Digging Up Resistence

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The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor. And when we think of that analogy, it’s good to think in terms of traditional medicine. That was the kind of medicine practiced in his time. And so when he was thinking about how doctors treat their patients, he was thinking about that. That was the kind of treatment he had in mind. And one feature of traditional medicine is that every doctor has his basic tonic. In Thai they call this “moi yai,” “the big pot.” The doctor would put in his special combination of herbs and other things. General tonic is good for dialysis. General medicine, like ginseng and Chinese medicine, is good for everybody, almost everybody. And there are other medicines that are specifically designed for specific illnesses. The Buddhist meditation teachings are the same. Some topics are for people in general, or for general usage. And then there are topics that are for specific problems that come up in the mind. John Lee talks about this. There’s the breath, which is your home meditation, your home base, the viharadhamma. And then there are meditation topics that are for foraging around when you need a specific herb or a specific treatment. You go out and you forage in the forest until you find that herb, which means that as meditators we need many themes to deal with specific issues that come up. The breath is our basic thing. It’s good for grounding us in all kinds of areas. It’s always there, no matter what comes up in the mind. If you can’t figure it out, the first place to go is to the breath. Hang out with the breath for a while, and see what the breath can do to help. If you’re itching for pleasure, well, the breath can make things more pleasurable. If you’re dealing with a confusing situation, the breath gives you a place to hang on to. If nothing else is clear, at least you know now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Be confident in that much. That gives you a basis from which you can look at the situation and figure out what needs to be done. For instance, if anger comes up, the Buddha gives lots of tools for dealing with anger. We most often know about spreading thoughts of goodwill, but that’s not his only medicine for anger. The most basic one, may not sound especially noble, but often it works. Remember that when you give in to anger, you’re going to do things that an enemy would like to see you do. You look horrible when you’re angry, and you say things that you’re going to later regret. You think you’re gaining the advantage when actually you’re losing it. Sometimes you destroy your friendship, sometimes you destroy your property. All this would please your enemy. Do you want to please your enemy? Sometimes that’s how you have to think if you want to get past the anger. And there are thoughts of goodwill and compassion. You don’t want to suffer from this anger. If you had goodwill for yourself, you wouldn’t let yourself suffer from it. In thinking these thoughts, the purpose is not to cover up your real feelings. It’s to remind you of what’s reasonable and then to see how the mind reacts. If it says, “But,” examine what lies behind it. Try to see what kind of thinking resists thoughts of goodwill. Because goodwill as an antidote for anger, if you turn it into this marshmallow cream or cotton candy that you spread over everything, after a while it starts feeling hypocritical. You’re still angry at the person. You still have ill will for the person. So you have to think it through. This is why the Buddha has you reflect on the principle of karma, as you reflect on the good points of that person, to remind you that many times when you give in to anger, your perspective is narrowed. You want to focus only on the horrible things that that person did, so you feel justified in giving rise to the anger. The question, of course, then is, are you enjoying the anger for its own sake? Are you actually looking for trouble? Why would you want to do that? You want to trace these things down, so you can trace them back to whatever strange thoughts or ideas gave rise to the emotion. Emotions are not always pre-verbal. They have their reasons. They have their way of thinking. Yet it’s often buried. So one of the purposes of this kind of practice is to dig it up, force it up to the surface. Only when it comes to the surface can you really deal with it. A similar process holds when you find yourself overcome with lust or desire. The Buddha has you think about the unattractiveness of the body, starting with your body. Because, as he points out, often we’re attracted to ourselves first, and then, based on that, we start getting attracted to other people. So look at what is there in your body that’s attractive, and then you apply the same analysis to the other body. Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes the mind is going to resist, and then you’ve learned something interesting. Why is it resisting? The unattractiveness of the body did it for years. It was his basic theme. Every body he looked at, he would take it apart, imagine what was inside the body, to the point where he wondered, had he overcome sensual desire once and for all? So he decided to test it. He started imagining a beautiful body. This beautiful body clinging to him wherever he went. For four days, the mind didn’t have any pleasure in that beautiful body. It was on the fourth day that it started having just a little bit of liking it. That’s when he realized that the situation hadn’t been resolved. And so then he went back and forth, imagining a beautiful body, taking it apart, then making it beautiful again, then taking it apart again, back and forth, until he realized it was the perception of beauty. It wasn’t the body. It was the mind’s desire to perceive something as beautiful. That was the problem. And we can say that in the abstract, and you say, “Well, of course.” But you have to see it in action. You have to see the mind fighting against this perception of unattractiveness, to understand exactly what it’s made of. And these kinds of practices will bring up different issues. Then it’s up to you to figure out how you can disidentify with the resistance. For example, the Brahma-bhārata. It’s not just goodwill. There’s goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. Some people you have trouble having empathetic joy for. They seem happy and you resent them. It doesn’t seem right that they should be happy. So you’ve got to think about it. What do you know about that person? How much do you know about that person’s goodness? There are some Buddhist teachers saying that if you want to see someone’s past actions, you look at their present condition. If you want to see their future condition, you look at their present actions. That’s not true. Because each of us has a lot of actions in the past that are not showing yet. And they may have already borne fruit, and that’s the end of them. There may be others that are still waiting to bear fruit. You don’t know what they are. So you can’t judge the person’s past, you can’t judge the person’s future, one hundred percent. You see just a part of the story. So it’s good to remind yourself of that, if you’re feeling resistance to feeling empathetic joy. Same with equanimity. If something happens to someone who’s really dear to us and we can’t stand the idea that we would be equanimous about it, that the mind could be at peace in the midst of that suffering. If you’re going to be effective in helping that person, you have to be able to get them to mind still and equanimous. So you can see what can be changed, what can be helped. And you can save up your energy so that you’re not wasting it on areas where you can’t be of help. So the purpose of these practices, to help you with lust, self-hatred, or laziness, or anger, distress, resentment, hard-heartedness, all these unskillful emotions. The purpose of these supplementary meditation techniques is to remind you what’s the wise attitude to take. And if you can, you try to adopt that wise attitude. If you find there’s a resistance, you examine it. You bring it out into the open. It’s only when it comes fully out into the open that you can understand where it comes from, where there’s the false assumption that underlies it. What this comes down to is another issue in the teachings, the Buddha’s teachings on clinging, on nutriment. The word for clinging, upadana, can also mean sustenance. In the Buddha’s basic introduction to the topic of causality is the act of feeding. The mind feeds. It takes sustenance on things. And in some cases, its feeding is open and aboveboard, and in other cases, it’s secret. You try to hide it not only from yourself. Excuse me, you’re trying to hide it not only from other people, but also from yourself. You’d like to admit to yourself that you do like to feed on ill-will, or you do like to feed on resentment. And so these taste preferences get buried. Other people may see them, but you may tell yourself you don’t want to see them. And so you don’t. You hide them from yourself. So in cases like this, different contemplations, the recollection of, say, death, contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, developing the bhava of the hearts, they’re meant to bring those feeding habits out into the open. It’s only when you see them for what they are that you can let them go. So we’re not simply programming ourselves to believe everything the Buddha said. And John Mahabal often likes to take this point, to make this point, to prove the Buddha wrong, to see which part of the mind argues with the Buddha. And then see if its arguments are valid. That’s how you bring your defilements out into the open. And it’s when they’re out in the open that you can shoot them down.

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