

The Challenge of Practicing with Illness

by Rodney Smith

This winter I had a conversation with a meditator who had the flu. Apologetically she mentioned she was too weak to sit in formal practice. I asked if she could use her illness to practice dying rather than attempting to sit in meditation. That startled her, and she said she didn't feel she could muster the energy for that practice. I asked how much energy did she think she would have when she actually did die, and if she were waiting for sufficient energy, wasn't she assuming she would die under normal and healthy circumstances. She asked how to practice dying, and I suggested totally surrendering to the conditions of her body. Such surrender does not require energy but the release of all resistance to the illness.

Our faith is severely challenged when our health and physical body is limited. It exposes our fragile and uncertain place on earth. We may hold a strong conviction that health is our birthright. Illness is seen as a personal setback because it limits our power and reminds us we are not in control. Since our self-image is often founded on vitality and strength, illness represents the shadow of decay and incapacity. Some philosophies even make illness a personal fault, a weakness of character, attitude, or way of thinking.

At best, we view illness as an imposition on our life. It is often considered a "dharma downtime" where awareness and insight are postponed until we are back on our feet and able to give spiritual inquiry the energy it deserves. When practice is dependent upon the conditions of health, we are essentially saying it is only possible when we are in control and everything is going according to our plan. We easily forget the many times in life when chaos reigns and practice is the only steady point we have within confusion. If we postpone practice during the difficult times, we may forget that practice is to free us from all forms of dependency.

Healing does not depend upon waging a ferocious battle against our limitations. "He fought a good fight" is the noble refrain when someone dies after a prolonged illness, as if struggle and worry were more honorable than mental ease. It is possible to relax into illness. Though this may be difficult when our energy is waning, relaxation is the practice of letting conditions be as they are. Resistance is what asserts our power

over the world, but relaxation is what realigns us to the power of nature. Through relaxation we surrender to mental well-being regardless of the condition of the body. We may believe that surrender is giving up, but overcoming illness does not need our struggle. In one sense it is “giving up”: we give our healing over to powers unseen, to forces unknown. Our mental exertion to heal is often in direct opposition to these natural forces of healing.

Does this mean we reject all outside interventions to heal? Of course not—it simply means dropping the fear and inward tension that forces a mental illness on top of the physical one. Healing ultimately is wholeness of mind. When the mind is fractured and waging war on the body, there is much more than our physical health at stake. Our spiritual integrity is at risk. To lose that is to lose everything, even if our bodies return to health.

Illness is inevitable. It is not a failure of mind or body. When we view nature, we see everything falling into decay. Is it the birthright of a tree to be without a gnarl or blight? Is it the birthright of the forest for timbers not to fall? Is it our birthright to remain forever healthy and unblemished? Awareness is our birthright; everything else, including our health, is in transition.

May all beings be at ease with the conditions of their bodies.