

The Mind's Immune System

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August, 2002

We're here to look after the health of our minds because the mind has a tendency to fall prey to diseases. There's a passage in the *Udana* where the Buddha right after his Awakening surveys the world, and he sees everybody on fire with the fevers of passion, aversion, and delusion. So when we talk about the diseases of the mind here, we're not talking about the ones that would throw you into a mental institution. We're talking about the diseases everybody is born with. We come into the world carrying germs inside.

Or you might say that we're born with a low resistance to disease. The mind doesn't have its immune system up, and as a result it catches fire – catches these diseases – when germ-laden stimuli come in from the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body.

As you know, we live in a world full of germs, but they can take hold in the body only when our resistance is down. The same principle holds with the mind: There are all sorts of things out there that would spark passion, aversion, and delusion, but only when our resistance is down do these things actually take over the mind. There are times when you can look at something really beautiful and feel no passion at all. Events can be really bad and yet there's no aversion. That's a sign that your resistance is on a high level; your immune system is working.

So the cure the Buddha offers is a double one. As a stopgap measure he says to practice restraint of the senses so you don't take in too many germs from outside. If you notice that when you focus on certain details the mind gets worked up, don't focus on those details. Often when we hear "restraint of the senses," it sounds like we've got to put blinders on – we're not allowed to look, we're not allowed to listen, which would cause all sorts of repressed things to come boiling up out of frustration inside. That's the image we have. But that's not what the Buddha's talking about. He says to watch for the details. What are the little things that set you off? Oftentimes that's just what the problem is: the little details. When you focus on the details and not on the whole thing, the mind comes up with a lopsided or unbalanced response. So if something with beautiful details is giving rise to passion, look at its repulsive details. That's why we chant that contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body almost every morning – as an antidote, to give you some perspective.

As for people or situations that get you angry, look on the good side, look for the good details. Don't focus on the details that get you upset. As Ajaan Lee says,

“If you look at things with only one eye, you see only one side of the situation.”
If you look at both sides, that helps get rid of delusion.

So that’s the stopgap measure: restraint of the senses. If you’re really diligent in practicing it, things get a lot easier in the meditation.

Our problem is that in the course of the day we leave our mind on a long leash and let it get involved in all kinds of stuff. Then when the time comes to meditate, it’s like a dog on a long leash. You’ve got to pull here and unwrap it there because the dog’s gotten the leash wound around a lamppost, wound around a bench, wound around bushes and all kinds of stuff. By the time you’ve unwound it, the meditation session is over.

At the same time, the mind hasn’t just gotten wound around things. It’s also picked up all kinds of germs, and you’ve got to sit here treating its illnesses. But if you really exercise restraint over the senses – if you notice when the mind is getting worked up in an unskillful direction *and you counter it immediately* – that’s developing mindfulness and alertness right there. So you’re strengthening your immune system at the same time you’re keeping germs from coming in.

The enemies of our inner immune system are the mental qualities called, “*anusaya*” – one of those Pali terms that’s really difficult to translate. Sometimes it’s translated as “latent tendency,” because literally “*saya*” means to “lie down;” and “*anu*” means to “be with” or “following.” But if you look how the word is used in the texts, it’s more like “obsession.” In other words, your thoughts keep *lying down* with a particular object, a particular pattern. They’re obsessed.

There are particular types of obsessions, and these are the things that cause trouble. For instance, when pain comes, the pain itself is not all that big an issue, but on its heels comes the obsession of resistance. You get obsessed with resisting the pain, and then you start looking for an escape. And because you see sensual pleasure as the only escape from pain, that’s where you go looking. You want to find some sort of sensual pleasure to cover up the pain, get rid of the pain, push it away.

Then once the sensual pleasure comes, there’s the obsession of passion. You get obsessed with passion for that pleasure. You want to keep it going to counteract the pain, to protect you from the pain.

And as for delusion, that usually centers on feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful: neutral feelings. You don’t pay much attention to them. You don’t really see them, because you’re out looking for the pleasure and trying to push away the pain. The neutral feelings seem unimportant, and so a lot of delusion comes into the mind right at that point. That’s where the Buddha says the ignorance obsession tends to focus.

