
Buddhism and Healing

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Our experience of ourselves and our world is inseparable from our embodiment. To be embodied is to be alive, our wonderful body is suffused with nerve endings and our sense organs are constantly providing moments of experience. Something is always happening. Some of these events we like and some we don't like. We find ourselves wanting more of what we like and less of what we don't like. As a general principle this makes a lot of sense – why would one choose difficulty and suffering?

However, in our interaction with the world we can't stop difficult and bad things happening, and we can't always that good things happen. We find that our ego, as a self-referential organizing principle, finds itself being bombarded by situations it doesn't like. For example, we don't like to be sick. Even if it's a small illness like having a cold, it can easily generate the sense that something has happened to 'me' that has made me 'not me': "When I get sick, I don't feel like myself." This is a very interesting experience for it would indicate that 'my sense of who I am' is revealed to me primarily in moments of its absence. If life is going well and we are healthy and happy then we are somewhat invisible to ourselves and this allows us to have optimal contact with the experiential field. Perhaps we are walking in the park, or just sitting here listening to the birds singing – there seems to be an unobstructed pulsation of ourselves into the environment and of the environment into ourselves. The experience fills us and is complete in itself so that it does not require analysis, editing or interpretation.

However, when we get sick we get a sense of standing in relation to oneself. We gain our body when we become sick. If we are feeling healthy when we are walking down the street it's as if we don't really have a body; we're just walking. We can take our body for granted because it is part of the flow and is not disrupting our easy relation with the environment. But when we get sick we suddenly find ourselves having a body that doesn't do what we want. It doesn't feel the way we want it to and it might not support us in being able to think in the way

that we are used to. We lose both our energy and our capacity for the pursuit of our familiar activities. In that way we come to 'have' a body – a body which seems like a burden.

Sickness, then, is a very useful experience for exploring the nature of duality: "I have a body in a way that I do not like, and things are happening to 'me' which I don't like." In this interpretation there is the subject, 'I', 'me', 'myself', and what is happening to it. When we get sick we sometimes retreat from our body and sometimes we merge into it. For example, when we think, "Oh, I feel so terrible, I am in pain," there is a sense that our consciousness has merged into the arising experience of pain and is totally identified with it. But our body can also be abandoned by our mind, for example when we are lying in bed feeling completely bored with being sick and feeling that we don't want to have anything to do with our 'stupid body' which is not well. These two positions of fusion and separation are pervasive in our experience, as a subject moving towards or moving away from the environment. Thus we can make our body part of our self or we can hold it at bay as part of the environment.

The experience of being sick occurs not just as sensation in the body but also through our emotions and thoughts. The fact that being sick is a dynamic phenomenon generated by the interaction of complex factors is especially important for those who practise meditation. The function of meditation is to enable us to relax into a state of presence in which everything occurs just as it does, without our wither falling into whatever is occurring, or trying to push away things we don't like. Tibetan texts on meditation return to this topic again and again, pointing to the middle way between fusing with arising experience or attempting to stand apart from it.

When we are sick this can be a very useful time to examine our experience because our usual sense of being a competent agent is compromised and maybe further limited by feelings of confusion and self-pity. This dislocation from our taken-for-granted identity opens up a space for an enquiry into the actual nature of how we are.

Sicknesses arising in the body, in emotions, and in cognitions all arise from imbalances of the five elements. Earth is the principle of stability, a principle which allows a sense of prediction from one moment to the next. Water is the principle of movement and connection. Fire is the principle of heat and expansion. Wind is the principle of flighty, fickle shifting. Space is the principle of openness, of hospitality, a sphere within which many different possibilities can occur. What we call, health is the manifestation of dynamic balance between these five elements. It is not a fixed thing which we have but a set of processes which are subtly moving, balancing and unbalancing each other.

For example, in terms of disorders of thinking, we have situations where our thoughts can seem to go much faster, often in small spirals reiterating the same theme. We find ourselves worrying about something and going over it again and again. This has a heating quality to it generated by the friction between the reified subject and the reified thoughts. The thoughts are rapid, manifesting both the concentrating and dispersal functions of the wind. This turbulence leads to the loss of any sense of spaciousness, of relaxed openness which is able to invite and be at home with whatever is occurring.

In states of anxiety, the anxiety can propel us out into global fears so that our concerns can fill the space of our existence, or the anxious thoughts can spiral back in on themselves and become very condensed, repeatedly trapping us in a tiny domain. You can observe for yourself how all the different kinds of mental distress that you experience can be put into simple categories: too rigid and fixed, too all over the place, too hot, too cold, and so on. These simple categories are useful because they directly relate to our lived experience and provide us with a

tool to explore and understand ourselves. Professional diagnostic systems tend to be objectifying, alienating and disempowering to those who suffer.

