

Gladdening the Mind

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Gladdening the mind. This is an important skill in the meditation. The Buddha lists it as one of the basic steps in mindfulness of breathing. If your meditation gets dry, it starts to seize up like an engine without any lubricant. So you need to keep your mind lubricated, keep it refreshed as you're practicing.

There are lots of different ways of doing this. Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of a parent who hears her child crying and knows when to take it out for some air, when to give it something to play with, when to feed it. In other words, you learn to read the cry and to look at what the child is doing, so that you can get an idea of what needs to be done to put the child back in a good mood. The mind is very much like a child – you have to look after its moods every now and then.

One way is to drop the breath for a while and focus on some of the other recollections that the Buddha recommends: recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, recollection of the Sangha.

With recollection of the Buddha, you remind yourself that you're following a path set out by someone who was totally free of defilement – who had no agendas, no ideas he was pushing just for the sake of satisfying or pleasing himself. He had found what worked and he taught it straightforwardly.

Now, where are you going to find something like that anywhere else in the world? One of the reasons why deconstructionism is so prevalent in universities is because people often advance an idea because they want power over other people, they want to influence other people to act in ways that are pleasing to them. The purpose of deconstructionism is to see through those agendas. But in the Buddha's case, all he asked was that people practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. On the night of his death, when the devas were singing songs, throwing down flowers and incense in honor of him, he said, "This is not the way to pay homage to the Buddha. The way to pay homage is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma" – which means practicing for the sake of dispassion, practicing for the sake of disenchantment with things, practicing for release. In other words, you show homage to the Buddha by gaining release from suffering for yourself. That's all he asked for. His was the most compassionate of motives. So when you're getting discouraged about the path, think about the other paths you might be following in life and realize there's nothing quite like this one. Even when you haven't yet reached the end of the path, it's still a good path to be on.

And the same holds true for recollection of the Dhamma. Think of all the good things the Dhamma has you develop inside. Of course, being on the path means that they're not fully developed yet, but at least you're headed in the right direction; your trajectory is headed to the right place. The Buddha talks about the

grief that comes from not having attained your goal on the path, but he said, Look, it's a lot better than the grief that comes from not having sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations that you like – he calls that “householder grief.” And where does that grief lead? It leads people to struggling and fighting and grabbing after things that are just going to slip through their fingers. Whereas the grief that comes from being on the path doesn't cause strife and it leads in the right direction. Just that thought should inspire you to practice further on the path. The only problem is when the grief gets too heavy, the discouragement gets too heavy – that's when you need to gladden the mind, by reflecting on all the good things you've done as part of the path.

And the path is asking you to do only good things, things you can be proud of, things that feel noble, honourable. You're not being asked to compromise your ideals when you practice the Dhamma. In fact, you're being asked to raise your ideals to a higher standard.

Then there's recollection of the Sangha. When your mind feels full of defilement, remind yourself that members of the Noble Sangha have all been in the same place you are. And people of all kinds – men, women, children, rich people, poor people, educated, uneducated, healthy, sick – they've all been able to find within themselves the strengths needed to overcome the weaknesses within them. If you're having a long, dry stretch in your path, read some of the *Theri-* and *Theragathas*, where the monks and nuns tell of long dry stretches in their own practice: thirty years or more. And yet, eventually, they still gained Awakening. So you can take encouragement from that.

Then there's recollection of your generosity, of your virtue – all the good things you've done as you've been following the path. This is a valid recollection, a good one for gladdening the mind as well.

As for recollection of the devas: This doesn't mean you sit thinking about devas. You think about qualities that make a person into a deva. The first is the sense of shame you feel when you think of doing things that are beneath you, realizing that you're a better person than that. The second is fear of the consequences of unskillful actions – which means that you have a well-integrated sense of self, able to deny yourself immediate pleasure that's going to have long-term bad consequences for the sake of actions that may not be so pleasant right now but are going to lead to good results on into the future. These are qualities that make people devas, and you have them within yourself. So that helps to gladden the mind.

