

Resisting the Germs of Defilement

January 7, 2019

It's that time of year when different types of flu and colds are going around. And you'll notice, as they come into the monastery, that some people come down with a cold or come down with the flu, other people don't. Sometimes a cold comes and a person A gets it and then person B gets it and then gives it back to person A.

There are germs outside. In some cases, there are germs that we've been used to all the time. We've developed a certain resistance. But then when our resistance gets weak, we become susceptible. Those are cases where your body knows that this is a foreign substance, this germ or this virus coming in, but it just doesn't have the strength to fight it off. There are other cases where it doesn't even know, it doesn't recognize it yet. The germ invades and can do all kinds of damage before the body realizes that something's wrong.

The diseases of the mind are very much like that. Sometimes there are things that we know are wrong: certain types of greed, aversion, delusion, lust. And normally we can resist them. But when our resistance is down, when it's weak, they take over. There are other things that sneak into the mind and we don't recognize them at first as being a problem. They move in and they take over. And only when you realize that you're suffering from them—and sometimes in a big way—do you realize something's wrong. But you don't even know where it came from.

So we practice meditation to develop our resistance. The concentration side is to develop the strength of resistance so that we have a strong sense of well-being inside. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath, why we try to find ways of breathing that feel good so that the mind is soothed when it needs to be soothed, energized when it needs to be energized, calmed down when it needs to be calmed. That way, it feels basically healthy. Other things come in from outside and you're just not interested. You've already got something good inside here. You're less hungry for whatever little pleasures that are offered by greed, aversion, and delusion.

So this practice of sitting here breathing in a comfortable way is not a selfish thing. We're not just hiding out from the rest of the world and getting our own little hits of pleasure. We're strengthening the mind so that we can live in the world and not come down with the diseases of the world. You look all around us. The media's nothing but greed, aversion, and delusion. I saw a cartoon one time:

A man was standing in front of a magazine rack, and the different names of the magazines were the seven deadly sins. You can probably think of the same sort of thing with the different unskillful mind states the Buddha talks about. There are magazines for anger, magazines for lust, magazines for greed, magazines for delusion. They're there all the time, and when our resistance is down we buy them. When our resistance is not down, we pass by them and don't find them interesting at all.

So think of the concentration as a way of building your resistance. You've got something good inside that you can carry with you wherever you go. It's only when you have a lapse in mindfulness that you leave yourself exposed. So you have to be heedful. There are germs everywhere: little germs of greed, germs of aversion, germs of delusion, germs of jealousy, envy. They're around us all the time. So you have to keep your resistance up. You have to keep your guard up to deal with these things.

Now as for the germs you don't recognize, this is where another quality comes in: The Buddha calls it analysis of qualities. It's in the factors for awakening. It builds on mindfulness. When you're alert to what's there in the mind, it can analyze it as to what's skillful and what's not skillful. Sometimes this quality is equated with seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. And that doesn't mean just knowing what the four noble truths are, but remembering what they're for: They're for dividing up our experience so that we know what to do with it—because each truth has a duty. Suffering, or stress, is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized, and you do that by developing the path.

Sometimes you hear analysis of qualities compared with the mindfulness that's defined as simply being aware of what's coming up, kind of a bare awareness. And then analysis of qualities, in that context, is what applies labels, "Oh, this is a thought, this is an emotion, this is a distraction, whatever." And then persistence, which is the third factor for awakening, is just keeping at this. But that's not how the Buddha explained it.

To begin with, mindfulness is a factor of the memory. It's not just awareness. It's composed of the things you try to remind yourself are important to remember if you're going to stay on the path. In particular, you remind yourself that you want to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones.

