



Mind That Heals Mind That Hurts

Dr. Ong Tien Kwan

Mind That Heals, Mind That Hurts

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of a talk given at **Brickfield Maha Vihara Buddhist Temple** regarding the mind and how it can heal as well as hurt us physically, emotionally and mentally.

1.2 Mental cultivation is the core of the Buddha's teachings.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha emphasized on the cultivation of

- Sila (Morality)
 - Right Speech
 - Right Actions
 - Right Livelihood
- Samadhi (Mental Cultivation)
 - Right Effort
 - Right Mindfulness
 - Right Concentration
- Panna (Wisdom)
 - Right Understanding
 - Right Thoughts

Most people assumed that the practice of mental cultivation is done only during meditation, and that the practice of all three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path is only for those who aimed for the final goal of Nibbana.

So most lay practitioners concentrate only on the cultivation of morality, and leave the cultivation of samadhi and panna to the monks and serious practitioners. In so doing, they do not put in sufficient effort to increase their day-to-day mindfulness or self-awareness. This day-to-day, moment-to-moment, self-awareness is important

because it is the key to our well-being and happiness. With it, we can achieve happiness, health and wealth in this very life.

Understanding how our mind affects our life and health makes it possible for us to use this knowledge to improve our life and our health.

CHAPTER TWO

2. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE MIND

2.1 “Mind is the forerunner of all states.” – The Buddha

*“By mind the world is led; by mind the world is moved.
All good and bad things exist in the world because of the mind.
Our actions are all led by the mind; Mind is their master; Mind is their maker.
If one speaks or acts with a defiled mind, then pain pursues him,
even as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox.
If one speaks or acts with a pure state of mind,
then happiness follows like a shadow that remains behind without departing.”*

– Dhammapada 1,2

What this means:

1. Mind is the source of everything in this world, both good and bad. Everything is mind created.
2. Our actions, both speech and deed, also originate from our mind. Our mind is the creator (maker). It's also the controller (master).
3. If our thoughts are unwholesome, our speech and actions will be unwholesome, and sufferings must naturally follow.
4. If our thoughts are wholesome, our speech and actions will be wholesome, and happiness must naturally follow.

“Whatever (harm) a foe may do to a foe, or a hater to a hater, an ill-directed mind can do far greater harm to oneself.” – Dhammapada, 42.

2.2 Science and our mind:

More than 2,600 years ago, the Buddha taught that our mind influences our feelings and our behaviour, and that the quality of our mind determines whether happiness or suffering follows. Today, science is beginning to discover the truth of the Buddha's teachings.

The Conscious and Subconscious Mind

According to science, our mind can be divided into two distinct aspects:

- the conscious mind, and
- the subconscious mind.

The conscious mind can reason and think logically. However, our subconscious mind CANNOT reason or think logically. It accepts everything that our conscious mind feeds it. It is like a computer. Whatever data that is given to it, it will process. If you give it good data, you get good results. If you feed it garbage, you get garbage. The other thing we have learned about the subconscious mind is that it is very powerful and creative. It literally gives us what we asked for. Our outer life is a reflection of our inner dominant thoughts and beliefs. It achieves this because like attracts like. Therefore, wholesome thoughts attract wholesome people and circumstances to our life. Unwholesome thoughts likewise attract unwholesome people and circumstances to our life.

This is called the **Universal Law of Attraction and Correspondence**. In other words, whatever our mind conceives and believes, it achieves.

Why is this important for us to know?

Because it means that it is extremely important for us to consciously decide what we allow to enter our subconscious mind and the only way we can control what gets filtered and imprinted on our subconscious mind is our conscious mind.

Therefore, our conscious mind serves as a “gatekeeper” for our subconscious mind, and this is a very important role that our conscious mind must do. Our conscious mind can only do this role as a gatekeeper effectively if we are constantly mindful.

