Dharma Medicine

June 25, 2007

The Dhamma is medicine for the diseases of the mind, the diseases here not being the ones that would send you into an insane asylum, necessarily. The basic everyday diseases are greed, anger, and delusion. These are the big troublemakers. They cause us to see things wrongly. We think something may be in our best interest, but it’s not. Greed may cloud our vision. Anger can cloud our vision. And, of course, delusion is the biggest cloud of all. We like doing things that are actually harmful, and we don’t like doing things that are actually helpful. So all of the teachings are there for a specific purpose, to help with a specific disease. It’s always wise to keep that in mind. Like with meditation, there are some techniques that are like a general tonic that’s good for everybody. There are techniques that are specific for specific conditions. We talked a little bit about this today. The breath is your general tonic. Breath meditation is a good home base because of the various topics. It’s the one that’s least involved with visualization, least involved with thinking discursively, and it’s something universal. Everybody has a breath. To have a sense of well-being in the present moment, everybody needs to learn how to relate to the breath in a way that’s comfortable, puts you at ease, gives rise to a sense of well-being, a rapture even. John Lee gives the image of a mirror. If you have a convex mirror or a funny house mirror, it distorts your body, distorts your reflection. But if the mirror is flat and smooth, then you get a true reflection. It’s the same with the breath. You can always check in with the breath. How is it going around? Is it smooth? Is it easy? Does it feel refreshing? That can be your home base, your standard of measurement, to get a true picture of what’s going on in the mind. Because with other methods, sometimes contemplation of the body can get you in a state where you don’t want to eat at all, or you focus on light or candle flames. You start hallucinating. Even the Brahma-Viharas have their drawbacks. You spend too much time with them. But the breath is safe. It’s the same with different medicines. Some of the medicines may have their drawbacks, but you need them for specific conditions, specific diseases, so you learn to use them for the specific disease. When that’s passed, you go back to your general tonic. Part of this means you have to learn to be your own doctor, analyzing what’s wrong, prescribing the medicine, and then making sure the medicine is really working, and noticing when it’s done its job, so you can stop taking the medicine. This is something you learn over time. You have to be very observant. You have to be able to put aside your likes and dislikes. Some medicines we like, some medicines we don’t like. But that doesn’t mean the ones we like are necessarily good for us or the ones we don’t like are bad for us. So having respect for cause and effect in your mind, learning how to notice the connections between what you’re doing and the results you get, and focusing primarily on the results that you want, not whether you like the causes or not. Make your likes and dislikes secondary. If you’re going to like or dislike something, focus your likes and dislikes on the results. Then you do what you have to do in order to get the results you want. This is an essential principle in wisdom. Most often, when we think about Buddhist wisdom, we go straight for the subtle or the paradoxical, the really complex teachings. Emptiness, dependent co-arising, and the Abhidhamma. Yet we tend to forget that the Buddha has wisdom start with some pretty basic things. One is the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” I start by seeing the connection between your actions and the happiness and well-being you can experience, or the harm and misery and suffering you can experience, and realizing the long-term is important. You’re not going to go just for the quick fix. You’re looking for a medicine that’s going to be good for you in the long-term. The Buddha mentions this as a basic set of questions for wisdom. It’s good to keep these questions always in mind, even when you’re dealing with the more subtle aspects, because the same principle applies across the board. Sometimes when you get involved in the subtleties and the complex teachings, it just gets more and more abstract. It gets further and further away from the intended purpose of these medicines. So always keep the basic principles in mind. Another basic principle, or, as the Buddha said, the measure of your wisdom, comes in reference to four different types of actions. There are the actions you like to do and give good results, and the actions you don’t like to do and give bad results. Those, he said, don’t really measure anything, because it’s natural that you’re going to do the things that you like to do and give good results, and not do the things you don’t like to do and give bad results. The ones that are really a measure of your wisdom, your discernment, are the ones where you like to do it and it gives bad results, and you don’t like to do it but it gives good results. So in the first case, with the things you like to do but give bad results, wisdom lies in learning how to talk yourself out of doing those things, keeping the results in mind. So how can you deny yourself the immediate gratification of doing the things you like to do but are going to be harmful down the line? That’s a real measure of wisdom. In other words, learning how to talk to the various committee members in your mind. And learning strategies. In some of the meditation techniques we have are strategies, and sometimes you have to practice them in advance at the teaching on goodwill. Sometimes you sit here thinking thoughts of goodwill, and it’s almost as if your heart isn’t in it. The mind has no problem. You can think thoughts of goodwill, but there’s no sense of warmth or anything that goes along with it. Well, at the very least, you’re establishing pathways in the mind. So when you learn how to think of the people you like and the people you’re neutral about and the people you don’t like, you can at least think your way into goodwill for the people you don’t like. That’s important because, as the Buddha said, there will be times when you’re really strongly tempted to do damage to those people. But if you learn how to think