A Foundation for the Heart

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The concept that the Jhans talk about a lot is something in Thai called lak chai, which literally means “a post for the heart.” This relates to the way houses used to be built in Thailand. There’s a ceremony of setting up the first post. Once that post was in place, then everything else depended on that. And if that post was firmly established, the rest of the house would be firmly established. They actually extended this to the building of cities. If a new city was going to be built, they would set up a post and make a shrine to the post, hoping that a good spirit would come in. Even today in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai, and in a lot of other towns in Thailand, you can find this shrine. It’s supposed to be the foundation of the city. And so you might think of it in English as “a foundation for the heart.” It’s a combination of three things—virtue, concentration, discernment—all acting together. The virtue, of course, is that you really hold to the precepts. You’re convinced of the principles and the need to be principled in your behavior, and you’re firmly convinced. But the conviction and so on is not enough. It has to be supplemented by the other two aspects of the practice. Ideally, a foundation for the mind would be stream-entry. That’s when your mind is really sure, really solid. But you work in that direction with the triple training. Concentration is also another important element. You have a good place for the mind to stay, a place where it has a sense of well-being. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have the sense of well-being that comes from the first jhana or something better, it’s very easy for the mind to go back to unskillful pleasures. It may see the drawbacks of those pleasures, but if it can’t find another source of pleasure that’s better, it’s just going to go back. It’s like knowing that junk food is junk food, but you don’t have anything better. So you feed off junk food. Through the concentration, you give yourself something better—health food for the mind. You get to know the breath really well. You get to be comfortable in your own skin. You try to develop your concentration so that it’s not easily shaken. All this, of course, requires the discernment of right view. That discernment comes on many levels. There’s the discernment that comes from listening and thinking, which is basically the discernment of study. Then there’s the discernment of the practice. As we all know, the discernment of the practice is the most important. But we shouldn’t overlook the discernment that comes from study. Because it sets the framework. And if you get the wrong framework, then the practice is going to go wrong. It’s like getting the wrong frame for a picture. It’s not the right size, it’s not the right shape, so you end up cutting the picture to fit the frame. So we come to the practice with a lot of wrong ideas. It can really weight-lay us. I’ve been in communication with a fair number of people who were convinced that the whole point of the practice was to realize there was no self. And they kept berating themselves for having a sense of self. And then, of course, the question is, if there’s no self, what exactly is going on? And they come up with the idea, “Well, you’re supposed to dissolve into the universe. You’re supposed to feel that you’re not separate.” But they kept running up against the fact that when you’re actually acting, you can’t dissolve. And so they felt that even by making choices and acting, they were getting away from the true Dhamma. Which is not the case at all. The true Dhamma is all about making choices, making skillful choices. So if you’re holding in mind the frame that we’re here for, no self, you’ve got a problem. So we study in order to get the right frame. Remember, the Buddha set forth two frames as the ones that are categorical. In other words, they’re true all across the board. They’re always true, they’re always beneficial, they’re always timely. One is the frame that skillful action should be developed, unskillful action should be abandoned. And the other is the frame of the Four Noble Truths. Everything you do in the practice, you want to keep these as your framework. So make sure you know these really well. And then what you’re doing as you practice, will then fit in and it will not be distorted or studded. Years back I was asked to give a talk on the role of study in the practice. It was from a group of people who practiced mindfulness of the sort that mindfulness meant, that you simply accepted whatever came up. So of course for them the question was, “Well, if that’s all there is to mindfulness, what’s all there is to the practice? What do we need to study for?” And I told them that the purpose of the study is to make you realize that that’s not what the practice is, that’s not what mindfulness is. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. It has lots of functions. You keep a particular framework in mind, and then you have a strong sense of what should and shouldn’t be done within the context of that framework. And then you look at what’s actually going on in your mind and use the framework to decide what to do. And so we study to get a better idea of what’s skillful and what’s not skillful and of what techniques work. What to hold onto, what to let go, and when to hold on and when to let go. Because the teaching is strategic. It’s not that the Buddha set out a particular view that we then crock or try to understand, and then when it makes sense and it seems to be true, then we’re satisfied. We’re not arriving at the right view. The right view is part of the path. It’s meant to take you someplace beyond the right view. It’s meant to get you to act in particular ways and then by acting skillfully you’ll gain results. In the Buddhist term, the Dhamma has what he calls an atta, a goal, a purpose. So right view aims at that goal, which means you have to have right view about right view. Otherwise you have an experience which fits into what you’ve heard, about what an enlightened experience is, and you say, “Well, this must be it.” And yet it may be far from it. So make sure that you’ve got all the principles of this foundation for the mind—the virtue, concentration, and the discernment. Remembering that discernment has many dimensions. We study, not just for the sake of study. We study for the sake of practice. And although we give privilege to the practice, we don’t say, “Well, ignore your study.” The study informs the practice, and then the practice gives you a better and better idea of what’s meant, that you’ve studied what it means. And the concentration provides good foundation for the discernment, and the discernment gives guidance to the concentration. The virtue trains your mind in mindfulness, alertness, and say, the qualities you need to get concentrated. And at the same time, as you get the mind more concentrated, you have a greater sense of well-being inside. It goes deeper than the things in the world that would tempt you to break the precepts. The concentration then develops your virtue. So all three aspects work together to strengthen one another. And it’s when they’re strong that you really have a foundation, you have that post for the heart, that foundation for the heart. That makes you resilient, not easily pushed over by the ways of the world.

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