2.3 It's a Natural Law

“If one speaks or acts with a defiled mind, then pain pursues him, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox. If one speaks or acts with a pure state of mind, then happiness follows like a shadow that remains behind without departing.” – Dhammapada

The statement above reveals a natural law that governs our life. As Buddhists, we called it the **Law of Cause and Effect**.

Today, many people refer to this natural law as the Universal Law of Attraction and Correspondence, which says that like attracts like, and that the inner world of our mind draws to itself what its dominant thoughts and beliefs are; thus our outer world

becomes a reflection of our inner mind. This basically explains how the Law of Cause and Effect works. It is important to realise that it works at all levels – actions, feelings and thoughts.

In physics, there is a principle called the **Principle of Sympathetic Resonance**. According to this principle, if you have two tuning forks with equal frequency, and you cause one of them to vibrate, the other tuning fork will also vibrate if the first tuning fork comes close to it.

This natural law is just like the Law of Gravity. We cannot run away from it. As long as we're on earth, we're subjected to the force of this gravity. Likewise, as long as we're in this cycle of life (samsara), we're subjected to this natural law.

It does not matter what it is called and it does not matter whether you believe it or not. Being a natural law, we're subjected to its effect regardless of whether we believe it or not, regardless of whether we accept it or not – just like the law of gravity.

Like the Law of Gravity, once we understand how the Law works, we can use it to our advantage.

For example, once we understood that the reason we are stuck on earth is because of the force of gravity pulling us downward, we begin to figure out how we can exert a greater and opposing force to lift us upward. Thus, man began to learn how to fly. Now we can even send a spacecraft all the way to Mars and to the edge of our solar system. In the same way, once we understood how the natural Law that governs our life work, we can use this knowledge to live a happier, healthier and richer life.

A natural law is an impartial law. It is impersonal and neutral. It does not favour one thing over another. Thus it does not favour wholesome thoughts over unwholesome thoughts. It treats and responds to them equally. It is because of its impartiality that it is just. The idea is not to beat the system, not to cheat the natural law, but to work in harmony with this law. Using what we know, we can then choose to work in harmony with the natural law for an outcome that we want.

Now, let's take a look at how our mind can hurt us and heal us, and how we can use our understanding of the mind to live a happier, healthier and richer life.

In this talk, I'll be focusing on how our mind affects our health.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 HOW OUR MIND CAN HURT US

Our mind influences:

- our feelings
- our behaviours (actions)
- our physical health
- our life in general

Our feelings, actions, physical health and attitudes toward life in turn influence the people around us, including our family (parents, spouse, children, siblings), our friends and colleagues.

3.1 Mind Affecting Our Physical Health

How it works:

Every thought causes neurochemical changes in the brain. Neurotransmitters are released by the brain cells and messages are transmitted all over the body through the nervous system, the endocrine system and blood or immune system to every cell, gland, organ, and muscle in the body, resulting in a specific body response.

Thus, a wholesome thought ends in a body response that is very different from an unwholesome thought. Wholesome thoughts generally result in an enhancement of the body immune system, and reduces stress to the body. In contrast, unwholesome thoughts result in a reduction of the body immune system and an increased in the stress level.

In fact, our thoughts and feelings can literally create physical illness.

Example #1:

A 35 year-old lady came to see me for a new onset of asthma. Despite treating her with appropriate modern drugs for three months, her symptoms did not improve. Finally, one day I started to enquire about any specific event that lead to the asthma.

She revealed that she had a miscarriage about two weeks before the onset of asthma, and that she had felt guilty and sad about it. Yet she was not able to talk about it or to share her grief with her husband. She cried as she poured out her feelings.

One month later, on follow-up, she told me that she does not have anymore asthmatic symptoms. Apparently, her symptoms disappeared after the last consultation, without taking her medicine.

Explanation:

In this case, her mind created a feeling of guilt about the miscarriage even though she was not the cause of it. As a result of this guilt feeling, her body underwent changes that resulted in her asthmatic symptoms.

