

Dhamma Medicine

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The Dhamma is medicine for diseases of the mind. These diseases are not the ones that would send you to an insane asylum necessarily. They're the basic everyday diseases: greed, anger, and delusion. These are big troublemakers in the mind because they cause you to see things wrongly. We think something may be in our best interest, but it's not. Greed may cloud our vision, anger can cloud our vision, and delusion is the biggest cloud of all. In addition, we like doing things that are actually harmful, and we don't like doing things that are actually helpful.

So all the teachings are there for a specific purpose. to help with a specific disease. It's always wise to keep that the mind. As with meditation: There are some techniques that are like a general tonic that's good for everybody, and there are other techniques that are specific for specific conditions.

The breath is your general tonic. Breath meditation is a good home base, because of the various topics, it's the one that's least involved with visualization, least involved with thinking discursively. And it's something universal: Everybody has a breath. And to have a sense of well-being in the present moment, everybody needs to learn how to relate to the breath in a way that's comfortable, that puts you at ease, gives rise to a sense of well-being, or rapture even.

Ajaan Lee gives the image of a mirror. If you have a convex mirror or a funny-house mirror, it'll distort your body, distort your reflection. But if the mirror is flat and smooth, then you can get a true reflection. It's the same with the breath. You can always check in with the breath: How is it going? Is it smooth? Is it easy? Does it feel refreshing?

That can be your home base, your standard of measurement, so that you can get a true picture of what's going on in the mind. Other methods, like contemplation of the body, can get you in a state where you don't want to eat at all. Or if you focus on light or candle flames, you start hallucinating. Even the brahmaviharas have their drawbacks if you spend too much time on them. But the breath is safe. So as with different medicines, some of the medicines may have their drawbacks, but you need them for a specific condition, specific disease, so you learn to use them for that specific disease. When that's passed, you go back to your general topic.

Part of this means you have to learn to be your own doctor, analyzing what's wrong, prescribing the medicine, and making sure the medicine is really working, noticing when it's done its job, so that you can stop taking the medicine. This is

something you learn over time. You have to be very observant. You have to be able to put aside your likes and dislikes. Some medicines we like; some medicines we don't like. But that doesn't mean that the ones we like are necessarily good for us, or that the ones we don't like are bad for us.

Have respect for cause and effect in your mind. This means, one, learning how to notice the connections between what you're doing and the results you get. And focus primarily on the results that you want, not on whether you like the causes or not. Make your likes and dislikes secondary. If you're going to like or dislike something, focus your likes and dislikes on the results. Then do what you have to do in order to get the results you want.

This as an essential principle in wisdom. Most often, when we think about the Buddha's wisdom, we go straight for the subtle or the paradoxical, the really complex teachings: emptiness, dependent co-arising, and Abhidhamma. We tend to forget that the Buddha's wisdom starts with some pretty basic things. One is the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, start by seeing the connection between your actions and the happiness and well-being you're going to experience, or the harm and misery, the suffering you're going to experience, realizing that long-term is important. You're not going to go just for the quick fix. You're looking for medicines that are going to be good for you in the long-term.

The Buddha mentions a basic set of questions for a wisdom, and it's good to keep these questions always in mind, even when you're dealing with subtler aspects of the practice, because the same principles apply across the board. Sometimes when you get involved in the subtleties and the complex teachings, it just gets more and more abstract, further and further away from the intended purpose of these medicines. So always keep the basic principles in mind.

Another basic principle that the Buddha said is a measure of your wisdom comes in reference to four different types of actions. There are actions you like to do and give good results, and actions you don't like to do and give bad results. Those, he said, don't really measure anything, because it's natural that you'll do the things you like to do and give good results, and not do the things you don't like to do and give bad results.

The ones that are really a measure of your wisdom, your discernment, are the ones you like to do but they give bad results, and the ones you don't like to do but give good results. In the first case—the things you like to do but give bad results—wisdom lies in learning how to talk yourself out of doing those things, keeping the results in mind. How can you deny yourself the immediate gratification of doing

the things you like to do but are going to be harmful down the line? That's a real measure of your wisdom. In other words, learning how to talk to the various committee members in your mind, and learning strategies.

Some of the meditation techniques we have are strategies, and sometimes you have to practice them in advance. The teaching on goodwill: Sometimes you sit here thinking thoughts of goodwill and you notice that your heart isn't in it. The mind has no problem thinking thoughts of goodwill, but there's no sense of warmth that goes along with it. Still, at the very least, you're establishing pathways in the mind. When you learn how to think of the people you like and the people you're neutral about and the people you don't like, you can at least think your way into goodwill for the people you don't like. That's important, because as the Buddha said, there will be times when you're really strongly tempted to do damage to those people, but if you learn how to think about their happiness, make that a consideration in your mind, you've opened up a pathway to more skillful actions.

