Diagnosing the Mind

February 21, 2010

This is a phrase you often encounter in the teachings of the Forest of Jhanas. When we sit down to meditate, make sure that your mind is standing upright, not leaning forward or leaning back, leaning to the left or leaning to the right. Leaning forward or back means you’re either focusing on the future or focusing on the past. You want to look right in the present moment. And leaning to the left or leaning to the right means you’re either indulging in sensual pleasures or you’re tormenting yourself with the things that you’re thinking about. And the thing is, if you see yourself leaning, you don’t leave yourself leaning there. You do something about it. If you’re leaning to the past, your mind will find that the past is gone. There’s nothing you can do to go back and change it or to bring what was past into the present. If there was anything good in the past, especially in your meditation, it’s not going to be found by thinking about the past. It’s going to be found by focusing on the present moment. As for your concerns about the future, you have no idea what’s going to happen, aside from a few general things. For example, aging, illness, and death. What you do know is that if the mind is prepared, it’s going to be able to face those things without having to suffer. And so the preparation comes from where? It comes from developing mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment here in the present moment. As for moods that you like or don’t like, as the Buddha said, those are going to be off the path. You’re going to get the mind right here watching. Pull out of those moods. We tend to think of our moods, especially our emotions, as a given. That’s who we really are. But they’re just as fabricated and just as arbitrary as anything else. And so there’s no need to stay stuck in them. The same thing applies to other types of imbalance in the mind. Too much energy, too little energy. You’ve got to think of the antidotes. When the mind is too energetic, one way of dealing with it is to give it lots to think about, but lots to think about in terms of the breath. Focus on the details. Move around. Watch the breath energy in different parts of the body. Get really precise, down to the joints of your fingers, the joints of your toes. Try to see if there are any parts of the body that you haven’t had covered. Keep this up until the mind is ready to settle down. Strangely enough, the same tactic sometimes works when you’re feeling sluggish. If you find yourself dozing off or getting very dull, if you’re focused on the breath, move around. Two breaths in this spot, two breaths in that spot. Keep chasing the breath around the body until you find that you wake yourself up. What this comes down to is learning how to diagnose yourself. Remember, the Buddha talked of himself as being a doctor for the diseases of the mind. Now what he’s training us to do is learn how to be doctors for our own diseases, our own defilements, our own lack of balance. An important skill as a doctor is, one, learning how to diagnose the disease, and two, having the appropriate medicine, the appropriate antidote. That means having a full range of medicines to draw on. If you went to a doctor and the doctor had only one technique or one medicine, you’d have to find a new doctor. It’s the same as a meditator. You’ve got to learn how to read your mind and see what it needs. We take the breath as our basic tonic. But sometimes you have other diseases that can’t be taken care of by that tonic. So you’ve got to look at them, look at the state of the mind, and realize you have a wide range of things to draw on. It’s good not to be too doctrinaire, that you either have to be very still or very active all the time, or that you have to simply sit there and watch whatever comes up. The Buddha never taught that. After all, right effort, if there’s a lot of unskillful things happening in the mind, you try to abandon them and then try to give rise to skillful qualities instead. So you’re not just sitting here, noting just whatever comes up. What that does is it blinds you to the fact that there’s a lot of fabrication going on under the surface. So as long as there’s fabrication, you might as well fabricate that thing in a skillful direction, because it gives you insight into how the process of fabrication goes. You can work with the breath, you can work with what you’re thinking about. If you’re having issues with somebody, try spreading a little goodwill, first to yourself, to remind yourself that sitting here stewing about the issue is not helping you. You’re the one who’s suffering at the moment. Then having some goodwill for whoever the person with the issue is. That can often change the dynamic, help pull you out, at the very least help you get out of the issue for the time being. Sometimes it’s worth thinking through, but if you find that trying to think through the issue is not helping things, it’s not getting any clearer, then you can tell yourself, “Well, you’re not up for this yet. You put it aside.” It’s not that you’re running away. You’re just learning to choose your battles, when you’re going to fight them, and when you’re going to be at a strategic retreat. Sometimes to see an issue more clearly, instead of thinking it through, you’ve just got to get very, very still, as we’re saying today. To see things clearly, you have to be still. The purpose of seeing things is to help them get more still. All too often our thinking goes off in different associations and wanders around and travels to who knows where. You’ve got to be more in control of your thinking. The purpose of thinking and meditation, the purpose of discernment, is to help the mind get more and more still, deeper levels of stillness, more secure levels of stillness, so you can see deeper into the mind. So areas of the mind that tend to be hidden start coming up to the surface, especially as your alertness gets more and more quick. You begin to see levels of decision going on in the mind that you wouldn’t have seen before. This requires a lot of stillness, but it also requires a lot of alertness. The image that Chan Khamdi used was of a hunter. That has to be, on the one hand, very, very still, so as not to scare off the rabbits and other animals, but at the same time very alert. They’re the slightest noise that the animals are making, so you gain a sense of when they’re coming. It’s the same with observing the mind. You’ve got to get very still to observe it. But it’s a balanced stillness, both still and alert. Then you find that you’re having trouble getting it into balance. So ask yourself, “Okay, which part is missing? The stillness? The alertness? The ability to pose questions?” And then try to compensate. Chan Khamdi has done studies to show that many times decisions get made in the mind very early on in the perception process. Yet the conscious mind is coming in slowly, slightly later, and thinks that it’s making the