

But Not Sick in Mind

February 28, 2016

Focus on your breath. Try to find a rhythm of breathing that feels good, all the way down through the torso, and even further down through the body if you can. You want to give the mind a place here in the present moment where it can stay with a sense of ease and well-being, because the mind needs that ease and well-being as its foundation. Otherwise, it goes running off with its thoughts, running to the future, running to the past, running everywhere but right here, because it doesn't have a sense that it can be at home here.

It's like a child in a family where there are a lot of problems. It's going to run out of the house and after a while you have trouble getting the child back. So make this a good place to stay, a good place to be. You can try deep breathing or shallow breathing, heavy or fast, slow, light. Try to find the rhythm and texture that feels best for the body right now, and that feels best for the mind: a place where the mind can stay still but alert. It doesn't feel like it has to go running out after things to find some pleasure. There's some pleasure right here. We need this foundation because, as the chant said just now, we're subject to ageing, illness, and death. We haven't gotten beyond them.

There's a passage in the Canon where an old man who's been sick has recovered from his illness enough to come see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, "Train yourself so that even though you may be sick in body, you don't have to be sick in mind." The man is pleased with the instructions, and he goes to see Sariputta. Sariputta asks him, "What did the Buddha teach you?" And the man says, "The Buddha said to learn how to be not sick in mind even though I'm sick in the body." And Sariputta asks, "What did he mean by that?" And the man says, "I don't know."

So Sariputta explains. If you're attached to your body, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, or consciousness, then as soon as these things change, you're going to suffer. As long as you see that they're yours—or that they're you, or in you, or that you're in them—you're going to suffer because they're sure to change. What you've got to learn how to do is *not* see yourself as in them, or not see them

as in you, or see them as you, or to see that you're somebody who has these things. Then when they change, you're not going to suffer.

It sounds a little abstract, but it's a very real ability.

If your body's ill, there's the fact that the body itself is ill, and there's the pain that comes with that, and as long as you're claiming the body as you or yours, or that you're in the body being attacked by the pain, or that the body is in you, and you're being attacked by the pain because it's inside you, then there's going to be suffering. As long as you perceive things in this way and you hold on to these perceptions, there are going to be stories around all this: "Why is this body doing this to me? And what's going to become of my life?" You can think about things you can't do while you're sick, all kinds of things: the possibility that the illness might be fatal, and where is that going to take you? As long as you get tied up in these stories, you're going to suffer.

You've got to learn how to pull yourself out of these things. And the first step is to get the mind into a good solid state of concentration so that has a place where it can step back from all these activities and see that it doesn't have to hold on to them, because it's got something better to hold on to: a sense of stillness here in the present moment. And that concentration requires four qualities for it to really be powerful, because the unskillful thoughts that come into the mind can be pretty powerful too. You need something good and strong to fend them off.

The four qualities are what the Buddha calls the four bases of success, which can also be translated as bases of power.

They start with desire. You have to *want* for this to work. Some people say, "Well, I'll just come to the meditation, and if it works for me, okay, and if it doesn't work, I'll go someplace else." That's not the right attitude. For it to work, you've got to *want* for it to work. There has to be desire. We may have heard the Buddha said negative things about desire, that it's the cause of suffering, and he does say that, but he also says there's a place for desire in the path. There are certain desires that are the causes for suffering, and others are part of right effort.

The desire to make the mind skillful, the desire to bring the mind to concentration: That's part of the path. It's not a cause of suffering. There will be some suffering in the sense that if you want the path to show its results and they're not happening, that'll weigh on the mind. But that, the Buddha said, is actually a form of suffering that's to be developed, cultivated. It gives you the motivation to want to do this. You see this especially clearly when you're dealing with hindrances, things coming up in the mind that would get in the way of the concentration.

Sensual desire comes up, and if you decide that you like the sensual desire, if

you don't see it as a problem, then no matter how many techniques you're given for dealing with sensual desire, they're just not going to work. You may chip away at it a little bit, but someplace in the mind there's a traitor to the whole cause and it's going to get in the way. So you have to ferret that out. See why that part of the mind doesn't want to gain the pleasure of concentration, doesn't want to gain the stability and the health of concentration, and talk some sense into it, basically. The same with all the other hindrances.

There's ill-will. If you think of somebody who you'd really like to see suffer, and there's a part of the mind that really agrees, "Yes, that would be a good thing to see them suffer, and I can sit here and think about that for a while, it'd be a good thing," you don't really have a desire for concentration. Your desires are going someplace else. They're becoming desires that cause suffering rather than those that lead to its end.

When sleepiness comes on, it's all too easy to say, "Well, I guess I'm too tired tonight, I might as well just rest." Sometimes sleepiness is a ruse. The mind can do things to the body that make it feel sleepy simply because it doesn't want to do the work

And so on down the line: Restlessness and anxiety—a thought comes up about the future, you're worried about the future, and part of the mind says, "I've got to think this through, I've got to worry about this." It's a sign you don't really desire the concentration.

When doubts come up, and you decide that the doubts are strong enough to get in the way of the practice, okay, "Why do you want to doubt? Why do you want to cut yourself off from the practice in that way?" You have to ask yourself those questions. Dig around a little bit in the mind and then do what you can to motivate the mind so that it *wants* to practice. You can think about the dangers that come when the mind is not trained, and you can see those pretty easily. Just walk into a hospital someplace or into an old folks home. You meet up with people who haven't been training their minds, and they're suffering intensely. Do you want to be in that spot? Well, no. Okay, then, do the work now.

