

Meditating When You're Sick

January 15, 2014

There's a cold bug going around. It's probably a gift I brought back from Thailand. And I'm sorry that I shared it with you. On top of that, we've got the Santa Ana winds, which can be very irritating to the membranes of the body—all the ionized air blowing around.

So it may be good to stop and think about meditating while you're sick.

All too many people I know go through an illness and afterwards tell me, "I just couldn't meditate." Actually, it's when you're sick that you really need to meditate. Because at the very least you've got to keep your mind in good shape, for its own sake and for the sake of your physical health as well. If you're all worked up around the illness, it can often make it worse.

So it's good to keep your mind calm and focused as best you can. Sometimes you have the problem of not being very alert, either because of the illness itself or because of the effects of the medicine. But it's still possible to meditate and to get benefits from the meditation even when you're not feeling well physically.

There's a story in the Canon about the Buddha suffering from an injury to his foot. Mara came up and taunted him as he was lying there and said, "Are you moping? Are you sad?" And the Buddha said, "No. I'm developing goodwill for all beings."

That's a good exercise, so that you're not concentrating on your own pain or concentrating on the limitations that the illness is placing on you. Spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. Let your awareness expand out so that it's not confined just to the body. "May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from stress and pain"—however you want to express that thought to yourself. And holding that larger frame of reference in mind is often very healing to the mind, calming for the body.

Then try to work with the breath. It's good, if one part of the body is especially ill, not to focus on that part immediately. If there's a strong pain in some part of the body, find a part that's not pained. Focus your attention there. And think of the breath flowing freely in that part of the body.

Then as that little beachhead gets established, you can spread it to other parts of the body and finally into the pained part. Think of the breath energy flowing all around and through the pain. All too often we tighten up around pain, which just makes it worse. So think of the breath energy flowing well and going right through it. It can permeate anything.

If you've got congestion in your nose or in your ears, think of the breath energy coming in and out every part of the body. That eases the pressure on the nose and the head, and eases the breathing process as a whole. There's breath energy coming in through the pores all over the skin.

And you may find that focusing on one part of the body in particular is very helpful for

pains in another part. If you have a headache, sometimes it's good to focus down around the base of the spine. Stomachache: focus on the knees.

In other words, give the mind something good to preoccupy itself with so that it's not focusing on the pain or on how frustrated you are with the illness. Allow the breath to actually help with the healing process.

A lot of this is going to be very individual. You know that the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's Method 2 were formulated when he was recovering from a heart attack. I've talked to people who've had heart disease and they've said that his focus on getting the breath energy in the back of the neck and going down the spine, down the shoulders, is a very direct way of dealing with some of the problems that come up when you have heart disease.

But if you have a different disease, try to figure out where the body needs energy and which direction it should flow. When you breathe in, the energy can flow up, it can flow down, it can flow into the body from all directions to a center that runs down like a string through the body, and from there flow out in all directions.

So play with the breath energy. And do everything you can to keep the mind in a good mood.

The Buddha advises that even when you're dying, keep the mind in a good mood. So illness gives you good preparation. If you're worried about things you're not getting done or pleasures you're not able to indulge in, just put those thoughts aside. They're not going to be helpful at all. They're weighing you down. Focus basically on doing what you can. If you're too groggy to be really well-focused, again, go back to those thoughts of goodwill for everybody. They're safe thoughts to keep in mind.

Ajaan Maha Boowa had a student one time, a woman who was dying of cancer. She came and stayed at his monastery for three months to meditate. As he pointed out to her, his main concern was not so much using the meditation to cure her cancer, but to make sure that her mind was in good shape.

She also brought a friend—a retired doctor—along with her. After the three months, she went home; then a couple of months later she died. At that point, the retired doctor decided that she had some free time, so she wanted to transcribe all the tapes.

She was suffering from some limitations herself. She was getting old, her eyesight was bad, but she wanted to see how much she could do with the abilities she still had left. And she actually ended up doing seventy, eighty talk transcriptions.

She wrote in her note that went along with the book that was ultimately printed from her transcriptions that she really wanted to know how much goodness she could squeeze out of what she still had to work with.

So make that your attitude. Think about what good things you can think about, what skillful things you can think about, even in your limited state when you're sick.

And simply because you can't sit up in the meditation position doesn't mean you can't

meditate. You can meditate lying down. You just have to be extra careful that you don't fall asleep too easily. One trick I've found that helps when you're lying on your side is to put one foot on top of the other and make sure that it doesn't slip off. Just that extra amount of vigilance helps keep you awake. And if you do slip off to sleep, I hope it's a healing sleep, but then when you wake up come right back to the breath.

In other words, these are good things you can still do even given the limitations of whatever the illness has placed on you.

So don't fall for that idea that says, "Well, I'm sick right now and my mindfulness isn't all that good and my alertness isn't all that good, so I just shouldn't meditate." Do the best you can.

If you have trouble focusing anywhere in the body, think of the space around the body. Here again, spread your awareness out so it's not confined just to your body right here.

Think of the human condition as a whole. Everybody has to get sick at one time or another. And so we're all in this together.

It's like a card game. All the different cards get passed out in the course of the card game. It's just which hand you have right now. It's not going to be the hand you have the next time around and the next time around. But you play with the hand you've got.

Remember the attitude of that old doctor. She said, "I don't know how much I can do with my limitations, but I'm going to try my best," to be as mindful, to be as alert and keep the mind on skillful topics.

It'll be good for the body but even more importantly it'll be good for your mind. You don't want your mind to get dragged down by the state of the body.

After all, we're meditating to find something that's not affected by the aging or the illness or even the death of the body. Illness gives you a good chance to practice that—to see that even with physical limitations, the mind can still train itself and find places in the body where it can develop a sense of well-being and use that to develop a sense of well-being in the mind.

Because it's the strength of mind that you're going to need. The strength of the body is inevitably going to have its ups and downs and wane away. And of course the condition of the body is going to have an effect on the brain. But there's a part of the mind that's not affected by these things. That's what you want to find.

And you find it by not giving in easily to limitations—learning to work around the ones that you can't change, and using the stillness of the mind, using the free-flowingness of the breath, to make changes for the better.