The Mind Well Trained Brings Happiness

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The mind, when trained, brings happiness. The question is, how well-trained is your mind? What does it mean for the mind to be trained? It’s when you know that something is good to think about—good in the sense that it’ll be good for you. You tell the mind to think about it, and it will. If something you know would be bad for you, you tell the mind not to think about it. And it doesn’t think about those things. Most of us live with untrained minds. They seem to have a mind of their own sometimes. What we’re doing as we’re meditating is to learn how to bring some training in here. For the next hour, tell yourself you’re going to stay with the breath. Why is that good? Because the breath is the element of the body that you’re going to have some control over. The way you breathe is going to make the difference between whether the body feels good or the body feels irritable, uncomfortable, antsy. You may notice that when you’re angry, you breathe in a certain way that gives rise to a tight feeling in the stomach, a tight feeling in the chest. And if you’ve got to get that feeling out of your system, then often you do things that are pretty harmful. That’s when an untrained mind can bring unhappiness. It gets you to do things that you know are not really good, but it seems to take over. So you want to take charge. You want to be the one who decides what you’re going to think about, what you’re not going to think about, how you react to things. So you need some friends inside. And the breath can be your friend if you breathe in a way that feels really good. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. And ask yourself, does it feel refreshing? Does it feel gratifying? If it doesn’t feel especially good, ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now. And remind yourself that the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s a feeling of the energy flow in the body that allows you to tell, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” You can feel that in all different kinds of places in the body. If you find an area where it feels good, focus your attention there. And then let that good feeling spread throughout the body, down the legs, out the arms, around your head, in your torso. You’re giving yourself a good place to start. And when the mind has a good place to start, it’s going to be a lot more inclined to want to be trained. Because the training you’re giving so far is good. The problem is, there are parts of the mind that will want to go out and think about something else right now. You’ve got a whole hour here. You could think about all kinds of things. But you’ve been thinking about all kinds of things since who knows when. Now’s the chance to get the mind to think about you. Just one thing. When you think about one thing like this, you get to know that one thing really well. It’s like standing in front of a tree. If you run past the tree, all you see is a blur. And if someone were to ask, “What’s in the tree? Any animals? Any birds? Any worms in the tree? Any bugs in the tree?” You don’t know. The whole thing is a blur. You maybe saw a few little details here and there as you went past, but for the most part you can’t really say what’s in the tree and what’s not in the tree. It’s when you stand still and look at it. That’s when you begin to see what’s actually there. It’s the same with the mind. If you want to see the mind in the present moment, you get it to stay with the breath, because the breath is your anchor in the present moment. There’s no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch. You’ve just got the breath right here, right now. And if something comes up in the mind, you’ll see it. The reason we don’t see things coming up in the mind is because our thoughts take us someplace else. You think about home, think about school, think about work, whatever. Whatever fantasy you may have, whatever dreams and hopes you may have, you’re off in those worlds. You’re not here in this present moment. So things can go on in your mind that you don’t know. And if the mind is doing things that you don’t know, then you don’t have control. The mind is not trained. So every time it wanders off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Ten times, a hundred times, just bring it back ten times, a hundred times. Each time it comes back, breathe in a way that feels good. That way the mind will be more and more inclined to want to come back. And you want to get quick at seeing how the mind wanders off. This is where you begin to understand the mind. The mind will wander wherever it will. It’s like riding a boat in a river and not having a particular direction where you want to go, and not being anchored to any particular spot. The currents of the river will push it here and push it there. And you’re really not sure where you’re going or what’s happening because you don’t have a reference point. But with the breath as your reference point, you can see that there’s a push from a thought about the future, a push from a thought about the past. Then you can say, “No.” And the mind might want to think about it again, to come back again, to say, “No” again. But this time you try to catch it more quickly. It’s always amazing when you’re meditating. You know that there will be thoughts pulling away from the breath, but you act as if they were a surprise. So when you know that distraction could come, look for the warning signals. And they’re there. The