

Taking Your Own Medicine

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Meditation is like medicine for the mind. The mind gets a chance to rest, recover from its illnesses, recover from whatever damage that's been done to it, just by allowing it to stay with the breath.

There's a passage where the Buddha said there's no happiness other than peace. There's no health for the mind, either, unless it has a chance to be peaceful, has a chance to rest.

So, make the breath comfortable. You're allowed to play with the breath. In other words, you have to fix your own medicine.

What kind of breathing feels good for the body right now? What kind of breathing would the mind find easiest to settle down with? If the breath doesn't feel really comfortable, there will be a sense of dis-ease in the present moment, and when there's dis-ease here, the mind will start looking someplace else for its pleasure, someplace else for its entertainment.

So one of the important aspects of breath meditation is learning how to skillfully adjust the breath. If you do it with too heavy a hand, it doesn't work. Just think, "Okay, what kind of breathing would feel best right now? What muscles in the body would feel good if they were allowed to expand with the in-breath, relax with the out-?"

You can make a survey around the body to see what kind of breathing the body needs, and as you're more sensitive to that particular question, you'll find that the breath pretty much finds its own rhythm. If it doesn't, you can nudge it a bit.

So: What would longer breathing feel like? Allow it to be a little bit longer for a while and see how that feels. Or how about shorter breathing, deeper breathing, more shallow breathing, heavier breathing? Sometimes if the breathing is too light, the mind begins to drift.

So experiment to get a sense of what feels best for the body right now,

because it's only when you play with cause and effect like this that you really get a sense of what's going on in the body and mind, and what would be helpful to encourage. You also begin to pick up on the fact that the mind does tend to play with the breath anyhow—subconsciously, but it does happen.

As you're doing it consciously, you begin to catch the more subconscious ways you've been manipulating the breath without even realizing it—sometimes in ways that are not especially good for the body or mind. So make this your conscious activity, your conscious endeavor right now, to see what kind of breathing feels good and to see what way of adjusting the breath feels good as well, works for you as well.

This gives the mind a place to rest, and when it rests, its wounds can begin to heal. We tend to think of the wounds as coming from outside, and there's an awful lot in modern culture that *is* detrimental to anybody's sanity, anybody's health, mental health. But a lot of the wounding comes from inside us as well, and this is what we really have to watch out for. Once the mind has developed a measure of well-being that comes from the meditation, start looking at how you wound your own mind, and you'll find it happens in all kinds of ways: in the things you do, the things you say, the things you think.

In fact, these are the things that reduce the mind's resistance to outside phenomena so that it's more susceptible to influences from outside. If you're not wounding yourself, nobody else can wound you because your resistance is strong. The mind naturally has a kind of strong resistance to outside influences if it's allowed to maintain that resistance, but when we're wounding ourselves, then it's hard to resist damage from outside.

So look at your actions; look at the way you speak. We had a really good example this morning. When people start getting casual about telling lies, even if it's only for fun, it starts to catch. Other people start playing the same game, and the truth becomes pretty questionable, and the value of our speech gets lessened—and when the value of our speech gets lessened, it's a

wound to the mind.

So you have to be careful about this, careful about the precepts, and careful about what kinds of things you allow yourself to think. We're all afraid of repression, but consciously saying No to a particular thought is not repression. Repression means you don't even admit to yourself that the thought was there. That's when it goes underground and turns into The Thing.

You may have seen that movie a while back, about a being that has long tentacles that slip underground and come popping up in unexpected places. It infiltrates people, takes over their cells, and basically takes them over.

The reason why movies like that are so chilling is that they resemble so much what goes on in the mind when there's repression. When ugly things in the mind suddenly take over, we don't know where they come from. Subconsciously, there is a sense that they came from within us, but we're not quite sure how.

When you learn to meditate, you start getting more sensitive to how these processes take place. A thought appears to the mind, and you see it clearly appearing. Then you have the chance to say Yes or No to the thought. And when you say No, you're not repressing it, because it's a conscious No. This is a very important part of the meditation.

Meditation is not just what we do as we sit with our eyes closed and give the mind a place to stay, give it a home to stay, give it a place to rest. That's an essential part of the meditation. It's our basic skill. It's the foundation from which everything else emanates. But it's not all we do.

Once you develop the sensitivity that comes with training the mind here as we sit, you want to use it as you go outside—in particular, to keep watch over yourself. If you just meditate for the sense of peace and calm that it gives, it's like someone who goes down to the gym and exercises just so that he can look good in the gym and that's it. He doesn't use his strength for anything useful outside. As a meditator, you want to be the sort of person who, once he gets strong, wants to use that strength in ways that are most

useful.

