Gladdening the Mind

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The Buddha divides his breath meditation instructions into four sets, or four topics. There are the steps focusing on the breath, the steps focusing on feelings, the steps focusing on the mind, and those focusing on Dhammas, mental qualities. In the steps focusing on the mind, you start out by being sensitive to the state of your mind right now. The Thayajans talk about this a lot. In the beginning of the meditation, you have to make a survey of your mind. What shape is it in? What does it need to be brought into balance? The Buddha recommends in his second step that you gladden the mind. In other words, you make it happy to be here. There are lots of ways you can do this. You can do it by the way you breathe. Think of breathing as a whole body process. Each time you breathe in, you’re being bathed by good energy. Think of the breath all around you. It’s not just a line coming down from the nose into the abdomen, but there’s breath energy behind you, breath energy to the left and the right, above and below. Are there any parts of the body that seem to be tense or tense? Are they tied right now? Think of them dissolving into the breath. Your experience of the body is made out of what the Buddha calls fort tattu, which can be translated as elements or potentials, properties. There’s the solidity, there’s the liquidity, which is cool, the warmth of fire, and then there’s the energy that flows. That’s the breath. One of those four, your first experience of the body, is of the breath. Now, you may have the perception that you’re first aware of the solid parts of the body, and you’re trying to get the breath to come into those solid parts. But switch it around. Think of the breath being there first. There’s really nothing to obscure it, nothing to obstruct it. Start to find a way of breathing that feels really good. That’s one way to gladden the mind. You can engage in what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is the breath, and also creating feelings of ease, which is part of mental fabrication. The other part of mental fabrication is your perception. What image is your holding in mind right now? The image is about the breath, the image is about the meditation, the image is about yourself. Which ones are conducive to settling down? And then there’s finally what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication. That’s how you talk to yourself. Because sometimes the breath doesn’t seem to be going so well. But you can talk to yourself in a way that’s encouraging. The Buddha himself, when he gave Dhamma talks, the verbs that they use in the Pali Canada say that when he gave a Dhamma talk, he would instruct, urge, rouse, and encourage. There are four verbs. One of them only is instruct, giving information. And the rest is to give what in Thai they call khamlong chai, strength to the mind, power to the mind. So see if your mind needs some empowering. Learn to talk in ways that empower it. And then you actually believe. All too often, especially in the modern world, we tend to believe the cynical voices in our minds, the ones that are discouraging. The ones that say, “See, this is not working. You’re not getting anywhere.” And those are not helpful at all. It’s not that they’re true. They have power because they serve the interests of some of your greed, aversion, and delusion. They serve your laziness. In other words, they serve your defilements. And they can be insisted that they’re true. But they’re not helpful. Think of the Buddha’s instructions on how to speak. He says to speak things that are true and beneficial and timely. So first you’ve got to convince yourself it is true, that you can get the mind to settle down. Remind yourself what the Buddha said. If human beings couldn’t develop skillful qualities or abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn’t have taught. Other human beings can do this. You’re a human being. You can do it too. Think in those terms. That’s true and beneficial. In terms of timely, you have to figure out what the mind needs right now. Sometimes it needs to be scolded a little bit to get in line. Other times it needs to be encouraged. So learn how to be skillful in your mental chatter. All too often you just let whatever comes into the mind go through the mind and dominate the conversation. But you want to learn how to be strategic in how you talk to yourself. After all, you’re trying to master a skill. It’s going to take time. It’s going to be a while, sometimes, before the results really become riveting, really become absorbing. So in the meantime, you learn how to talk to yourself, to give yourself energy, to give yourself encouragement. You’re harming no one. You’re hurting no one. You’re having an opportunity to look at your mind. These are all good things, even before the concentration comes. So learn how to gladden the mind. It’s when the mind is gladdened that it’s going to settle down. Some people meditate saying, “I hope the meditation will make me happy.” We have to learn how to encourage yourself to be happy as you’re beginning. It’s simply that you have more and more basis for happiness, more and more reason to be happy as the meditation progresses. But it starts out by lifting the mind, uplifting the mind. So lift it up above its normal conversations and bring it up to the fact that you’re here in the present moment. Watch the breath, the same breath that the Buddha was watching on the night of his awakening. It’s simply that the matter is now how to get here and stay here. Learn how to appreciate what you’ve got, even when the concentration is not all that strong and not going all that well. You may have a little bit of meditation, a little bit of mindfulness, a little bit of concentration. Protect that. Think of cupping it in your hands. It’s like a small fire that you’re getting started. The wind keeps blowing it out, so you’ve got to protect it. It doesn’t seem like much, but after all, where do huge forest fires come from? They come from little tiny sparks. You’ve got a little spark here. You’re not trying to burn down the forest here, but at least you’re trying to get something to catch in the mind. So when it does begin to catch, protect it. Don’t look down on it. When I was first studying with the Chan Furung, I’d be sitting with a group of people, and this person would be having that vision, and that person would be having this vision. I kept wondering, “When am I going to get the visions?” I began to assume that my concentration was no good because I wasn’t getting visions like other people. Then I began to realize that my mind was going in a different direction from theirs. I had to learn how to protect the concentration that I had. Then it could develop. In John Lee’s image, it’s like you have a plot of land, and there are potentials in the land. There’s soil in the land, and it can grow things. But at the moment, it’s all weeds. So what do you do? You clear away the weeds. For a while, you’re not getting any crops. But still, the fact that you’re hacking away, hacking away, hacking away, you get a little bit of a corner here, a little bit of a corner there, and you need to learn how to plant that, plant this. Bit by bit, the fields grow. But they grow only when you protect them. So when you plant seeds, don’t expect them to be huge plants right away. They’re going to be small for a while, but that’s precisely when they need to be protected. As they get bigger and bigger, they take on a strength of their own. So in the beginning, learn how to talk to yourself in a way that’s encouraging. Learn how to appreciate whatever stillness you can find. And as you protect it, it’ll begin to take root and grow. And reward you for your efforts.

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