

Antidotes

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It's a common complaint you hear among meditators—the question, “I've been meditating all this time, and I still have a problem with anger,” or “I still have a problem with the lust”—or fear, or greed, or jealousy, whatever the unskillful emotion is. The expectation seems to be that sitting and meditating is going to take care of everything else. But you have to remember that the concentration, the mindfulness, the alertness you develop as a meditator: All of these things are tools. If you don't actually use the tool, you're not going to get any results. You can put the tool on the cushion or in a nice little display box, but unless you take it off of the cushion or out of the display box and put it to use, it's as if you didn't have the tool at all. So you can't expect that x number of hours of sitting here with your eyes closed—very concentrated, very mindful—will automatically make a difference in how you deal with emotions as they arise in the course of the day. You have to develop your discernment by learning how to *use* the concentration and the mindfulness and the alertness.

Discernment is not automatic. It's not the case that once the mind gets very clear, all these wonderful insights will suddenly come springing up that you can trust 100%. After all, some of the worst delusions that meditators suffer from come from a concentrated mind. Ajaan Fuang had a number of students who became quite psychic through their meditation. In some cases, the more psychic they were, the more they were impressed by how accurate their intuitions were. But then when mistaken intuitions came up, they wouldn't recognize them. They wouldn't admit they were wrong. Major delusion.

He had one student in particular, I remember, who had extremely strong powers of concentration. She would come to him and complain that she still had anger, she still had other problems. Why wasn't the concentration taking care of them? And was because the concentration on its own is not enough to dig these things out. It just gets the mind calm enough so that you can see—if you're willing to see. And it gives you a foundation that you can use to take things apart, to analyze things, to understand why it is that the mind gets overturned by these things.

You can do this on many levels. One typical level is that if you're going into a certain type of situation that you know is going to create difficulties, you have to prepare yourself. Say you're going home for the holidays: You know what the family can be like. Well, it's good to sit down and plan: So-and-so tends to say

this, or so-and-so tends to push these buttons, and in the past you've reacted. How can you think about the situation, and how can you prepare for the situation so that you don't react in those unskillful ways?

This comes under the aspect of right effort that's called preventing unskillful qualities from arising—i.e., you know they have a tendency to arise, so sit down and think about them. This is a legitimate use of the end of your meditation. If you've been sitting for an hour, give yourself some extra time at the end of the hour to think about these things and plan. Run some scenarios through your mind. In other words, you have to get to know what are your trigger points, and how you've responded unskillfully to those trigger points in the past. Try running a few alternatives through the mind, and see how the mind responds.

Sometimes it'll go with the alternative, and other times it'll come up with a complaint or an objection. You have to ask yourself: "Is the objection legitimate?" Because one of the most important things about being a good meditator is to learn how to be a little bit skeptical about what the mind is telling you. In other words, you test your proposal, and then you test the objections. It's not that you immediately go with one or with the other.

That's one of the reasons why we train the mind to be with the breath—so that it can sit there and not take sides prematurely. Just as when you sit here and a thought comes into the mind you learn not to run with it, you've got to learn to use this skill in other areas, other parts of your life, where things are more rushed, where there's a lot more going on. If you forget the skills you've developed here, you're going to get into trouble. So spend a little time running these things through your mind, getting prepared.

The same principle applies to more subtle affairs in the mind as well. Last night someone noted, "There are these schools of Buddhist thought that say you have to learn to perceive the world in certain terms before you can truly be awakened. You have to have a perception of how empty everything is, you have to understand emptiness, or you have to have an understanding of not-self. Or to learn how to see things in terms of ultimate realities. And then once you get the correct perception, that's going to take care of everything."

Fortunately, the Buddha wasn't as one-eyed as that. He realized that the human mind has many ways of feeding. It's like that story in the Canon of when the daughters of Mara come to test the Buddha. They say among themselves, "Men have many different tastes in women. Let's try all different kinds to see what will attract him." And so they run through lots of different guises, and they're unable to catch the Buddha with any of them. And that's just lust. The mind feeds on anger in many different ways, too. The mind feeds on fear, it feeds on worry in

many different ways, and you've got to learn how to know your feeding habits. Why do you react in certain ways? What is it about that reaction that you enjoy?

The Buddha gives an example for when you're analyzing your attachment to concentration. This is a fairly advanced stage, but the principle applies all across the board. You look at the state of concentration and learn how to see it as aggregates. Then look at the aggregates as inconstant, stressful, not-self, a cancer, a dart, a dissolution—all kinds of different ways of driving the point home that these are not things you want to stay attached to. Some people will respond to the inconstancy. Some people respond more to the not-selfishness. Some people respond more to the idea that the aggregates are a wound or a disease.

