Healing Work

July 23, 2004

Practice is often compared to a medicine. There’s the medicine of the Buddha, the medicine of the Dhamma, the medicine of the Sangha. These are qualities we’re trying to develop in the mind. So as you’re meditating, it reminds you of treating the wounds, treating the illnesses of the mind. Sometimes illnesses require harsh medicine, but more often it’s soothing medicine, healing medicine. Bring a quality of awareness to the breath that feels good, that feels healing, and allow the breath to bathe the body in a way that feels healing as well. Then learn to be very patient. Think of all the diseases in the world that require simply time to mend. When you place a cream on a rash, say, on your skin, you don’t put the cream on the cream and then immediately wipe it off. You let it stay there. It works for hours and hours and hours. Then you put some more on and let that work for hours as well. You can’t push it. You can’t tell the cream to hurry up and do your business, because I’ve got other important things to do. It has to take its time. So be patient. If impatience takes over, you’ll find yourself pushing things too much or pushing them in the wrong direction. Then the quality of impatience itself becomes the opposite of a healing mental state, because you’re healing it not only with the mind and the body, not only with the breath, but also with the quality of your attention, the quality of your awareness. So learn to observe that. Watch what kind of awareness is too heavy, too pushing. Watch what kind of awareness is too lax. If it’s too lax, it’s like having the medicine over in the cabinet and you’re sitting here and the medicine can’t do anything because it’s not on your skin. If it’s too pushy, it’s like taking the medicine and rubbing it very hard into your skin, which creates more problems. So adjust both your awareness and the breath. The two of them have to be just right together for the healing to take place. What are the diseases we’re healing? Well, there’s greed, there’s anger, and there’s delusion. Delusion is the big one, because it forms the breeding grounds where all the other ones can take shape. So we bring awareness to counteract the delusion. What kind of awareness? Just the simple awareness you’ve got here right now, the awareness of the present moment. It doesn’t seem all that imposing because we don’t give it a chance to grow. We step on it and want to think about the future, step on it and want to think about the past, think about this person, think about that person, this injustice, that problem. And this simple present awareness doesn’t get a chance to show itself, to do its work. So try to give it some space. Let it be as continuous as possible. Try to connect all those little moments of present awareness until they become a continuous stream. There’s a word that Ajahn Furing liked to use. He used to recall it as when you’re holding your hands outside of a baby who’s learning how to walk. You don’t grab the baby because you want the baby to learn to walk on its own. And so you hold your hands a few inches away, not so far that if the baby fell there’d be a problem. Just a few inches there to protect it, because the baby is still weak and gentle. It’s the same way with your concentration, the same way with your breath. It’s still weak, still gentle. So learn to treat it gently, but with constant vigilance. It’s the quality of your awareness that’s going to make all the difference. When Ajahn Lee makes the comparison, he says, “Mindful awareness is like the medicine. The breath is the inner ingredient that you use to allow the medicine to spread through the body.” So even though we’re focused on the breath, we want to have one eye on the mind as well. The way you’re approaching the breath, the kind of pressure you’re putting on it. If you’re going to adjust it, how do you adjust it? Do you adjust it with impatience? Do you adjust it with frustration? Or do you adjust it by being calm and observant? So remind yourself as you’re meditating here that it’s a healing process. The awareness is what heals all the things that can arise because of delusion, that arise because of ignorance. All the blockages we create in our minds because they’re things that we think about that we don’t want to admit to ourselves. And so we block them off. Present intentions, memories of past intentions that we don’t want to admit to ourselves. We don’t like to think about them, so they get blocked off as well. All these walls get built up in the mind. It’s behind the walls that the germs can grow. So as we create this space in the present moment, we create a space where it’s possible for them to open up and not be threatening. At the same time, we develop a resistance. We tend to think of greed, anger, and delusion as being caused by things outside, but they’re not. Their qualities are already there in the mind, and they go flowing out after outside things. That’s when something inside you wants to be angry, and you can find things to be angry about. When you want to be lustful, you find things to lust after. And you enable yourself to act in these ways by building up these walls in the mind, screens to hide yourself, to hide these intentions from your vision. But part of you knows that it’s a game. So we’re trying to create a space here where all these things can be healed. It requires patience, it requires endurance, it requires persistence. But it’s good work. Think about the alternative, not healing the mind, where you’d be left. Things just get worse and worse and worse. When they get worse inside, they start spreading out and getting worse outside as well. So the healing work is a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. Fortunately, it’s made out of simple things, things you’ve already got, your awareness of the present moment, your breath. The sense of the body is sitting right here. Other good qualities that may be strong or weak, as the case may be, but they’re all there. It’s simply a matter of bringing them together so they can grow, so they can do their healing work together. Even though concentration is a fabricated state, it’s fabricated out of things that are right here. You don’t have to squeeze it and force it in such a way that it’s going to turn into something else, or scramble around trying to find this, trying to find that. All the qualities you need are here. Just sit with them and watch them with a sort of friendly interest. Then they begin to fall into place. All the ingredients of the medicine come together. Then you patiently allow them to do their work.

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