A Mind that’s Not Ill (outdoors)

October 8, 2017

There was once a man who came to see the Buddha. He’d been sick and he’d just recovered enough. He wasn’t fully well, but he’d recovered enough to come walking to see the Buddha. He bowed down to the Buddha and said, “Okay, make sure that even though your body is sick, your mind isn’t sick.” The man was very pleased with the teachings, so he bowed down and left the Buddha, went to see Venerable Sariputta. Sariputta asked, “Your face is bright. Have you completely recovered?” The man said, “No, but I’ve just learned the Dhamma from the Buddha.” Sariputta said, “What did the Buddha teach you?” The man said, “Even though the body is sick, make sure the mind isn’t sick.” Sariputta asked him, “Did you ask the Buddha what that meant?” The man was taken aback. He said, “No, I’m afraid not.” Sariputta said, “Well, let me explain what that means.” He wanted to say that as long as you see your aggregates, in other words, your body, feelings in the mind, perceptions, thoughts in the mind, even your awareness in the mind, as long as you hold on to these things, claiming them to be yours, then when they change you’re going to be sorrowful, you’re going to be upset. That’s what it means to be sick in mind. If you don’t hold on to these things, don’t claim them to be you or yours, then no matter how much they change, the mind is not going to be affected. That’s how the mind is not sick. So what does that mean in practical terms? Well, actually, in the practice you have to be careful how you apply that teaching. You can’t just let go of everything right away. Maybe you’ll be able to let go of things, but that’s when the mind is strong. As long as the mind is still practicing, it still needs something to hold on to. This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation. Developing concentration in the mind, working with the breath, staying with the breath as much as we can. Some people might say that we’re attached to the breath, but that doesn’t matter. They can say what they want. We need the breath as food for the mind. The time hasn’t come to let go yet, because if the mind doesn’t have good food like this, it’s going to go feeding on all kinds of things, good or bad. For instance, we’ve got thinking about sensuality and get really wound up in sensual thoughts, which the Buddha defines as the mind holding on to its pleasure in thinking about sensual thoughts. It’s interesting that the pleasures themselves are not the problem. It’s our tendency to think about these things and embroider them. You can think about going to a restaurant for a meal, and you can think about it for hours with what food you’re going to order, what changes you might want to make, and then you change your mind. Well, how about ordering this or that? Or changing the restaurant? When you get there, it doesn’t take that long to eat the meal. And then you can think for hours afterwards about how much you enjoyed the meal, how much you want to do it again. That’s called being stuck on sensuality. And as long as you’re stuck on sensuality, the Buddha would say you’re sick. The mind is ill. It’s going to suffer, trying to hold on thoughts that just slip away, and many of which are lying to you to begin with. Or you can get stuck on thoughts of ill will, thinking about someone who’s harmed you, and say, “I’d like to see them suffer a little bit, maybe not all the time, but a little bit before they get happy again, just in recognition of the suffering they’ve caused me.” You might think that. Part of the mind really hates that kind of thinking, but another part really likes it. You’ll find some nourishment there. If you get stuck on that kind of thinking, the Buddha would say the mind is sick. So what he says to hold on to is the kinds of thoughts that get you past sensuality, the kinds of thoughts that get you past ill will. But even those thoughts need some foundation, as he once said. If you don’t have the pleasure of concentration, then no matter how much you see the drawbacks of unskillful thoughts, especially about sensuality, you’re going to go back. The mind needs pleasure. So give it meditation. Give it the concentration. Learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good, really satisfying. What are your energy needs in the body right now? See if you can breathe in a way that satisfies those felt needs. Then it’ll be easier to let go of the things that are making the mind sick. You’re changing your feeding habits. It’s just like changing your feeding habits in physical food. If you’re eating junk food, you’re making yourself sick, well, turn around and start eating health food. Find a way to fix health food so it tastes good, so you’re not constantly thinking about going back to the junk food. And if you feed it well with the right kind of food, the mind eventually gets to the point where it doesn’t need to feed anymore. That’s when it can let go of everything. In other words, we just can’t let go of everything right at once. We have to be selective in what we let go. Another image the Buddha gives is of trying to get milk from a cow. Suppose you think you can get milk from the cow by twisting its horn. So you keep twisting, twisting, twisting. No milk comes out. You get tired. The cow is probably harassed. Someone comes along and says, “You’d be a lot more comfortable if you just stopped twisting the horn.” So you stop twisting the horn. And yes, you do feel more comfortable. The problem is, you still don’t get any milk that way. You’ve got to pull the udder. That’s when you get the milk. In the same way, you have to hold on to the path. All the teachings from right view all the way through right concentration, but especially right concentration, because that gives you an immediate sense of well-being. And then it’s a lot easier to let go of the kind of food that makes you sick. Other people may say you’re holding on, but that doesn’t matter what they say. You’re more concerned about the genuine well-being of your own mind. We’re not doing this to impress other people. We’re doing this to get over our illness. As with any medicine and any food that you take for treating a disease, once the disease is gone for sure, then you don’t need that food or medicine anymore. Then you put everything aside. In other words, once the mind is strengthened through the path, to the point where it can let go of everything, then there’s no need to hold on even to the concentration. But that doesn’t mean the concentration disappears. You still have it to use. It’s just that you don’t need to take your sustenance from it anymore. You’ve found something better inside that doesn’t need to feed. But in the meantime, feed yourself well. Hold on to this, because it’s holding on to the concentration, holding on to your mindfulness, all the other good things, in the path that the mind can get over its illnesses and never have to be ill again.

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