He said that these obsessions circle around the pain, the pleasure, the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain. They’re the things that cause problems in your immune system.

Now, the mind’s immune system doesn’t work quite like the body’s. To strengthen it requires understanding – understanding that there are alternatives

to the ways you ordinarily react to pleasure or pain. The texts talk about three ways of doing this. In the *Culavedalla Sutta*, Visakha, a layman, asks his ex-wife, Dhammadinna – who’s now a nun – some questions on the Dhamma. After she explains these three obsessions – resistance, passion, ignorance – he asks, “Is there passion obsession with every feeling of pleasure? Resistance obsession with every feeling of pain or disease? Ignorance obsession with every feeling of neither pleasure nor pain?” She answers, “No,” and goes on to explain: “You can focus on the pleasure of the first jhana, and the passion obsession doesn’t come into play there.” It’s a different kind of interest, a different kind of attachment. There *is* attachment to that state, but it’s not quite the same as the obsession you have for sensual objects. It actually builds up your resistance to those obsessions.

As for the desire for Awakening, she says, “Even though it may be unpleasant to think about how far you have to go, or how much you want to be awakened and you’re not awakened yet, it’s still a *useful* unpleasant feeling.” A lot of people say, “Don’t let yourself have the desire for Awakening, because you’re going to make yourself miserable. Just be content with where you are.” That’s not how the Buddha taught at all. He said, “If you don’t have the desire to awaken, how are you going to awaken?” When you’re shooting a gun, you can’t hit higher than you aim. You’ve got to aim high. So the frustration of aiming at a goal, an Awakening, you haven’t yet attained: That’s a useful sense of dis-ease, a useful sense of “something’s got to be done, something’s not quite right yet.” In the course of that useful dis-ease, though, there’s no obsession of resistance, so that helps break this cycle of these obsessions.

As for the ignorance obsession that tends to hang around neutral feelings, you can cut through it with the fourth jhana, where the mind settles down to a state of neither pleasure nor pain – total equanimity. “Purity of equanimity and mindfulness,” it’s called. Total, full-body awareness, like a white cloth covering the body from head to toe. There’s no ignorance obsession there.

So these obsessions that circle around pleasure and pain can be cut when you realize that there are alternative ways of dealing with pleasure and pain, alternative pleasures and pains to focus on. When there’s pain in the body, you can still find a way of giving rise to jhana. You focus not on the pain but on the parts of the body that are still comfortable, at ease, and you maximize that sense of ease. This leads you either to the point where the physical pain goes away or to the point where, even if it’s still there, it doesn’t matter. You’ve got a better place to be, which at the same time doesn’t have the drawbacks of sensual pleasures. That sets you on the path to cutting those other obsessions as well.

So the work here is twofold, just as it is when you try to protect the body from disease. On the one hand, you don’t expose yourself to more germs than you need to, and then, on the other, you build up your resistance, strengthen your resistance, strengthen your immune system.

To do this you start with the practice of jhana, the practice of good solid concentration, so you can cut through those obsessions, so that you gain

alternative ways of relating to pleasure and pain. As the Buddha said in his sutta on the two arrows, if there's pain in the body it's like being shot with one arrow. When these obsessions get involved with the pain, it's like shooting yourself with another arrow – although for most of us it's not a second arrow, it's a third, fourth, fifth – whole flurries of arrows get shot there, right in the mind, over one little pain. It's even worse with big pains. In other words, the germs get in and simply take over.

So you build up your resistance through the practice. Ultimately, when discernment finally breaks through to the ultimate level, you can go wherever you want. No germs can touch you because your immune system is totally in control. But until that point, you have to be careful, working both on the outer and on the inner level.

When you work on the two of them together, that's when you get the best results. Your mind gains a better sense of what it means to be really healthy, to have real sense of wellbeing no matter what happens, because you know the basic principles of looking after the mind's health.

After all, the Buddha said he was a doctor for the mind. This was the kind of medicine he practiced, not where he cures our diseases, but he tells us how to cure our own diseases – which is what we're doing right now.