It doesn't matter whether her beliefs were true or not. All it matters was that she believes it to be true. Once she accepts it as truth, the belief passed through from her conscious mind to her subconscious mind, setting in motion the changes in her body that gives rise to her asthmatic symptoms.

Once that belief is changed, and she lets go of her guilt, her body automatically changes to heal herself.

Therefore, by changing our thoughts, we change our neurochemical response, which results in a change of our body responses. Thus, our mind is the first line of defense against illness.

3.2 Mind Affecting Our Behaviour

Clinical psychologists believe that our mind affects our feelings, and that in turn affects the way we behave. Our behaviour, in turns, influences the way we think.

Thoughts influence behaviour and vice-versa: *thoughts > feelings > behaviour > thoughts*

By changing our thoughts, we can change our emotions.

Example #1:

Do you ever notice that you behave differently when you come to the temple, or when you are at other places of worship like churches or mosques?

Somehow, every time we step into a “holy” place, we change the way we think, feel and behave. We become more polite and careful with our words, and we become softer and gentler in our behaviour and approach with others. Wouldn't it be nice if we are all like this all the time? Life on earth would be more peaceful and happier for everyone.

If everyone can bring this “holy” mentality to the entire planet, and imagine this whole earth as a holy and sacred place, perhaps heaven on earth can be a reality.

Example #2:

A patient came to get her blood test done. She told me she was afraid of blood taking due to a previous bad experience. Sensing her tension and fear, I directed her to lie down on the couch and focus on her breathing, and continue to distract her by talking about some pleasant things.

When I asked her to sit up again, she was surprised that her blood was taken already.

By re-directing her mind to some other object, I managed to change her feeling of fear to one that she could cope with.

Quotes:

1. *“A man's life is what his thoughts make it.” – Marcus Aurelius*

2. *“Where we are now is the result of a lifetime of thinking – both positive and negative. Thoughts can be changed, and with that change comes changes in our life.”*

3.3 Mind Affecting The People Around Us

Unwholesome Thoughts (akusala) lead to harmful words and deeds which in turn affect the people we interact with.

This problem arises from the incorrect views or beliefs on which we base our lives. These false assumptions and beliefs lead to unskilful and harmful thoughts, words and deed.

If our own beliefs are wrong, how can we impart right views to our children?

Children are helpless and they absorbed whatever we as parents feed them as “the right way” to live. Thus, we programmed their mind from very young. By the time they grow up, they already assimilate these beliefs in their life. They will have great difficulty breaking the mental barrier.

Example #1:

The baby elephant that was chained to a stake grow up believing that it cannot pull the stake out of the ground. As an adult elephant, it does not even try to escape when chained to the ground with a simple chain and stake.

Example #2:

The teacher and students in her classroom:

Do you ever notice that teachers unconsciously favour the bright students in their classes? For example, a teacher moves the bright students to the front of the class, gives them more time to answer a question, and is more lenient with them. On the other hand, a teacher seats the poor students at the back of the class, is more impatient with them when answering questions and is harsher with them.

The poor students thus end up in a vicious cycle, hanging with other poor students with poor attitudes towards academic excellence, believe that they are stupid and cannot excel in their studies.

Little wonder that we grew up with all kinds of self-imposed limitations and beliefs; beliefs that is a self-fulfilling prophesy and self-sabotage.

*“The mind is its own place,
and in itself,
Can make a Heaven of Hell,
A Hell of Heaven”
- John Milton, Paradise Lost*

3.4 Words Have Powers

Most of the time, we talk without thinking about what comes out of our mouth. We don't realise that our words have powerful influence over people we talked to. In fact, our words have great influence over us as well.

Our destiny may actually be determined by the words we constantly use in our life.

Let's take a look at some of the ways we used words:

1. All or None (always, never)

- "You're always late."
- "You never finish your homework."
- "Why must you always do this to me?"
- "You always do these stupid things."
- "You're always sick."

