

A Doctor's Strategies

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The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor offering a cure for the sufferings of the heart. But he was a traditional doctor. Back in the old days, they didn't have injections. You'd go to a doctor, and he would recommend that you go get the leaves of a certain tree, or the roots of a certain plant. Then he would tell you how to turn it into a medicine. Then you'd go and you'd do it yourself. In other words, a lot of the work for the cure was up to you. And it's the same with the path.

There is a famous statement where the Buddha says he simply points the way. It's up to you to follow the path—which means that you have to train yourself to be your own doctor, learning how to read the symptoms of the mind.

There's so much Dhamma out there. Even just the Pali Canon is 45 volumes, thousands of suttas. So how do you know which medicine to take? Fortunately, there are a lot of short statements of the path, like the sutta we chanted just now on the noble eightfold path: different medicines for the mind. And in the beginning, it's best to focus your attention on the shortest, simplest statements. Gradually, you begin to learn how to read your own mind and see what it needs, realizing like any good doctor that sometimes you have to use strategies.

For instance, with the breath: You want the mind to stay with the breath so that it can settle down. You're not here to get the breath. You're here to get the mind. So you want the breath to be comfortable. Now, some people say that when you're making the breath comfortable, you're giving in to your defilements, your desires. Well, the mind needs a sense of comfort in order to stay. That's part of the strategy of the doctor.

If you want to learn about the Buddha's attitude towards doctors, it's good to read about the story of Jivaka, who was the Buddha's own personal physician. They tell us his story in the Vinaya. It's a long story about how he was born the son of a courtesan. She found herself pregnant, so she sent out word that she was sick for a while, and she didn't want to receive visitors. She figured that if she gave birth, if it was a girl she'd keep it and train the girl to be a courtesan, too. But it turned out to be a boy. So she had him taken out in a basket and put on the garbage heap. Just opposite of what they might do in China these days. It was the boy who got thrown away.

A prince comes along and sees the baby lying on the garbage heap, so he takes him back to the palace, raises him there, names him Jivaka, which means "one

who is alive,” from having survived being set out, disposed on the garbage heap. As Jivaka grows older and realizes that he’s not really a member of royal family, he figures, “I’ve got to learn a skill.” So he goes off and learns how to be a doctor. On the way back from his studies, he treats various people. He does such a good job that he comes back with lots of wealth, which he offers to the king. The king said, “You can keep your wealth but stay on here as my doctor.” Eventually he becomes the Buddha’s doctor.

One of the people he treats on the way back is a millionaire who’s got horrendous headaches. Doctors have come and looked at him, and some said he was going to live only two more days. Others say, “Well, he is going to live five more days. But there’s no way to treat him.”

Jivaka comes and says, “There is a way to treat you, but it’s going to involve surgery.” They had brain surgery back in those days. “And after the surgery, you’re going to have to lie on your back for a month. You wouldn’t be allowed to move.” And Jivaka adds, “If I cure you, what will you give me?” The man says, “I’m willing to be your slave and you can have all my possessions.” He has become that desperate.

So Jivaka straps him down, bores a hole in his skull, and pulls out two worms. Apparently a lot of people have come to watch this brain surgery. So he shows the worms to the gathered public, and says, “You see this one worm here? This is the one that those doctors saw who said that he is going to live only two more days. The worm is going to eat out his brain. This other worm over here, this is the one seen by those who said he was going to live five more days.”

So he patches up the wound, and says, “Now lie here for a month on your back. Don’t move.” At the end of a week, the millionaire says, “I’m going to die if I can’t move.” Jivaka says, “Hey, you gave me your word you’d stay here for a month.” The man says, “I know I gave my word but I’m going to die if I can’t move.” So Jivaka says, “Okay, turn over on the right. But you’ve got to stay here for a whole month on your right side.”

