The Right Medicine

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Let’s say that there are 84,000 sections to the Canon. In other words, it’s a huge number of teachings, 45 volumes in all. And it’s best to think of it as a big medicine chest. You don’t need all the medicines in the chest. You need to figure out what your disease is and which is the right medicine for your disease. That should be your primary concern. So when you look into the teachings, it’s important that you bring a clear notion of what your problem is. Of course, the big problem we all share is that we’re suffering. And we’re suffering because of our craving, and we have craving because of ignorance. Sometimes we’re ignorant of the fact that we’re suffering. We don’t know exactly what the suffering is. We know that there’s pain in our lives. But the question is, what kind of pain is important? Some people are really concerned about physical pain, but the Buddha said, “No, it’s the suffering in the mind, the stress in the mind. That’s the big problem. That’s what you’ve got to work on.” And he said, “It’s caused by craving.” And there’s a way to put an end to it, by putting an end to craving. You put an end to craving by following that eightfold path. That much is easy to know. That’s called the Dhamma of Study, the Pariyatti Dhamma. But then you’ve got to put it into practice. They call it the Bhatti Bhatti Dhamma. To see exactly where your suffering is and exactly when the craving comes, how the craving comes. This is where the path comes in. You’ve got to get the mind really still so you can see these things in motion. That’s where we work with the breath. Both because the breath can be very calming and can provide a good foundation for the mind so it can stay continually in the present and feel content to stay in the present. And also because the breath is about as close as you can get to the mind without actually focusing on the mind itself. It’s the closest physical sensation of the body. Without the breath, you wouldn’t feel anything. You wouldn’t feel anything in the body at all. So when you’re with the breath, you’re very close to the mind. You begin to see the movements of the mind and see all the intricate feedback loops. This is why you need so many different kinds of medicine, because each of us gets caught up in a different loop. But there are two big issues that are common to everybody. One is this problem of ignorance, and the other is your intentions, the movements of the mind based on your views, based on your understanding of things. Simply knowing the vulnerable truths in the sense of having heard them or read about them is a good place to start in the practice, but it can’t be the practice. In and of itself, you’ve got to take those categories and apply them to what’s actually happening. And each of those categories has a duty. You want to comprehend suffering. You want to let go of its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. So you work here on the path so that you can perform those other duties as well. So work on the cessation of suffering. Concentration is not just a matter of forcing the mind into stillness. You have to have some understanding as well. The Buddha said it’s both samatha tranquility and vipassana insight that are necessary to get the mind to settle down. He didn’t draw a clear distinction between samatha practices and vipassana practices. They’re qualities of mind you need to bring to the process of stilling the mind. Without any understanding of the mind, your concentration may be strong, but it’s not necessarily right concentration. And in the process of bringing it to stillness, you learn things about the mind. In fact, there’s a whole sutta, the Svaha Sutta on Emptiness, which shows how, as you bring the mind from one state of concentration to a deeper state of concentration, one way of doing it is through understanding the concentration you’ve been indulging in. And the Buddha says, “Enjoy it. Indulge in it.” That’s an important part of concentration. But there’s a point where you begin to see that there’s still disturbance within that concentration, and so you let go of the disturbance. And it’s not extraneous to the concentration. It’s kind of built into that level of concentration. It’s built into the perception that keeps you in that level—how you perceive the breath, how you perceive your focus of the mind. And the mind, in relation to the breath, can really determine what level of concentration you hit. For example, if you see the breath as something you’ve got to pull in through the nose and push out through the nose, it’s hard to get a really deep level of concentration going with that perception. If you think of the breath as an energy that is there in the body and is augmented by energy coming in and out of the pores. It changes your relationship to the energy field of the body, and it makes it a lot easier for the mind to settle down. So when you compare the two levels of concentration, you see that the disturbance in the first was actually part of the concentration, the way you perceive things. When you understand that, then you can let go of that perception and go to a deeper level of concentration. This is one of the ways in which you learn about the mind, by trying to bring it to deeper levels of stillness. Just in that process, you’re already applying the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths aren’t ideas to think about. They’re categories to apply to your present experience. You’ve got a state of concentration going, and then you look at where the stress is. You see what’s causing it. Well, there’s this craving to perceive in a particular way. You let go of that craving. Then you move into another level of concentration. There’s going to be a craving for that level of concentration as well, but it’s more subtle. And so on down the line through the levels of concentration. This is concentration developed through discernment, concentration developed through what they call vimamsa, which can be translated as your powers of analysis, the ingenuity of the mind, basically the active side of the intellect. So concentration isn’t always just forcing things into stillness. Sometimes to develop, you have to look at it, and this requires a certain amount of balance. If you analyze it too much, you destroy it. If you don’t analyze it enough, you tend to just drop out. You go into a state that may be still, but there’s not much insight. Well, there’s not much mindfulness. It’s just a dull state. So you’ve got to learn how to mix things in the right balance. Again, this is how to get which medicine is just right for you at a particular time. This is called the Dharma of Practice. Finally, it leads to the point where you let go of all your attachments, all your craving. In other words, you get to the point where you see all the subtle intentions in the mind, and you see them so clearly that you sense the stress that each of them carries, each of them causes. And you finally get to the point where you realize that you have to drop all intentions if you want the mind to be really still. That’s a tricky thing, because the intention to drop the intention turns into another intention, but it doesn’t always have to be that way. There is an opening. And that’s when you see what the teaching is all about. There really is an end to suffering, and you can bring it about through looking at your own actions. That’s why intention is important. Intention is so central in the Buddhist teachings on dependent co-arising. It’s right down there in name and form, one of the very early factors. Once that factor is pulled out through applying the Four Noble Truths, all the other factors, like a chain reaction, they get pulled out as well. And you see that what the Buddha taught was really true. There is a Deathless. This is called the Dhamma of Attainment by the Veda Dhamma. This is what it’s all about. Now, to get there, different people will apply different aspects of the teaching. This is why the Buddha maps everything out in such complex detail. But you don’t need to know the whole map. It’s like driving from here to San Francisco. You don’t need to know all the roads that lead to Lake Tahoe, or to go up to Mount Shasta, or head over to Phoenix. You just need to know the roads that take you to San Francisco. So when you look at the Buddhist teachings, remember, this is what it’s all about. There are maps. There are all kinds of complex sets of teachings. But the essential thing is to see where exactly is your problem, which of the teachings is appropriate for what you’re going through right now, and then apply it. This is why in the past, a lot of the Buddhist Arahants and disciples had to then learn more of the Dhamma after they gained awakening. They learned their particular route. But if they were going to teach, they needed to know more routes as well. Remember, you always should put the teaching to the purpose for which it is intended, the end of suffering. All the teachings are skillful means. All the teachings are meant to be taken as strategies. Once you’ve used the strategies and gotten the proper results, you’re really going to cherish them. You see, this is the most precious thing that human beings can pass on to one another, this knowledge of these strategies. But to really appreciate them, you’ve got to see the results yourself. In other words, take the medicine and see that the disease really does disappear. That’s when you become a real strong supporter of that particular medicine. That’s what keeps the Dhamma alive. It’s not just a curiosity. It’s not just a game. It’s actually seeing the end of suffering, when the Dhamma turns from study to practice and then on to attainment. That’s the life of the Dhamma. And it’s something worth giving your life to as well. (crickets chirping)

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