The Buddha says there are basically four uses for concentration. One is a sense of well-being it gives in the present moment, which is nothing to sneer at. It's good; it's important. The mind needs that as part of its healing, but that's not the whole story.

Another use for concentration is as a basis for mindfulness and alertness. We tend to think of mindfulness meditation as one thing and concentration meditation as something else, but they can't be separated. They've got to be connected. If the mind isn't really well-concentrated, mindfulness and alertness don't have a basis, and if there's not much mindfulness and alertness, you can't really get the mind concentrated to begin with. So these three qualities have to help one another along.

This is where it's important that you use the mindfulness and alertness you develop while sitting here to watch the ways in which you wound yourself throughout the day when you allow greed to take over, lust to take over, anger to take over, or delusion to take over. Or in terms of the hindrances, when sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty take over, watch for those things and see what state they leave the mind in when they've gone, and what they do to the mind while they're present.

When you watch for those things, you really begin to see, well, yeah, the real damage to the mind doesn't come from outside. It starts from within, and that's what we've got to take care of.

A third use for concentration is to develop psychic powers. That's one of the side effects of meditation, but it's nothing you can really aim at. I've seen so many cases of people who practice meditation for the purpose of developing psychic powers, and they all get kind of crazy in the end. If it so happens in the course of your meditation that you *do* develop powers, you have to be very careful with them because, one, an awful lot of pride can go along with them, and two, it's not necessarily the case that, say, the information they give you or the abilities they give you will be really helpful

or true, because false information can get mixed up with true information. Then again, you have to watch out for the defilements that arise. Some people develop supernormal powers and also develop supernormal levels of greed, anger, and delusion as a result.

The fourth use of concentration is one that the Buddha said was the most important, and that's to put an end to suffering, to put an end to what they call the effluents in the mind. If you make that your purpose, then whatever else happens in the course of the meditation, you're safe.

In other words, you realize that, Yes, this tendency of the mind to harm itself is what you've really got to work with. And there is a way you can put an end to it.

These things are called effluents. They're qualities that come flowing out of the mind and cause it to suffer. They start with sensual desire and states of becoming. Becoming is one of the those words we hear and we say, "What are they talking about?" States of becoming are the worlds the mind creates for itself. Artists are especially good at this. They can create whole worlds with, say, a musical composition, a novel, or a poem. But the Buddha points out that there's a lot of suffering involved in that. And it's not only artists who do it. We do it all the time.

We create little worlds in our mind, and then stay in one little world for a while until it begins to fall apart. Then we've got to move to another one, and then another one. That's something that comes flowing out of the mind and causes suffering, causes stress.

Then there is the effluent of views, that this has to be this way, that has to be that way. You latch on to these views. As the Buddha said, even when your views are right, you have to let go of them eventually. Learn to use them as tools and put them down where they're not useful. It's not helpful to go around holding on to views all the time, because sometimes they really get in the way of seeing what's really needed in any given situation, and they form a burden on the mind.

The fourth effluent is ignorance—in other words, not knowing the mind,

having blind spots in the mind. Not knowing when greed, anger, or delusion arise. Not knowing where they come from. Not understanding the nature of the mind itself. That's a big blind spot in all of us and it's the one we really have to work on the most.

So keep chipping away, chipping away, chipping away at your ignorance by developing more mindfulness and alertness. This ability of the mind to hide things from itself is what creates the subconscious and the unconscious. That's where a lot of ignorance lies right there, so we chip away at that, first, by becoming more sensitive to simple things like the breath—the way we manipulate the breath already, how we can learn how to do it more skillfully—and then by being quick to be sensitive to thoughts: in other words, realizing when they arise.

You want to be quick enough to see a thought before it actually becomes a verbal creation or a mental picture, when it's just a sense of stirring in the mind. Learn to be quick to see that. That way, when it actually forms into an actual thought, you can tell, "Okay, this is one I want to follow up on. This is one that I shouldn't."

In other words, you want to cut down the number of subconscious decisions that are being made in the mind, because that's one of the most important aspects of ignorance right there. The mind can really slip a lot of things past itself this way, because it keeps hiding things from itself, deceiving itself. We want to use the powers of concentration and mindfulness and alertness that we develop when the mind is well concentrated so that we can start seeing into these things and putting an end to the suffering, putting an end to the harm and damage that the mind causes itself.

That, of all the four uses of concentration, is the most important. The concentration itself is a kind of medicine, but it's not the ultimate medicine. It needs insight as well. It needs discernment as well. And where do insight and discernment come from? From the powers of mindfulness and alertness you develop while you're concentrating. Learn how to use them properly,

applying them to things inside and out, so that the strength and the health you develop by sitting here don't go to waste.