Glad to Be Here

May 24, 2025

The Buddha’s instructions on how to get the mind in concentration start on the one hand with the reminder that you have to get past sensuality, your fascination with thinking thoughts about sensual pleasures. You can’t let the mind wander off in those areas. And the Buddha says you should have a definite sense of the dangers of those places. That’s why he gives you some pretty graphic images to hold in mind, like the image of the monkeys. Some monkeys in the Himalayas stay in the area where only monkeys go, and they’re safe. But then there are the monkeys who go into the area where human beings go as well. And those monkeys are in danger because the human beings come and hunt the monkeys. They set a tar trap. The monkey gets stuck. And the more it tries to pull away, the more stuck it gets. There it just lies there, whimpering. And the hunter comes along, skewers the monkey, and takes him home. It’s a violent image. Because for most of us, sensual pleasure is fantasies are a lot of fun. They seem to be relatively innocent. And if they’re not innocent, you like them. You have lots of pleasant associations with them. So the Buddha’s trying to teach you to have some unpleasant associations with them. The image of the hawk that has a piece of meat. And it flies off with that piece of meat. And then other hawks and crows come and chase it. And if it doesn’t let go, it’s going to get killed. That’s sensuality. So you should have a very live sense of the dangers of those areas. Those areas of the mind where you don’t want to go. On the other hand, the Buddha says you want to approach concentration with a sense of gladness. There are several ways you can make the mind glad. You’re glad because of your virtue. You’re glad simply because you have the opportunity to do this. To have some quiet time by yourself, where you don’t have any other responsibilities. In other words, you have to lift your spirits. In Thailand, they talk about lifting the mind to its object. And lifting your spirits is part of that. That you’re doing something good. And John Suat would talk about this very often. Come with a sense, he says, of conviction that this is a good thing to be doing. And confidence that if you master this skill, it’ll take you far. And that you do have the ability to master it. This is why it’s important to have a cheerful attitude as you do this. Because there will be setbacks. And the setbacks that keep you set back are the ones where you get really depressed. Down on yourself, saying, “I can never do anything right.” And there comes a long litany of the things you’ve done wrong in the past. But that doesn’t help anything. There has to be a part of the mind that steps back from that. And says, “I don’t have to get involved in that.” This ability to step back from the negative thoughts in the mind. That’s basically what humor is about. You look at the world. You step back a little bit from it. And yes, it’s a miserable place, and people are horrible. But you’re able to step back and see the irony in all of it. And people claim to be looking for happiness. But they’re suffering. And you have to have compassion for them. But you also have to see the irony. So that you don’t get sucked into their narratives. And the same with your own mind. Your mind has some very unhealthy narratives that you have to watch out for. So you have to be able to step back. That’s when you have a certain amount of detachment from your defilements, and can laugh at them. How foolish your greed is. How foolish your anger is. How foolish your depression is. That frees you from that. Then when the mind is freed from those things, then it can settle down. That’s the meaning of all those passages in the very long suttas where the Buddha goes into a lot of detail about how to deal with the hindrances. What the hindrances are. The hindrance of sensual desire. The hindrance of ill will. Sloth and torpor. Restlessness and anxiety. Doubt. And each of these hindrances will give you lots of reasons why they’re right. And again, if you can’t see through those reasons and see how foolish they are, you’re going to get sucked in. So you have to be able to laugh at your sensual desire. Laugh at your ill will. Laugh at the part of the mind that says, “Oh, I’m tired right now. I really do need to sleep.” The part of the mind that says, “I’ve got to worry about X. I’ve got to worry about the past. I’ve got to worry about the future.” What gets accomplished by worrying? You’ve got to be able to pull out of the narrative that justifies that kind of thing. Doubt, of course, has two kinds. There’s healthy doubt and unhealthy doubt. Healthy doubt is the doubt that wants to know. You wonder about this, and you want to know whether this path is true or not. That kind of doubt you actually encourage. Say, “I don’t know, and the best way to find out is to try it.” There’s the other doubt that’s lazy, doesn’t want to bother. That kind of doubt has to be questioned. Because it tends to be cynical. And there’s some reason why cynical voices have a lot of power in our minds. The ones that tell you that you can’t do this. And they will give you a long list of things in the past where you couldn’t do what you were supposed to do. So you have to ask them, “What’s your purpose?” “Why are you trying to discount this practice? Why are you trying to discount your ability to do this?” There will be part of the mind that says, “Well, if I tell myself I can’t do this, then when it turns out that I can’t do this, I won’t be disappointed.” What kind of reasoning is that? Nobody got anywhere in life by thinking in those ways. So you have to learn to see that. The foolishness of a lot of your hindrances, that’s when you can pull out of them. And once you see that they are hindrances, and they’re getting in the way of true happiness, that’s a lot of the battle right there. You can be open to the idea that, yes, they’re wrong. And so their arguments and their justifications lose a lot of their power. Then the mind can settle down. And as the Buddha said, there’s a sense of release with that. It’s as if you had a disease and now you’re cured. You’ve been in prison and now you’re out. You were a slave and now you’ve been freed. This is a joy that comes with that. That joy is going to be your food for concentration. Because the mind does need a good place to stay, a place where it feels at ease, where it feels confident. So even though we have to be hateful, wary of the dangers in our minds, it doesn’t mean we have to be grim. Because grimness can also be a defilement. Because it wears you down. We’re in here for the long haul. And grimness doesn’t last very long. At least it doesn’t allow you to last very long. So see the danger in grimness. See that it too is a defilement. So even though we’re serious about the practice, we’re also cheerful that we’re here. We’re glad that we’re here. This is a good place to be. After all, you’re right here with your breath. This is your territory. How you feel the breath from within is something no one else can know. How you’re suffering from within is something no one else can know. The problem is right here. But the solution is right here as well. And this is your territory. And Jon Sweat would often note the paradox here. We’re told so often about the inconstant, stressful, not-self nature of things. But what you’re doing right here, right now, your karma right here, right now, that’s yours. The choices you’re making right now, those are yours. And you’re free to make them as skillful or as unskillful as you want. But then why make them unskillful? Sometimes it’s because you don’t recognize certain thought patterns as unskillful. But when you’re warned that they’re dangerous, then you’re in a better position to sort through things, realizing that what you experience is a combination of old karma and new karma. You can’t do much about the old karma, but so much of what you experience is actually based on choices you’re making right now. So inhabit that territory. Fully inhabit that territory. Use all your powers of observation, what the Buddha would call commitment and reflection. Do what you can of the path, then reflect on the results, and the results aren’t good. Ask yourself, “Well, what am I doing wrong? What can I change?” Because there is so much you can change in the present moment. Take advantage of that, which is why this is a good place to be, and why you should be Glad that you’re here.

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