

Medicine – Timely & Timeless

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The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor. And the Dhamma was his medicine. When we think about this analogy, it's important to remind ourselves that the Buddha was not a doctor in a modern hospital. You didn't go to him for a shot. He was a traditional doctor, and traditional medicine is a lot more strategic than modern medicine is. The Canon gives us a picture of Jivaka, the Buddha's own personal physician, telling how he became an expert doctor, and it gives us a good idea of the kind of doctor the Buddha had in mind. Even though part of Jivaka's knowledge covered the medicinal uses of every plant he encountered, that wasn't the entirety of his skill. A lot of his expertise lay in his strategies: how to deal with difficult patients, how to treat difficult diseases.

So when the Buddha was saying he was a doctor, he was saying that he was very strategic. When he spoke, it wasn't just a question of saying what's true. That was just the first question he'd ask before deciding to say something: Is it true? He also made sure that what he'd say was beneficial, and that it was timely. In other words, his words were designed to have a specific effect, taking the circumstances into consideration to see if this was the right time and the right place to say that particular truth to get the desired effect.

This is why when Anathapindika—who was a stream-enterer and would seem to be qualified to know—was asked what kind of views the Buddha had, said, "I don't know entirely what views the Buddha has." This was because he realized that when the Buddha taught, he taught strategically. His words didn't necessarily encompass the entirety of his views. So when you read that the Buddha saw the world in this way, or he thought this, he thought that, you have to ask yourself, "To whom was he saying that, in what situation, under what conditions?" Because as a doctor he had to be strategic.

If you've ever had traditional medicinal treatments, you know that they're a lot more varied and strategic than what you'd get in most modern medicine. I've known a couple of cases where a traditional doctor would treat one disease by actually inducing another disease. Once the first disease had been turned into the second disease, then he could knock off the second disease. What this means is that sometimes you take a particular medicine to induce new symptoms, and then at a certain point in the treatment you have to drop that medicine and take up something else to treat the new symptoms. Some medicines you might take all the way through the treatment. But with others, once the medicine has to be changed, you can't touch the first medicine. Or in the course of taking the first medicine, you can't yet touch the second one.

So when you look at the Buddha's teachings, you have to ask yourself: Which of the teachings apply across the board and which are designed for a particular stage in the practice? For example, the Buddha makes heavy use of perceptions. He says that we suffer because of our misperceptions of things, seeing constancy in what's inconstant, pleasure in what's painful, self in what's not-self, and attractiveness in what's really unattractive. But he doesn't then just go and say,

“Simply turn your perceptions around and that’s that. The problem is solved.” That’s not how it works. The solution is more indirect.

Before you take up the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress and not-self, he has you develop other perceptions first—in particular the perceptions that lead the mind to concentration. While you’re here practicing concentration, focus in on your breath. What keeps you with the breath? A perception, a mental label that says “breath.” And a lot of the concentration practice is learning how to gain a perception of breath that you can hold in mind for long periods of time with a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing. You test different perceptions of the breath to see which ones hold—in other words, which ones you can stick with.

This would seem to go against the perception of inconstancy, and it does. You’re actually looking for a perception you can hold onto as constant. You want to see the breath as something consistent and pleasant you can stay with. For example, if you see the in-breath and the out-breath as two radically different things, it’s going to be hard to stay with them comfortably because you have to keep switching back and forth between the two perceptions. But if you see the breath energy as something present in the body all the time, try to hold that perception in mind. You’ll come to sense the breathing process in a different way. The breath is always there, it’s just a matter of letting the in-breath meld with what’s already there. Then you check to see whether “what’s there” is getting pumped in too full or squeezed out too much.

When you see breath energy in a constant way, it’s a lot easier to adjust the breath in a way that feels right, feels healthy, feels nourishing. You can gain a sense of fullness without feeling stuffed. When you breathe out, you can begin to sense the point where you’ve breathed out too much: You’re squeezing the breath energy, depleting yourself of breath energy in ways you don’t need to.

For the time being, you simply want to hold onto that perception of the breath as constant and pleasant, something you can gain some control over. Use the three perceptions only when you find the mind being pulled away from the breath to other things. You look at the happiness, the pleasure that comes from chasing after those other things, and you learn to see it as less constant than the pleasure that comes in staying with the breath: more stressful, less under your control.

So at this stage in treating your illness, your primary focus is on constancy, on seeing the breath as always there. Ajaan Lee says that you want to see what’s constant in what’s inconstant. If you see everything as inconstant, he says, you’re missing some important aspects of the training. The example he gives is symbolic: Your lower lip has never turned into your upper lip. That’s something constant about your lower lip. Your eye has never turned into an ear. That’s something constant about your eye. In the same way, there are some aspects of the breath energy in the body that really are constant. As long as you’re alive, there will be breath energy in the body.

And you can learn to use that fact to your advantage. Just stick with that perception of breath and see how the underlying breath energy in the body goes through small fluctuations. You hold onto the idea that breath is constantly there, simply that it’s sometimes stuffed in too full, sometimes squeezed out until it’s too depleted. But you can learn to adjust the rate of your in-breath and out-breath, to see the in-ness and the out-ness as secondary and the presence of breath energy in the body as primary, the given you hold onto.

That's how you use perception at this stage in the game. When your concentration is solid enough, then you can start using the three perceptions to take the concentration itself apart. But until you've reached that stage, you don't want to think in those terms. If you start out with three perceptions and try to use them as your medicine to treat everything that comes along, it's very hard to get the mind into concentration.

So realize that there are stages in this treatment. Your mind is sick. What's it sick with? Greed, anger, and delusion. And this is the treatment. It has its different stages. You try to get as constant and easeful and controlled a state of mind as you can. You're actually fighting against those three perceptions. But it's only when you fight against a truth that you know how true it is, how far it's true, and where its limitations are.

So remind yourself that you're engaged in a strategy here. Don't try to jump the gun, wanting to go straight to the three perceptions to get everything done with so you can get on with your life. The practice has its rhythms, just as the treatment of a disease has its rhythms. Sometimes you might want to ask the doctor ahead of time, "How many months do I have to stay in this stage of the treatment before I switch it around?" He'll probably say, "Well, it really depends on how long the body takes to respond." And it's the same with concentration practice. How many years does it take? Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Don't ask. Just do what needs to be done." When the mind gets ripe, whether it's fast or slow, the important thing is that it's ripe—ripe for insight, ripe for other stages of using perception.

In the meantime, don't try to second-guess the Buddha. If this is your stage of treatment, stick with it. Trust that the Buddha was an expert doctor. There are a lot of paradoxes in his strategies, but the strategies have worked for more than 2,500 years. They deal with elements that are universal in all people's minds regardless of where you come from, what age you live in. That's why the Buddha said the Dhamma is timeless. It's not something that was true only in the time of the Buddha. It's true across time. The time-sensitive part is simply which stage you're in, in the treatment of your disease. So try to apply the Buddha's teachings in a timely way. That's how you'll finally get to the ultimate timelessness that the whole training is aimed at: total freedom from disease.