

Learning from Sensual Desire

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In Buddhist traditions, they tend not to make a sharp distinction between the heart and the mind—the heart being the part that wills and desires, has feelings, emotions; and the mind being the part that thinks and calculates, tries to reason things out. As they say, “The heart has its reasons.” And the mind has its desires, its passions.

There was a book that appeared a while back called *Intellectual Passions*. It was about the thinkers of the eighteenth century, which was the century of rationalism. The author was trying to make the point that even though these people were rational, they were very passionate about it. They had very passionate ideas about the role that reason should play. They were looking for glory, they were looking for independence, they were looking for power.

So there’s no such thing as a pure thought without desire. After all, the Buddha said, “All things—all dhammas—are rooted in desire.”: all dhammas. That would exclude nibbana—taking it as the end of dhammas—but everything else, skillful and unskillful, comes from desire.

So we have this mass of desires and thoughts and intentions that we’ve got to train. So we use the whole *citta*—the whole mind, the whole heart—to train the heart and the mind. *Citta* is usually translated as “mind,” but there are passages in Pali where it means heart, as in *mettācittena*, “with a heart of goodwill.” It’s not just thoughts of goodwill; there’s a heart that goes along with it. The verbs related to *citta* are verbs about thinking *and* willing. So you bring all of this together. All of this is what has to be trained, and all of this is what’s needed to train itself.

You see this when you’re dealing with the hindrances. I was listening a while back to someone saying that you shouldn’t try to fight the hindrances; you should try to learn from them—which is both right and wrong. You want to learn about them, but you can learn about them only by fighting them. And in fighting them, you have to use a lot of skill.

This is where the mind part comes in. You have to strategize; you have to outwit them. As the Buddha said, when something like this comes along—something like, say, sensual desire—first you have to watch for the origination. Why does it get sparked in the mind? What is it?

Sometimes it’s hard to see. Well, watch it while it’s there, with the purpose of not feeding it, to see when it stops. Because, as is the case with any mental

phenomenon, it's going to last for a while and then, if it's not fed any more fuel, it's going to go away. So you try to starve it of the fuel.

You have to get yourself on the side *against* the hindrance. In fact, that's half the battle right there, because you'll find that, in the committee of the mind, there are lots of members who want to go for it. They think a thought of sensual desire would be really attractive, a lot of fun, nourishing, refreshing.

You want to see their reasons. So, you set yourself up against the hindrance: Say, "I'm not going to go there." And it'll go away. Then it'll come back. That's when you have to watch: *Why* did it come back? And, when it came back, why was there a part of the mind that went along with it? And which part? Which mind part, which heart part went along with it?

Sometimes it's a free association: There's just a random perception that you have, that you've associated with sensual desire. It feels it makes you attractive, makes you clever, makes you... whatever. That's on the side simply of perception, or the heart side, the emotion side. In other words, there's no clear reasoning there. There's just an association, and a feeling that goes along with the association, that you like it.

You have to ask yourself, "Exactly what do you like there?" Do you like the thought itself? Do you like the object of the sensual desire? Do you like the role that you're playing in your fantasy? What are you attracted to? Where's the association that makes it attractive?

Other times, you find there's more of a reasoning going on, saying, "Well, this is natural. After all, I have a body, and the body wants this." I once tried that argument with Ajaan Fuang, saying, "But this is what the body wants, right?" And he said, "The body doesn't *want* anything. If the mind weren't here wanting, the body would just lie there dead. It doesn't care." So it's the mind that comes up with these reasonings and excuses.

It's like that image I heard one time, comparing the mind to a grab bag, with lots of Legos inside. Some of the Legos have been assembled into buildings or fragments of buildings or other objects, and some are just random Legos. You reach in and you pull something out. If it's assembled already, that tends to be more on the mind side, the thinking side, the reasoning side.

Other times, it's just random connections. That's the heart side. But you learn a lot about the heart and mind with them, because sometimes these random connections are really powerful. They go *way* back into your history. This is why, in psychoanalysis, they like to do free association, just to see where your random connections are.

So you set yourself up against the hindrance, saying, “I’m not going to go with it.” Then, notice that part of the mind will go anyhow. Look for why.

Ajaan MahaBoowa talks about how, when he’d been doing body contemplation, he got to the point where he was very, very quick. He’d look at *anybody’s* body and immediately see it as taken apart, with the skin stripped off, and blood all over the place. There had been no thoughts of lust at all for quite a while.

But then he asked himself, “Well, when did the lust go away? When was the moment? When was the insight that made it go away?” And he realized, there was no moment. So he began to get suspicious. Maybe it was just hiding.

So he imagined a beautiful body right next to his, and everywhere he went, this beautiful body went along, right there. This went on for several days: no reaction inside the mind at all. But then after the fourth day, he began to sense that part of his mind actually liked that body. So he realized that the problem hadn’t been solved.

So the next question was: “why?” He began to realize that, as he went back and forth between perceiving that body as attractive and perceiving it as unattractive, there was a part of the mind that *wanted* to see it as attractive. No matter how much you looked at the reality of the body, there was another part that just *wanted* it to be attractive, wanted to have that perception of beauty.

Well, why? What was the allure of that? It was when he saw that allure: That was when he was able to see that it was totally worthless. And, compared with all the drawbacks that come with sensual desire, that was when he felt dispassion for it. That was when he totally let go of any kind of sensual desire.

So you learn about the hindrances—you learn about them both as a mind function and as a heart function—by bringing your whole heart and your whole mind to trying to figure them out for the sake of freeing yourself from them. You try to get your heart on the side of *wanting* to be free. You get your mind on the side of trying to outwit them; seeing, what do they do that fools you every time they come on and you go for them?

This is going to require good concentration. The irony is that you need to get the mind past these hindrances to really get into good concentration. But that’s just an irony in theory. In practice, what it means is that you fight them off and work on your concentration at the same time, as best you can. This is why we have that chant about the 32 parts of the body so often: so that we can immediately think about a way of counteracting our desires.

They’ll just be quiet for a while. They haven’t gone away—they’re just lying there, quiet. But the fact that they’re lying there, quiet, allows the mind to settle

down. This is how we deal with all our defilements as we get the mind into concentration: clear an area where the mind can settle down—knowing that it's not totally without danger, totally without problems, but it's good enough to settle down for the time being.

As you get the mind more and more on the side of concentration, you're going to convert the heart. It begins to see that the concentration really is a good place to be, and you're better off *not* siding with the sensual desire, *not* siding with the other hindrances.

The reasoning part of the mind can then do its work to outwit the hindrance. That's what it means, when it says that it's discernment that sees through them: It outwits them.

So both the heart and the mind are needed to train both the heart and the mind. It's only when the training is total like this, dealing with all your mental functions—all of your thinking functions, all of your willing functions—that the whole heart and mind can be free.