So a week after that, the man says, “Look I’m going to die if I can’t move.” Same story. Jivaka finally says, “Okay, turn over in the left. But again, you’ve got to lie here for a whole month without moving.” So at the end of a week, the man says, “I’ve got to move. I’m going to die if I don’t move.” And Jivaka says, “You’re cured. Get up. If I had told you only had to lie here one week on each side, you wouldn’t have made it for one week.” He was a strategic doctor. He knew that curing a patient required not only medical skills, but also psychological skills.

And it’s the same with the meditation. You need to psych yourself out, learn how to read your mind and think strategically.

We focus on the breath not because breath is awakening, but because it's a means to get us there. We use our desire for comfort. We use all kinds of things that eventually we're going to have to let go. But if you make a show of letting go before you've got the mind in a position where it really can see things clearly, it's like that simile of the raft. You get on the raft going over to the shore. People say, "Well, you know that story about the raft. Once you get to the other shore, you've got to let go of the raft." So before you've gotten anywhere, you let go of the raft to make a show of the fact that you're not clinging. What happens? You get washed down the river.

So if the mind likes comfort, give it comfort with the breath. If the mind is restless, even though you know you want it to settle down, sometimes you've got to give it things to think about. Try to figure out what it's restless about. If you're feeling down on yourself, think about your generosity, the things you've given to other people in the past when you didn't have to. Think about your own virtue, the times when you did the right thing even though it was hard. These are in the traditional list of what they call recollections—meditation as thinking.

Because, the Buddha points out, there are times when you focus on the breath or on feelings or on just the state of the mind and you can't settle down. So you need techniques that assist you, things that you can think about to get the mind in the right mood to settle down. These recollections are useful for just that purpose. The times you're feeling doubtful about the path, think about the Buddha, the kind of person he was. Imagine a politician nowadays with a bright future ahead of him suddenly disappearing, going off into the forest because he realizes that politics isn't where it's at. After he finds the truth, he comes out. He teaches it to people. He doesn't ask any money, he doesn't ask anything from them. He goes for alms in the morning, and that was enough for him. That kind of person is really hard to find.

But that's the sort of person the Buddha was. He kept on teaching from age 35 to age 80. He walked all over India, even on the very last day of his life. He was suffering from dysentery, but he knew there was one more person he had to teach. So he walked for many miles until he reached the spot where he was going to lie down and die. Even as he was lying there, the last person came. And the Buddha taught him. That sort of person is hard to find.

And the Dhamma he taught wasn't a Dhamma that was designed to sell. He simply told the truth as he discovered it—what worked to free the mind from suffering, what worked to take it beyond just the end of suffering. Because with the end of suffering, there also comes a realization of the Deathless. So that's the kind of teacher we have here. That's the kind of Dhamma we're practicing.

And we have the Sangha, all these people, all over the centuries, who practiced this Dhamma and found the same purity of mind, the same release from suffering. You can read their stories in what are called the Verses of the Elder Monks, the Verses of the Elder Nuns. A lot of them went through a lot of trouble—a lot worse off than any of us are right now—and yet they were able to find that truth, find that peace, find that freedom.

So these are some of the things you can think about when the mind is unwilling to settle down.

Or if the mind has a particular problem, you can sit there and watch it. When the mind is sleepy, what is sleepiness? How much of it is physical, how much of it is mental? You can pose that question in your mind. When the mind complains of being bored, try to take the boredom apart. Is there a physical side to boredom? What are the assumptions of boredom? Usually you're bored because you're not paying careful attention to what's going on. There are many layers of mental activity going on in the present moment, many layers of physical sensation in the body. Here's your chance to watch the mind in action, to watch your body in action. And you're bored. You're not paying attention. Or you may be bored because there's something else you want to think about. Ask yourself, what is that thing you want to think about? Is it really worthwhile?

See what sort of arguments the mind comes up with. One of the best ways of learning about the mind is to refuse to follow its inclination, and say, "Until I've got a good reason, I am not going to follow you." See what kind of reasons it comes up with. And don't be easily swayed by whatever it says.

