For When You’re Ill

November 25, 2012

There’s a passage where Ajahn Lee compares mindfulness of breathing to a medicine both for the body and for the mind. The mindfulness—and here he means both mindfulness and alertness—is the actual medicine, and the breath is the delivery vehicle. As you spread mindful alertness throughout the body, together with the breath, you find it can take care of a lot of pains and patterns of tension in different parts of the body. The blood flows more easily, the breath energy in the body flows more completely. And this is good for the body in addition to being good for the mind. It provides you with a much better place to stay, a much stronger foundation for the meditation. So give it a try. Trace the breath energy through the body as you breathe in, breathe out. Where do you feel it? Are there any places where it feels blocked? Any places where you feel like a part of the body seems to be missing? It might be your elbow. You can feel your hand, you can feel your shoulder, but for some reason your elbow isn’t there. See if you can trace where the elbow might be. It might not be in the same place where it should be when you look at it from the outside. Notice what rhythm of breathing feels best for the body, too. I’ve noticed many times that in the past when I had migraines, one way of making them a lot easier to deal with was to breathe very deeply, to fill up the whole abdominal cavity with as much breath as possible. Even to the point where it seemed a little bit overly full. And to really emphasize the in-breath. Long, deep in-breaths. Long, deep in-breaths. There’s a lot to explore in this area. Because as you stay with the breath, it’s both a matter of the energy in the body being allowed to flow more freely and also the qualities of mind you’re developing. Because as John Lee said, it’s the actual mindfulness and alertness that’s the real medicine. Your body’s not feeling well. All too often the mind is off making even more trouble for it, worried about where this disease is going to take you, or upset over the things you can’t do because of the disease. But if you’re simply mindful of mindfulness and alertness right here, right now, take the opportunity to put aside your concerns about where the disease is going to go and what other things you could be doing, and focus right on what you’re doing right here, right now. That quality in and of itself is a strength. It’s called conviction. Conviction that what you’re doing right here, right now, is important. Your responsibilities outside can be put aside. You’re working on the quality of your mind, and that’s an important thing to do. From that conviction comes the persistence, trying to figure out, “What can I do with the breath? What can I do with the way I focus my attention that can provide for greater strength in the body?” Realizing that the main concern, of course, is the strength of the mind. Because there will come times when you can’t depend on the body at all. This is the other problem with illness. It’s just the general lack of energy that comes. Because of the lack of energy, the body’s fighting off, say, germs or whatever. You’ve got less energy left over for the meditation. So you learn how to take what little energy you have and use it as wisely as possible. Any kind of thinking that’s going to be a waste of energy, you put it aside. You’ve got to gather your strength right here, right now. As the Buddha points out, if your thought is, “Well, I’m too sick to meditate right now. I’ll just wait until I get better,” who knows? The disease might take a turn for the worse. Your thought should be, “At least I have enough energy to focus on the breath right now. I’ll stay right here while I’ve got the opportunity.” Learn how to downsize all your other expectations about the present moment to what you can handle right here, right now. And you’ll find that you really can get concentrated in the present. This gives the mind a lot more strength. And in the course of developing the concentration, you gain some discernment, too. You learn where to focus, where not to focus, what to think about, what not to think about. And if you’re heedful, and that’s the quality the Buddha says strengthens all of these inner strengths, you realize that this is the most important thing you can be doing right now, working on your mind. Upaskaji mentions the fact that you’re actually lucky. When you’re sick, people say, “Okay, you don’t have to do this, you don’t have to do that.” So you’ve got all the time right here to focus on getting yourself back together again, getting your mind back together again. That’s the primary point. And as for the body, if it benefits from your concentration, fine. If it doesn’t, at least your mind is in good shape, and that’s what really matters. If you’ve got a cold and find it difficult to breathe through your nose, just think of the breath energy coming in all the other spots in the head. Jon Lee talks about the middle of the forehead, the top of the head, the back of the neck, and that takes a lot of the pressure off the muscles in the head and in the shoulders that are trying to pull the breath in through the nose. And you find it really does make a difference. Think of the breath coming in and out the eyes and the ears. Years back, when I had malaria, I found that it was getting more and more difficult to breathe because, of course, what’s happening when you have malaria is that the parasites are eating your little blood cells. Then the oxygen you would have gotten from the blood cells is no longer yours, no longer available. And so the muscles that are doing the work in the breathing are getting starved of oxygen. And it gets very laborious. Then the thought occurred to me, “Well, those other spots in the body where the breath energy can come in, how about rethinking this process of breathing and simply holding a different perception in mind?” The breath coming in the top of the head, the middle of the forehead, the back of the neck, the ears, the eyes, changes the mechanics of the breathing. And the muscles that hadn’t been doing any work before pitched in. The muscles that had been working got a chance to rest. There are lots of ways you can deal with the specifics of your current illness. Something is having that conviction. That’s what gives you the strength. Whatever ability you have to focus the mind, even if it’s not as great as it was when you were feeling healthy, really does make a difference. And it’s really important that you take care of the quality of your mind. You take whatever medicines the body needs that are available, and you let the medicines do their work. And then you can help them along with the breath energy. After all, this is how that monk, I’ve forgotten his name, in the Theragatha, cured himself of his illness. He was out in the middle of the wilderness, and there was nobody else around, and he was sick. What do you do? You don’t have a doctor, you don’t have any medicine. Was he going to try to get back to civilization? No, he wasn’t. He was going to stay there and think about all the greater jhans in the past, the Buddha course, and all the other noble disciples. Take their practice as an example. He’s going to stay right there and he’s going to develop the bases of power, develop the five strengths, the factors for awakening. And it’s through developing those qualities of mind that he strengthens not only his mind but also his body. Because remember, there is that aspect of karma which is present karma. Sometimes the illness comes from past karma, and you can’t do much about it. But if your present karma is contributing to the illness, well, you can change that. And you can learn a lot of useful things as you explore this. This method of meditation we’re doing here, Chan-li’s method, too, was something he developed when he was out in the wilderness. He suffered a heart attack, and he used the breath to pull himself back together again. So even though when they talk about dharma medicine, they’re talking about medicine for the mind, it also has an impact on the body. There are passages where monks are sick. I think Moggallana Mahakassaba, the Buddha, comes and reminds them about the seven factors of awakening. And as they develop those qualities in the mind while he’s teaching it to them, the illness goes away. Another time, Junda comes. He repeats what the Buddha had taught about the seven factors of awakening, and the Buddha gets well as he consciously reviews those topics. There’s mindfulness. We’re working with the breath right here, right now. And then there’s analysis of qualities, figuring out what kind of breathing is skillful, what kind of breathing gives rise to skillful mental qualities, what kind of mental qualities are going to help you with the breath. When you can figure out what’s skillful, again, then you really work at developing what’s skillful and you put aside what’s not. And that can give rise to a sense of fullness in the body. This really is the food for the mind, the nourishment for the mind and the body. Try to breathe in a way in which the breath energy suffuses the entire body. The mind will settle down, be still, finally attain concentration. And we’ll develop equanimity towards the things that you can’t change. And that right there saves a lot of wasted energy. And the energy you do have in the mind can be used to repair both body and mind. Now there will be times, of course, when even the best state of mind will not be able to have an impact on the body. It won’t cure you, at least. But it will have a strong impact inside you so that you’re not suffering so much from the disease. And again, you’re wasting as little energy as possible so that a maximum amount can be used by the body. And you’re training the mind in good qualities. That right there is really strong medicine.

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