

## *Learning Through Healing*

*October 8, 2011*

The mind has its illnesses—and I'm not talking about the kind of things that put you in a mental hospital. It has its greed, aversion, delusion. It wears itself out with these things.

And so we come here for the Buddha's treatment. As we're sitting here meditating, the first part of the treatment is to get the mind to settle down. Just be quiet for a while. The process of getting it to settle down is part of the treatment, the part that soothes the mind. You find an object that the mind likes to stay with, that it finds interesting and refreshing, and you try to keep it there. Because it does have a tendency to want to wander off. It's so quick to get tired of things, to get bored.

Especially in this world of ours with so much multitasking, and the speed with which images flash across television screens, the internet, and computer screens. We think that when we see a flashing image we understand what it represents. And yet there's so much we don't understand. There are things we can learn only by spending time with them.

So we have to keep reminding the mind: "Stay here, stay here, stay here, this is good for you, you're going to learn more as you stay here." When the Buddha describes the techniques of meditation, it's not just a matter forcing the mind simply to be in the present moment. There are things you have to do—and you learn by doing them.

Look at his 16 steps for breath meditation. Step number three is being aware of the whole body, training yourself to be aware of the whole body. Step number four is noticing the effect that the breath has on the body. What kind of breathing feels good? And then you try to have a calming effect: calming the breath itself and allow the breath to have a calming effect on the rest of the body and on the mind.

So experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good right now and what kind of effect it has on the body and the mind. Try long breathing for a bit and see what that does; then try shorter breathing, see what that does. When you find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels really good, stick with it.

There's an old principle in Thai medicine. They have all these really bitter medicines and they say, "You know when you've got the right medicine for your disease when the bitter stuff tastes good."

So try and find a way of breathing that feels really good for the body. The more sensitive you are to the body, the deeper the impact of the breath can go. At the same time, while you're soothing the mind and soothing the body with

the breath, you're learning about the body and mind, too.

It's like the way a doctor learns about the body by treating a disease. You don't just sit and watch the disease. You try different medicines. This is how medicine as a science has advanced, because we try to treat different illnesses and we find out what works and what doesn't work. If something doesn't work, you go back and try something else. As you do that, you understand more and more about the disease and about the body.

The same with the mind: The more persistence you show in trying to get the mind to settle down, the more you're going to learn about the mind. And especially if you're doing the meditation not just while you're sitting here, but also as you try to keep the mind centered, alert, and equanimous as you go through the day. You begin to see the different things that have an impact on the mind.

You also begin to see the extent to which the mind goes out and creates trouble for itself. There's common understanding that greed is incited by seeing something desirable, lust is sparked by seeing something desirable, anger is incited by hearing someone say or do something that's really outrageous. But that's not always the case. Often you go out looking for something to want, looking for something to lust after, looking for something to get angry about.

This tendency of the mind to flow out and create situations is called fabrication. And of all the things you want to learn about the mind, this is the most important. It's because we fabricate based on ignorance that we suffer. So in the course of treating the mind, we're going to learn a lot about fabrication. We'll learn a lot about the impact the mind has on the breath, the impact the breath has on the mind; the way the breath can fashion your sense of the body and then the impact that has on your mood. Or the way you talk to yourself—the impact that's going to have on the breath.

The Buddha tells you to engage in what he calls directed thought and evaluation to get the mind to settle down. In other words, you look at the breathing, watch it for a while. Notice where you feel it: Does it feel good? If it doesn't feel good, you can try to change.

Directing your attention to the breath: That's directed thought. Judging whether it does or doesn't feel good, and figuring out and what you can do to make it feel better: That's the evaluation. And when the breath feels better, you think of it spreading out to fill the body. Think of the breath coming in and out all the pores of your body.

