

The Buddha's Medicine

March 4, 2008

The Dhamma is medicine—medicine for the ailments of the mind. And just as with medicine for the body, some Dhamma medicines are meant to be preventive and others are meant to treat illnesses you've already got.

And although we have the Buddha as the primary doctor, and other people are more experienced on the path as doctors who can give us advice, we're the ones who have to take the medicine.

It's the same as with doctors out in the world. A doctor can give you all kinds of good advice on how to live, but you're the person who actually has to live. He can give you medicine, but you're the one who has to take it. Occasionally, a Dhamma talk might be like getting a shot from the doctor, in which he's the one actually giving you the medicine. But for the most part, you're the one who has to do the work. You're a doctor in training.

The problem, though, is compounded by the fact that one of the main diseases in the mind is delusion. And it's the nature of delusion that you don't know you're deluded. So as a good precaution, you have to go on the assumption that as long as there's suffering, as long as there's stress, you're still suffering from delusion. That means there's always something new to learn. There's always the possibility that you might be misreading the diagnosis or applying the wrong medicine.

That's why it's important to have someone else around who can observe your diseases and give you advice. But even when there is someone like that around, that person's not going to be around 24/7. You've got to learn how to watch for the symptoms yourself.

To begin with, you've got to learn preventive medicine. A lot of what the breath can do for you is as preventive medicine—because germs don't just simply come into the mind. You go out looking for them.

It's like knowing that a countertop in the kitchen is full of germs and you go licking it. Now, do you blame the germs for being there? Well, no. You're the one who put your tongue on the counter. Why did you do that? You were hungry. Maybe you thought there might be a little bit of food film left over on the counter. But there were all those germs there as well.

So the first thing you've got to do is to feed the mind properly. A sense of well-being with the breath helps an awful lot in that way. You breathe in, breathe out, and try to develop a sense of fullness. Notice, when you're breathing in and

breathing out, where in the body there's a sense of pulling the breath in, a sense that you're really hungry for the breath. Try to think of that area of the body as filling up immediately as soon as the in-breath starts, so that you don't have to pull anything in. If you have a sense of pulling-in around your nose or around your cheeks, think of the breath coming in not just through the nostrils but also from the sides of the cheeks as well, so that you don't have to pull anything in.

This allows you to develop a sense of fullness there. The blood is allowed to flow in a relaxed way through those parts of the body. The blood vessels relax, things fill up, and you develop a sense of fullness. Learn to develop that sense of fullness in different parts of the body.

It may be hard at the beginning to develop it in the whole body all at once, but work on it section-by-section. Think of your hands being full all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Then your wrists, your forearms, your elbows, your upper arms, your shoulders. Then start at the toes and work up through the feet and the rest of the body section-by-section, so that there's a sense of fullness all the way through the body, all the way through the breath cycle. When you've got that sense of fullness, it's nourishing to the body—you feel less hungry—and it's nourishing to the mind. You're starting to hunger less for outside distractions and you're building up your resistance.

This way, when pretty sights come that might ordinarily give rise to lust or greed, or disturbing ones come that would ordinarily provoke your anger, you find that you're not interested. You realize that if you went there you'd just create more trouble for yourself.

This is how you build up resistance to provoking things outside. This is how you also build up resistance to the mind's tendency to go out and look for trouble.

This is how restraint of the senses and concentration practice work together. Because it's not simply the fact that outside stimuli come and barge in on the mind. You have to create the bridge. After all, you're the one who looks, you're the one who listens. There's an intentional element there. And you have to ask yourself, "What is the intention? When you're looking, what are you looking for?"

That way, in addition to building up resistance to disease, you also learn how to protect yourself from diseased areas, from sources of disease. It's like knowing that there's an epidemic raging in a particular country, so you don't go there. Or like knowing that there's a contaminated water supply, so you don't drink the water. If you're really thirsty, it's very tempting to drink the water no matter what. But if you've got a sense of well-being inside, you've got your own healthy water inside so the body feels well-watered by the breath, that's one level of protection

against going out and drinking up contaminated stuff.

