Diseases of the Mind

March 16, 2008

The Buddha compared himself to a doctor treating the diseases of the mind. Each of us is here because we’ve realized that we need treatment. That, in and of itself, is an important step. Most people out in the world take the disease state of the mind as normal. They’re perfectly fine. They’re not just okay with it, they really enjoy it. A lot of the mind’s diseases are caused by people out there. Not just out there, but a lot of us in here. Each of us in here has had our times when we enjoy greed, when we enjoy anger, when we enjoy delusion, and all the other unskillful states of mind. These eat away at our potential for true happiness. All the diseases come from within. Sometimes outside circumstances aggravate them, but the actual source of the disease is inside. This is why we meditate. We’re looking right at the source of the problem. As any good doctor would do, the Buddha tells us not to focus on irrelevant issues. I think we’ve discussed before the story they tell of the administrator of a hospital who discovered that when patients come in and complain of what seem to be the symptoms of a heart attack, actually a very short questionnaire is more effective than a long, detailed questionnaire to figure out who’s got the genuine symptoms of an oncoming heart attack and who simply has indigestion or whatever. There are times when you can know too much about a problem and it paralyzes you. Or you can get information that actually distracts you from the problem at hand. So the Buddha makes sure you focus strictly on what the problem is and how you can cure it. The cure, of course, is based on understanding the causes of the problem. This is one of the Buddha’s explanations of the processes leading up to suffering, which starts with what are called asavas, effluents, things that come flowing out of the mind. There’s sensuality, there’s views, there’s becoming, and there’s ignorance. These are tendencies that come out of the mind. Sometimes we feel that, say, the sight of a good-looking person causes lust. Well, the lust is there, ready to happen. It’s just looking for an excuse. And after all, that good-looking person is not so attractive. You start looking in a lot of detail. You realize he’s not so attractive after all. But because lust wants to get provoked, or the mind enjoys the provocation of lust, we very consciously ignore all the unattractive points and focus on the things we like. So this is something we have to retrain. You have to keep reminding yourself there are these other sides. Even if you got the person you liked, and it was a heavenly person, could you live with a heavenly person? You know all those stories about heavenly beings that come down and mix around with human beings and then get out as fast as possible when things start getting sticky. But here the person isn’t a heavenly person. It’s just a human being with all the body parts that we chant about and think about so often in the texts. Most people don’t think about those things, and they find them tiresome to think about. That means you have to go back a step further and understand, really understand, the dangers of lust. Just sitting around having lustful thoughts really does wear down the mind, aggravates the illnesses of the mind, and makes it more and more difficult to find any real peace of mind. In other words, you’ve got to look not only at the drawbacks of the object of your lust, but also at the lust itself. It’s not your friend. Then there are views. Back in the time of the Buddha, the big views were about the origin of the universe, the nature of what your self or your soul is like. Those are the questions the Buddha set aside. Nowadays, it seems to be more on politics. Then again, what’s the allure of the views? You have to look at the idea of your being right and proving somebody else wrong, or you’re having the final word on some particular issue. But just as the Buddha pointed out with the questions about the origin of the universe, you weren’t around at the time. Everything you say about it is speculation. It’s the same with political views. Candidates offer themselves. You have no idea what that candidate is going to do when he or she gets into office. So you think about this and remind yourself that your views are not that important. It’s useful to have views in areas that are helpful to the training of the mind or the curing of your diseases. But learn to look on the whole question of views with a jaundiced eye, so that when someone else expresses a view that you don’t agree with, you can just let it pass. You’ve got more important work to do. Similar issues relate to becoming the mind’s desire to create these little worlds for itself. It often entertains itself with the world. Sometimes it’s a sensual world, but not always. The way to get past the effluent of becoming is actually to learn how to do it skillfully, in other words, by creating a state of concentration. Then you go beyond the concentration by learning how to take it apart. The danger of knowing this ahead of time is that a lot of people start getting very analytical about their concentration at the very beginning, which is not helpful, because it tends to get in the way of your getting really deeply into absorption. You think about the breath enough to get it comfortable. When distractions come up, you analyze them enough to let them go away. That’s plenty right there, because as you’re sitting here meditating, your primary object should be to get the mind as still as possible. Anything else that comes up, you deal with it only to the extent that you need to in order to get back to your object of meditation. Sometimes insights will arise as you do that, but don’t worry about it. You’re here to get the mind still. It’s only when you’re really, really solidly still that you can start taking things apart in a more concerted and more intentional way. This is how you get past ignorance as well. You learn to look at whatever comes up in the mind in terms of the formable truths. Seeing where there’s stress, seeing where there’s the craving that causes the stress, realizing you can’t let go of the stress. You let go of the craving. And as you learn how to understand the stress as stress, that comprehension leads to the dispassion. It’s in this way that you use the becoming of a state of jhana, a good, strong concentration, to learn how to cure the mind of its affluent of becoming. It just keeps fermenting these things out all the time. Because even though it may seem entertaining, it passes the time of day. It’s really stressful and creates all kinds of bad habits in the mind. So, as the Buddha said, even though you have to be careful in terms of restraint of the senses so that you don’t bring in any outside germs to provoke your diseases, the real source of the disease is inside. This is what we’ve got to learn how to deal with as we meditate, looking at these affluents. And seeing what provokes them, looking at why we enjoy them, and trying to see their drawbacks. If you don’t see their drawbacks, there’s no way you’re going to get past them. If you don’t understand their allure, there’s no way you’re going to get past them either. You’ve got to see both sides. You look at the allure until you really see it. It’s pretty pitiful, the kind of pleasure you like to take out of these things. It’s in this way that you learn how to get past the diseases of the mind. Ultimately, when the affluents are there, then no matter what the outside circumstances are, the germs that used to provoke your diseases, you’ve got a really well-developed immune system. The mind doesn’t go out looking for them and doesn’t bring them in to aggravate its diseases. So learn to keep your focus steadily on the real cause of these diseases. Try not to get distracted with other entertainments, other blind alleys. They really do get in the way of curing the disease at hand. The Buddha’s image, of course, is of the man who comes to the doctor with an arrow sticking out of him. He refuses to have the arrow removed until he finds out who shot the arrow, what kind of wood it’s made of, what kind of feathers, who the arrow maker was. If you want to know those things, you’re going to die. The immediate issue is that you’ve got this disease, you’ve got this arrow sticking in you, and you’ve got to get it out. The Buddha was the kind of doctor who said, “Put those other issues aside. Focus on getting the arrow out.” That’s what’s so special about his teachings. If you can maintain the same focus as the doctor, it’s going to help speed your recovery. as well.

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