

Truth as Medicine

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The Buddha treated truth as if it were medicine. In other words, there are lots of truths out there, just as there are lots of medicines, and the question is, “Which ones are really useful?” The Buddha focused on truths that are useful for putting an end to suffering, an end to stress. He wasn’t interested in truth in the abstract, or about the true nature of things out there, for its own sake. He was more interested in, “What affect does a particular truth have on the mind?” Because there are some truths that are helpful, others that are actually harmful, and even the useful ones have their time and place.

This is his basic principle in right speech and it applies to the way he taught. He would speak only about things that were true and useful. And then as to whether the truths were welcome or not, he would try to find the right time and right place. Because even truths that are welcome are not necessarily the good things to teach at certain times.

So when we look at his teachings, we have to realize that he’s not around here to tell us what’s precisely right for us right now. For that, we need to learn to use our discernment. The doctor’s not here, but his medicine is here. And so it’s up to us to figure out which medicines are right for us right here right now, as we practice.

So as you approach every aspect of the practice—reading, listening, meditating—treat it all as potentially medicine. Certain medicines, even though they’re medicines, could kill you, because they’re not right for you right now. And there are other medicines that are just right for whatever your illness is, but they may be hard to take.

Learn to look at your own thoughts in the same way, because everything you know about the Buddha’s teachings is filtered through your own point of view, your own way of thinking. You’ve got to look at your own point of view and your own way of thinking to see where it’s helpful, where it’s harmful.

As we often discover in life, the things that people can do to us from the outside are often much less harmful than the things we do to ourselves from the inside: the ideas we hold onto, the attitudes we have, the things we do to other people. Those can cause us a lot of harm. And sometimes it can take a long time to heal ourselves from that damage.

So, remember the Buddha didn’t condemn thinking. He just said there’s thinking that’s harmful and thinking that’s helpful. Learn to focus your thinking on the aspects of truth that are really helpful right now.

You could focus on all kinds of things that would make you depressed and make you discouraged in the practice. They may be perfectly true but they’re not right for you right here, right now. Those particular truths are not useful truths. They’re not worth talking about, not worth thinking about. Think instead about the things that are actually healing.

With a lot of truths about things outside, you never really know. For instance, there's that whole issue: Does the world really exist outside the information we get through our senses? That's one of those issues the Buddha said, "Don't go there."

What we *can* know though is what we directly experience in terms of suffering and stress. Ideally, you know when the mind is suffering, you can tell when it's not. Yet even that we tend to cover up because we're interested in other things. But if you focus on this issue, after a while you begin to get more and more sensitive to when the mind is actually causing itself suffering and when it's not.

Look for the type of thinking, the types of attitudes, the types of practices that help relieve the suffering, and let go of the ones that don't.

And you'll find, of course, that sometimes a particular medicine may be good for you today, but you don't need it tomorrow. And it may actually be harmful for you on the next day. So you have to learn to read the principle of cause and effect as it appears in your mind.

This is why it's so important to get the mind to come to stillness, because once the mind is still then it can see these things more clearly—see the connections between cause and effect, and see which causes are harmful. This is where you learn to become your own doctor.

But that basic attitude as a doctor: You look at the various truths, the things you know that you really believe in, and say, "Okay, this is a kind of medicine but is this a good medicine for me right now?"

It's like doctors in the old days. They'd go into the forest, and all the trees and all the bushes, their leaves, their roots, whatever, would have different medicinal purposes. But you can't believe that just because they're natural they're always good for you. Some natural things can kill you. Some natural things are helpful but you need to take a lot of them over a long period of time.

So learn to use your discernment. Even with things that you know are true, you're 100% convinced that this is absolutely true, you've got to hold onto this principle—that it may not be the right medicine for the mind at that particular time. You've got to learn how to put it aside and look at it from that perspective: Learn to see yourself as a doctor, and you're learning about medicine.

Some medicines, as the Buddha said, are always good. Mindfulness is always good. When he talks about mindfulness on its own, he usually means mindfulness coupled with alertness. He said it regarding mindfulness as a factor of awakening—he was talking basically about the four establishments of mindfulness—and that's not just the ability to keep things in mind. It also includes having a sense of what's skillful, what's not skillful, watching what you're doing to see what the results are, and then being very earnest in doing what's skillful and not doing anything that's unskillful.