about them, think about their happiness, make that a consideration in your mind. You’ve opened the pathway to more skillful actions. So that’s one strategy. It’s learning how to just keep practicing these things over and over again. It’s the same with the ability to think about the unattractiveness of the body. You can think about the various organs in the body, and it doesn’t really do much to you either way. You say, “Oh yes, that’s a fact that you do have this and you do have that.” There’s no sense of loathsomeness or something. But you do it as a regular practice. So when the time comes when there is strong lust in the body, that’s when the loathsomeness of the body really is off-putting. You don’t want to think about the liver. You don’t want to think about the intestines. You don’t want to think about the blood, the lymph, whatever. But if you’ve made a habit of thinking about these things, it’s going to come more easily to you. It’s the same with working with the breath energy in the body. This is one of those general tonics that’s useful in all kinds of situations. If you learn how to think about the breath in a way that immediately causes ease and ease to the sense of breathing, this is a good tool in almost any situation. Because if you’re coming from a sense of well-being and ease throughout the body, it’s harder to get enthralled, say, with anger. Or when lust comes, it doesn’t latch on to a feeling of hunger and dis-ease. So in a lot of ways, you can think of these meditation techniques as trying to prepare—i.e., meditation practice—for when you need to perform. At the time comes when you’re really strongly tempted to do something you know is going to be harmful, you have some techniques to fall back on. When you know that something is really good to do, but you just don’t feel like doing it, you breathe deeply inside, and you find that you can muster the strength to do it. So this is one kind of strategy in practicing meditation—developing these good qualities in the mind so that they’ll be there when you need them. This is a very basic form of wisdom, and it’s always important not to forget the basics. They form the structure of everything else. So when you apply the various teachings that are more subtle and more specific, you’re applying them in the right spot. Keep the general framework in mind. Where does this teaching fit? What situations is it meant for? When that situation comes up, you know your tools. You have a sense of what they’re for, what their purpose is. You’ve mastered their use. Or to continue the analogy of medicines, you can begin to read your symptoms and know, “Okay, this particular disease requires this particular treatment.” That’s how you become a wise doctor of the mind. There are lots of medicines in the Dhamma, and you always want to make sure that you use the right one and use it successfully. Some of these teachings are really basic. They’re simple enough for kids to understand, and yet often we forget them or bypass them, wanting to go for something more subtle. John Lee once made the comment that a lot of people have high Dhamma and low Dhamma all mixed up. Some of the things that we do overlook and think, “Well, this is just ordinary, everyday Dhamma.” Well, it’s everyday Dhamma for a good reason. It’s something you need to use every day. It’s something you need to keep in mind every day. It’s a basic question. So what will I do that’s going to lead to long-term harm? What will I do that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? That’s a question that should always be in the back of your mind. How can I talk myself into doing things that I don’t like to do but are going to give good results? How am I going to talk myself into not doing things that I’d like to do but will give bad results? Again, that’s something you should always keep in mind. That’s high Dhamma. It sounds simple. You can teach it to kids. But for some reason it’s very easy to forget as we get more enthralled with the more subtle issues. There’s nothing wrong with the subtleties, but you’ve got to make sure that they’re in the right place in the framework, in this system of medicine, this system of treatment that the Buddha has laid out. You can develop a sense of that, both through associating with other people who’ve had experience in giving this kind of treatment and in learning how to observe yourself, or learning how to observe others, what you can see from the outside. Not that you want to pass judgment on them, but simply you want to see what, when they do it, works, what, when they do it, doesn’t work. You can learn from them as well, in terms of actions and words. But as you learn to be more observant and see the connections between cause and effect, the medicines and the results they give, that’s when you can begin to trust yourself as a meditator. You see that the diseases in the mind really are wasting away, and the good qualities are growing. That’s what the teaching is all about—getting those good qualities strong in such a way that they can lead even beyond the need for good qualities. The ultimate health, as the Buddha once said, nirvana is true health. It’s something we have to take on faith, because most of us haven’t tasted that yet. But we have to remember that anything short of that doesn’t count as true health yet. It’s a well-being that ultimately doesn’t need any more help, doesn’t need any more causes, doesn’t need any more medicines. So, even though you may haven’t experienced it yet, keep that possibility always as an open possibility in your mind. And always keep open the idea that you can do it too. Other people have done it in the past, people who were worse off than you are now. But they had the right combination of goodwill, the desire for true happiness, and heedfulness, watching for causes and effects. They see what works and what doesn’t work. Learning how to develop the causes for true happiness, learning how to delight in developing, and learning how to delight in letting go of the things that cause harm. The Buddha once said that that’s the basic principle and the customs of the noble ones, the traditions of the noble ones. That’s how we can turn ourselves into noble ones as well. By following their customs, learning to be skilled doctors of the mind. So we can have a taste of that true health as well.

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