Not Everything Natural Is Good

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Once there’s someone who believes in all sorts of natural remedies, that if something was natural, it was good for you. Of course, you didn’t know much about natural remedies. There are a lot of remedies that are not right for your particular disease. In fact, they can actually aggravate it. I was once suffering from a sore throat in Thailand, and they gave me a medicine, vattalaijon, which is supposed to be good for sore throats. It turned out I had bronchitis, and it was actually making the bronchitis worse. So just because something is natural doesn’t mean it’s good. The same applies to the mind. Our minds have greed. They have aversion. They have delusion that these things are natural. But that doesn’t mean they’re good. The Buddha actually calls them defilements, things that darken the mind, that stain the mind. Unfortunately, the stain isn’t forever. There’s that famous image where he says the mind is bright, and it’s darkened by visiting defilements. That’s why it’s possible to train the mind. The brightness here doesn’t mean natural goodness. It simply means the mind has the ability to know. And the defilements that come in don’t make a permanent stain. That’s why we can train the mind. You recognize something is a stain on the mind, and you learn how not to get involved. But that’s the important part, recognizing that it is a stain on the mind. All too many people don’t like the idea of defilement. It’s one of those words that you very rarely find in Western Buddhism. I don’t mean to mention that people say that lust is a defilement. They get very defensive. Anger, not quite so much. But then a lot of people feel, “Well, what about my justified anger?” As for delusion, there are a lot of people who believe that their minds are naturally pure and they’re deluded only because of social influences. Well, if the mind didn’t have the propensity to delusion to begin with, nobody could delude it. And the fact that you deny that these things are darkening the mind is a sign of the darkness. That’s one of the first things we have to recognize. Sometimes something coming into the mind may be there naturally, but it’s not good for you. And as you’re meditating, you’re going to run into the hindrances. And the first prerequisite for dealing with the hindrances is to recognize that that’s what they are. They hinder the mind. They are problems. The hindrance of sensual desire is related, of course, to delusion. Compassion, ill will is related to aversion. And the remaining three, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty, are all related to delusion. These things are defilements in the mind that we have to recognize before we can deal with them. Otherwise, sensual desire comes and what you desire really looks desirable. And it’s a good thing that you’re desiring it. There’s so much written about it. After all, sex is natural. Without sex, where would we be? Well, we’d probably be in a lot better places. Same with ill will. You really anger at somebody and you can convince yourself that that person really does deserve to suffer. It would be good for them to suffer and teach them a lesson. That kind of thinking. In the meantime, you don’t notice what that line of thinking is doing to your mind. And sleepiness comes. That’s a sign you need some rest. That’s what the mind thinks. When you’re worried about something, you’re afraid that if you don’t worry about it, it’s going to be dangerous. But somehow, by worrying about it, you’re getting prepared. Well, there is such a thing as intelligent planning, but a lot of the worrying we do is totally useless. It just wears the mind down. It’s for uncertainty, and the mind can tell itself, “Well, this really is an unsure thing. I can’t really commit myself yet.” And so on and on and on. But when you recognize that the mind is something you want to get to settle down and you want it to be clear that these things are getting in the way, that’s when you have a handle on these things. The next thing is to want to get rid of them. This is why it’s important to recognize that they are defilements. They are obscuring the brightness of the mind that could be there if you were really centered, still, mindful, alert. So those are the first steps in dealing with these things. One is admitting that even though they’re natural, they may not be good, and deciding that you really do want to get past them. The texts give lots of techniques for dealing with the different hindrances. When sensual desire comes, you first look at yourself, this body you’ve got. What’s in there? If you’re having desire for somebody else’s body, that body has the same things. If you look only as far as the skin, maybe it’s okay. But if you look inside, then there’s all kinds of stuff that you wouldn’t want to get anywhere near. Yet you’ve got that in your body. It’s all nicely wrapped up in the skin. If you look carefully at the skin itself, you look long enough and it gets kind of disgusting, too. The things that come out of the skin, the diseases it can get. That line of thinking is often very helpful. Sometimes, though it’s not enough, you have to look deeper into the mind. What is this defilement