

Treating the Diseases of the Mind

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The Buddha is like a doctor; the Dhamma is like medicine. We all have diseases in our minds—not necessarily the really heavy kinds of diseases that they put you in an institution for, but we do suffer from greed, aversion, and delusion. We suffer from the hindrances, the fetters. There are long, long lists of the problems of the mind. So we want to make sure we take the right medicine.

When we think of the Buddha as doctor, we have to think not of modern doctors who run a lot of tests. You walk into the office and they don't ask you all that much. They take your blood; they listen to your heart. Then they give you a diagnosis and send you home with the medicine. Sometimes they'll actually give you the shot themselves.

Back in the old days, though, it was very different. You went to see the doctor, the doctor would have lots of questions for you. Even today, if you go to a traditional Chinese doctor, they'll ask you to give a thorough report of how you're sleeping, how your digestion is, all kinds of things. In other words, you have to learn how to be observant of yourself if you're going to get anywhere with this medicine. And as was often the case with doctors in those days, they would give you the list of ingredients you needed to get for the medicine. But you had to go find them yourself.

In the same way, in the Buddha's course of treatment, you have to administer the cure. The Buddha lays out the pattern: This is what the disease comes from; this is what it means to be cured. And he gives you advice. But the work is something that you have to do yourself.

Again, this requires that you be observant. If you take the wrong medicine—or in the Buddha's image, if you grab hold of the water snake the wrong way... Suppose you need to get some venom from the snake, because they are kinds of medicines that would involve poisons of different kinds. If the medicine was right for your disease, the poison would actually help you. If it wasn't right, it could harm you. So you tried to get the water snake. That was his image for grasping the Dhamma.

Notice that you do grasp the Dhamma—you hold on to the practice. But you have to hold on right. And you take the medicine. In some cases, as with concentration practice, you want to make sure that the medicine is right for you. This is one of the most defining features of the Forest tradition: that they don't have a defining meditation technique. Ajaan Lee probably worked out the most complete guide to concentration, but it's not the only way to meditate taught by the ajaans.

An important part of concentration is that you feel comfortable with the object. You find it interesting—something that engages you. If it puts you to sleep, it's the wrong object. Fortunately, with the breath, you can work with it in lots of different ways. Of the various objects, it has the most variety, in the sense that you can use it to wake yourself up; you can use it to calm yourself down; you can use it as an object of concentration; you can use it as a basis for understanding the processes of fabrication that go on in the body and the mind, so that it becomes an object for insight.

But you have to learn how to observe when you stay with the breath of a particular kind: Does it work? If you change the breath, does it work? If you figure out all the different ways you might be able to work with the breath and nothing seems to work, then there are other topics you can focus on: recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. These are good medicine for times when you're feeling discouraged.

You think about the Buddha. How many people in the world have put that much into finding the truth the way he did? When he found it, he didn't sell it. He offered it freely to everybody who was ready to learn. The same with the Sangha. Sometimes it's easier to relate to the Sangha, because when you read about the Buddha's path, it seems that he was totally determined right from the very beginning—no moments of weakness. Whereas when you read about the stories of the different ajaans or the stories of the monks and the nuns in the *Therī* and *Theragata*, they had their weaknesses. It's easier to relate. But they were able to overcome those weaknesses. Some of them were suicidal, but they came to their senses. Some of them were discouraged for many, many years—their practice didn't get anywhere. But they didn't let that get them down. That kind of

contemplation can be encouraging. And again, like the Buddha, when they attained the truth, they didn't sell it.

Years back, when Ajaan Fuang was alive, different members of what one might call the Dhamma press—they had these monk magazines—would go around and interview the ajaans, ask them about their life story, take what they learned back to their office, add a few extravagant details to make the story more interesting, and then sell it. Ajaan Fuang refused to sit for an interview with them. As he said, the ajaans put their life on the line. When they came back, they had the genuine Dhamma and they didn't sell it. These people with their magazines, though, had who knows what. And it had a price.

This is the way most of the world is. People get something good and they try to figure out how to make money out of it. But the Buddha was noble. In addition to being a doctor, he was a noble doctor. He offered his medical advice, he offered his medical knowledge for anybody who wanted it, totally for free. Sometimes thinking of that can be very inspiring. It helps keep you on the path.

