

## *To Gladden the Mind*

*August 3, 2020*

When you sit down to meditate, there are three things that you have to check, to survey, to make sure they stay together. There's the body, there are feelings, and there's the mind. With the body, of course, we're mainly concerned with the breath. The mind is your awareness right here. And we're trying to create a feeling of pleasure, as a kind of glue to keep the mind with the body.

If, as you survey these things, you find that one of them is off, then you make corrections and adjustments. If there's something wrong with the breath, you can change the breath: Try deeper breathing, shallower breathing, heavy, light, fast, slow. See what kind of breathing feels good right now. You're not confined to whatever the body is already doing, because the breath is called the bodily fabrication, which means that it contains an intentional element. You can let the breath go on automatic pilot, but there's something in the mind that monitors it. So you want to take advantage of that fact.

At the same time, the mind is something that you can fabricate, too, through your perceptions, through your feelings. So if the problem is the mind, you make adjustments there. The Buddha talks about this in several places. In one place, he says that there are times when you try to get the mind to stay with the body, stay with the breath, say, and there's either a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. In other words, it's just not comfortable. You're not getting the feeling you need to glue these things together. In that case, you drop the breath and focus on an inspiring theme to give rise to a feeling of joy, which will have a good effect on the mind. In his breath meditation instructions, he says a similar thing: First you get sensitive to the state of the mind, and then if you need to gladden it, that's what you do. Give it something that feels uplifting.

This is especially necessary now, when the news of the pandemic and of people's reaction to the pandemic can get you pretty down. If all you're feeding on is the news out there, you're going to make yourself sick. You've got to take your own mind in hand and figure out what will give rise to a sense of well-being. This is not a polyanna-ish, pretending-that-everything-is-okay technique. It's a very clear-eyed realization that when things are down in the world, it doesn't help to get your mind down. You've got to lift it up.

The Buddha lists many different themes for contemplation. One of them is recollection of the Buddha himself. Think about the fact that despite how the world is going right now, we are living in a world that has had a Buddha, and his teachings are still here. He sets a good example for human beings—that it is possible to find true happiness by being truly good. And he taught many people to do that.

Given that we live in a world where people are looking for happiness, and their ideas of goodness are very strange or they don't care about goodness at all, it's good to remember that there are people who said that the real deal—real happiness—requires that the mind be good, the heart be good. There's something very nourishing in that thought.

Look at the Buddha's example: He was born into wealth and power, and yet he abandoned them. He saw that they weren't the way to true happiness. He sacrificed a lot of his own personal comfort. He went through six years of austerities before realizing that that was a false path. But he kept trying. Nothing could discourage him. He was determined that if there was a path to the deathless, he was going to find it—and he did.

And then he taught it for free. He walked all over northern India. Wherever he sensed that there was somebody who would be ready to hear the teaching, he would go. And even though not many people act like the Buddha, there are many people who in the course of history *have* been inspired by him, and you have every right to join that group of people. Those are the people who bring light to the human race, and you can be one of them.

Because when we reflect on the Buddha, it's not simply admiring a person in the past, or worshipping a person in the past, or simply believing that there was such a person. As he said, you're always going to have doubts about him until you've found the Dhamma within, and he pointed out how to do it. He didn't ask that you simply just believe, believe, believe. He said that we all come with uncertainty, and where are you going to cure the problem of uncertainty? You can cure it by looking into your own mind and asking the right questions. In other words, you come to confirm your conviction not by stifling your doubts, but by directing them in the right way.

You look into the mind to see what's dark and what's bright there, what's skillful and what's unskillful. In other words, any mental states that, when you act on them, lead to long-term happiness—those are the skillful ones. Any mental states that, when you act on them, lead in the opposite direction—those are the unskillful ones.

This is something you can observe for yourself. Just take the time to make that question an important question in your mind. And look very carefully. This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation: to get the mind to be mindful and alert enough so that it can gauge what's going on in the mind, exercising its powers of judgment in a really useful way.

You'll find, as you develop the skillful qualities of the mind, that they really are in line with what the Buddha taught. You develop concentration, you develop discernment, and they take you to the point where you can confirm for yourself inside that the Buddha knew what he was talking about—there is a deathless, and it can be attained through human effort. That's how you overcome your doubts about the Buddha. From that point on, your conviction is confirmed.

So the Buddha wasn't the type of teacher who would simply demand allegiance or demand belief. He said to exercise your doubts, but learn how to train your doubts in a useful

direction. It's refreshing that there has been a teacher like that in the world, and that there are people who've carried on that tradition. And you can be among them: You take refuge in the Buddha in terms of his example, and you let that lift your mind up.

Even though there are miserable people in the world—and by that I mean people acting in miserable ways—not all human beings are like that. There are human beings who have been shining examples. You can take them as an example and you'll benefit. That was one of the Buddha's discoveries: By being good—in other words, developing really skillful qualities of the mind, qualities that are harmless, qualities that strengthen the mind in a good direction—you can find true happiness. And it's not the happiness simply of patting yourself on the back that you were good, but you open up to a dimension that's totally other, totally free from suffering.

So we respect the Buddha because he teaches us to respect something good in ourselves: our desire for true happiness. About that desire, the world says, "Oh, don't bother, it's impossible, nobody can do it." But he's here to say, "It is possible, and you can do it."

We also respect him because he treats us like adults. He doesn't simply demand allegiance. He has us exercise the full range of our mental abilities.

So we have the opportunity to practice in line with his teachings. We live in a world as I said, where his teachings are still alive, and at the moment we're still breathing, we're still capable of following those teachings—so let that thought be uplifting.

The Buddha says that when you think of death, don't just think of the things you're going to miss. Think of the fact that "I do have this breath right now, there's a lot that I could do that would give meaning to this life." "One instant," the Buddha said of insight, "is worth more than a hundred years of no insight." So if all you have is one instant, make sure to do the best thing you can do.

So even that we admit that the world is often a discouraging place to look at, it doesn't have to be discouraging to our goodness. It doesn't have to discourage us. We may say, "Maybe I only have a little bit of time left." Well, a little bit of time can be well spent. And the goodness you do in that little bit of time doesn't vanish. It lasts.

So these are some of the things you can think about when you think about the Buddha—not only of who he was, but also of how you can follow his example. And of the way in which he would have you follow his example: He treats you like an adult. He gives you a challenge, a good challenge. And it's a challenge that, when you try to meet it, you find that it really makes life worthwhile.

With those thoughts in mind, then you can get back to the breath and develop those qualities: the qualities that the Buddha developed himself and that he didn't lay exclusive claims to. He opened the path to everybody. So here it is, open to you.

Let these thoughts be uplifting.