The same as when you notice that a particular disease has arisen: You've got to learn how to separate yourself from the causes. Because if you've got a cold and you keep going into places where there are people with colds, it's just going to keep hanging on, hanging on.

And it's the same in the mind. If you find that there are certain topics that, when you think about them, give rise to greed, anger, or delusion, you've got to give yourself an alternative place to go. Here again, the breath helps.

And then you look to see the symptoms of the greed, anger and delusion in the body. Because sometimes those aggravate the problem. This is another area where the breath can help. Here the breath is not so much preventive medicine as healing medicine.

We've all felt the sensations of the body that go along with anger. We know they're there. Often we're not fully aware of them, so it's good to make yourself conscious when you're angry, "How does the breath feel? How do different parts of your body feel? Can you change the breathing?"

The anger doesn't come from the body, but the symptoms in the body often aggravate it. In other words, there's a brief flash of anger, and hormones get churned up in your bloodstream. The flash of anger goes away after a while, but the hormones are still there, so you've still got the physical symptoms of anger. You notice that and think, "Well, I must still feel angry." So that sparks the anger again. This way, you keep going back and contaminating yourself again and again and again.

So as soon as there is that sense of bottled up pressure coming from the anger, learn how to breathe through it. And remind yourself—this is where your internal medical theory comes in to remind yourself: Okay, there will be a continued disturbance while the hormones are still in the bloodstream, but simply because there are physical symptoms of anger doesn't mean that there's still a steady state of anger in the mind. It comes and goes.

When you can make that distinction and then try to breathe as much as you can through the physical symptoms, it may take a while, but it helps to keep you from re-contaminating yourself.

So the breath is one of the helpful medicines both for preventive medicine, to help prevent diseases—as an adjunct to other preventive medicines like restraint of the senses—and it's also a kind of healing medicine.

This way, once anger has flared up in the mind, you can at least make sure that the body doesn't aggravate the condition. Then when you're coming from a healthier physical sense inside, you can start looking at the anger in a healthy way

—in other words, bringing in your mental medicine as well.

Look at the situation. If you see someone who's been acting in a very bad way, remind yourself, "Well, is there something good about that person?"

Because remember, you're sick. You can't go around just picking up more germs from other people. You've got to look at their good side. Or in the Buddha's analogy, you're walking through a desert, hot, trembling, thirsty. You come across a little cow footprint and there's a little tiny puddle of water in the footprint. You need that water. You can't scoop it up because you'd make it muddy. So you have to get down and slurp it up very carefully. The water's *that* valuable to you.

In the same way, other people's goodness is valuable to you. If you focus on their bad points, it just aggravates your own diseases, aggravates your own thirst. Other people's good points are like water for you. You need it.

So the breath helps a lot. It's not the total medicine in the treatment but it's one of the very helpful medicines. It has to be allied with a proper understanding of what actually causes the diseases of the mind.

Ajaan Lee makes the point that it's not only the case that beautiful things come in from outside and cause passion to flare up. or disagreeable things come in from outside and cause anger to flare up. Often you're looking for something to make you passionate, something to make you angry. You're licking the toilet seat, trying to get yourself sick.

So you've got to learn how to put a stop to that. This is why restraint of the senses is important, and why right view is an important medicine as well.

As for the breath: Learning how to work properly with the breath simply gives you the strength that you can apply the other medicines well, so that you're not so hungry, you're not so foolish to go out and try to get diseased.

This is why the breath is an important part of your medical arsenal. It's not the whole arsenal. You need a full set. After all, the Buddha said there are eight folds to this noble eightfold path. And working with the breath covers three of them: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. But you need the other factors of the path as well. Altogether they're the Buddha's medicine cabinet.

So as long as you know that you're subject to illnesses and that you've got one of these underlying continual diseases, like people who have a continual low-level inflammation in their bodies—the mind has a continuing level of delusion: You've got to watch out for that. But you do your best to chip away at it bit by bit by bit, listening to other people, using your own appropriate attention to see where there's still stress and what's coming along with it.

The combination of your own developing skill and the lessons you can learn

from outside: These'll help you to be a good doctor.

So even though the body may still have diseases, the mind doesn't have to be diseased.

That, as the Buddha pointed out, is true health.