Total Fitness Workout, A

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You can think of the training of the mind as a total fitness workout. On one level, there’s medicines for different diseases. The practice of generosity in virtue of meditation to overcome the gross diseases of greed, aversion, delusion. But you realize that these diseases come into the mind not in a large abstract form, but in specific thoughts, specific urges, specific intentions. And you have to deal with them as they come. They don’t come lined up in a nice gradual order, where you can pick them off from the easiest to the most difficult. They come all jumbled together. This is why we need lots of different specific treatments, lots of specific different courses of treating the mind. Some of the practices are healing and soothing. It’s when you relax with the breath, work through the tension in the body, when you train the mind to think thoughts of goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. But then, as the mind begins to gain health, you have to give it a workout. To make it strong, you have to push its limits. Some of the exercises are there for developing mental strength. Some are for developing agility. Some are for developing flexibility, like all the different courses, different ways of developing fitness in the body. And again, it would be nice if the mind was a clear program of what goes first, what goes second, what goes last. But the mind doesn’t work that way, just as the body doesn’t work that way. Sometimes you find as you’re working on the fitness, all of a sudden it gets sick again. So you have to go back to the medicinal treatment, back and forth like this. And sometimes, say, as you’re working on strength, you overdo it, and then you’ve got to rest for a while, work on other capabilities in the body. It’s the same with the mind. There’s no one particular practice that’s going to take care of everything. This is why the Buddha sat at a full range of medicines and a full range of exercises for the mind, in hopes that we’d be able to learn how to diagnose what’s wrong with ourselves and then use the proper treatment, use the proper exercise, use the proper medicine for whatever specific illnesses or ailments or problems come up. After all, we’re dealing with dharmas, these events in the mind. The word “dharma” sometimes means “phenomenon,” sometimes it means “mind’s object.” There’s one meaning that’s not widely recognized. It’s there in the Vinaya. They talk about a dharma as an act. An action that you do. The event. As we chant the Bodhimokkha Uddhagye Hassa Thamme, the act of playing around in the water. So it’s specific actions of the mind that you’re learning to work on, not big, large abstractions. We often think that we can wait for the really big issues to come along and then treat those. We think that we can ignore the little issues or the little symptoms that come up in the mind. But you can’t. You’ve got to treat the little symptoms as they arise, because it’s through treating them one by one by one as they come, and getting a better sense of what particular action, what particular problem in the mind requires which particular medicine or exercise, that you develop your powers of alertness, you develop your powers of observation, you develop your discernment. And it also allows you to be more open to treating unexpected illnesses or treating major illnesses in unexpected ways. Greed, anger, and delusion take all kinds of different disguises. Sometimes what may seem to be a minor problem is actually one of the big ones. So don’t underestimate any of the little things that come along in the mind. Don’t underestimate any of the little problems, or don’t underestimate any progress, because the little things have the potential to relate to the larger things. So an important part of treating our own minds is not only learning the exercises and learning the medicines and courses of treatment that the Buddha has to offer, but also learning to read our symptoms. So that we’re quicker and quicker and more and more precise in how we apply these different treatments to what actually comes up in the mind. This teaches us to deal right in the immediate present, what’s immediately apparent to us, and not to go guessing at what lies behind it. But it requires that we remember that there’s no set course of treatment that has to be followed in a clear step-by-step manner, where you go from the easier things to the more difficult ones. The mind will throw different issues up at you at different times. Sometimes the really hard ones come. Sometimes a lot of easy ones come. Sometimes the mind seems to be getting really fit, and then all of a sudden something comes in, a major illness, and strikes it down. If the training of the mind were as easy and systematic as meditation manuals would have you believe, it would be a lot quicker, a lot easier than it actually is. So it’s important that you learn how to read your symptoms as they come, and not underestimate little things. After all, many serious diseases, start out as little tiny symptoms here and there, a little irregularity in your heartbeat, a little faintness, a little pain here, a little pain there. At first it seems to be inconsequential, but then it turns out that these are the first signs of something really serious. So pay careful attention to what’s going on in the mind. Try to develop that sense of telling when the mind needs to be soothed and healed, and when it needs to be stretched and put through its paces. So at the times when the mind is ready for the more rigorous training, you can take it as far as you can go. If you notice the warning signs that you pushed it too far, then you can back off a little bit. But the only way of learning this is through trial and error. The role of the teacher is to set out the course of treatment and to watch for the symptoms that can be seen from the outside. But each of us as meditators has to learn how to see the symptoms from inside. Those are the important ones. It’s learning how to see these symptoms that we develop our own discernment.

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