The purpose of these contemplations is to get you back to the breath because that is home base. It's in the interaction of the body and the mind right at the breath where you learn an awful lot about the mind.

When you're feeling lazy, you might want to contemplate death, realizing that it could come at any time. The question always is, are you ready? And the answer almost always is, "Not yet." Ask yourself, "Why? What's standing in the way? What attachments do you have?" Maybe you can work on those a little bit—learn how to think them through. See the attachment as something strange. Why would awareness want to hold on to that? Especially when it's going to drag you down when you have to leave.

Contemplate the parts of the body when lust arises or when pride around the body arises. If you have the opposite problem of having a really bad relationship with the body, focus on someone else's body first until you realize that every body—every human body—when you take the skin off, is hard to look at. This is what we all have inside. This is where we're all equal. The purpose of this contemplation is to equalize everything—and to realize that the value of the body doesn't lie in the aspects that give rise to lust. The value of the body lies in your ability to use it to do something good.

Then there's goodwill for times when you're angry. First you start with goodwill for yourself. Are you showing yourself goodwill by allowing yourself to be taken over by the anger? Well, no. Then why do you do it? What's the appeal? It's important that you approach goodwill practice not simply as a visualization of cotton candy spreading all around the world. It's a contemplation to make you dig down into the areas where you harbor ill will, and to ask yourself: Why? You're not pretending that they're not there; you actually dig them up and learn how to contemplate them in way that allows you to see that once you bring them into the light of the day, they shrivel away. They really don't have that much appeal anymore.

When you gain insight into something, it has to involve seeing it come, seeing it go. You have to learn how to see your anger come and see your anger go. Then ask yourself, when it's coming, what comes along with it? When it goes, what happened? That gives you a sense of what the appeal is—that's the next thing. Why do you like getting involved with the anger? What sense of power does it give you? What sense of righting wrongs does it give you?

But then you look at the drawbacks: How many wrongs get committed under the power of anger? You've got to learn to balance them against each other—the appeal and the drawbacks. Then, by cutting through the appeal, you learn how to find the escape. If you don't admit the appeal to yourself, you'll never be able to see where the escape is. This is one of the hard parts of a lot of these defilements. We like them but we don't want to admit to ourselves that we like them.

Now, if you find yourself dealing with something that seems threatening and you're not quite ready to handle it, go back to the breath, because the breath is the Buddha's basic tonic. You add other ingredients to the tonic as necessary. If you find that some of these contemplations are actually causing trouble, you realize that it's not a medicine for you. It's got a little poison in it that may be right for someone else's particular problems, but not for yours. You've got to learn how to be self-observant, to diagnose your problem, and to also check your progress as the medicine—hopefully—is doing its work.

So this course of medicine requires your participation as well as the doctor's. You have to be an active participant in bringing health to yourself. Which means that the discernment and wisdom that you bring to the process will have to

develop over time. There will be mistakes. There will be setbacks. But basically you're training yourself to be a doctor, too, starting with your own diseases.

You don't want to get involved with other people's diseases until you've cured your own. You may look at them and see, "Oh, when people get angry, this is what it looks like. That's probably what my anger looks like." When people get greedy for things, this is what it looks like. This is what your greed looks like, too. Use other people's defilements as mirrors for your own. But your main emphasis should be on focusing on curing *your* own problems. You've got to learn to be a doctor for yourself first before you can give any kind of advice to anybody else.

That's how the cure is effected—and it's how the whole purpose of the Buddhist teaching is effected as well. There is a word in Pali: *attha*. It's not *atta*, which means *self*. But A-T-T-H-A—*attha*—has several meanings. One is *meaning*. It also means *benefit*. The fact that the same word is used means that the meaning of the Dhamma is realized when you've experienced its actual benefits. The Dhamma is meant to be put into practice. And its meaning—it's whole purpose—is to be put into practice so that it gives the benefits to the mind. This is medicine as a performance art. The cure is the *attha* of what this is all about.

You don't hear that word much in the States. In Thailand it's often used in tandem with Dhamma. It's what makes the Dhamma complete—when you've reached the benefits for which these words are meant to serve. Otherwise, you can hear the Dhamma and analyze it, but you don't know the meaning. It's only when you've tasted the benefits that you know, "Oh, this is what that was for."