

Developing the Heart

October 26, 2021

One of the Pali terms for meditation is *citta-bhavana*: the development of the *citta*. We usually translate *citta* as “mind,” which gives one sense of what the word means, but it’s only one sense, because the word *citta* can also mean “heart.” When we talk about a *citta* of metta—*metta-cittena*—it’s not just thinking thoughts of goodwill, it’s *feeling* thoughts of goodwill and *willing* thoughts of goodwill. So what we’re training here is not just the mind up in the brain, but also down into the heart.

Now, the heart has two main functions: One is feeling emotions, and the other is willing actions. The two are very closely connected. With certain emotions, you don’t feel any energy to act at all. With others, you feel very strongly an energy to act. The question is, will your actions be skillful or not?

This is why the heart needs to be trained as much as the mind: trained in how to feel, trained in how to will. The Buddha gives lots of training in this direction. Those five reflections that we chanted just now are not just to think about. They’re also for you to contemplate: What’s really worth doing? On the one hand there’s a lot of change: We’re subject to aging, illness, death, and separation from all that we love. The question is—what are you going to do about change?

Some people will tell you that the Buddha teaches you, “You simply have to accept it because that’s all there is: things that keep on changing, changing, and changing. If you resist change, or if you try to find something that doesn’t change, you’re going against the nature of reality.” But the Buddha did teach that there is something that doesn’t change, and it can be attained through our efforts.

So, what’s worth willing then? Simple acceptance? Well, no. What’s worthwhile willing is to act in ways that will lead to that changeless dimension. That’s why the contemplation ends with, “I am the owner of my actions... whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” Your actions will make a difference, so you want to make sure that you’re well motivated to act *skillfully*.

This is where the emotions come in. They’re not just a matter of how you *feel* about somebody doing something or someone saying something or events outside. They’re not just your passive reaction to things, they’re also your active sense of what can be done. There’s a certain amount of emotion that goes into that, too. You see this very clearly with people who are depressed: They have no desire to act. They feel that everything is hopeless, their actions will not make any difference, so they just give up.

That’s a very bad heart state to be in, just in terms of the feeling side. And it’s very strongly related to the fact that they don’t feel that anything is worth doing, nothing is worth *willing*.

But as the Buddha said, the end of suffering is possible. It is possible to find something that doesn't change. That's very much worth willing.

This is why, when he explained the different emotions that we're subject to, he pointed out how we normally deal with undesirable change with sadness and sorrow—what he calls *household sorrow* or *household grief*. Our usual reaction to that kind of sorrow and grief is to try to go for *household pleasure*, *household joy*. In other words, we're disappointed in things that change—people change, situations change—so we look for new people and new situations to depend on. But of course, that's setting us up for a fall.

That's why he says the cure for householder grief is *renunciate grief*: the realization that there are people who have attained true awakening. That's the hope part of that contemplation. The grief part of that is that you're not there yet. But still, it's grief with a purpose, grief with an end in sight. If you learn how to master the path, you, too, can find the way there. Then he says to replace renunciate grief with *renunciate joy*—which is the joy that comes from contemplating things and realizing that there's something much better than the sensory pleasures you've been looking for, and you've attained it. This is followed by *renunciate equanimity*. When you've attained that joy, you can look at the rest of the world with a lot more equanimity.

This is a very different kind of equanimity from ordinary, everyday equanimity. The equanimity that many people will counsel when they say, "Well, learn how to accept things," just stops right there: You have to force yourself not to want anything more. You're *lowering* your sights, which is certainly not what the Buddha would have you do. He would have you *raise* your sights to find the deathless.

When you do, then you can look back at the world, and the equanimity there comes from knowing that no matter how much things are going to change in the world, what you've found is not going to be affected by those changes. That's where the Buddha is pointing us in training the heart and training the mind: Learn how to think in a way that excites the emotions so that they will want to act toward that goal, realizing that it is a possibility.

So remember, you're not just training the brain here. You're not just training the way you think. You're training the way you *will*, the way you *feel*. All these things go together, which is why they use the one word *citta* for heart and mind. From the Buddha's point of view, our division between heart and mind is artificial. After all, the way we think is going to have an impact on how we feel and what we'd want to do, and how we feel and what we want to do is going to have an impact on the way we think.

In other words, our desires have their reasons; our reasons have their desires. You want to remember that you're going to be training both sides, and training them in such a way that you can find the heart's true desire, which is for a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't let you down. We've seen so much of the changes in the world, and we've realized that the only way the heart is going to find any true peace is to find a happiness that's not going to

change on you. The Buddha's good news is that there is such a happiness. It does exist and it is attainable.

So as you experience grief over the way the world is changing—and when you look around you at the world at large, it *is* pretty discouraging. But we have to remember that each of us is creating his or her own world, and it is possible through your actions to create a world in which the deathless is possible. You're creating a new you; you're creating a new world. The two go together. You'll be going beyond them at some point, but you need to use them to get beyond them, which is what the training is for.

So even though there's some grief in the realization that you're not there yet, it's grief with hope, which is the opposite of depression. That's grief with no hope at all, which is basically what's being taught by that teaching on simply accepting everything and just being okay with the fact that everything changes—and just staying right there. That's pretty hopeless.

Take the Buddha's alternative, which is that it is possible to find something that doesn't change, and it's going to be a happiness that doesn't change. Trust him when he says that it's really worth whatever effort goes into it.

So, whenever we have that reflection on aging, illness, death, separation, and karma, remember: It's there to train your heart. You remember that even though the world is full of aging, illness, death, and separation, it has something else. And that something else can be found through your own efforts.

Let that inspire both your heart and your mind.