

Dhamma Medicine

July 23, 2017

The practice of meditation is medicine for the mind. It cures our diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion. In fact, the practice as a whole is medicine. The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor, and to get the full implications of that image, you have to think about what old-fashioned medicine was like. To begin with, the doctor didn't give you a shot. The doctor would tell you the medicine you needed to take, and you would go out and find it. If you had to boil it, you'd boil it. If you had to chop it up, you'd chop it up. You were the one responsible for making the medicine and taking it.

In the same way when you practice, you're the one who's responsible. The Buddha tells you what works—what's good for the mind, what's bad for the mind—but it's up to you to follow the instructions. The path he lays out is very similar to the three kinds of treatment you get when you go to, say, a traditional Thai doctor. First, the doctor will warn you about the things that are bad for the disease, things that aggravate the disease—the kinds of food, the kinds of activities you have to stay away from. Then, depending on the nature of the disease, he'll either give you a tonic medicine or a detox. A tonic medicine is to strengthen you, to give you energy. The detox is to get rid of all the germs and other bad things inside the body.

The Buddha's course of treatment has the same three parts. The precepts basically tell you the things that aggravate your condition: killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. These are all things you have to stay away from, because otherwise the disease will flare up.

Concentration, which is what we're doing right now, is the tonic. It provides nourishment and strength for the mind. There a lot of things the mind wants to do but you know are wrong. If the mind isn't strong, it's very easy to give in. You feel weak in the face of your temptations. So the purpose of the concentration is to strengthen you. Find a way of breathing that feels really good, that's relaxing to the body if you're feeling tense, that's energizing if you're feeling weak or tired. Allow the mind to settle in one hundred percent.

When they talk about effort that's just right, they warn you against effort that's too strong, effort that's too weak, but that doesn't mean you put in just a middling effort. You put in the effort that's appropriate for what needs to be done. Also, you focus your efforts on the causes. The problem too often with our effort is that we're focused on the results. We think, "I want this, I want this, I

want this,” but we don’t stop to think about what’s going to be needed in order to get what we want. We put all our energy in trying to clone what we want without looking after the real causes. If you look after the causes, the results will have to come. The more energy you put into the causes, the stronger the results will be. That’s one case where you can give yourself one hundred percent to the causes.

Our causes here are mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. When the Buddha describes the establishing of mindfulness, he’s basically telling you how to get the mind into concentration. He says to *focus on the body in and of itself*: for example, the breath in and of itself. In other words, you don’t think about it in relationship to anything else, just the fact that you’ve got the sensation of breathing right now. *Ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.* You’ve got two activities there. One is the focus, and then the other is the putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That second activity is basically clearing away anything that’s going to interfere with your focus.

Then there are three qualities of mind that help both with the focus and with the clearing away. You’re ardent, alert, mindful. Ardent—you want to do this well. You’re alert to what’s actually going on, what you’re actually doing, and you’re mindful to keep in mind the lessons you’ve learned from the past as to what works, what doesn’t work, and also to recognize when something comes up: Is this a friend or a foe?

If you keep working at these activities and keep developing these three qualities of mind, the mind will have to settle down. The more energy you put into that, the more you’re going to be rewarded. That’s a case where you can put in one hundred percent energy and the results come back one hundred percent. The mind feels energized, strengthened, and nourished, because one of the lessons you remember from the past is that if the breath is comfortable, it’s going to be a good place to stay. If it’s not comfortable, it’s going to be like keeping a balloon under water. As long as your grip is good, it’ll stay under water, but as soon as your grip loosens a little bit, it’ll come popping up. If the mind is being forced to stay with something it doesn’t like, it’s not going to stay. It’ll stay for a little bit as long as you’re holding on to it really tight, but as soon as your mindfulness begins to slip or your alertness begins to slip, it’ll be gone.

So remember: What kind of breathing feels good? Where in the body is the comfortable spot where you like to stay? These are lessons you can learn in the meditation. It’s not the case that every moment is a totally fresh, unprecedented moment. The mind has its habits. The longer you sit with it, the more you’re going to get to see its habits, and as you use your ingenuity in dealing with its bad habits, you begin to pick up a useful body of knowledge—what works, what doesn’t

work. That's how mindfulness helps you. It also gives you protection. You're not totally left alone in the present moment without any guidance from the past.

