

Delighting the Mind

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When you sit down to meditate, you've got all four of the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness right here. You've got the body—the breath—and feelings, which would be a mixture right now of pleasure and pain. You're trying to work, though, for pleasure. There's the mind, and then there are mental qualities.

Even though your focus is the breath, the feelings are right there; the mind is right there; mental qualities are right there. Sometimes you'll notice that it's easy to get them together, and other times it's hard. When it's hard, you have to see which frame of reference is the problem.

Is it the breath? Work with the breath, play with the breath, adjust it, see if that helps. See if you can breathe in a way that gives rise to a pleasant feeling: a feeling of spaciousness, ease, well-being in the body. If you can, but if the mind still doesn't want to settle down, you've got to look in to the mind.

This is why we say that the different frames of reference run parallel as you practice, and you have to focus on whichever one is the problem. If the mind is the problem, the Buddha gives two steps to begin with. One is being sensitive to the mind, and the other's gladdening the mind.

To be sensitive, you have to step back from the mind's mood and look at it objectively. Which direction is it leaning to? Is it leaning into its likes, leaning into its dislikes, leaning into confusion, leaning into fear? To see these things clearly, you have to have part of the mind that's not leaning. You want to emphasize that.

Remember the Buddha said that he got his mind on the path by being able to step back from his thoughts and divide them into two types: those that were based on sensuality, ill will, harmfulness on one side, and those based on renunciation, non-ill will, i.e., goodwill, and harmlessness or compassion on the other side. Once he was able to step back from his thoughts and see them, not so much in terms of their content but in terms of the state of mind behind them and where they would lead—the skillful thoughts leading to good actions, the unskillful thoughts leading to unskillful actions—then he knew what to do: Abandon the unskillful thoughts

and develop the skillful ones in their place.

So as you step back from your mind and you notice that it's not quite in balance, remind yourself that if there's anything unskillful in there, you want to figure out how to let it go.

This is where you move on to the next step, which is to gladden the mind. The Buddha talks many times when he's describing the steps of the practice, about how you gladden the mind through the practice of virtue and through abandoning the hindrances. Then, when the mind is glad, it finds it easy to settle down.

So what can you do right now to gladden the mind? In some cases, the Buddha talks about a fever in the mind getting in the way of settling down, and the way to overcome that fever is to think of an inspiring theme. For instance, think about the Buddha: the kind of person he was. He had everything that anyone could imagine back in those days as an ideal, pleasant life. Yet he saw that it was lacking. It would change on him and leave him worse than before. He was willing to give it all up, go out in the forest, into the wilderness, and really put his life on the line to find something that wouldn't change, a happiness that wouldn't let him down. And he found it. When he came back, he taught it for free, for forty-five years. Wherever there was someone who needed to be taught, or was ready to be taught, he would go there. That's the kind of person who found this skill.

Then there's the Dhamma itself. We're lucky that the Dhamma taught by that person is still alive, still available.

And there's the Sangha—the people who've kept that tradition alive through all these many, many centuries. Many of them had lots of problems. You read about the monks and the nuns in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā, and they talk of the obstacles they had in their path, the problems they had in their minds. Some of them were getting suicidal but they were able to overcome those problems. The whole purpose of that contemplation is to remind yourself that they could do it, they were human beings; you're a human being, you can do it, too.

So if you find any of those themes inspiring, think about them for a while to gladden the mind.

You could also think about your own virtue, the times when you could have

gotten away with breaking a precept, but your sense of honor, your sense of your worth as a person prevented from stooping that low. You have something to take pride in.

The same with generosity: You had things that you could have consumed yourself, but you decided purely out of freedom of choice to give them away. Thinking about those things can lift your spirits.

Another way of looking at how to gladden the mind is to think of the six kinds of delight that the Buddha talks about as being conducive to the practice. The first is delight in the Dhamma. It's similar to recollection of the Dhamma. You think about what a great Dhamma this is; how it's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. In other words, it starts with good actions, leads to more good actions, and ends up with something that's totally beyond the world. And here you have the opportunity to practice that Dhamma.