And then analysis of qualities is what actually recognizes what's skillful and what's not. It does that by looking at cause and effect. When you develop this particular thought in the mind, where does it take you? If you develop that one, where does it take you? You analyze the thought not in terms of whether you like

it or not. You analyze it in terms of where it's coming from in the mind and where it's going: what qualities are leading to that kind of thought and what actions it induces you to do. The Buddha himself said he got into the path of awakening by dividing his thoughts into two sorts: those that were imbued with sensuality, ill will, harmfulness on one side; those imbued with renunciation; lack of ill will, i.e., good will; and harmlessness, i.e., compassion, on the other side. He basically saw what these thoughts came from and what they led you to do. The first sort, he realized, took the mind into areas where you would want to act in unskillful ways and the second sort didn't. So you want to learn how to look at your thoughts in the same way, in terms of cause and effect. Where are they coming from? Where are they going? That's analysis of qualities.

And then based on that, you know what to do in terms of your persistence, which is the third factor for awakening: how to develop skillful qualities, how to abandon unskillful ones—and *wanting* to do it. An important part of persistence is to learn how to motivate yourself. You've seen the harm that can come from certain thoughts, certain ideas, certain urges in the mind, and you realize that you don't want to continue harming yourself that way. You've had enough.

At the same time, you've seen the benefits of the more skillful qualities. And you cultivate the desire to develop them more in the mind, realizing that this really is a worthwhile process. Too many people think, "Oh well, whatever goes through the mind just goes through the mind. It comes in, goes out, and that's it. Nobody else knows what's going on in my mind, so it doesn't matter." But it *does* matter. These things shape your life: what you're thinking, what thoughts you pursue, which ones you don't. So when you realize that your life matters, the question of your happiness matters, then you can motivate yourself. That's an important part of the persistence.

These three qualities—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence—correspond to right mindfulness, right view, and right effort. As the Buddha said, these are the three qualities that circle around every path factor, starting with right view itself all the way through right concentration. So these are three qualities you want to keep in balance, working together, hovering around whatever you're doing.

So the meditation is not just concentration. In the factors for awakening, concentration follows on persistence and covers four factors: rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. Those can help build up a lot of resistance. But the first three factors—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence or right effort—are the factors that help you recognize the germs that you didn't recognize

before, the things that you for a long time thought were okay or normal, but now you suddenly realize are the beginning points of a lot of trouble.

You see this because you're looking in terms of cause and effect. You step back from the question of whether you like or don't like a particular thought and instead look at it as a type of action that leads to a result. You judge it by the results. You're allowed to like and not like certain results, to want and not want certain results. When the Zen master said that the Great Way is easy for those with no preferences, he wasn't talking about preferences for results. He was talking about preferences for the training itself. In other words, if you know that things you like are going to be bad for you, you teach yourself to be happy to give them up. And as for things that you may not like to do, but you know they're going to give results, you learn how to be happy to do them. That's when the Great Way becomes easy.

So it's important to remember that the quality the Buddha calls analysis of qualities, which is the discernment factor in the factors for awakening, isn't simply a matter of noting or recognizing. It's more a figuring things out and knowing that these teachings are meant to be acted on, in terms of the things you bring into your mind right here, right now. And the teachings are relevant right here, right now. They may sound abstract but they're directly related to the health of your mind. When you learn how to see your thoughts in these ways, to see your state of mind in these ways, you know how to behave in a way that's going to keep it healthy and keep up your resistance—because the germs of the mind are different from the germs out in the world. The germs in the world just keep mutating into more and more and more forms. But even though the germs of the mind are many, they have certain classes, certain types. And it is possible to come to the end of them so that the mind can be in a state of perfect health.

That's what the Buddha called nibbana: health. But it's a health that's much more reliable and more resilient than the health of the body. And it's a health that, once it comes, never leaves you. With the health of the body, certain times you're okay, certain times you're not okay. And the body's heading to death. There's going to be a point where no matter how well you feed it, no matter how well you treat it, exercise it, try to build up its resistance, it's going to die. But the mind doesn't die. Your consciousness keeps going: usually up and down. If you get it to a state of health, though—in the Buddha's sense of the term—then there's no falling back.