So even though we're practicing to get the mind beyond attachment to comfort, you have to make the breath comfortable to get it to settle down. We try to get the mind to a point where it can be beyond all thought, but you have to use your thinking to get it there. We try to get it beyond desire, but you have to use your desire. Desire is part of right effort. In that chant just now, when we were chanting about right effort, there's the phrase, *chandam janeti*, generating desire. We've often heard that Buddhism is down on desire. But here it is, it's part of the path. In other words, there is skillful desire and unskillful desire.

In the same way, you want to get the mind beyond its attachment to habits, but you have to use the habits of virtue in order to get it there.

In other words, you have to think strategically. Think like a doctor who's got a difficult patient, who has to deal not only with the physical symptoms of the disease, but also the patient's peculiarities, the psychological issues that are aggravating the disease or making it difficult for the patient to accept a cure.

Another one of the stories about Jivaka: After he became the personal physician of King Bimbisara, there was another nearby king, Candappajjota. Canda means fierce, cruel. He got sick one time. Candappajjota asked for the physician. Bimbisara knew that if he didn't send the physician, Candappajjota might come and attack, just to take the doctor away. So he sent Jivaka over, but he warned him, "Watch out for this king, he's fierce." So Jivaka goes and examines him. It turns out the king has a disease that requires ghee. So he tells the king, "I'll make you a medicine based on ghee." The king says, "Anything but ghee, I hate ghee. Ghee is disgusting." And Jivaka considers, "There's no other way this disease is going to be cured."

So he takes various herbs and cooks the ghee with the herbs to disguise the smell, disguise the color, disguise the taste of the ghee. But before he gives the medicine to the king, he says, "You know, we doctors sometimes have to go out and gather medicines at weird hours of the day. So I'd like you to send out an order to all the gates of the city: 'If Jivaka comes out, no matter what time of the day, no matter what he's riding, he should be allowed out of the city.'" So the king sends out the order.

Once that's done, then Jivaka presents him with this herbal concoction. Once the king takes it, Jivaka gets out of the palace as fast as he can, hops on the fastest elephant in town, and goes heading back home. Well, after a while, after taking the medicine, the king burps up and he realizes that's the taste of ghee. "This doctor has tricked me into taking ghee." So he has this half-human, half-non-human servant who can run faster than the elephant go get the doctor. "But watch out for this doctor," he tells the servant. "Doctors are tricky, you know. Don't take anything from him."

So the next morning, the servant catches up with Jivaka as he's having his breakfast. He's taking myrobalan, which has a part of the fruit that causes diarrhea. But with his fingernail, he is scratching that part out of the fruit and he eats the rest. So he offers the other half of the fruit to the servant without scratching out the purgative, and says, "Here, have some of this." The servant thinks, "Well, he's eating it himself, so it can't be bad." So he takes it and immediately gets a really bad case of diarrhea. He's so totally depleted that he can't do anything but lie there. Jivaka says, "Don't worry about the king. He's cured. But I'm not going to go back to that king." So he gets on the elephant, heads back home. By the time he gets home, the king is cured. So now he has changed his mind about Jivaka and sends him two beautiful sets of cloth as his reward.

So doctors are tricky. As a meditator you have to be tricky with your own mind, too. You've got to think strategically. And realize that some of the things

that people generally say are bad for your meditation—such as desire, efforting, the discriminating mind that discriminates between good and bad—are actually good for it. I don't know how many people say that these are bad things for your meditation. But the Buddha actually says that they're the bases of success. So learn how to read your mind's symptoms, read up on some of the medicines that the Buddha offers.

There's a good passage in *Wings*, under the topic of factors for awakening, that talks about the food for the factors of awakening and the food for your hindrances, and also ways that we tend to starve the factors of awakening, and how, if we want to, we can starve the hindrances. It's good knowledge for doctors of the mind.