

When Your Will Is Ill

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The Buddha gives two main sets of images for the hindrances. One set has to do with water. Ideally you want to be able to see your reflection in the surface of the water, but with the different kinds of hindrances you can't, for different reasons.

Sensual desire is like water that has been treated with dye. It's murky, the color is all wrong, it's not clear. Ill will is like boiling water; you can't see a reflection in that. Sloth and torpor is like water covered with sludge and slime. Restlessness and anxiety is like water that has wind blowing over the surface, creating a lot of ripples. Doubt and uncertainty is like stagnant water placed in a dark place. You're certainly not going to see your reflection there.

The Buddha also compares the hindrances to different kinds of hardships: Sensual desire is like being in debt, sloth and drowsiness is like being in prison, restlessness and anxiety is like being enslaved, doubt and uncertainty is like traveling across a desert with no surety that you're going to make it to the end.

Ill will, he says is like being sick. The name in English tells you that: Your will is ill, something's wrong with your intention, and it's going to get in the way of your concentration.

That's what all these hindrances are: They're obstacles to your concentration, they obscure your discernment, they obscure your awareness. So you've got to get past them.

The first step in each case in trying to get past is to see that they're *worth* getting past.

I remember that when I first learned about the hindrances and how ill will doesn't mean negativity or dislike—it means actively want to see somebody suffer—I couldn't see in my own case that I wanted to see anybody suffer. But then I reflected: During my first year in particular when I was meditating on the top of the hill there at Wat Dhammasathit, the thoughts that would destroy my concentration more than anything else would come from thinking back on some injustice, where somebody had done something wrong or was doing something

wrong and getting away with it. I could get worked up about that for hours at a time, with a strong sense of righteous indignation—and that’s a lot of what ill will is.

You don’t like what’s happened, and it seems wrong that there’s no punishment, that people are getting away with things that you see clearly they should not be getting away with.

But that, the Buddha says, is wrong view. Remember that the right attitude to have toward somebody who has no good qualities at all is to see that person as a sick person lying by the side of the road in the middle of the desert. Even if that person is a stranger, when you see him you have to think: “If only someone could help that person.” That’s the right attitude to have toward someone who’s misbehaving, who has no good qualities. When you keep that image in mind, then you have to ask yourself: Who’s sick here? You have to see the other person as sick and you have to see yourself as sick if you’re filled with righteous indignation. You may not be able to do anything about that other person’s illness, but you can do something about your own.

You’ve got to change your views, that strong sense of offended justice. You’ve got to look into that. We’ve talked about this before, how justice requires that you know the beginning of the story, you can tabulate who did what to whom, whose actions can be justified, whose actions cannot, and then you tally up the score. But from the Buddhist point of view, there is no beginning point. You can’t say who did what to whom in the beginning, who was the first mover in a particular story. It’s like coming in on the tail end of a movie: You don’t know who got their just desserts.

Karma itself doesn’t go around dishing out just desserts. Think of the case of Angulimala. He killed all those people but then he had a change of heart. The Buddha saw that he had the potential for a change of heart, so he went right to him and taught him, and Angulimala became an arahant. He ended up not getting punished for all those murders. There were people who were upset and would throw things at him when he went on his alms around. But as the Buddha told Angulimala when he came back from his alms round with his head bleeding, his rope torn: “This is nothing compared with what it would have been if you hadn’t gained that attainment.”

So this should be our attitude toward people who we think are getting away with murder, getting away with injustices. We should hope that they see the error of their ways, change their way of action, because that's how goodness gets established in the world—not by going around and punishing all the wrong doers, because often the punishment won't make them see the fact that they were wrong. You can pile up all kinds of evidence, but if they're unwilling to admit the evidence, they'll be more and more firmly entrenched in their wrongness and their harshness and their cruelty. The ideal attitude is to wish for them to have a change of heart—and you have to have a change of heart too.

Again, you can't necessarily treat that person's illness, but you can treat yours, by changing your views around it. "People who are getting away with wrongdoing: May they see the error of their ways". That's the proper attitude. If you're upset that they're not getting punished, that's the beginning of the ill will, and that's going to get in the way of your concentration. It's going to aggravate your own illness.

So you have to remember—for the sake of training your mind, for clearing up your own discernment—you have to focus on the areas where you're doing something wrong *right now* and you have to do something about it *right now*. Because it's in the actions themselves: Whether they're skillful or unskillful is what makes us happy or unhappy. We tend to think of happiness as a product of an action, something we receive. The same with pain: We think it's the product of the action. But there's a passage where the Buddha indicates that the action *itself* is either the happiness, or the pain. After all, he says in the case of acts of merit, the phrase, *act of merit*, is another name for happiness. The happiness is there in the action. Similarly with suffering: Suffering is the clinging. Clinging is an activity, it's something you do.

So when people are misbehaving, treating other people wrongly, they're already suffering. They may not admit it, but that's because their faculties are impaired. When you see that in someone else, you have to turn and look at yourself. Your desire to see them punished is a sign that your faculties are impaired, too. It's your desire that's creating suffering *right there*. So when your will is ill like this and your views are wrong, you've got to treat the will, you've got to treat the views.

Remember one of the consequences of the right view is that it develops right resolve, and one aspect of right resolve is non-ill will. If you allow ill will to take over, not only does it get in the way of your concentration but it's also going to lead you to want to do things and say things, advocate courses of action that will simply bring more suffering into the world. If you can develop some goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people who've been doing wrong, then there's some hope for the world.

After all, you probably don't have all your wrong actions tallied up and punished. And you're probably glad that that's the case. Well, try to develop the same attitude toward other people and see what you can do to develop some health in your mind. When you know the way to make your mind healthy, then you're in a better position to give a good example to others, so that they can make their minds healthy as well. In that way, we all benefit.