

Heart & Mind

March 30, 2010

We're here training the mind because it's the most important thing in our lives. The mind is what shapes our actions, and our actions shape our experience. It's important, though, to know that the word "mind" in Pali, *citta*, corresponds to what we would call both mind and heart in English. In other words, we're dealing both with thoughts and with emotions, because there's no radical difference between the two. If you look at any emotion, there's going to be a thought triggering it. And if you look at a thought, there's usually a feeling, a whole complex of associations, that go along with it. So it's not as if we're simply training the mind to be clever in its thinking. We're also training the heart how to deal wisely with emotions as they arise.

This is where the breath is really useful, because strong emotions are basically thoughts have an impact on the body. They're not just something going through the brain. You can feel them in patterns of tension in different parts of the body, the way your heart gets racing over some issues, the way you feel cold with fear, hot with anger. These things are directly related to the breath energy, which is why the Buddha not only has us focus on ideas of right view, but also encourages us to reclaim the body, so that we can fill the space of the body with our awareness. That way, we know what's really going on and can exert some control over it.

We may not like the idea of controlling our emotions, it sounds heartless, but we're fabricating emotions anyway, so we might as well do it skillfully. Sometimes we feel that our emotions are what we really are, but if you look into the matter very closely, you begin to realize that a lot of your emotions come from ideas you picked up from people—fears, expectations—that over the course of time you've clustered together with a lot of different thoughts and associations. Which means they're habitual, not necessarily natural. They're habitual. And you can ask yourself, are these good habits?

As with any habit, you can learn to retrain yourself. But you're going to have to deal both with the physical and with the mental side if you're going to have any hope of gaining any real understanding of what's going on. If you try simply to think your way around your emotion, it's not going to work, because the body is screaming at you. So you have to learn how to inhabit the body in a way that you bring your full awareness to it. As the Buddha said, this process of fabricating emotions, if we do it with ignorance, will cause suffering. If we do it with knowledge, it actually becomes part of the path.

There are three factors here. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath, and "breath" here is conceived in very broad terms as the energy flowing through the body. It courses along the bloodstream, goes through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin. There are different levels of energy, different levels of subtlety, different ways in which this energy either moves or stays still. It's important to get in touch with it because it shapes all the other functions in the body. If you can get the breath on your side, it's a lot easier to deal with a difficult emotion, to remind yourself that no matter how bad your anger or your fear may be, you've still got the breath and you can still breathe in a way that's more calming, more nourishing.

You practice learning how to deal with patterns of tension in the body, to breathe through them, because a lot of your physical reaction to anger or fear, or whatever the emotion, is directly related to those patterns of tension, which build up to the point where they seem unbearable, and you just want to get them out of your system. Well, this is a much more skillful way of getting them out: You breathe through them. You know where the tension is, know where you can relax it, and you notice how you can breathe to restore a sense of well-being in the body. The more you fully inhabit the body, the more quickly you can pick up the germs of an emotion as it begins to grow. The more quickly you can pick them up, the less damage they do. If there's a sense of tension here, a little tightness there, you breathe right through it. Then you ask yourself: What was the issue?

This is another part of fabrications, called verbal fabrication: the way you talk to yourself about things, your internal dialogue. This is where you reeducate your thoughts and views, because you have lots of ways of thinking about things that just simply stir up useless old issues. This is why it's good, when you're meditating, that you notice things coming up that may get normally buried by the day-to-day agitation on the surface of the water in your life. When the water grows still and there's not much happening around you, these things will start bubbling up.

In the beginning of meditation, you're told simply to breathe through any thought energy. That's your first line of defense, but it doesn't mean that you're going to be taking that line of defense all the time. Certain thoughts come up, and you notice that they have a holding power on the mind. They keep coming back again and again, exerting a pull on you. So you have to look into them, to see, "Why do I believe this?" This is where you might want to be an anthropologist from Mars: "Why would I believe this particular thought? Why would I believe that particular idea?" Learn to develop the inner observer that looks at things with curiosity and a sense of their strangeness. Then you can replace ideas that recognize as unskillful with more skillful ones.

When anger comes up and you tell yourself, “I’ve got to get back at that person,” stop and think: “If I were to get back at the person, what would that accomplish?” It’d create a cycle of revenge back and forth, because they would then try to get back at you. What would that accomplish? Nothing good, so remind yourself of that. You can think about how many times in the past you’ve acted on your anger and you’ve later regretted it. So you want to replace your angry thoughts with thoughts of goodwill, starting with yourself, remembering that you don’t want to harm yourself, which includes ultimately that you don’t want to harm other people.

And remember the danger of letting emotions take over. If the emotion is really strong, you say, “I’m not going to act on that right now. I’m going to wait until things calm down, and then I’ll say something or do something.”

In other words, you learn to think about your emotion—or the ways of expressing the emotion, the ways of dealing with it—in new ways. You learn to think about it in new ways, realizing that you have other alternatives aside from the ones you’ve grown accustomed to.

Finally, there’s what’s called mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Feelings here are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. Here again, learning how to breathe skillfully in the midst of difficult situations can give you a foundation of well-being inside, so that you don’t feel so oppressed, so hemmed in by events. You realize that regardless of what’s happening outside, you can still inhabit the full space of your body with pleasant breath energy, so that you’re acting from a position of strength.

At the same time, you learn how to change your perceptions, the mental labels you apply to things, the images that come up in your mind.

All too often, say, when we’re angry at somebody, it’s as if we’re putting ourselves on a judge’s bench and saying, “This person’s good, that person’s bad. I’ve got the power and the right to pass judgment in this way.” The Buddha has you hold a different image in mind. He says to think of yourself as a person crossing a desert. You’re hot, tired, trembling with thirst, and you come across the footprints of a cow. There are little puddles in the cow’s footprints. It’s water you need, but if you try to scoop up the water with your hand, it’s going to get muddy. So you have to get down and slurp it up. It’s not a very dignified position, but hey, you need water. What else can you do? In the same way, the Buddha said, when you find yourself really oppressed by other people’s bad habits, bad actions, bad thoughts, bad words, try to focus on where there is some goodness in that person, because your mind needs the goodness of other people, your heart needs the goodness of other people, in order to not to wither up and dry.

So you have to remember that you're not endowed with the strength to be a judge, and you're not totally impervious to your negative views on humanity, because if you see everybody as bad, it's going to be hard for you to do good. Or if you see specific other people as bad, it's very hard to do good to them. You've got to realize that they've got some goodness someplace. Look for it and use that goodness as nourishment.

You're replacing one set of mental images with another set.

In this way, you learn how to take your emotions apart and put them back together in a more skillful way, realizing that, after all, they are fabricated, so you might as well fabricate them with knowledge, with awareness, with intentions that you really can be proud of. And give it your full assent, so you don't find yourself totally helpless and the victim of your emotions. After all, they're not a necessary part of your nature. They're habits that you build up, so now that you can see that these habits are unskillful, you've got the tools to develop more skillful habits in their place—in particular, by working with the breath. Without this sense of understanding of the breath energy in the body, and really being in touch with it, being very sensitive to the slightest changes that happen, you're left with just your mental and verbal tools, which are not strong enough to deal with your emotions. You need this physical side as well.

So you're training the heart and mind together, because they are two sides of one thing. The effects of the heart might show up in the breath, but you also learn how to use the breath as a means of stripping the powers of the unskillful emotions that you find taking over your life. This way, the training deals with the whole of your heart and mind, and not just one part, so that your mind becomes your friend and not your enemy; your heart becomes your friend and not your enemy. That's because you've learned to understand them from all sides.