Training the Whole Mind

August 15, 2022

We’re here to train the mind. And it’s interesting that the Buddha doesn’t really define mind, or jitta, except to say that it can be trained, that it can be released. He puts an awful lot of detail, however, into the training itself. By the way, he lays it out, you’re going to understand that you’re going to be training the whole mind. There’s a part of the mind that’s basically simply aware, and there’s a part that feels, and there’s a part that thinks. When I think of the word jitta, it’s best to think of the English terms both “heart” and “mind” at the same time. Because the word jitta covers your thinking and your emotions, and your will, and as I said, basic awareness. And at different stages in the training you’re going to be focusing on different aspects. Like right now you’re focusing on getting the mind to settle down with the breath. So you want to be as sensitive as possible to how the body feels right now. Spread your sense of awareness so it covers the whole body, from the top of the head down to the feet, and then breathe in the context of that whole body awareness. If you notice any tightness in the muscles that’s pulling the body out of alignment, see if you can loosen up the parts that are making it out of alignment, so it can come back into alignment. And ask, what kind of breathing would feel good now? Sometimes this takes a while to figure out, and sometimes you do it not by figuring it out, but simply listening to see what the body needs. But don’t be afraid of figuring it out. We are using the thinking aspect of the mind as well. It’s not that we’re stopping our discursive thinking, we’re just learning how to do it in a new way. As the Buddha said, the ideal is that you learn how to think the thoughts you want to think, and not the thoughts you don’t want to think. And as you train the mind, your sense of what kind of thoughts are worth thinking will change. Right now the thoughts have to do with how to make the breath comfortable. Once it’s comfortable, how to maintain that sense of comfort, and then as you maintain it, how do you let it spread? So that you’re not only aware of the whole body, but there’s a sense of ease and well-being that fills that awareness, that fills the body. So we’re working on different aspects of the mind, trying to make them work together right now. That’s for extraneous thinking. Just put it aside. That may require some thinking too. As the Buddha said, there are five ways you can deal with distracting thoughts. One is simply to note that they’re there, that they’ve pulled you away from the topic where you want to be, and just reaffirm that topic. And a good way to do that is when you realize that you’ve wandered away from the breath, just drop whatever the thought is. Come back to the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels especially satisfying. Ask yourself if there are any parts of the body that have been starved of breath energy. Let them have their dose. And of course, why stop with one breath that feels really satisfying? Just keep at it. The thoughts come back. Try to remind yourself of the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. You don’t want to get involved. It may have its allure. But nine times out of ten, these are not new thoughts. They’re thoughts you’ve been mulling over again and again and again. Why do you need to come back to them now? This is not the right time for that. They’re imbued with passion, aversion, delusion. They’re actually off the path. How much more time do you want to spend off the path? Here’s your opportunity to get back on. If the thoughts still don’t go away, then you just tell yourself, “I’m not going to pay attention to them. They can be there. They can chatter away in the mind.” This is where it’s useful to have that image in the mind as a committee. Let some of those committee members chatter as much as they want. You don’t have to give them any attention. If that doesn’t work, try to figure out which parts of the body have patterns of tension that correspond with those thoughts, and allow those patterns of tension to dissolve. If nothing else works, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and just tell yourself, “I will not think those thoughts.” This is where a meditation word that you’re repeating really fast can be useful, like bhutto bhutto bhutto, rapid fire. So those are some thoughts that you want to get rid of, ways of getting rid of thoughts that aren’t helpful. But then there are thoughts that are helpful. After all, as the Buddha said, “Directed thought and evaluation are part of the first jhana.” That’s when you’re evaluating the breath. And then you evaluate your focus. Is your focus too heavy? Is it too light? How can you get things snugly together? Body, breath, mind, feeling of pleasure. This takes some thought, takes some powers of observation. But it’s thought that spins around where you are right now. In a John Lee’s image, it’s like hanging on to a post. As long as you hang on to the post, you can run around the post, not get dizzy. If you just try running around outside without anything to hold on to, you get dizzy pretty quickly and fall down. In the same way, as long as your useful thinking is centered on what you’re doing right now, there’s nothing wrong with it. We’re taking this aspect of the mind that we use so much for good or bad, and trying to focus it on something that’s really good. Your