Similarly with a physical condition, our body can get too hot or too cold, too rigid, too floppy, too sensitive, too insensitive. When we say it is too much this way or too much that way what is it too much in terms of? If you are building a wall and you want to make sure it is vertical, you can use a plumb line, a little weight tied on a piece of string, to check that the line of the wall is straight. But when we come to ourselves how do we know what that straight line is? How should I be? Is it better if I am more social, because I get to meet people and I enjoy meeting them? But then I also find this tiring. Should I be more careful and serious about how I plan my life? But then I might become ritualistic and over-determined and exclude the opening of new possibilities. One of the great mysteries of being alive is the fact that we are not like machines. If we were machines it would be much simpler in some ways, for we would just have a spanner and screwdriver and we could regulate ourselves every morning, and if something went wrong we could look in the manual and it would tell us how we should be. Over the years every religion develops many kinds of manuals pointing out how we can be balanced and healthy but none of them meet the high precision to be found inside engineering manuals. They all say vague things such as that you should love everyone. When you read that on a bit of paper it is beautiful and may be inspiring but when you try to bring it into practice it becomes more difficult.

One of the ways in which we can get lost in our lives is to continue to seek a simple method to deal with the complexities of our lives. This complexity is irreducible – it is richness, not mistake. As we sit here together we are influenced by many changing factors, the time of day, the heat which means that the windows have to stay open which then lets in the noise of the street. This is normal life. That is to say, how we are arises in relation to the circumstances within which we are operating. We are not internally determined or defined, and nor are we operating in a fixed world where we can work out where we fit. Rather, when we start to examine our existence we find that it is changing moment-by-moment, not entirely determined by our internal programs, and not entirely determined by external events either. In fact our lives arise from the ceaseless interaction of subject and object, self and other, as the movement of their energy is revealed through our sense organs.

This experience is so quick and so subtle that it is very difficult to catch; in fact it is ungraspable. However, the ungraspability of experience usually doesn't raise any questions for us. We tend to fill that inexpressible space of not knowing with our fantasies of knowledge. For example, we might sit and think about what we really want to do with our life. What are the things that are good for us? Who makes us happy? Such conceptualization is normal and normalising but in terms of meditation practice it is not helpful. Why? Because we are unreliable, because we change according to circumstances. How could we possibly come to a final solution, a final decision about how we really want to be? Things work for a while, we feel connected and everything seems meaningful, and then something changes and another focus takes our attention.

Does that mean that something is wrong with us? Well, in terms of institutions and systems where you have to present yourself as a reliable, predictable person, yes, it does. As children we are told that it is very important to be honest and to keep our word. So if you say that you want something then that is what you need to keep wanting. When I left school I enrolled to go to university to study geology. In the summer holidays I saw many, many rocks and hills and when I got to university I changed to study anthropology. The Professor of anthropology asked me, "Well you said you wanted to study geology but now you say you want to study anthropology. How do we know that within one year you will not want to study something else?" So I had to reply, "No, no, I'm completely committed to the study of

anthropology.” He then explained to me this commitment is necessary if you really want to understand. From the point of view of taking on a social role this makes sense.

Life is easier for other people if they can predict how we are going to behave. The efficient functioning of society requires people to stay in role. However we are very interesting people and what makes us interesting is that we are interested in different things. When you get a job you usually have to limit the range of your capacity in order to get some money. We know this. We feel the price that we pay in order to be paid. We wake up in the morning and we know that we have to go to work. We may not want to go to work but we have to be reliable; this is the structure of our world. We perform our tasks and maintain the shape expected of us in order to continue to fit in. This structure means that my impulse to do something else is the enemy of my successful life. Of course this is true but it can mean is that we don't listen to or value our own creativity. Freedom and conformity are not necessarily in conflict. The freedom to fulfil ourselves require us to be ourselves. This freedom is intrinsic and is found by relaxing into our own nature rather than by attempting to push away the structures that we feel constrict or oppress us. Liberating our creativity is not about feeling frustrated by, and rebellious towards, the structure of our life. If we think, “I am a creative person whose life is being constricted because I have to go to work,” this merely installs a further duality between compliance and creativity. Rather, with the support of our meditation practice we come to see that moment-by-moment our embodied experience is changing; what is revealed through the senses is changing, and thoughts and feelings are changing. This is the immediacy or facticity of experience. This is the creativity of the ground of our being. This is what there is and it subverts all conceptual dualities.

Across this dynamic ever-changing interweaving matrix we tend to run lines of interpretive narrative. If we become completely wedded to our narrative, believing that it reveals the truth about what is happening, then we are likely to hold on to it and try to protect it from the challenges presented by the changing nature of events. If we do this we will then become tired and since the movement of internal and external factors is ceaseless, we will ceaselessly have to recreate ourselves in the image of the definition that we have decided is a good one for us. This effort is necessary because our ego-identity, our personal sense of who we are, is actually part of the world and therefore is not a private possession. It doesn't have any individual essence or separate basis of its own. So in trying to ringfence and protect our individual self, what we are actually doing is working to sustain a developed narrative about our having an individual self.