2. Self-Criticising

- "I can never do this properly."
- "I'm so careless."
- "I always fall sick easily."

3. Generalisation

- "All men are the same."
- "All women want from me is just my money."
- "All politicians are corrupted."

4. Labelling

- "I'm a failure."
- "You're so useless."
- "You're such a naughty boy."

Using words negatively like the examples above leads to a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 HOW OUR MIND CAN HEAL US

Now that we understood how an unguarded mind leads to unwholesome thoughts, and how these unwholesome thoughts resulted in unwanted side-effects to our body, our life and to the people around us, it's time to take a look at how our mind can heal us.

4.1 The Four Brahma Vihara

The four Brahma vihara are Metta (unconditional love), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (altruistic joy) and Upekkha (equanimity). In the presence of any of the brahma vihara, there is no fear, no anger, no anxiety, no negative emotions. Thus, this state is conducive to healing.

Metta (Loving Kindness)

11 Benefits of Metta:

1. Sleeps in comfort
2. Wakes up in comfort
3. No bad dreams
4. Dear to human beings
5. Dear to non-human beings
6. The gods guard him
7. No fire or poison or weapon harms him
8. His mind can be quickly concentrated
9. His complexion is serene
10. He dies without falling into confusion
11. Even if he does not progress any further, he will pass on to the world of High Divinity, to the Brahma World

Compassion (Karuna)

Compassion, which is a strong feeling of wishing to alleviate the suffering of another living being, can generate a powerful healing energy when properly directed.

Example #1:

While working night shift in a hospital one day, I noted an Indian man in his 40's was being admitted to the ward. The reason for his admission was because he was suffering from a pain in the chest area. It wasn't a heart attack. His story was unique.

When he was in his teens, he swallowed a bottle of corrosives in an attempt to commit suicide. That resulted in destruction and erosion of his esophagus. Eventually, the doctors had to replace his esophagus with a section from his large colon. Since that operation, he has been suffering pain over his chest area and the pain has progressively become intolerable. He progressed from oral pain killers to injections, and finally to injectable morphine.

That night, he admitted himself into the hospital with the hope of getting his morphine injection. Unfortunately, being a Houseman, I could not prescribed a morphine injection for him and he had to wait for the next day when a specialist is available to review him.

However, as I sat beside his bed listening to his story, I felt a wave of strong compassion in me, and for some strange reasons, I started to sweep my right hand over his chest area (area of pain) downward to his feet. I did that several times, wishing that his pain may go away.

The next morning, while I was doing my ward round, he said to me:

"Doctor, I don't know what you did last night, but last night was the first night I had a good sleep without any pain."

4.2 The Power of Forgiving

Forgiving is compassion in action. It is the process of coming to terms with an injury and letting go. Forgiving can be:

- forgiving self, and
- forgiving the person who inflicted the injury

Benefits of forgiving:

- gain psychological benefits – peace, improved self-esteem, increases hope, feeling of well-being, able to move on
- emotional healings – letting go anger, resentments, revenge
- reduces hostility towards self and others, reduces anxiety and depression

According to Michael McCullough of the National Institute of Healthcare Research in Rockville, MD, forgiveness may be motivated by empathy. We are also more likely to forgive if the offender apologises. Apology elicits empathy, thus inviting forgiveness.

Study:

In general, young adults (18-44 years) reported that they were less likely to forgive others than middle-aged (45-64) and older adults (65 and older).

Young adults who reported high levels of self-forgiveness were more likely to be satisfied with their lives, whereas middle age and older adults who reported high levels of forgiveness of others were more likely to report increased life satisfaction.

In other findings, attendance at religious services was associated with decreased psychological distress, particularly among young and middle-aged adults, and increased life satisfaction among young and old adults. Service attendance was also associated with higher self-rated health among all age groups.