That gets into what the Buddha calls mental fabrication: the perceptions you hold in mind. When you breathe in and out, what is the mental picture you have of the breath? Where does the breath start? Where does the breath come in? What does it do when it comes in? Where does it go in the body? When you breathe out, how does it go out? Does it need to be forced out or

does it go out on its own? Can you let it go on its own? Try to get in touch with the mental picture you have of this process and see if you can come up with a mental picture that allows the process to feel more refined, to suffuse more through the body, to allow the sense of ease to calm the mind.

They talk about the breath going through the nerves. This is not air going through the nerves; it's energy going through the nerves. What happens to the breathing when you hold that mental picture in mind? And when feelings of ease come up, how do you notice that they're feelings of ease? Sometimes in the very beginning they just feel neutral, nothing particularly worthy of attention. But if you allow them some space, they develop a sense of fullness. Then you can think of that fullness spreading throughout the body, like honey pouring through the body.

There are all kinds of different mental images you can hold in mind, different ways of thinking about how comfortable feelings flow through the body. And as you work with these, you begin to understand a lot more about what the Buddha's talking about when he says "fabrication." Or what he's talking about when he says "perception": these mental pictures and images that you hold in mind. To get the mind to stay with the breath, you need to have an image or a sign. It could be a word; it could be a mental picture. It's going to remind you: Stay here, stay here, stay here, stay with the breath. And the image that you use is going to have an impact on how easy it is to stay with the breath and how comfortable it is to breathe.

Then, as you develop skill in this process, you develop skill not only in getting the mind to settle down, but also in understanding how the mind deals with things, how it shapes its experience. Because this is the big issue: We shape our experience out of ignorance. We have things coming in through the senses that are essentially the result of past kamma. But we're already primed to manipulate those experiences: We focus on some things and ignore other things. We direct our thoughts and evaluate things in a particular way. And when we do this out of ignorance, there's going to be suffering.

We hold certain images in mind. When you deal with some people, you're not really dealing with that person, you're dealing with an image you've carried over from somebody else, other situations you've been in before. And that can have a huge impact on the new situation. As you get sensitive to the processes of getting the mind to settle down, you begin to see yourself doing these things in other areas of your life as well. And just as you've learned new ways of shaping your experience in the meditation, you can apply those new ways to your other experiences too.

So just as a doctor learns about a person's body by trying different medicines, trying different medical techniques to treat whatever illness there is, you're going to learn a lot about the mind as you treat its sense of feeling raw

and aggravated from spending a whole day dealing with other people or dealing with work. As you try to soothe the mind, think of the breath as a soothing cream that you rub over the body. For it to do its work, you have to let it stay there.

At first it doesn't feel like you're learning too much, but over time you begin to see deeper and deeper into all the different functions that the mind performs, all the different voices, all the different committee members you have in there. And as you deal with this one and deal with that one, you begin to get a better sense of what's going on inside.

So you learn about the mind not simply by sitting and watching things and not reacting. You actively try to heal whatever problems there are, whatever diseases there are in the mind. If you notice there's greed, you ask yourself, "What are you going to gain from that greed?" Notice all the different hindrances bothering your meditation. If sensual desire comes up, how are you going to deal with it in a way that allows you to get back to the breath? Ill will for somebody comes up: How are you going to deal with that in a way that allows you to get back to the breath? You come up with various strategies, various tactics. And in doing so, you get a real sense for this process of fabrication, the process of perception, all the different activities we use to fashion our experience.

This is why the Buddha didn't make a clear distinction between tranquility practice and insight practice. They go together. As you try to get the mind to calm down, as you try to heal its various diseases, you gain insight into why the diseases are there to begin with. If you don't look for those causes, the treatment you give to the mind may gain some benefits in the short term, but eventually they'll start unraveling.

So if you're really serious about treating the diseases, that's when you're really going to gain insight into the mind. You go deeper and deeper into why the mind is causing suffering for itself. And every time you understand a particular cause and can learn how to treat it, that gives you the opportunity to go deeper still.

So look at this as an opportunity both to heal the mind and to understand it; to soothe the mind and gain insight into it; to calm the mind and gain discernment. All at the same time.