

Brightening the Mind

If the meditator is well-prepared – if her mind is well-prepared – she’ll have a much greater opportunity to develop concentration. It’s particularly important for householders, involved in the affairs of the world, to take time before meditation to prepare the mind. As a lay person, your mind is prone to agitation, dis-ease, stress; there’s a tendency to be unfocused, easily distracted. You’ll be well-served, therefore, if you see to it that your mind is in a good place before you begin to be mindful of the breath.

In brightening the mind, we cultivate the heart quality of joy. This is a specific type of joy, sometimes known as appreciative joy, or, simply, appreciation.

When there’s joy in the mind, meditation flourishes. This is a central cause and effect relationship, explicated by the Buddha in his delineation of the path that leads to true happiness. Appreciative joy is a direct cause leading to the development of the qualities of jhana. The degree to which there’s brightness in the mind is correlative to the degree that we’ll be able to cultivate skillful pleasure.

We cultivate appreciative joy by reflecting on our own goodness and the goodness in the world.

The reflection includes three main components:

- 1- Recollecting the blessing of our goodness and the goodness in the world.
- 2- Connecting to gratitude.
- 3- Connecting to joy.

First, we recollect our goodness and the goodness in the world. It’s useful to recognize the expressions of goodness as blessings.

The recognition of our blessings gives rise to gratitude. Gratitude is an emotion. We feel it in the body.

Gratitude gives rise to appreciative joy. In connecting to appreciative joy, we might ascertain a quality of brightness in the heart center, a glint of light, a felt sense of joy.

The recognition of our own goodness is an important part of the process of training the mind and the cultivation of the qualities of jhana.

There are, classically, three elements of our goodness that we learn to reflect on, in an effort to develop appreciative joy. Known as the three forms of “merit,” they are:

- 1- Generosity
- 2- Ethical conduct (Virtue)
- 3- Meditation

(For a comprehensive exploration of the skillful qualities, the reader may want to refer to *The Skill of Living*.)⁵

In reflecting on generosity, we recall the ways we’ve practiced “skillful giving.” We bring to mind, in a general or specific manner, the ways we’ve given the gift of our resources and our time in support of others, in helping others to find freedom from suffering.

In reflecting on ethical conduct, we recollect the ways in which we’ve made an effort to practice non-harming. We develop ethical conduct by refraining from taking actions that are harmful to ourselves and others.

The Buddha gave specific parameters for developing ethical conduct. For householders, he delineated five precepts. The precepts identify five modes of harmful action.

The five precepts are:

- 1- To refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
- 2- To refrain from stealing.

- 3- To refrain from engaging in illicit sexual conduct.
- 4- To refrain from false speech.
- 5- To refrain from consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

It's particularly important to pay attention to the ways we cause harm through our speech. If we engage in unskillful speech, it will cause agitation in the mind. The body will be afflicted with dis-ease, and, accordingly, it will be difficult to cultivate skillful internal pleasure. The Buddha delineates four forms of harmful speech:

- 1- False speech (all forms of lying, blatant and subtle)
- 2- Abusive speech (harsh, abrasive, loud, angry, aggressive, violent speech)
- 3- Divisive speech (speaking in ways that create division between people; setting people apart from and against each other)
- 4- Idle speech (frivolous speech, including gossip)

The third form of merit is our meditation; specifically, the effort we make to train the mind. For dharma students, this entails the time and energy we put into our "on the cushion" meditation practice; and it includes the effort we make "off the cushion," the effort we make, as we go through our days, to abandon unskillful qualities and cultivate skillful qualities.

In preparing the mind for meditation, it's especially valuable to reflect on our own goodness. Meditation, we might say, is a confrontation with ourselves. As many a wise being has noted, the confrontation with ourselves is the most profound and challenging confrontation we'll ever have. Indeed, for most of us, it's a confrontation we'd rather not have. Much of the time, we spend in an effort to get away from ourselves.

If we're going to spend 30, 45 minutes in meditation, alone with ourselves, we're going to have to want to be with ourselves for that amount of time. We're going to need to be on reasonably good terms with ourselves. We're going to need, at least to some extent, to feel good about ourselves. We're going to need a degree of self-esteem. Unfortunately, most of us don't feel so good about ourselves. Most of us suffer a level of low self-esteem. Most of us don't contemplate our good qualities; instead, we tend to focus on our weaknesses, faults, mistakes, failures.

By developing our skillful qualities – generosity, ethical conduct, the effort we make to train the mind – and, in turn, by reflecting on these qualities, we connect to the truth of our goodness. We begin to feel good about ourselves. We begin to feel alright with the notion of spending 30, 45 minutes alone with ourselves. We put ourselves in a good position to practice breath meditation.

In brightening the mind, we can also reflect on the goodness we find in the world. To that end, we might recollect these three categories of goodness:

- 1- Other beings
- 2- The dharma
- 3- The preciousness of life

In reflecting on "other beings," we recall the beings who've supported us in our efforts to move toward a greater happiness in our lives. As we've made our way along the path, there have undoubtedly been many beings who've supported us, in various ways, blatant and subtle.

The dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, provides us with a way to develop our goodness. Reflecting, we remember this. We remember that the dharma offers a path, comprised of skills that we have the ability to practice, that leads to true happiness.

And, finally, in cultivating brightness in the mind, we reflect on the preciousness of life. In doing so, we acknowledge the goodness in life, the goodness that is available to us as sojourners in this

human realm. As human beings we have an innate ability to know true happiness; and we have an ability to develop the skills that will enable us to know this happiness.

If meditation is a journey to the present moment, for most of us it's a problematic journey. The problem, as we've suggested, is that we don't want to be present. For most of us, most of the time, the present moment is the last place we want to be. Most of our lives we've sought to escape the present moment. We've held a negative perception of the present moment. We've considered the present moment unpalatable, painful, anxiety-producing, fearful.

If we're going to practice meditation, we have to begin to change our relationship to the present moment. We have to be able to find some joy in the present moment.

As we reflect on our blessings, we bring brightness to the mind. We connect to a quality of appreciation. In the process, we begin to feel more inclined to remain in the present moment. We begin to feel alright with the prospect of spending the next 30, 45 minutes alone with ourselves in meditation.

-from *Skillful Pleasure*....

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