We are endlessly at work promoting and protecting something that is an illusion. What we call 'myself' is a living system that is part of the living system that we call the world. We breathe in and out all the time, without the air of the world we die. On a hot day like this we can feel the sweat coming out on our body, water is oozing out of us. We easily become thirsty. Water and food have to come into the body and the waste materials have to go out. We speak a language that was in existence before we were born, and that came to be ours due to the kindness of others. We wear clothes that have come to us from other people. So when we start to examine ourselves, what is the personal, intrinsic essence to our sense of 'I', 'me', 'myself'? What is truly internally defined or created? Actually there is nothing at all which is uniquely mine or uniquely me and that sets me apart as a separate substance. However, I am a unique pattern within a common manifestation, a specific, particular appearance in the infinite field of experience we all participate in.

So what is the basis of our manifestation? The meditative tradition is not concerned with the stories we tell ourselves about who we are or how the world is. Rather it is concerned with the immediacy of who I am in each moment that I say or do or feel or think anything. Who is the thinker of the thought? Who is the performer of the action? Moment-by-moment, all day

long, we are constituted out of thoughts, feelings, sensations and activities. This is all we have, this is all we are, there is nothing solid, fixed, reliable about us. As the day gets on we may become a bit tired. Usually we feel more tired at night than we do in the morning. The causes and conditions of sleep create something different from the causes and conditions of being busy all day long. Feeling fresh or feeling tired are products, they are generated out of dynamic interactions.

The organising principle that we usually apply to make sense of our experience is to say, "This is happening to me", or in its more active form, "I did this". From the point of view of meditation this kind of statement is at the heart of our confusion. This is where we mistakenly take imprisonment or limitation or contraction to be freedom or vital aliveness. The self-referential momentary arising that says, "I am doing this" appears to be sealed and intact as a self-defining, immediately understandable statement of truth on the basis of which there is nothing further to examine. It appears automatically just to be the case. So if I say, "I am talking", that seems obvious. 'You' can hear 'me' talking. I can hear me talking so obviously "I am talking". That is a story line, a narrative. Any kind of story installs a particular interpretation, a particular world of meaning. Who is the one who believes in the narrative that the one is speaking? This question is the point where meditation begins, as we start to examine the immediate present moment within which all narrative, all thought, feeling, sensation and experience arises. This space of experience is present now in this room. It is not something esoteric, something far away somewhere else. It is the clarity that reveals the story line which tells a lie about the identity of the experiencer.

The traditional example used to demonstrate this is a mirror and its reflections. When you look in the mirror you never see the mirror. You see your reflection. You become interested in your reflection. The reflection seems to be the function of the mirror – that is why I look in the mirror, to see my reflection. But what is the mirror? I don't know, it is just where I find my reflection. The mirroriness of the mirror is ignored since the mirror is taken for granted as long as it performs the function we expect from it. I exist, I am hungry, I am tired, I am walking; these are states which are revealed to us moment-by-moment. Just as when you look in the mirror and you move your head, different aspects of your face are revealed to you, so in meditation practice we relax and open and are present with the immediacy of the arising of our familiar narratives. We see them as being like a reflection, visible yet ungraspable, and with that we open to our presence as infinite hospitality, like a mirror. Even the most habitual and familiar thoughts are now revealed to be fresh and groundless.

This mirror of awareness is both me and not-me. It is me as the immediacy of my aliveness, my being-here-ness, an ungraspable, indefinable open presence which is not the presence of something else. It is not-me in that it is not built up with the familiar building blocks of my sense of self. It is independent of my history, body, hopes, fears, emotions, thought, knowledge and so on. And yet it doesn't reject them or anything else. There is room for everything and everybody within open awareness.

This openness is the basis of healing. Non-violent, non-judgemental welcome allows whatever manifests to be seen as it is. Paradoxically this is the opposite of attachment for the welcome free of demands lets the natural self-liberation of phenomena occur without interference. Neither pulling in what is liked nor pushing away what is not liked, experiences arise and pass. Health and sickness, happiness and sorrow, enjoyment and depression – all the possible modes of our experiences arise and pass. Through not over-identifying with passing moments, without investing health as being intrinsically more valuable than sickness, there is space to see that true healing occurs not in terms of trying to control the forms of our current or future experience but with resting in open awareness and experiencing the integration of all that occurs.

Everything that has ever occurred has been inseparable from the spacious open ground of being. There are no truly existing entities. No matter the form or flavour of what is manifesting its uniqueness is inseparable from its open ground. The details of its form are the radiance, the creativity, of awareness, and are not the signs of a separate substantial thing. Non-duality is the actuality of existence. Due to the illness of ignoring how it is, we come to fantasise, to concoct plans and maps and judgements and demands about how life should be. These plans lead us to the on-going sickness of endless micro-management. This cannot be healed within the domain of its own falsifying interpretation. Healing is immediately available by resting in the natural openness of the intrinsic wholeness of our presence.