4.3 The Attitude of Gratitude

Gratitude plays a significant role in a person's sense of well-being and health.

From Cicero to Buddha, many philosophers and spiritual teachers have celebrated gratitude. The world's major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hindu, prize gratitude as a morally beneficial emotional state that encourages reciprocal kindness.

Study by McCollough and Emmons:

Participants were divided into 3 groups. The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day, while the second group recorded their unpleasant experiences. The last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

The results of the study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved. McCollough and Emmons also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another.

A poem of Gratitude:

Thank you for the abundance,
Thank you for the wealth;
Thank you for all the happiness,
Protection and good health.

How to have an attitude of gratitude:

- Keep a Gratitude journal
- Volunteer to help the less fortunate
- Volunteer in hospitals, old folks home, nursing home

4.4 Generosity (dana)

*Kindness in words creates confidence
Kindness in thinking creates profoundness
Kindness in giving creates love*

Kindness or generosity (dana) starts from our mind. A kind thought leads to a kind word and/or action.

“Bhikkus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds. Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful, they would not enjoy eating without having shared it, if there were someone to share it with.” – the Lord Buddha.

The Story of Suppavasa:

Once the Blessed One lived among the Koliyans, at a town called Sajjanela. One morning, the Blessed One dressed himself, took his upper robe and bowl and went to the dwelling of Suppavasa, a Koliyan lady. Having arrived there, he sat down on the seat prepared for him. And Suppavasa attended to the Blessed One personally and served him with choice hard and soft food. When the Blessed One had ended his meal and had withdrawn his hand from the bowl, Suppavasa sat down at one side and the Blessed One addressed her as follows:

“Suppavasa, a noble woman-diciple, by giving food gives four things to those who receive it. What four? She gives long life, beauty, happiness and strength. And by giving long life, she herself will be endowed with long life, human or divine. By giving beauty, she herself will be endowed with beauty, human or divine. By giving happiness, she herself will be endowed with happiness, human or divine. By giving strength, she herself will be endowed with strength, human or divine.

A noble woman-diciple, O Suppavasa, by giving food, gives those four things to those who receive it.”

4.5 Humour

Laughter has often been regarded as the best medicine. This is proven true in the case of Norman Cousins who had ankylosing spondylitis, an arthritic condition that was progressively crippling him and caused him to be bed-ridden.

While in the hospital, he watched a comedy and laughed continuously. He noted that his pain subsided after that. He then decided to watch as many comedies as he can, and laughed his way back to good health.

What happened:

Laughters cause the body to produce endorphins, a substance that provides a “feel-good” effect as well as reduces pain. Laughters also improve the immune functions in the body.

4.6 Confession

Confession has powerful healing properties. It is an act of facing up to and accepting responsibility for the mistake we’ve committed. Confession requires penance, a feeling of regret or remorse at the act and a willingness to pay for it.

Confession cleanses the soul, clearing away the negative imprint which would otherwise have stayed longer within our mind and festering into emotional or physical illnesses.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 CULTIVATING A MIND THAT HEALS

5.1 The Importance of Mental Cultivation

The Buddha's teachings can be summarised in these three simple instructions:

"Avoid evil, do good, purify your mind"

1. Avoid evil

By following the Five Precepts, avoid killing, stealing, sexual misconducts, lying and taking intoxicants.

Avoid evil not just in terms of actions or deeds, but also in words and in thoughts.

2. Do good

By cultivating the positive aspects of the Five Precepts, honours and respects life, honours and respects properties and ownership, honours and respects the sanctity of marriage and relationships, upholding truth and mental cultivation.

Do good not just in terms of actions or deeds, but also in words and thoughts.