There's another place where he says you should learn to see the aggregates as murderous. They're chewing you up. There's a memorable story of a man wanting to kill a king, so he gets into the king's service and becomes a reliable servant of the king. And then one day, when he finally catches the king one-on-one, he kills him. As the Buddha said, the man was actually the king's murderer even before he got into the king's service. Every day when he was getting up before the king and going back to sleep after the king and doing everything the king told him, the man was still the king's murderer, because that was his plan. The Buddha then said it's the same with the aggregates. Right now you can use them: Your body is very helpful. When you want to get up, it'll get up; when you want to eat, it'll eat; if you want to do work of different kinds, it'll do it for you. But it won't always do that. Someday these aggregates will turn on you. They're already your murderers.

There's a phrase in Thai, *taai-jai*, which means that you trust something so much that all your skepticism dies. That's the way we are with many things in life, and the Buddha has to remind you to remind yourself these things are not totally dependable.

So there are many possible angles by which you may suddenly decide that these things that you've been feeding on are not worth it after all and you lose your taste for them. You know that concentration is there to give you something better to feed on, but this is not always obvious to the mind. Most of us say: "Well, we can do the concentration and the mindfulness at one time, and then we can have our other pleasures at another time. What's the problem with that?" The problem is that those other pleasures are going to turn on you sometime. And where are you going to go then? If your concentration hasn't been fully developed, you're going to be lost. So you do have to reflect on the advantages of the pleasure of concentration, the advantages of the sense of stability and clarity that come with the concentration.

So when you're dealing with lust or anger or fear, learn how to observe the whole process: the object, say, of the lust, and also the actual sensation of the lust in the mind: what it's doing to you; the object of the anger, and what the anger is doing to you. Try to look for where you get your pleasure out of these things and why you enjoy feeding on the pleasure. Then try to develop whatever perceptions are necessary to help remind you that, okay, this may seem reliable but it's not really reliable. It may seem pleasant but it's not really pleasant. It may seem something that you have under your control but it could go totally out your control. It may seem healthy but it's a disease.

That's one of the mind's big arguments: that the real disease lies in not giving in to lust or anger. "This is just the way a healthy mind has to function," it says. "If it's not allowed to give into its passions, it's going to get all messed up." Like those monks and nuns in that old Ken Russell film, *The Devils*. The nuns were going around with their heads at a 90° angle, they were so distorted by their lack of sex. You walk into the movie and you realize: "Oh, this is what that movie is going to be about. The heads are not going to stand straight up until they've had sex." I walked out of the movie and said: "I don't need to see a movie about that." But there is that aspect in our society that says if you don't give in to your passions, you're going to get all distorted and crooked. You have to say: "Well, wait a minute. Killing, cheating, stealing, anger: These are the things that are crooked in the mind. These are diseases, these are wounds in the mind." So in every case, you have to develop a perception that's an antidote focused right in on the area where you like to feed on a particular emotion, a particular way of behaving, to show you that it's not what you thought it was, that it's not worth it.

Sometimes you hear it said that we latch onto things because we have a sense that they have a permanent essence, that there's some inherent existence in that thing. Well, that's *one* reason why we latch onto some things: We think that it's permanent enough, that it's going to be lasting enough, it's going to be worth whatever effort is needed to put into it because it'll last long enough. But that's only one reason why we are attached to things. The ultimate underlying principal all across the board is that we think that whatever pleasure we get out of something is going to be worth the effort that we put into it. Some things we know are not going to last forever, but still we say: "It's going to last long enough for me, and I'm going to get enough pleasure out of it."

So you have to learn how to analyze your tastes in things to see why you're attracted to something, and then use whatever perceptions the Buddha applies, or whatever perceptions you can think up on your own, that will counteract your initial perception and show that you weren't really getting out of it what you

thought you were. The satisfaction you were going to derive from this is going to turn on you at some point, and you'll end up worse than you would have been otherwise. And whether you're focusing on the not-selfishness, or the pain, or the wounded side, or the diseased side, or the emptiness side, or whatever that's an effective antidote for your particular attachment: Those are the perceptions you have to develop. You learn how to read your defilements—and the more clearly you understand them, the more effectively you'll be able to counteract them.

The concentration and alertness and mindfulness are here to help you with that project. But you have to put them specifically to use to get their full benefits.