Training the Heart, Training the Mind

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In Pali, the word citta covers both heart and mind. And apparently, in most of the cultures where Buddhism’s influence has spread, they tend not to make a big distinction between heart and mind. Even in Thai, where you have two separate words, there’s citt, which is mind, and jai, which is heart. The two words are pretty interchangeable. This may have to do with the large role that intention plays in the Buddhist teachings. You remember on the night of his awakening, the second watch of the night, he saw how beings were reborn in line with the quality of intention. The karma of the Buddha’s heart was intention. When you form an intention, it’s a matter both of understanding, which is a mind function, and of desire, a heart function. You desire something, and then you think about, given the way the world works, how you’re going to act in order to get there. And intention is a desire with reasons, and the reasons have their desires. What we’re trying to do as we practice is to develop wise intentions, which means it’s both an affair of the mind and of the heart. You ask your heart, “What do you want?” And if the answer hasn’t been beat out of you, the answer is true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t change, a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone, a happiness that’s totally safe. I say beat out of you because sometimes you’ve been taught that this is impossible. The mind’s side has been taught that this is impossible. This is one of the special attributes of the Buddhist teachings. He said it is possible, his view of the world, his view of causality, how things work. All the very intellectual teachings are all there in the service of that heart’s desire for true happiness. It’s simply a matter of getting those two sides together. This is why discernment is a matter both of the mind and of the heart. Right view is more of a mind factor, where we come to understand that some of the things we really like are actually causing us suffering. We’re craving for sensuality. We’re craving to take on an identity in the world. If we’re sick and tired of that identity, we desire to get rid of that. These are things that we like, but it’s a noble truth that tells us that these are causing suffering. And it points out what kind of desire is useful, the desire to give rise to skillful qualities in the mind, the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities in the mind. And that kind of desire is actually conducive to that true happiness we want. So right view tells us this much. It explains things to our understanding. And then right resolve comes in. This is the heart’s side of discernment. We realize that those two courses, the path that leads to suffering and the path that leads away from suffering, have different values. And we want the path that leads away from suffering. It’s the better path. So we have to resolve that we really do want to get beyond sensuality, to find a happiness that’s non-sensual. We want to avoid ill will. We want to avoid harmfulness in general. That’s the heart’s side. Then how all of this is going to work? The two have to get together. We’re training our intentions, for example, with concentration. It’s both a matter of the mind and a matter of the heart. We’re going to say, “No to sensual pleasures. We’ve got to have something else.” We’re saying yes to the pleasures that can be found by inhabiting the form of the body, getting familiar with the breath, learning how to adjust the breath so that it feels good, feels refreshing, learning how to adjust the different elements and properties so it’s not too hot, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light. We don’t just stay there. We use this state of concentration to see things more clearly. Here again, we’re getting the heart and the mind to work together. In the beginning, what you’re going to see is how to parry your defilements. They come in with their swords and you’ve got to parry them. Otherwise they’re going to take you away. You’ve got to learn how to see when a thought is beginning to form, how you can zap it in time so that it doesn’t take over. So here’s the mind coming in to protect that sense of well-being. You have to be vigilant. As John Lee says, when you’re being alert to what’s going on in your meditation, the alertness looks at two things. It looks at the breath and it looks at the mind to make sure they’re going to stay together. If they show any signs of going separate ways, that’s when your ardency has to come in, your strong desire to get this together and keep this together. So the two sides, your desires and your understanding, work together. And what you know is of real value, even as you get to the more advanced stages of learning how to let go. It’s a matter of the mind and the heart working together. You take on the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, but you do it because you know it’s going to be good for you. And you’re looking at all the things that the heart tends to latch onto, or the mind tends to latch onto. And you’re trying to see them in a way that gives rise to dispassion for them. Why? Because dispassion is going to be good for you. Because it’s in that direction that true happiness lies. And there are some people who like vipassana because it’s very intellectual. And they see it as an intellectual exercise. But it’s missing a large point. It’s there to train your heart. It’s also to serve your heart, the heart that wants true happiness. Remember, we’re trying to get the heart and the mind to work together here in all the stages of the path, because all the stages of the path are formative intentions. We take on the precepts because we’re training our intentions. And remember, intentions involve both the heart and the mind. You see the problems that will come by breaking the precepts, and so you say, “I don’t want those.” It’s based on an understanding of karma and your desire to avoid harm, to avoid pain. As the Buddha said, this is the way we show love for ourselves. In practice of concentration, it’s the same sort of thing. We’re going to train the mind, train the heart, so that they don’t go running after lower pleasures. You’ve got something better for them, just the sense of well-being that comes from being right here, inhabiting your body in a comfortable way. And the discernment itself is a matter of heart and the mind, seeing how the places where you’re holding on are suffering in and of themselves, and learning how to let go. So you can find a much better happiness, a happiness that really will satisfy your desires. So when we talk about meditating, getting into concentration, it’s not just concentrating the mind, it’s concentrating the heart. Or it might be better to say, we’re centering the mind and centering the heart. Because once we’re centered, we’re going to see the things that will lead to the happiness that we want.

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