

This week we will look at ways to "gladden" the heart. This is not just an antidote for those bestowed with aversive tendencies, gladdening the heart helps us all to find greater contentment and happiness in life, no matter what it may be offering us. It is also a wonderful catalyst for creating focused attention in the mind.

I know many of you have been struggling with difficulties arising during your practice. Gladdening the heart doesn't eradicate the disturbing fluctuations of the mind, but it helps promote a spaciousness in the mind that supports the natural impermanence of things, including those that bother us. Remember - we do not meditate or practice mindfulness expecting to prevent troubles from arising. It would be foolish (and frustrating) to think that we could stop distressing thoughts, sensation and emotions from arising, no less outer conditions. But we can cultivate a habit of letting go instead of holding on, instead of making the experience "mine" or "me." Gladdening the heart creates an atmosphere in the heart/mind that allows us to act more like teflon than velcro for such experiences, makes letting them go more natural.

You know how if you are in a grumpy mood and you walk into a room full of people commiserating about some injustice, challenging person, or unwanted circumstance, it is easy to fall right into the gossip, the complaining, the bitterness. Your grumpy mood is supported and encouraged by the energy that surrounds it, perhaps even enhanced. But if you walk into a room with that same grumpiness and everything and everyone there is carefree and happy - not so sugary sweet that it makes you want to puke and feel even more miserable; rather, the people and conditions are positive and friendly, kind and supportive. It is hard to still be grumpy in the presence of such ease and contentment, to continue holding onto your bad mood. So we practice gladdening the heart so as to create an environment conducive to letting go - letting go of confusion, of

fear and anger, of wanting, anything that creates suffering in the heart and mind.

Here is a basic list of practices that I hope you will find helpful.

Gladdening the Heart and Mind

1. Gratitude - Consider writing (journaling?) or sharing with someone in your life (in person or via phone/email) what you're grateful for each day. If you have someone you're close to that you decide to do this practice with, consider also sharing what you appreciate about him/her as well. Short of that, just count your blessings, as you have many, I'm sure. No matter what sour grapes you may have, if there are sweet ones on the vine, taste those and enjoy them!

2. Generosity - Follow your generous inclinations. We all have them. Notice how good it makes not just the recipient feel but also yourself.

3. Recall your/others' goodness - Just by remembering your acts of kindness or good naturedness or generosity can bring back the goodness of heart that was there at the time and can shift your mindstate dramatically.

4. Spaciousness - Expand your awareness to the bigger picture. Take in the sky, the birdsong, the trees, mountains, all of nature. Open your mind to the vastness of life. Consider that all views are possibly as correct as your own. Open your body, literally, and feel life force flowing through you. Breathe deeply and expansively.

5. Take in the good (30 seconds) - When something good happens, to you or another, spend 30 seconds really drinking it in. Feel it penetrating your cells, every ounce of your being. This reprograms your brain for goodness. Delight in others' good fortune and piggy

back off of it for your own happiness.

6. Let go of "shoulds" - Anything you should or should not do limits you; it contracts your heart and mind. When you feel yourself being guided by a should or judging yourself or others over a shouldn't have, etc., just remind yourself that it is not helpful and, quite frankly, ridiculous. Things should be just as they are. If they were meant to be otherwise, they would be. Don't fight reality and your heart and mind will be happier.

7. Be spontaneous/silly/listen to your heart - Reconnect with the child in you. What does s/he want in the moment? Listen to him/her and if its not destructive to your well-being, do it! The sillier the better. And remember to laugh at yourself.

8. Challenge yourself (beyond your comfort zone) - If our hearts and minds are a bit funkified, sometimes the best way to get unstuck is to do something new, something we never would think we could do, or are afraid to try. Just taking the leap can set your heart and mind free. Let go of results.

9. Smile breath: Inhale and close your eyes. Exhale and drop your chin to your chest. Inhale, smile, lift your chin back up and then open your eyes. It's a great one! (And if it feels silly, see #s 6, 7, and 8.)

10. Cultivate joy through: play, creativity, singing, dancing, music, art, etc.

Good luck and have fun.