Then there's delight in abandoning and delight in developing. In other words, when you see a defilement in the mind, instead of just falling in with it, you take it as a challenge: "How can I find some way around this?" See it as an adventure. You're exploring new territory in the mind instead of simply just falling back with your old habits, your old enslavement. You want to try to work your way out. It's like people in prison trying to figure out how they can get out of prison. You're really enjoying the process of figuring this out.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the sense of satisfaction that comes when you see even just a tiny fleck of the bark of the defilements surrounding your mind falling off the tree, and learning how to take joy in that.

Similarly with developing good qualities in the mind: You try to take joy in being up for the challenge. Even on the days when you don't seem to be getting very far, just the fact that you're on this quest, and it's a noble quest: Learn how to take satisfaction in that.

Then there's delight in seclusion. Usually in cases like this, the Buddha's talking not only about physical seclusion, but also about learning how to take delight in the fact that when the mind is free of its defilements, you enjoy that, appreciate that. If you don't appreciate it, it's very easy for the mind to fall back into its old ways.

As you think in these ways, you find it easier and easier to get the mind to settle down, because you're getting it to side with the path, instead of siding with the defilements or with your discouragement. You learn how to side with the side of the mind that really does want to find freedom, and it's happy to be able to have this opportunity right now.

Then the Buddha talks about delighting in the unafflicted and delighting in non-objectification. Those are two epithets for the goal—unbinding—but they give you an idea of the direction in which you're already heading.

For instance, there's one passage where the Buddha talks about the different levels of concentration as being less and less afflicted as you go up the ladder. As you can get the mind to settle down and just be with the breath—happy to be talking to itself about the breath, adjusting the breath and realizing that you're not concerned with any sensual thoughts, you're not concerned with anything outside, just happy to be right here, right now—then you're free from the affliction of sensuality and your unskillful thoughts. Appreciate that.

If you work with the breath, and it finally begins to settle down, get into a good rhythm so that you don't have to think about adjusting it so much anymore, you can put the work of directed thought and evaluation aside, and even learn to see them as an affliction. Appreciate the mind when it can simply be one with the breath, one with the body. And so on up the ladder.

Similarly, with non-objectification: Objectification is when you start out with the idea that you are a person, you are the thinker, and the thinker has his or her world in which to find food. The mind is basically getting into a state of becoming. Any kind of thinking that promotes more states of becoming counts as objectification.

But you can learn to work in the direction of non-objectification by simply seeing things as events, without building a "me" or a world around them. Just simply: These events are happening; this event causes that event, this action causes that action, which causes another action. See them in those impersonal terms, so that you can get out of the narratives of "me, me, me, and my problems."

Remember that even though the Buddha said the causes of suffering are in the mind, he doesn't have you say, "Well, what's wrong with me that I'm causing

suffering?” It’s simply: “What events in the mind, what actions of the mind are causing the suffering? Can they be abandoned? They can. What are the events that lead to the cessation of suffering? Can they be developed? They can.” Think in those terms and you can release yourself from a lot of issues.

What’s happening, especially with these last two forms of delight, is that you’re moving from gladdening the mind into concentrating the mind, and then from concentrating the mind into releasing the mind, which completes the four steps that the Buddha lists in his discussion of mind as it develops in breath meditation.

So the gladdening does a lot of the work. Remind yourself of that when meditation seems a chore: that the Buddha wants you to gladden the mind as you’re doing it. Even if things are not going well, do your best to try to figure out what’s going wrong, and take delight in the fact that you’re doing that, and not just succumbing.

Remember, the Buddha’s way of teaching, was described as instructing, urging, rousing and encouraging: four verbs. Only one of them concerned giving information. The other three—encouraging, urging, rousing—give you the strength you need to *gladden* the mind, to be happy that you’re doing this.

And seeing it as *the most interesting thing* you could be doing. After all, what else could be more interesting than figuring out your own mind? Especially the way the mind lies to itself: When it wants happiness, it finds ways of destroying its happiness. Why is that? That should be the most interesting thing possible.

The Buddha says there’s a solution to that issue. When you solve that issue, you’ve found the greatest happiness possible.

So lots of interesting things are happening here, and you should be glad you have the opportunity to be here to ferret them out. When you can develop that attitude, then you’ve gone quite a way in the practice. You develop the qualities of mind that are needed to make this gladdening of the mind something that eventually you won’t have to do anymore. The mind will find a state where it doesn’t have to be gladdened. It will have everything it needs, along with a very strong sense of enough.