

## Closer to the Heart

The main reason why meditators, try as they might, are not able to make significant dents in their suffering is that they're not able to maintain mindfulness of the body.

To find happiness in this life – true happiness – we need to come to the heart; and the way to the heart is through the body. The heart is found inside, in the body. In simple terms, we might think of dharma practice as a process in which we learn to come out of the head, into the body, and, ultimately, into the heart.

The Buddha's happiness is the happiness of the heart.

Most people never find a way in, into the body. Most people live in conflict with the body. They never get to the body. And, consequently, they never get to the heart.

The Buddha, in his instructions for practicing mindfulness, provides a way into the body, to the heart. This is the middle path we've described: the path of skillful pleasure. By developing skillful internal pleasure, we make our way into the body; we make our way to the heart.

In the final analysis, this is why we cultivate skillful pleasure: to get closer to the heart.

What is the heart? Sometimes we use terms like "heart" but we're not quite sure what we mean when we use these words. In the Buddha's design, when we talk about the heart we're referring to what the Thai Ajaans call the *citta*. The *citta* is located inside; it's located in the body. In the *citta* – in the heart – we find our innate wisdom. As human beings we have an innate wisdom. It's a wisdom that abides within us, in the body. It's a wisdom that surpasses intellectual or academic wisdom. It's a wisdom that comprises a deeper knowing. This knowing quality understands the way things are, the truth of our human experience; it understands why we suffer, what we need to do to find freedom from our suffering. As such, it is a liberating wisdom. It is the wisdom that will lead us to true happiness.

Our greatest source of wisdom exists within us. The truth, the dharma, exists within us. This isn't a conceptual notion. The *citta* is something real. It's something we can feel. It's something that, as dharma students, we learn to know on a felt level. We learn to experience the *citta*, our innate wisdom, as a felt sense, in the body. Some Thai Ajaans describe the *citta* as, specifically, being located in the middle of the chest. In the following passage, the Thai Ajaan, Ajaan Maha Boowa offers a profound description of the *citta*:

When the *citta* enters into a deep state of calm and concentration, the conscious awareness that is normally diffused throughout the body simultaneously converges from all areas of the body into one central point of focus at the middle of the chest. The knowing quality manifests itself prominently at that point. It does not emanate from the brain. Although the faculties of memorization and learning arise in association with the brain, direct knowledge of the truth does not. Step by step, beginning with the initial stages of samadhi practice, progress in meditation is experienced and understood in the heart – and only the heart. This is where the truth lies, and the meditator who practices correctly knows this each step of the way. When it comes to understanding the true nature of all phenomena, the brain is not a factor – it is not useful at all. The *citta*'s serene and radiant qualities are experienced at the heart. They emanate conspicuously from that point. All of the *citta*'s myriad aspects, from the grossest to the most subtle, are experienced clearly from this central spot.<sup>20</sup>

As Ajaan Maha Boowa explains, when we're developed in concentration, our awareness converges at the heart, at the "one central point of focus at the middle of the chest." Normally, Ajaan Maha Boowa says, our awareness is diffused. We're preoccupied with unpleasant sensations in the body, physical pain, mental dis-ease; we're distracted by various sense experiences, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations; we're carried away by currents of thinking. But as we strengthen in concentration, as we bring the mind to the body, as we cultivate a pleasant abiding in the body, we're more and more able to establish a connection to the heart. We're more and more able to meet life from there, from the heart, in accord with the knowing quality.

As we become developed in skillful internal pleasure, we spend more and more time in the present moment. Our awareness abides, more and more, in body. And gradually, our awareness converges at the heart. We move closer to the heart.

As we learn to keep the mind in the body, we become more and more in tune with the heart.

In the heart, we find "direct knowledge of the truth." This quality of wisdom understands – in a way the thinking/intellectual mind can't understand – what we're doing that's causing suffering, and what we need to do to alleviate our suffering. And our wisdom understands what we need to do, the actions we need to take, in order to have true happiness in this life.

Wisdom, we could say, shows us what actions lead to true happiness, and lovingkindness is the attitude that informs these actions. In the citta we find the sublime qualities of lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Lovingkindness (*metta*) is the quality of the heart that informs the actions we take in support of our wish to be happy (and the wish, for happiness, that we have for others).

As we become able to keep the mind in the body, we come, more and more, to know the quality of lovingkindness – along with the other sublime attitudes – on a felt level. Like our innate wisdom, lovingkindness is not a conceptual premise. It's real. It's tangible.

As dharma students developed in skillful internal pleasure, we learn to maintain a felt connection to the heart. We learn to take action, from the heart, connected to the quality of lovingkindness.

Lovingkindness fuels skillful actions, the actions that lead to true happiness. Lovingkindness powers skillful actions in the same way that anger, for instance, powers unskillful, violent actions, like yelling at somebody or punching somebody in the nose. Lovingkindness gives us the power to take skillful action; it drives action. It is, in fact, our greatest source of power. It is our greatest strength. It is stronger than anger or hatred or desire or greed. Lovingkindness overcomes anger and hatred. It is, as the Buddha declared, the only means by which we're able to overcome anger and hatred.

Hostilities aren't stilled  
through hostility,  
regardless.

Hostilities are stilled  
through non-hostility:  
this, an unending truth.

(Dhp 1.5)

Throughout history, we've witnessed the power of love in dispelling hatred. We've seen people like Ghandi and Martin Luther King, who've adopted the Buddha's teachings, accomplish extraordinary things, overcoming hatred and violence through loving and compassionate action.

Lovingkindness provides us with the strength to act in an effort to find true happiness. It enables us to move forward.

When we're able to keep our awareness in the body, connected to the heart, when we're able to be in touch with an attitude of lovingkindness, we're able to move forward when we decide to take action that might not be that easy to take. We're able to act, even if it's difficult. We're able to move past our perceived limitations.

Often we don't take action that may be in our best interests, that may be an expression of love for ourselves, because we're afflicted with fear. We stay with a job that doesn't speak to us because we're afraid to leave our secure position. Or, because we're fearful, we don't pursue our creative inclinations. Or we don't attempt to make a connection with another person. Or we don't express our truth to somebody dear to us because we're afraid of how they might react. We could go on and on with examples of how fear hinders us, prevents us from taking action.

But when we're able to remain with the heart, when we're able to act with lovingkindness, we're able to move past fear. Lovingkindness, in fact, is the antidote to fear. Lovingkindness preempts fear. Lovingkindness, simply, is stronger than fear. As the Buddha might've put it, lovingkindness overcomes fear the way a strong man overcomes a weaker man.

It's lovingkindness that enables us to surpass fear. It's lovingkindness that enables us to move forward in our lives.

Our ability to meet our suffering, to transcend fear, to know true happiness, depends on being connected to the heart. If we want to know true happiness, we have to find a way to the heart; and the way to the heart is through the body.

As dharma students, we follow the Buddha's middle path – the path of skillful pleasure – because it provides us with a way to the body. And in doing so, it provides us with a way to the heart.

-from Skillful Pleasure

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