So you adjust the breath for a while. See if it feels good. If it doesn't feel good, you can adjust it a little bit more and then sit with it for a while and see if *that* feels good. Keep this up until you find a way of breathing that you can settle into—where you feel at ease, feel comfortable, feel strong. It's the ability of the mind to stay with that one object, to feel united with its object with no temptation to slip off: That's what gives it strength. It's this ability to rest with the breath and not have to move that nourishes the mind. Every time it jumps around, it's using up energy. Its real happiness is when it can be with something and stay there for long periods of time. So that's the tonic for the mind.

Finally, there's the detox. That's discernment, when you realize that you've got greed, aversion, and delusion, you've got other unskillful qualities in the mind, that tend to take over. They make it so that you can't see things clearly, you can't hear things clearly. Your vision and your sense of hearing, smell, taste, your sense of your body all get colored by unskillful mindsets. You've got to learn how to wash them out.

The Buddha's medicine here has five steps. One is that you want to learn to see: When do these things arise? And when they arise, what *makes* them arise? All too often, we're aware of them only when they're in the mind in full-grown or full-blown states, but you want to be able to check when is the first time that, say, a little thought of greed moves into the mind and plants a little germ and then slips off. It comes in again, tries a little bit more, slips off again, until finally it's planted enough seeds that suddenly the mind is overcome with weeds. That's usually when you're aware that this mind state is there in the mind. You want to be able to detect it more quickly than that. This is one of the reasons why concentration is an important basis for discernment. When the mind is really still, it can see little movements a lot more clearly.

When you see these things coming, you also want to be able to see them going. That's the second step. The lesson here is that these mind states are often not as solid as we tend to think they are. Say you're angry, and the breath gets stirred up. Then the thought of anger goes away, but the physical side effects or symptoms of the anger are still there. You can then use those symptoms to convince yourself that the anger is still there, too, so you dig it up again. But if you can learn how to distinguish the anger from the physical side effects, you begin to see how these things come and how they go, and they're not nearly as powerful, they don't have to be as powerful, as we make them.

The next step, when you see something like that coming, is to see: What's the allure? Why do you go with it? You want to see what causes it and also what makes you decide that this is something you really want to run with. Why do you like it? There are a lot of mind states we have that we don't like on an official level, but someplace down inside the mind is part of you that does like it. For example, sometimes we don't like our anger, but there's a part of the mind that really does get some kicks out of anger. The same with greed, the same with lust, the same with jealousy: They have their appeal.

You want to see what that appeal is, because the next step is to compare that with the drawbacks. What are the results of going with that mind state? You can focus on the drawbacks as much as you like, but if you don't really see the appeal, really see the allure, you're not going to be able to dig these things out, because what you want to do is develop a sense of dispassion for the allure. That's the fifth step. In other words, you have to compare the drawbacks and the allure and see it's not worth it.

That's a lot of what constitutes discernment right there. It's a value judgment, seeing that you've been putting your energy into things that are not really worth the energy. And as I said, it requires that you be really honest with yourself about what the appeal is. There are certain things we don't like about ourselves but we're also very dishonest with ourselves about why part of us does like it. That's the part we have to overcome. Getting the mind into concentration helps because it gives you a sense of well-being where you can sit back and look at these things with a little bit more objectivity and not feel so threatened by the discoveries that you're going to come up with. It also gives you the strength to keep on looking for the drawbacks of things you really like until you can convince yourself that they're not really worth it. Whatever little bit of pleasure you got out of them is not really worth it in the long term. That's the Buddha's detox.

So what we have here is a complete course of treatment for the diseases of the mind: a list of things to avoid that aggravate the disease, tonics to strengthen you so that you can develop a resistance to the disease, and then detox to flush out the things in the mind that are causing trouble. If you take the complete course of treatment, you'll find that it gives a complete cure. The ways the mind used to create trouble for itself: You begin to step back from them and see that they're not worth it, you don't need them, and you have no nostalgia for them anymore. They've lost their appeal. When the mind can't be tempted by greed, aversion, or delusion, that's when it's cured.

These things are called defilements. A lot of us don't like hearing the idea that our minds are defiled, but when the mind has gotten away from these things, then

you realize how much clarity the mind can have, how much brighter it is when these things weaken. At that point, you're glad you're not siding with them, that you've learned how to pull yourself out from under their power. You've got the strength of the mind that doesn't have to be anybody's slave. That's when you're truly healthy.