So that's one strategy in learning to keep practicing these things over and over again.

The same with the ability to think about the unattractiveness of the body: You can think about the various organs in the body but it doesn't really do much to the mind: "Well, oh yeah, that's a fact that you do have this, you do have that." There's no sense of loathsomeness or anything. But if you do it as a regular practice, then when the time comes when there's strong lust for the body, that's when the loathsomeness in the body really is off-putting. You don't want to think about the liver, you don't want to think about the intestines or the blood and the lymph, whatever, but if you've made a habit of thinking about these things, it's going to come more easily to you.

And it's the same with working with the breath energy in the body. This is one of those general tonics that's useful in all kinds of situations. If you learn how to think about the breath in a way that immediately brings ease to the breathing, this is a good tool in almost any situation, because if you're coming from a sense of well-being and ease throughout the body, it's hard to get enthralled, say, with anger. Or when lust comes, it doesn't have a feeling of hunger or dis-ease to latch on to.

So there are a lot of ways you can think of these meditation techniques as preparation, i.e., meditation practice for when you need to perform. That way, when you really are strongly tempted to do something you know is going to be harmful, you have some techniques to fall back on. Or when you know that

something is really good to do but you just don't feel like doing it, breathe deeply inside, and you find that you can muster the strength to do it.

This is one kind of strategy: practicing meditation to develop these good qualities in the mind so that they'll be there when you need them. This is a very basic form of wisdom—and it's important not to forget the basics, because they form the structure for everything else. That way, when you apply the various teachings that are more subtle and more specific, you can apply them in the right spot, keeping the general framework in mind: Where does this teaching fit? What situation is it meant for? When that situation comes up, you know your tools, you have a sense of what they're for, what their purpose is, and you've mastered their use.

Or to continue the analogy of medicine, you can begin to read your symptoms and know, okay, this particular disease requires this particular treatment. That's how you become a wise doctor of the mind. After all, there are lots of medicines in Dhamma, and you always want to make sure to use the right one—and to use it skillfully. Some of these teachings are really basic. They're simple enough for kids to understand, yet we often forget them or bypass them, wanting to go for something more subtle.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that a lot of people have high Dhamma and low Dhamma all mixed up. Some of the things we overlook, thinking, "This is just ordinary everyday Dhamma." Well, it's everyday Dharma for a good reason. It's something you need to use every day, something you need to keep in mind every day. These basic questions: "What do I do that's going to lead to long-term harm? What do I do that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" Those questions should always be in the back of your mind. "How can I talk myself into doing things I don't like to do but are going to give good results? How can I talk myself into not doing things that I like to do but would give bad results?" That, too, is something you should always keep in mind.

That's high Dhamma. It sounds simple. You can teach it to kids, but for some reason it's very easy to forget, as we get more enthralled with subtler issues. There's nothing wrong with the subtleties, but you've got to make sure they're located in the right place in the framework of this system of medicine, this system of treatment that the Buddha has laid out.

You can develop a sense of that, both associating with other people who've had experience in giving this kind of treatment and learning how to observe yourself, or learning how to observe others in general, what you can see from the outside—not that you want to pass judgment on them, but simply to see what when they do it works, what when they do it doesn't work. You can learn from them as well, in

terms of actions and words. But as you learn to be more observant, and see the connections between cause and effect, the medicines and the results they give, that's when you can begin to trust yourself as a meditator. You see that the diseases in the mind really are wasting away, and the good qualities are growing.

After all, that's what the teaching is all about: getting those good qualities strong in such a way that they can lead even beyond the need for good qualities, to the ultimate health. The Buddha said that nibbāna is true health. That's something you have to take on faith because you haven't tasted it yet. But you have to remember, anything short of that doesn't count as true health yet. True health is a well-being that doesn't need any more help, doesn't need any more causes, doesn't need any more medicines. Even though you may not have experienced it yet, keep that potential always as an open possibility in your mind,

And always keep open the idea that you can do it, too. Other people have done it in the past, people who were worse off than you are now, but they had the right combination of goodwill, the desire for true happiness, and heedfulness, watching for causes and effects, to see what works and what doesn't work, learning how to develop the causes for true happiness, how to delight in developing them, and how to delight in letting go of the things that cause harm.

The Buddha once said that that's a basic principle in the customs of the noble ones, the traditions of the noble ones. It's how we can turn ourselves into noble ones as well, by following their customs, learning to be skilled doctors of the mind, so that we can have a taste of that true health, too.