

Expanding Your Awareness

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The mind in concentration, the Buddha calls *mahaggattam cittam*, the enlarged mind, or the expanded mind. There are two ways you can expand it.

One is through developing the sublime attitudes: “May all living beings be happy. May they be free from stress and pain. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained. All living beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.” We apply these thoughts to everybody, all living beings of all kinds.

There’s also a chant that specifically directs you to think these thoughts in specific directions: first to the East, then West, North, South, Northeast, Southwest, Southeast, Northwest, above and below—all ten directions. Sometimes it’s a useful exercise.

You’ve got yourself sitting right here in the middle and thinking of all the beings off to the East, wishing them goodwill. Now think of all the beings off to the West, and so on around the directions. They say that Ajaan Mun did this three times a day: right after waking up in the morning, right after waking up from his mid-day nap, and before going to bed at night.

It helps keep everything in perspective. You realize what you’re doing here as a meditator is in a larger context. You can think of all the beings that you’re dependent on for your food, your clothing, your shelter, your medicine. You realize that there has been a lot of suffering in providing those things. Some beings gave their lives—and not willingly. There are the people who’ve had to help in the transport of these things, in the preparation, and it finally gets to you, simply because you’ve got this body that needs these things.

They say in the suttas that one of the motivations for people to practice is that the higher your attainment in the meditation, the more the results will spread to the people who supported you, the beings who supported you. This gives the lie to the old idea that arahants are practicing just for their own good. One of the reasons they practice to become arahants is so that the fruit of the merit that comes from supporting them will be great.

So one way that you can show goodwill to all beings and really help them to be happy is to sit here and practice, to work on your mind.

Another way of expanding your awareness is to keep expanding it through the body as you work with the breath energy in the body. You get a sense of comfort from the way you breathe and you think of it seeping out through all the channels

of in the body in whatever way it's going to go. If you try to force it, of course, you create more problems. Simply allow it to spread. Think of it spreading out, leaking out your fingers, leaking out your toes, in all directions: a sense of ease flowing out through the pores, breath flowing out through the pores. This kind of expanded awareness helps keep your concentration grounded. The concentration that comes from the four sublime attitudes can get a little amorphous sometimes, so it's good to have a grounding right here in the body.

When you have a combination of the two, then you've got the ideal state of mind for working on awakening. Some of the texts talk about developing the seven factors of awakening based on goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. Others talk of the factors of awakening being based on this enlarged state of awareness in the body. Either way, you've got a foundation right here. Even in day-to-day life, these two forms of expanded awareness are really good, really helpful.

When you're working on restraint of the senses, it can lead to a sense of being really confined at times. You can't look at this, you can't look at that, without having to think of the other side. Looking and seeing become a real chore. Well, part of the practice is to realize that if you're going to look in a responsible way, you have to take responsibility for the mental states that will arise from the way you look, from the way you listen. Before, we tended to be pretty irresponsible in our looking, our listening, our smelling aromas, our tasting, and our touching. A common reaction as you try to get responsible for these things is that you feel you can't look here, you can't listen to that, and all of a sudden you feel very confined. This is why it's useful to develop these expanded mind states.

First, so you don't have that feeling of being confined, and second, so that these expanded mind states can help you to keep your priorities in mind. When you focus on looking at things in such way as to give rise to lust or anger or greed, you narrow your awareness down to very small details, the little things that excite lust, the little things that provoke your anger. You lose sight of the larger picture. Expanding your awareness helps to keep that larger picture in mind.

At the same time, you begin to see that the reason you're trying to feed off those things is because there's a sense of dis-ease in the present moment.

So you keep the sublime attitudes in mind as a way of keeping the larger picture in mind, and to keep your awareness suffusing the body as a way of creating a grounded sense of ease, so that you don't have to go looking for gratification in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, either liking them or disliking them. You've got good food right here. You don't have to go feeding in the dumpsters or garbage pails.

When your awareness is all-around, you start seeing things in the mind you didn't see before. You catch sight of the motions in the mind out of the corner of your eye that you'd miss if your awareness were too narrowly focused.

So this practice of expanding your awareness and keeping it expanded is a really important part of the meditation. It provides nourishment for the mind in all kinds of ways and keeps your perspectives straight, so that your meditation, if you do it properly, really is a gift not only to yourself, but also to everybody around you. That kind of nourishment helps keep the practice going.