decision. Actually, what it’s doing is ratifying a decision that’s already made. This doesn’t mean that we don’t have free will, that everything is on automatic pilot, although many of us do leave things on automatic pilot. But it means that it doesn’t have to be. If you’re meditating, then you get very quick and you begin to see these things more and more quickly. You can bring what’s hidden in the mind up to the surface. That’s the state of balance that we’re trying to achieve. So you look at your mind as it is right now, as you’ve been fabricating it, and ask yourself, “Is this the state of mind that’s going to help see things more clearly? Or is there something missing? Or is something out of balance?” Learn how to diagnose the mind and use whatever medicine you can think of. Sometimes it’s learning to take a different topic for your meditation for a while. Goodwill, equanimity, any of the brahmaviharas. Use contemplation of death. There’s what they call the four guardian meditations. There’s recollection of the Buddha, which is for encouragement, to inspire you to practice. There’s development of goodwill when you’re dealing with anger, contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body if lust is a problem, and contemplation of death when you’re feeling lazy. Again, you have to notice when the medicine is working, what medicine is appropriate for you. Usually it’s best to do any of these four in moderation as ways of bringing the mind back to the present moment with the right attitude, with the right level of energy, and then drop them and get back to the breath. And they use the breath in various ways. There’s the soothing breath. There’s the energizing breath. If you find yourself focused on the breath and it’s getting dull, have some good deep breathing for a while. See what that does to wake things up. Years back, there was one of Ajahn Fueng’s students who had lost track of him. She had no idea where he’d gone. She tracked him down, finally found him in Riong, and came to see him. After that first evening’s meditation, she said, “Look, you’ve been using the cool breath all the time. This is not good for you.” In other words, she’d been focusing on making everything very refined, very still with the breathing. It’s not necessarily good for the body to have that kind of breathing going on twenty-four hours a day. So it may feel less relaxing. You may have to do some deep breathing. Stir things up again. Energize things. Provide the body with its needs and bring the mind into balance. There’s a kind of breathing that clears unhealthy breath energy out of the body. There’s a kind of breathing that nourishes the body. Just as there are different kinds of medicine, there are different kinds of breathing. So you have to learn how to read the breath energy in the body and learn how to read the mind. In other words, you’ve got to exercise your diagnostic powers to see what you need and then provide what the body and the mind need. So you bring everything into balance. This way, you learn how to become your own doctor. Because there’s nobody who can stand over your shoulder and say, “Okay, now you breathe this way, now you breathe that way, now you focus on this. You better drop that.” If there were somebody doing that and they were accurate, it would scare you. There’d be somebody reading your mind that accurately. What you want to do is learn how to read it yourself that accurately. This is going to take time. But it means having a very broad attitude towards the practice, not being doctrinal. It’s got to be this way, it’s got to be that way, or you have only one technique that you’re going to hold on to all the time. This is why the jhani, one-note attitude toward meditation is not really helpful. As I said, it’s like a doctor who has only one medicine or one type of treatment. It may be good for one particular kind of disease, but the mind has many diseases, many ways of going out of balance. So even though we take the breath as our main tonic here, remember, you have other medicines as well. And even in the main tonic, you have your own medicines with their variations. So remember the story of Ajaan Chah. One of his students went to him and complained one time. Ajaan Chah was giving contradictory advice to different people. And as he said, “Sometimes I see people going down the road and they’re veering off to the right, so I have to say, ‘Go left, go left.’ Other people are veering off to the left, so I say, ‘Go right, go right.’” So you don’t listen just to the words. You look at what’s happening to see why those words are appropriate. That’s one way of learning some diagnostic powers. And the other way, of course, is learning how to look at your own mind, try different approaches if things aren’t working well. If things are working well, learn how to maintain them. Keep them going. Remember, there are four types of right effort. Abandoning, preventing, developing, maintaining. So it’s good to figure out what’s appropriate any one particular time. A useful sutta to read is Majjhima. The Buddha talks about seven different types of effort. One of the really useful pairs there is tolerating and avoiding. On the one hand, he says, if there are pains that come up that you have to bear, you learn how to tolerate them. You learn how to endure them. But at the same time, you know enough to avoid unnecessary pains, unnecessary difficulties. In other words, you see a cesspool right in the middle of your path, but you don’t walk through it just because you’ve decided you’re going to walk that path. You walk around it. You learn how to apply this to the mind. There are times when there are certain mental states, certain emotions that come up, and you’re not required to sit there and endure them. Give the mind something else to think about. Give it reasons for dropping that particular emotion. It’s not that you’re avoiding the reality, because after all, as I said earlier, the reality is fabricated. And you can learn an awful lot about the process of fabricating by fabricating new ways of breathing, new ways of thinking about things, new things to focus on. Developing alternative feelings, i.e., feelings of pleasure through the breath. So the mind isn’t sunk in a funk. You learn how to avoid unnecessary trouble. And you’ve learned an awful lot about how the mind works, how the principle of fabrication works. So learn how to read the mind. Learn how to understand the mind. Learn how to diagnose its illnesses, its imbalances. Remember, there are lots of medicines that you can draw on. And your skill as a doctor is in learning which disease or which imbalance requires which treatment. How do you learn this? You learn this by reading, you learn this by listening, and you also learn this by applying different tactics to your mind, applying different strategies. You make mistakes, but then you learn from your mistakes. That’s how discernment is developed.

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