3. Purify your mind

By mental cultivation through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The four aspects of Right Effort:

1. Prevent the arising of unwholesome thoughts.
2. Eradicate any unwholesome thoughts that have already arisen.

3. Increase the arising of wholesome thoughts.
4. Maintain wholesome thoughts that have already arisen.

The four aspects of Right Mindfulness:

1. Mindfulness of the body
2. Mindfulness of the feelings
3. Mindfulness of the mind/thoughts
4. Mindfulness of the Dhamma

Right Concentration:

By applying sustained effort and attention to an object until one-pointedness concentration is achieved.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha teaches morality (sila), mental cultivation (samadhi) and wisdom (panna).

The core of the Buddha's teachings is the cultivation of the mind. Mental cultivation purifies ourselves of our innate negative tendencies and helps us change those aspects of our life that often create sufferings for ourselves and others.

“One of the most important discoveries of our time is that human being, by changing the inner tendencies of our mind, can alter the outer aspects and circumstances of our lives.” – William James, psychologist.

In the “Tao Te Ching”:

“Small problems arise from big problems.
The wise take care of their small problems,
Thus they have no big problems.”

5.2 How to Transform Our Mind

A. Change to a more pro-active mindset/attitude

We like our comfort zones and would like to stay in our comfort zones. Our tendency to stay in our comfort zone is due to the mental tendencies and inclinations that we have accumulated through neglecting the mind.

Instead of letting our fate and destiny be determined by our lazy negative mental tendencies, choose to be proactive and take charge of your mind.

Understand fully that our wholesome thoughts must result in wholesome outcome, and unwholesome thoughts must result in unwanted outcome. This is a natural, impersonal law.

*“Two men looked out from a prison bar,
One saw mud, the other saw stars.”*

B. Work consciously to guard our mind and re-train our mental habits

We are constantly being bombarded by negative messages from the people and environment around us. Thus, we need to guard our mind.

Be highly aware of what we allow to pass through our conscious mind to our subconscious mind. Remember your conscious mind's role as a gatekeeper and make it work harder for you.

As a child, we were helpless by the negative bombardments that come our way because we did not know any better. As an adult, we have a choice to stop accepting all these negative inputs. Make your conscious mind be an active gatekeeper.

C. Increase Your Mindfulness (Self Awareness)

Mindfulness or self-awareness can be increased through proper cultivation of the mind. Below are some suggestions: Meditation

- Self reflection
- Journalling
- Johari Window

Points to remember:

- Work at both the subconscious and conscious levels
- Change the innate tendencies of our lazy and careless mind
- Persist in reframing, re-patterning, re-programming the mind
- Stop negative thoughts, encourage positive thoughts
- Repetitive until new habit is cultivated

D. Understanding change

All change starts with overcoming resistance, our comfort zones. So we can expect to feel uncomfortable in the beginning of our practice, but as we continue to practice, it progressively becomes more comfortable.

E. Passionate about Transformation

- Adding an element of emotion or passion into your transformation gives it added power.
- Try to visualise the end-result of your goal

F. Your Word is your Bond

- Note the many and frequent negative words we use in daily life, especially with our children.
- Consciously change to using more positive words.
- The word “cannot” is a reflection of our beliefs, and if we allow it to seep into our subconscious mind, we’ll convince ourselves that we “cannot” do a lot of things.

G. Let Go and Let God

- Have faith in the Universal Law.
- Do not worry about the “how” and “how to”.
- Believe it and you will see it.

H. Persistency and Discipline

- There is a time lag from thought manifestation to physical manifestation. By persisting and having faith in the Universal Law, you will reap what you sow.

I. Getting Help From Your Subconscious:

Autosuggestion

a. Write down a suggestion you want to feed to your subconscious mind. Review it carefully and make sure your words are safe and effective.

Example:

Every moment, my infinite intelligence is guiding, directing and prospering me spiritually, mentally, bodily and materially.

b. Memorise it.

c. Suggest it to yourself three times a day for one month. Choose a time when you will not be disturbed. Sit or lie down comfortably and relax yourself from head to toe. The more relax you are, the easier it is for your subconscious to get the imprint.

d. Watch the change or effect.