This desire is something really positive. It strengthens the mind. It gives you something you can really depend on. Because there will come that time when the doctors throw up their hands, and say, "Well, that's all we can do." What are you going to do then? You can look for alternative medicine, but the alternative medicine doctors will reach a point, too, where they have to throw up their hands. Ultimately, there comes a point where you're really on your own. It's just you and your mind. And if the mind hasn't been trained, it's going to cause you a lot of trouble. It's going to go latching on to some perceptions, or latching on to some

stories that it'll use to stab your heart. You've got to train it so that it doesn't do that, so that when thoughts of that sort come up, it can see them as something it doesn't want to get involved with—and it really doesn't get involved. That requires training. So you think in these ways to give rise to a sense of wanting to do the practice, and seeing the value of the practice.

Another one of the bases of success is persistence: You really stick with the practice. This often means learning how to pace yourself: "How much effort can I put in consistently?" There are times when you need to put in extra effort because a particularly strong problem comes up in the mind. Other times, the effort has to be a little bit more refined. But it's a matter of being willing to give time and energy to the practice, working on figuring it out. In fact, it's in the course of figuring things out, how to do things, how to get the mind down, that you gain a lot of your discernment.

This leads directly to the other two bases of power. One is intentness, that you give it your full intention and your full attention. As the Thais say, you put your heart into it. When you're watching the breath, you're not just counting how many more hours, how many more minutes before the session is over. You're thinking: "How can I really see this breath, how can I really see *this* breath, and how can I figure out what there is to see there?" There's a sense of ease or dis-ease in the breath, which you can work with. Then there's the question of whether your mind can stay focused, or is it pulling off in other directions? If so, why is it pulling there? Look into it.

When they talk about acceptance as a part of the practice, what it means is that you accept the situation as it is in the present moment so that you can figure out what's wrong with it, and then what you can do to fix it, to make it better. The kind of acceptance that's unhealthy is when you just say, "Well, this is the way things are, so I'm just going to leave them there." That's not healthy. The kind of non-acceptance that's unhealthy is the one that refuses to admit what's there to begin with. So you want to accept what's here, but also realize that there are potentials for change. There are potentials for making things better. There are potentials for making things worse. Which are you going to take?

So you pay careful attention to what's going on, to figure out how you can bring the mind to a greater sense of stillness and, when it's still, how to keep it there. And when it's been there long enough, how do you figure out how much is long enough? When you've had enough, you can start looking into: "Where is there still some disturbance in here that I can let go to get the mind into deeper concentration?" Or if there's a particularly persistent distraction that keeps coming up, "What is it about this distraction that has a pull on my mind? What's

attractive about it?” All too often, the things that pull us away are the ones where we keep saying, “I don’t like that thought. I don’t like that thought.” Well, something about you likes that thought, otherwise you wouldn’t be letting it pull you away.

You’ve got to see what, in the Buddha’s terms, is called the allure of the thought. Then you put the allure right up next to the drawbacks. Our problem is that when we see the allure of something, we’re forgetting the drawbacks, and when we see the drawbacks, we forget the allure. And we wonder why our mind is pulling us in different directions. It’s because we won’t let ourselves see the two at the same time. When you see them at the same time, you can make a comparison. Then it’s easier to let go of whatever it is because you see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure.

These are some of the benefits that come from really paying careful attention to what you’re doing.

The last of the bases of success is *vimansa*, which Ajaan Lee translates as circumspection. *Vimansa* is a word that has many meanings in Pali. We can also translate it as ingenuity, or as discrimination—in other words, seeing clearly what’s going on, making distinctions about what’s skillful and what’s not in the mind, and figuring out what to do about the things that are unskillful, figuring out what to do about the things that are skillful. In other words, you bring your powers of analysis and ingenuity, because sometimes there’ll be techniques that you’ve heard that will be helpful, and sometimes you cannot think of a single technique that you’ve heard of that’s going to help this situation, in which case you have to figure out your own. And you’re encouraged to do this.

As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, there are many times in the practice when you come up with a problem and you can’t remember anybody telling you about this particular problem. You try to think, “Well, what are the basic principles for dealing with a problem of this sort?” And if you come up with a solution, then even though it’s not in the books, it still counts as Dhamma. So you want to exercise your ability to think about the basic principles and then figure out how to apply them right here, right now, in a way that’s effective for your particular problem right here, right now.

Now, when you develop these four qualities, your concentration will have a lot of strength. It’ll have a lot of power. And that’s when you’ll be able to use it to peel the mind away from all the stories that make you suffer.

The pain of disease, the pain of dying largely comes not so much from the pains in the body, and more from the stories the mind is telling itself: latching on to different perceptions, latching on to different narratives that it stabs itself with.

So you need the concentration to give you a space where you can pull back from all that and see it all as alien. There's a part of the mind that's doing that, but you don't have to get involved. When it tries to stab your heart, don't put your heart in a place where it can be stabbed.

These are some of the skills that you can develop as you work on the concentration.

Realize that these are necessary skills for negotiating all the obstacles that life places in our way. Because whether we realize it or not, as soon as we're born, we've signed on to aging, illness, and death. They're part of the package deal. And so as these other elements in the package start appearing in our experience, we need this skill in order to learn how not to suffer from them. Ideally, we can get to the point where we don't sign onto any more package deals like this ever again. But for the time being, focus on the skills you're going to need so that when the body is sick, the mind doesn't have to be sick—because it's not latching on to things that would pain it. That's one of the most important skills you can master, and here's your chance.