There's the story in the Canon of a monk sitting in the forest on a holiday night. Off in the distance he can hear people playing music and having a good time and he feels very discouraged. Here he is miserable, sitting out alone in the forest, and everybody else is having a good time. And a deva comes and says, “Look, there are lots of people who really envy you because they see where you're headed; as for the people out there having a good time, their lives aren't headed anywhere.”

So when the path starts getting discouraging and the mind starts feeling dry, these are things you can think about to remind yourself that you're on a good path. It may be a long path, but it's a lot better than not being on a path at all, or on a path that requires compromises in terms of your ideals, in terms of your sense of what's right and honourable, and then yields a happiness that laughs in your face and runs away.

Another good way to gladden the mind is with the breath: finding ways to breathe that give a sense of ease, wellbeing, and refreshment both to the body and the mind here in the present moment. Don't be afraid of those feelings, thinking that they're an attachment. Of course you're going to be attached to them – but it's better to be attached to good things than to things that stir up the mind in harmful ways. In the beginning these feelings of refreshment and rapture come and go seemingly without any pattern. But over time you begin to realize that they do have a pattern. When you get more and more familiar with them, you can tap into them more and more regularly.

Another way of gladdening the mind with the breath is to explore different ways of breathing. Try to think of a way of breathing you never thought of before, and see what it does for the sense of the body. Think of the breath energy coming in, not from the outside, but welling up from within. Or breathing with different parts of the body: breathing with your legs, breathing with your arms, breathing with your fingers. Notice which part of the body has been the neglected stepsister – starved of breath-energy – and focus on giving it as much breath energy and attention as you can. In other words, use your imagination. If you feel patterns of tension in the body, think of a big knife coming through to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut all the patterns of tension.

In other words, use your imagination here – not to wander away in fantasy worlds, but to explore some of the possibilities in the present moment. Try to think of some impossible ways of breathing and then try them – because you can learn a lot about your body that way: what's really possible and what's not. It's like reading about quantum physics. Some of the things they've noticed in their experiments, as far as they can tell, can be explained only by allowing for the idea that certain particles go backwards in time. That explanation required a real leap of the imagination. There's so much out there in the world that's counter-intuitive. Your sense of the body here in the present moment has a lot of counter-intuitive potentials as well. If you only go with your normal intuition, that's all you see: what you expect to see. See if you can surprise yourself with new ways of thinking about the breath.

So there are lots of different ways of gladdening the mind. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like being a good parent. You need lots of different tricks up your sleeve. If the child cries and all you do is feed it every time it cries, you're going to end up with a fat, grumpy child. Sometimes the child has to go to the bathroom, sometimes it's just bored, sometimes it needs some fresh air, it needs a change of scenery.

If all else fails, and nothing in the meditation seems to cheer you up, go out and walk around for a while. Find a little job to do. Notice some place in the monastery where it's not clean, where things are disorganized, and straighten them out. In other words, learn how to find pleasure in doing skillful things of every sort.

Ajaan Fuang once said that when he was a young monk he used to avoid construction projects around the monastery. He'd help a little bit and then sneak off to meditate. Ajaan Lee never said anything about this until they were preparing for the Buddhist year 2500 and Ajaan Lee was going to hold a big celebration at Wat Asokaram. One day he said to Ajaan Fuang, "If you don't help me I'm going to die, you know." So Ajaan Fuang thought about it for a while and finally said to himself, "Well, construction work in the monastery is a form of skillful activity. If I die with a hammer and saw in my hands – well at least I was using the hammer and saw for good things."

So be the sort of person who's always hunting for something skillful to do, because this lifetime is so short. If you spend your time just being depressed or discouraged, you waste so many opportunities for doing good. There's so much good that needs to be done in the world. Starting from little things, like keeping your surroundings clean and neat, and working on up: It's all worthwhile. There are so many ways you can gladden the mind.

There's a story in one of Ajaan Lee's talks about an old woman who went to the monastery and noticed that the walking meditation paths weren't well swept. So she swept them and set out some water for washing feet. Just that much made her feel cheerful. It so happened that on her way home she had a heart attack and died. The next thing she knew she was a deva, just from the cheerfulness that came from keeping the place around her clean. This story illustrates an important principle: Whatever you can do to gladden the mind in a wholesome and skillful way is part of your repertoire as a good meditator.