ability to pick a topic and to evaluate it. At the same time, you want to get in touch with what really feels good. This is where the mind is. Your sensitivity comes in. Because you can have some preconceived notions about what kind of breathing would be good for you. If it says no, you have to learn how to listen to the body. If it says no, you’ve got to change. In this way, you’re exercising the different aspects of the mind. Getting more familiar with what it feels like to be right here, right now. Not worrying about the future, not concerned about the past. Nostalgic for the past. You’re here right now. But you’re fully alert. And you’re ready. If any issues come up, you may have to think them through as well. Because sometimes there are some thoughts that won’t go away until you’ve sorted them out. This is why the Ajahn say that at the beginning of meditation, if you’re trying to settle down and the mind just will not settle down, ask yourself, what direction is it leaning in? Is it leaning toward the past? Leaning toward the future? Is it leaning towards things that you’d like to think about? Is it leaning towards thoughts that you don’t like to think, but they’re in there anyhow? Learn how to think in new ways. This is what the Buddha gave those topics for recollection. Recollecting the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Recollecting your virtue. Recollecting your generosity. Even the recollection of the devas. In other words, reminding yourself that the qualities that make a human being into a deva are things that you have. To give yourself some energy, to give yourself some encouragement. And also to remind yourself, if you’re dealing with other qualities of the mind, where are they going to pull you? All too often we think simply the fact that nobody knows what we’re thinking, we can get away with any thoughts we want. But they’re a form of karma. And they have their consequences. So think about that. So thinking isn’t bad per se. It’s just a matter of learning how to use it, when to use it. I was reading my teacher today saying that one of the big problems in the mind is that there’s a part of the mind that wants to get things right. You can ponder what’s wrong with that. If you really want to get things right, you should bring your thinking here. Devote your thinking to the question of how the mind can settle down, and how you can stay clear and alert and not zone out. And on the one hand you have to learn how to trust the sense of your sensitivity to the body in the present moment, that this is a good place to stay. But it’s not the case that you can trust everything that comes up in the mind when you’re here. So just as with getting used to any new location, where people act in ways that are not the same as your home country, say you’re off in some other country, it takes a while to learn who you can trust, who you can’t trust. In the same way you’ve got to explore your mind in the present moment. Which parts of the mind right now can you trust? Which parts of the mind can you not trust? Even with the body. We say that you want to listen to the body. Well sometimes it’s been too squeezed by the mind in the past, that it’s not going to open up. So there you have to be patient. But be confident that we’re not trying to cut off any part of the mind. Simply we’re learning how to use the different parts of the mind, have them work together. For a purpose. It’s not the same as we may have used them in the world outside. This is John Fung, he used to say, people coming to the meditation either come thinking too much or thinking not enough. We here in the West tend to think too much. So the emphasis will be on getting the mind as still as possible, sensitive as possible, to how the breathing feels. Learning how to respond to what the body needs. Learning how to respond to what the mind needs. And not emphasize the thinking so much right now. But the thinking will have its place. Just that you want the different parts of the mind to get on better terms with one another. So that every aspect of the mind is working in the direction of freedom. They’ve been doing their work to create suffering, even though they don’t want to. But all the parts of the mind can be trained. And as you train the mind, you get a better and better sense of what it is. How it functions. And that’s the important part. How it functions. There’s that great quote from Ajahn Chah, where he asks, “What is the mind?” And then he responds, “The mind isn’t ‘is’ anything.” And it sounded as strange in the Thai as it sounds in English. But we’re not here to figure out what the mind is. We’re trying to figure out how to get to use it properly. All of its aspects. Because when all of its aspects work together, then they can really do something special. They can achieve completion. The Buddha’s last word was to achieve completion. It’s an interesting idea. We get the mind completely trained. And then you don’t have to train it anymore. We live in a world which is constantly looking for change, looking for improvement. Nothing is ever good enough. No matter how good things get, you always want to improve them. But the Buddha says there is a way of training the mind so it finally reaches completion. It doesn’t need to be trained anymore. So if you focus on the training, bring the complete mind, so it can achieve the completion that the Buddha is talking about.

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