That basic attitude is useful all the time. It requires mindfulness, alertness, and a sense of ardency in what you do. Then as you apply it—either to your body, feelings, mind states, and

mental qualities—you get more and more sensitive to what really is good medicine for yourself right now, and what's either ineffective or actually harmful. You learn to read yourself better so that you know what's the right time and place for a particular medicine.

Some medicines take a long time, and we get impatient. We want a quick shot. But sometimes your disease is like a rash. You have to put a cream on and you have to put the cream on it again, day after day after day after day, and the cream has to soak into your skin and stay there before it's going to show any benefit. If you put the cream on and then wipe it off, it's not going to do anything for you. And you can't say "Well, this cream doesn't work or I'm not going to be able to cure the rash with this cream." You didn't give the cream enough time.

And as for the shots, they can be pretty dangerous. Some shots really will cure your disease right away, but there are others that can kill you.

So learn to look at everything as medicine.

The texts tell about Jivaka, the Buddha's doctor. He studied for seven years under his teacher, and then he began to wonder: When was the end to this course of study ever going to come?

So he asked the teacher, and the teacher said, "Take a pair of scissors and a basket, and go around Takkasila"—that's where he was studying—"and if you find any plants that are not medicine, bring them back."

So Jivaka went around Takkasila—a radius one league around the city, which is quite a huge area—and came back and said, "There was nothing that's not medicine." And his teacher said, "Okay, now you're ready to be a doctor." Jivaka could see the medicinal value in everything.

That's the way you've got to look at truths. Anything you think you know may be true, may be 100% proven, but the question is, "Is it right for right now?"

You have to look at the truths for their usefulness, and for their usefulness in terms of what's the right time and place for these particular truths.

When you can step back from your beliefs to that extent, then you're in a much better position to gain liberation, because you can use the truths when they're useful and put them aside when they're not. And the mind will benefit.

And the truths may be unwelcome or they may be welcome. Even with welcome truths, you have to be careful, because they're not necessarily good for you all the time. There are times when compassion is called for, there are other times when equanimity is called for. Everyone likes the compassionate response but there are other times when you have to step back and learn some pretty harsh truths.

So as you practice, think of yourself as a student doctor. You're trying to see the medicinal value of everything around you. When you learn to look at all of your experiences and all of your actions as potentially medicine, then you get a much better sense of what's the right thing to do, what's the right thing to say, what's the right thing to think, what's the right thing to

meditate on, and what's the right time to do all this.

Always keep in mind the fact that the mind is diseased, and the diseases come from the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act. That doesn't mean you should stop thinking and stop speaking and stop acting. It means simply that you have to learn how to think and speak and act in ways that are medicinal, that help cure the mind.

And don't be too impatient to get the results. After all, we've been harming the mind for how many years, how many lifetimes? When the time comes to turn around and heal the mind, it's not going to take just three days.

Remember: This is the only way the mind is going to be healed. If it's been harmed by your own actions, then you can't hope for somebody else to come in and undo the harm. You can learn through watching other people's actions and watching the results, as well as your own actions and *their* results, to learn to be a better doctor for yourself, reminding yourself all the time that that's basically your role now as a meditator: You've got to learn to be your own doctor.

You can learn from watching how other people cure their diseases. And you can learn from reading the books, listening to the Dhamma, a lot of good general principles. But the time will come when you have to learn how to apply this to your own mind.

This relates to old-fashioned medicine as well. The doctor in those old days wouldn't give you a shot. He'd say, "Okay, these are the leaves and the roots or whatever that you have to take as medicine." Then you'd go out and find them for yourself, make them into your own medicine.

In other words, you have to play part of the role of doctor as well. You can't expect pre-packaged pills that are going to come in and make your life wonderful. That's because you have to treat the disease at its cause. The cause is in your own actions, so you learn how to train your actions in another direction. And with time, as you become a more skilled doctor, the disease goes away.