more quickly you can catch the process of the mind wandering off, the more you see how it happens and the many layers in which the mind lies to itself. This is the mind you’re in control of, but it’s been lying to you. You’ve got to learn how to see through the lies if you want to gain some control, have it really trained. It’ll make the decision that it wants to go, and then it will pretend like it never made a decision at all. Then it’ll wait for a moment when your mindfulness lapses or your alertness lapses. Then it goes. So be on the lookout. And the more quickly you can catch the process of the mind wandering off, the more quickly you can catch this stirring in the mind that would pull you away. The more you’ll see there’s a stirring, and then part of the mind will identify that stirring as either a physical sensation or a mental sensation. And if it’s mental, then it’s going to be a thought about something, and you can decide what it’s about. Sometimes it seems to be ready-made, that it’s about this, that, or the other thing. Sometimes it’s just a stirring, and you decide, “Well, I’m going to make this a thought about so-and-so.” In other words, part of you is collaborating, conspiring against the meditation to think about something else. So look for that. Look for those labels that you slap on the stirring. Where do they come from? What hunger do they satisfy? When you understand the hunger, then you can make a decision. That’s when you understand how to train the mind. On the one hand, you can point out the drawbacks of whatever it is the mind is hungry for. But then you also have to offer it something better. The breath is part of what’s better. There are also other ways of thinking that allow you to realize that you’re better off not going with that particular distraction. And these thoughts can be harsh. You’re trying to make them inviting, inspiring. Whatever you find works. Because, as in any kind of training, there are rewards, but there are also punishments. And since you’re training your own mind, you have to be the one who serves out the rewards and also serves out the punishments. Too many people, when they’re meditating, don’t want to inflict punishments on themselves. But you have to warn the mind, “If you go wandering off, I’m going to make you do x, x, x, or I’ll give up x, x, x, and stick by your threats.” But you can’t make it just threats. You have to give a list of rewards. Some of the rewards are in the meditation itself. Some of the rewards are in other areas. Some of the rewards are skillful. Whatever works. And that’s something you have to find out for your own mind. I was talking to a dog trainer a while back, and he said you want to develop a certain amount of fear but also some affection in the dog. If you do nothing but fear, the dog will turn on you at some point. It’s like those spirit doctors over in Asia. As long as their concentration is strong, they get these spirits under their control and get them to do all kinds of nasty things. But then as the spirit doctor’s concentration begins to fade, especially as they get older, the spirits turn on them. So when you’re dealing with your mind, you have to be firm at times, but also you have to keep reminding the mind that you’re doing this for its own good. Then you give it the rewards that you promised it. And as it gets more and more tame, you find that you rely less on fear and less on rewards, and just on your discernment, combined with your concentration and the sort of self-esteem that comes with virtue. This is why virtue, concentration, and discernment are all necessary parts of the path. You want the mind to be happy. You want it to be happy to be trained. In Buddhism, it’s just like an elephant that’s been brought in from the forest. They tie it to a post, and it doesn’t like being tied to the post. But then they play music for it, and they give it good food, and they treat it well. After a while, it decides it really likes being in the city. It really likes being with human beings. Then it doesn’t have to be tied to the post. It likes to stay around them. It doesn’t run off. So you’re going to be both the trainer and the trained, and learn to use your own discernment as to what works in getting you to do the things that you know are good for the mind, good for you, but you don’t immediately feel inclined to do them, or there’s a resistance inside. And it’ll not do the things that you know are bad for you but part of you really likes. The Buddha said that this is a measure of your wisdom and discernment, and it’s also a measure of how far you’ve gotten in training the mind. So it’s going to be a measure of your happiness, too. I guess the “shoulds” and the training that the Buddha teaches us, these are all “shoulds” for our own good, for our own true happiness. They’re all on our side. The problem is that there are parts of our mind that are not on our side, at least not in terms of long-term happiness. Those are the parts you’ve got to train. As for the parts that do want long-term happiness, you’ve got to strengthen them. This is why we meditate. This is why we take on the precepts. This is why we practice generosity. It’s how the mind finds joy in doing the things that are good for it. So it’s the training that leads to joy, that leads to happiness. The goal is happiness, and the means there are also things that make you happy, in a way that feels really good deep down inside. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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