

Ugly Body, Happy Mind

March 20, 2023

Gladdening the mind is an important part of meditation. It's listed as one of the steps in breath meditation, and there are many places where the Buddha talks about how creating a sense of gladness, a sense of well-being, is an important prelude to getting the mind to settle down.

He also talks about two ways in which you develop that sense of gladness. One is through getting the mind to be tranquil and calm. He talks about breathing in such a way that feels comfortable and then spreading that sense of comfort throughout the body. Another way to gladden the mind is through insight. He talks about what he calls renunciation gladness, when you see that all the things in the senses—sight, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations—are inconstant and not worthy of attachment. The fact that you're able to lift your mind above those things gives a sense of gladness.

So when you find the meditation is down, and you're feeling discouraged, think of ways to gladden the mind and have a broad repertoire for how you're going to do that.

There's the passage where the Buddha's talking to Rāhula, teaching him how to meditate, and before he talks about breath meditation, he gives him a series of other contemplations: contemplating the body in terms of elements or properties, contemplating the four brahmavihāras, and contemplating the foulness of the body. We don't usually think of that last contemplation as a way of gladdening the mind. In fact, the Buddha himself lists it as a painful practice. But when you can think in ways that lift you above your ordinary obsessions with the body, that can give a sense of refreshment, a sense of expansiveness.

You'll notice when you're focused on the body as being attractive, you usually focus on certain details. There are certain details that set you off. You have to narrow your vision to a really narrow tunnel vision to do that, because the things you find so attractive are very near things that are not attractive at all. Just go down beneath the skin a bit, and there's a lot of stuff you wouldn't want to get

anywhere near if the skin weren't there. But the fact that the skin *is* there makes a big difference. Why is that?

You see that the practice of contemplating the foulness of the body is not so much to get down on the body, it's to learn how to understand your mind. Why is it that you can do this practice of going through the body section by section, organ by organ, each of the thirty-two parts, and you can admit that there's nothing attractive about any of them when they're taken alone—and then the mind switches, and all of a sudden they're attractive again. We're a slave to that switch, so that's what you want to contemplate.

All the contemplations ultimately get down to understanding perceptions. When the *ajāns* talk about contemplating feelings, especially feelings of pain, the issue comes down to what's creating a bridge between the physical pain and the pain that you're suffering in the mind? It's a perception. What kind of perception? Why do you think in those terms?

The same with the contemplation of the parts of the body: The Buddha recommends that you start with your own body first and then realize that the other body you're attracted to has pretty much the same parts. There may be a few details different here and there, but it's all pretty much the same stuff. So why do you let yourself get so attracted to that?

Part of it, of course, is that you want to find yourself attractive. Most of us find exciting to think of ourselves as attractive. We fantasize about other people finding us so attractive that they can't resist us. What's that all about? That attractiveness then gets reflected back to us when we see other people's bodies as being attractive. Why do we do this? What is it that the mind wants to accomplish? What's the allure? And how can you see through that?

One way is to think about how the parts that you're attracted to are very near parts that are not attractive at all. Why is it that you're able to draw such a clear, distinct, firm line? There's no such line in the body itself. So you want to see why you're doing this to yourself. And also, how you don't have to.

The Buddha says you're not going to get past lust, you're not going to get past attraction to the body, until you hit non-return. So this issue is always going to be there until then.

It's interesting that non-return is also the point where you've perfected concentration. So when you can get the mind concentrated—focusing on the breath, getting some gladness out of the calm—see if you can also get some gladness out of the insight that comes when you contemplate the things that have tied you down for who knows how long.

As Ajaan Fuang pointed out, the things that we lust after, the things that we desire strongly in terms of the senses, are things we had in the past. We miss them, which is why we want them back again. As he said, if you think about that a bit, it's enough to give rise to a real sense of *saṃvega*. After all, if you get them again, you're going to lose them again and you're going to lust after them again and miss them again.

It's like that carrot they use to get a donkey to move. They put it on a string, hang it from a stick, and dangle it just a little bit out of the donkey's reach. So the donkey goes after it, keeps going and going, and of course, the carrot gets further and further away. Every now and then they'll give it a bite, then they'll hang it out far away again. How much longer do you want to be in that position, chasing something that's being dangled in front of your nose?

It's when you can see through the attractiveness, or *why* the mind wants to deceive itself around this: That's when the mind can get glad—because there's a gladness that comes with the freedom that you don't need that anymore. You're not a slave to that anymore.

So when the time comes to gladden the mind, have a wide repertoire of the things you can use to gladden it with. That way, you can find a way of keeping the mind interested in the meditation, keeping it happy to be here working on its internal problems.

You have to remember, we're really fortunate we have this opportunity. Look at the world outside. There are all kinds of disturbances going on, all kinds of conflict. Most people don't have time to just stop and breathe, but as you're listening to this, you do have that opportunity, so make the most of it. Gladden the mind so that it can keep on going.

Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula: When you realize that you've done something well, be gladdened by that, and then use that sense of gladness to

further your practice—to get even more diligent. In that way, you *use* the gladness for something even better.

One of the forest Ajaans who's reputed to be an arahant said that when he was able to get past his attraction to the human body, he could see the auras of people. So when you think thoughts of the unattractiveness of the body, don't think that you're cutting off an avenue to pleasure. You're opening up the mind to possibilities that you may not have thought of.

So even though it's listed as a painful practice, contemplation of the body can be gladdening because it's liberating. The gladness of liberation is one of the best forms of gladness there is.