she’ll say, “Yes, Your Majesty, you.” This is the Pali Canon. It’s not Hollywood. And Mallika’s no fool. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. How about you?” That’s a total turn-off for the king. That’s the end of that scene. But you realize that so many of your fantasies depend on really unrealistic assumptions. Think of that fantasy that Ajahn Lee had when he was thinking of disrobing. He imagined marrying the daughter of a nobleman, which would have been impossible, but the fact that it was impossible didn’t deter him. But then reality set in. He realized that if he had a daughter of a nobleman for a wife, she probably wasn’t all that strong. But she would have to do work because he wasn’t all that wealthy. The work of having a child would probably do her in. Then the fantasy just goes on. It just got worse and worse and worse as more and more reality came in. That’s one of the things you can do with these fantasies. You can poison them with reality. Then when your feelings of lust begin to calm down, then you can go back to the breath. Or you may be angry at somebody. We always hear that the antidotes for anger are goodwill and goodwill and goodwill. But the Buddha gives more variety than that. You think about karma, how that person probably hasn’t done solely bad actions. And how about you? Do you have a clean record yourself? And if somebody’s doing something that’s really getting to you, you might ask yourself, “Well, maybe I did that in the past.” You probably did. If you didn’t do it in the past, it wouldn’t be happening to you now. So is anger the proper response? No, it’s never the proper response. When the Buddha was asked one time, “Is there anything at all that he would condone the killing of?” He said, “Just one thing. Anger.” Even when there’s been a lot of misbehavior, cruel behavior, heartless behavior, anger is not the response. You want to be able to keep the mind in a state where it can see clearly. Clearly, what would be the most effective thing to do and say to stop that unskillful behavior? We’re not sitting here just letting everything happen without interfering at all, but knowing when to interfere and how to interfere and at what time, how you do it. You can’t think those things through clearly when you’re angry. And the problem, of course, is when you’re angry, you put lots of blinders on the mind, as with all your other defilements, and some things seem very clear that you’ve got to say this, you’ve got to say that, but they’re clear because your range of awareness, your range of thought, is very, very narrow. So you contemplate the object of your anger, you contemplate the anger itself, you contemplate your motives for going for the anger. Lots of things you can analyze to calm the mind down. And there’s joy that comes when you can pull the mind out of a defilement like that, and it’s ready to go back to the breath. So there are lots of ways you can gladden the mind. But it’s important that you realize you’re gladdening the mind, gladdening the heart, by developing a good mind and a good heart. The good heartedness is mainly a matter of how you interact with other people as you go through the day, being generous, being thoughtful. Trying to be as harmless as you can. And then you’re gladdening the mind by trying to understand cause and effect in the mind. When things become clear like this, there’s a part of the mind that really responds to that clarity. I was reading a while back someone talking about how he didn’t like a lot of the Buddhist teachings on rebirth and karma, because it had left no mystery in life, as if mystery is what we wanted. A lot of people think life would be much better if everything were left mysterious, and so you can just do what you wanted and fantasize as you like. But the whole point of the teaching, the whole point that we have in the Dharma is that the Buddha is making things clear again and again and again. When he would give Dharma talks, people would express their appreciation and say, “Something has been overturned, it’s been set up right.” In many and various ways, the Tathagata has made things clear. It’s like carrying a lamp into the dark. So you need to be clear about your mind. Really develop the goodness of your heart, both heart and the mind develop together. And when they develop together, then the progress they make is solid, reliable, mature. And that’s the source of gladness that goes deep.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240518_Gladdening.mp3>