Mental Disease

April, 2002

Practice the Dharma in order to cure the diseases in our mind. We all suffer from these diseases. These aren’t the mental illnesses that mean you’re so crazy you can’t function. People still can function, yet still have lots of diseases in their minds. The basic disease is the suffering we cause ourselves unnecessarily through craving and ignorance. So when you’re looking after your mind, you have to be conscious of the fact that it’s a mind suffering from diseases. Just as when the body has diseases, you have to take extra special care not to do anything that would aggravate the disease. Then do what you can to not only treat the symptoms but also get to the root cause. It’s the same with the mind. On the one hand, we treat the symptoms. We have to dig down to the root causes, which are the cravings and the ignorance. We keep getting mixed up in the way our minds function. To fight off these diseases, it’s the same way as when you’re protecting the body from diseases. On the one hand, you have to look after your environment, try to get rid of all the germs and other things in your environment that would cause disease. But there’s only so much you can do with the environment. Your main defense against disease is to build up your internal resistance. In terms of the practice, clearing away the diseases in your environment is a function of the restraint of the senses. We talked about this the other day. In other words, if you see something or listen to something or smell something or taste something or touch something, there are certain details in that experience that get you all worked up, either in terms of lust or greed or anger or delusion. You don’t focus on those details. You look at other details that will calm those states of mind. In other words, if it’s something that arouses desire, look at the unattractive side. This is why we have those 32 parts of the body every day, every day. So the mind realizes that it’s just a few of the details in the body that get you worked up. Most of it is nothing that’s really worth getting into, nothing that you would really want to have around all that much. As for anger, we have the practice of developing goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy. Equanimity. In other words, give you other details to focus on so the mind doesn’t get back into its old ruts of focusing on the things that get it worked up, all the injustices and disappointments you’ve had in life. You don’t focus on those details. You focus on the other sides. You also look after your environment to see what things you’re bringing in, in terms of what you read, what you listen to, what you have around, the friends you associate with, to the extent that you can choose these people. Try to choose people who are helpful for the practice, people who don’t arouse unskillful states of mind. But as I said, your outside environment for the mind is the same as the outside environment for the body. There’s only so much you can control. Lots of things are beyond your control, in which case you have to work on the other side, which is to build up your internal resistance. This is why we work with the breath. That’s the main reason those outside factors can come into the body and cause diseases. We open the door, we put out a bridge and say, “Come on, in.” We leave ourselves wide open to outside influences. The wandering mind is the real troublemaker. It just wanders here, wanders there, picks up this, picks up that, and brings it all home. And who knows what germs it’s going to bring back with it? At the same time as the mind is wandering around, it’s not really fully occupying the body in the present moment. But if you can stay with the breath, consistently, make the breath comfortable, make the breath a good place to stay, this gives you something to feed on right here. Because the reason the mind is wandering around is because it’s hungry. Looking for a little satisfaction here, and sometimes it gets it. If it doesn’t get it, it goes looking someplace else. And then looking over there, looking over here, back and forth, all around. But if you can give the mind something to feed on right here, it doesn’t have to go looking around like that. It’s not exposing itself to things that are going to come back and infect the mind. In other words, the situation outside may be as it always has been. There’s only so much you can do for the human world. But you’re not trying to feed on it. And when you’re not trying to feed on it, you don’t pick up the germs that it has to offer. This is why we work on getting this sense of stability and well-being inside, really solid, so you can always have your internal source of food. At the same time, when the mind is with the body, really fully with the body, the whole body here in the present moment, there’s kind of an energy field that it creates, like the difference between being a lump of clay and being a hardwood door. If someone throws a stone at a hardwood door, it doesn’t go into the door. It just bounces off. If a stone gets thrown into a lump of clay, it goes right into the lump of clay and leaves its imprint. It’s the same when your awareness fills the body. It’s like the hardwood door. Things come and they just kind of bounce off. There’s no place in the body where they can get lodged. But if your awareness occupies only one little tiny part of the body, or it’s not occupying the body at all, it’s like a big lump of clay. All kinds of stuff comes in and leaves its impressions. So this is how you build up your resistance. It’s by getting comfortably with the breath, and then keeping your awareness as expansive throughout the whole body as much as you can. Really occupy your body. Don’t leave parts of it vacant. The more you can occupy the body, the more full your awareness is right here in the present moment, the more it has this energy field that can repel all kinds of unhealthy influences from outside. And at the same time, it helps suppress unhealthy influences from inside. Because the real diseases, as I said, the real causes for the disease are not outside. They may foster disease, but it’s the craving and the ignorance that come from within. That’s what creates the suffering. The suffering of things that change outside is nothing compared to the suffering that comes from the craving and the ignorance in the mind. That really burns the mind. Keeps it miserable all the time. This is the importance of the Buddhist discovery. If suffering were something inherent in experience, what would we do? He said that suffering is there only when there’s craving and ignorance. When the craving and ignorance are gone, there’s no suffering involved. The khandhas without clinging are not suffering. They may change and be stressful in and of themselves, but as long as they don’t impinge on the mind, as long as they’re not drawn in through ignorance, allowed to move in through ignorance, and as long as you don’t try to feed on them with craving, the mind doesn’t suffer. So we try to fend off the outside things that aggravate disease so we can have time to really focus in on the real causes which come from within. You practice restraint of the senses. You practice keeping your awareness, filling the body as much as possible in the present moment. Don’t leave it. Don’t abandon it. Don’t let other things move in. John Lee once said that when your body isn’t occupied by the mind in the present moment, it’s like a haunted house. All kinds of other things come into the house, and you have a really tough time getting them out once you try to move back in. But if you’re staying here all the time, you know who’s coming at the windows, who’s coming at the doors, and you can keep them away if they’re going to be unhelpful. You can open the windows and doors only when good influences come in, because you’re there keeping watch over things. So wherever you go, always be conscious of the fact that your mind has disease or has the potential for catching different kinds of diseases. So you look after it the same way you do when the body is subject to disease. Take care of it and know, “Okay, there’s illness here in the mind that you’ve got to watch out for, and you have to be careful. You can’t be careless.” When the Buddha talks about being heedful, this is one of the main points he’s making. You can’t overlook even the little things. After all, where does disease come from? Germs aren’t as big as your body. They’re these little tiny things that come in. It’s the same with the causes for suffering. They come as little tiny, tiny things, little tiny careless things, when you’re not observant, when you’re not careful, when you say, “Well, that doesn’t matter.” This is one point that we have to hammer over and over again into ourselves. Okay, little things do matter, because they do make a big difference. John Munn once said, “It’s very rare that people get blinded by whole logs, but you can get blinded by fine sawdust.” It’s the little things you have to watch out for. So what it comes down to is being heedful. In the same way, the person whose health is not all that good has to be really heedful of outside influences, when the wind is too cold, when there are germs here, there are problems there. You have to be really careful about where you go, what you do, to help the body recover. It’s the same with the mind. The mind has these diseases. We really have to look after it. Only then will it have a chance to recover.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0204n2a1%20Mental%20Disease.mp3>