Your Inner Immune System

February 29, 2012

The best nurses and doctors are those who have a good immune system, who don’t pick up the diseases of their patients, so they can stay strong and healthy, taking care of themselves and taking care of the needs of others. The same principle applies to meditation. Often you hear people saying that meditators are selfish, they’re just looking after their own happiness. But what we’re doing is actually training the mind to have a good immune system, so it can resist the diseases of greed, aversion, delusion, all the unskillful thoughts, all the unskillful qualities that go sloshing around in our society. We’re training ourselves not to be selfish. To take in germs from outside and not to go out looking for the kind of food that’s going to make us sick. And at the same time, developing our resistance so that even though we may be exposed to all kinds of germs—in other words, beautiful things, ugly things, lovable behavior, despicable behavior—it’s all around us. The mind doesn’t have to pick up those germs. It doesn’t have to pick up those diseases. And in this way we’re a good example to others. We’re not spreading disease around to them. And when other people have problems, we’re in a much better position to help them with their problems. So when you’re meditating, remember, this is a gift. It’s a gift both to yourself and to other people. The ability to resist greed when it comes, the ability to resist anger when it comes, the ability to learn how to recognize delusion—that’s the hardest of the three. Because often when you’re deluded, you don’t know you’re deluded. But as we develop more mindfulness, more alertness, we can begin to see, when we do something or say something or think something, what the results are. Then we’re in a better position to judge those results from a fair standpoint. So how did we develop these abilities? Well, we start with that alertness and mindfulness. Develop them as you’re staying here with the breath. Try to keep the breath in mind and be alert to whether the mind is staying with the breath or not. And if you find it wandering off, don’t be surprised. But don’t let it go very far. As soon as you notice it’s wandering off, come right back. This is the quality of ardency. The sincerity that you’re putting into the practice, the effort that you’re willing to put into the practice to make it skillful. While you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath is having an impact on the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? How does the in-breath feel different from the out-breath? How about the energies that are already there in the body? How does the in-breath mingle with those energies? It feels good. All too often there’s a tendency when you’re settling down with the breath to try to make it really obvious when you’re breathing in, really obvious when you’re breathing out. And sometimes you distort the energy in the body in doing so. So think of the process as being one of mingling comfortably. When you breathe out, you don’t have to squeeze the breath out. Or force it out. It’ll go out on its own. You don’t have to worry. Allow the whole body to be involved in the breathing process. As you breathe in, think of it going all the way down through the abdomen. And there’s another level of breath energy that goes all the way through the nerves. In fact, as soon as you start breathing in, that energy has already gone all the way through the nervous system. So you’ve got several layers, several strata of breath here. And think of them all mingling comfortably. This sense of well-being that comes from the breathing is an important part of the practice, because often the reason the mind goes out looking for food that’s not especially good for it—junk food for the mind—is because it doesn’t have a sense of nourishment, doesn’t have a sense of well-being in the present. It’s just looking for something. But when there is that sense of well-being, you’re not as desperate. You see, the potato chips of the mind is just a lot of fat and a lot of carbohydrates and a lot of salt, which you don’t need. So you don’t feel tempted. You’ve got several layers. And this is how you begin to develop that sense of resistance, because you’re not gobbling down other people’s moods and gobbling down other people’s actions. You can develop your own sense of nourishment inside. At the same time, you’re developing a whole range of qualities that help to strengthen the mind. You’ve got the conviction that what you’re doing is important in that it has an impact on how your life is going to go. That in and of itself is a lot of strength right there. Because otherwise we just go along with the flow. Other people do things, we do it along with them. We pick up their diseases, and we all end up being sick together. But if you realize you have the choice to go with what other people are doing or not, and the fact that you can exercise that choice, it really does matter. That right there is an important strength. Sometimes people complain that meditation has ideals and values that don’t fit in with our society. It’s an Asian import. But the values of the meditation are not Asian or American or African or anything, as the Buddha said. They come from the culture of the noble ones, people who’ve realized where true happiness lies. And so the practice of the Dhamma actually stands apart from the culture in every country it’s in. I noticed this when I was first studying with Ajahn Phuong in Thailand. His values seemed very different from most ordinary Thai people that I had met. He’d been out in the forest, and as often happens when someone has been living in the wilderness, they can cast a slightly skeptical eye on the values of society. They learn to develop their own values. It’s what this means, is that regardless of where you’re from, whether it’s France, America, Thailand, Japan, the practice of the Dhamma is always going to go against the general values of society. Which is perfectly fine, because the general values of society, wherever you are, tend to be a little sick. They look for happiness in the wrong places. Their values of what’s good and what’s bad are all skewed. And it’s good to be able to step aside from that so you’re not picking up the diseases around you. The other strengths that we develop are persistence, that we stick with this, the mindfulness and the alertness together to keep your sense of well-being inside, in mind, so you don’t go throwing it away when something flashy comes by. It’s concentration, well-being, and stability that come as your mindfulness gets firmly established. And then the discernment that you can develop as the mind is really still. You begin to see things more clearly. You see the motions of the mind more clearly. You see where it’s going out to pick up germs. You see how it’s going out to pick up ideas from other people. How it’s looking for trouble, how it’s looking for things to get greedy about or angry about. Because the germs don’t lie just outside. The real germs lie in the mind. The need we feel in order to get worked up about something, the need we feel to have something to lust after, to be greedy for, to be angry about, thinking that somehow that’s what life is all about. So the real germs that we’ve got to watch out for. And it’s our discernment that allows us to separate ourselves from them. So even though they’re there in the mind, we don’t have to pick them up, we don’t have to let them develop into major diseases. We keep probing in, probing in, probing in, and finding where these things are coming from. What strange ideas do they come from? How can we counteract those ideas? All of these things are the strengths that we develop in order to resist the diseases that can grow in the mind, the diseases we can pick up from outside. This is how we strengthen our inner immune system, strengthen our inner resistance. And as we’re stronger in this way, as I said, we’re in a better position to be helpful to other people when they’re suffering. We can deal with people who are angry, but we don’t pick up their anger. We can deal with people who are greedy, but we don’t pick up their greed. We don’t get involved in the useless competitions that can make life together really miserable. So the skills we’re developing as meditators are really important, not only for our own well-being, but for the well-being and health of people around us. So have a sense of confidence in what you’re doing here. Because, as I said, it’s a gift to yourself, a gift to the people around you.

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