here of lust? What’s the defilement? What’s the defilement of desire? What is it doing to the mind? That’s why you want to look at the negative side of the object that you’re desiring. So you can put that aside. But then you’re not done with the problem. You have to look deeper into the mind because this is where the problem is. In Thay, they often associate the word kilesa, defilement, with asavat, these things that flow out of the mind. Effluents, fermentations. And you realize that the reason you desire things is not so much that the object itself is really desirable, but there’s this push in the mind. It wants to go out and grab onto these things with greed or passion or with aversion or with delusion. The principle applies across the board. It’s something that’s pushing out of the mind. So even before you have an object to desire, you think that you want to desire something. Even before there’s an object to be angry about, you’re feeling the need to be angry. You want to focus it on something. So again, with the ill will, you realize what’s going to be accomplished by that person’s suffering. You think, “Well, maybe they’ll learn a lesson.” A lot of people don’t learn lessons from suffering. They just get worse. And there’s so much useless, pointless suffering in the world. Why wish more on anybody? So you learn how to think about the other person in a way that can get you past your ill will. If there’s something good about the person, you focus on that to remind yourself they’re not totally bad. If you can’t find anything good about them, you have to feel compassion. And if your mind can’t do that, that’s a sign you’ve got to turn around and look at your mind. What’s your issue? It’s obviously not the person. Something else is going on inside. That’s where the remaining hindrance is. When sleep comes, you’ve got to test it to see if the body really does need to rest. Because sometimes when you get really sleepy in your meditation, it’s actually a sign that something important is coming to the surface and part of the mind wants to avoid it. So you do what you can to fight the sleepiness. You can change the object of your meditation a bit. If you’re focusing on breath and the breath is very, very subtle, you say, “Well, let’s breathe a little bit more heavily and see if that wakes you up.” Or if you find that staying focused on one spot is getting you torpid, you can either expand your awareness to fill the whole body or just chase your focal point around the body. Just stay at one spot for three breaths and then move to another spot for three breaths and another spot for three breaths. Keep this up. Keep moving around. Cover the body as many times as you want. If that doesn’t work, you can get up and do walking meditation. If you find that you’re still sleepy while you’re doing walking meditation, try walking backwards. See what that does. Walking backwards is a sign that the body really does need to rest. But you have to test it. Because if you don’t, then the mind will just hide all kinds of things from itself under the cloak of sleepiness. That’s restlessness and anxiety. Worried about the future? Remind yourself. You don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know that you’re going to need mindfulness and alertness and discernment in order to deal with whatever comes up. Some things you can prepare for, but a lot of things are going to be unexpected. And you want to have the skills to deal with the unexpected. And that’s where mindfulness, alertness, and discernment come in. So your best protection against the unexpected in the future is to work on developing mindfulness and discernment. In other words, you can’t let yourself get sucked into that worrying mind state. And as for uncertainty, the only way you’re going to gain any certainty about the practice is really to do it. That’s when you’ll be in a position to judge whether it’s working or not. If it’s not working, you can try various things. You can try changing the breath, changing your focal point, changing the topic of your meditation for a while, and really sticking with it. Because the only way to overcome uncertainty is to be true, as Ajahn Fung used to say. Or as they say in the text, you want to notice what actually is skillful and unskillful in the mind. And the only way to know that is to watch the mind. So, is it true that greed, aversion, and delusion cause suffering? Well, remember what happened when you gave in to them in the past. And would it really alleviate your suffering if you were able to drop them? Well, try dropping them. So you’ve got to test all of these hindrances. Question them. Because the simple fact that the mind is hindered means it’s already darkened. It’s already got some of the darkness of defilement right there, and that obscures your vision. And the reason people say their minds are not defiled is because their vision is so poor that they can’t recognize defilement. This is a very important principle in the practice, so you don’t side with your defilements. Because once you do, they’ve got you. And it’s only by figuring them out and recognizing them for what they are that you can begin to find some brightness in the mind.

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