

**A Conversation Regarding the Application of the Antidote and Developing the Mind Versus
Watching the Mind**

Thoughts Regarding the Place of the DBT Wave Skill in the Gradual Development towards Enlightenment, and on the Traps of the Practice of Watching the Disturbing Thoughts

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Mr Smith's Query¹

In your most recent teaching to us at the Shantideva Discovering Buddhism group, you made a very important point about the possible harms of practicing merely being mindful of the afflictions that arise to the mind. You gave a very compelling explanation of how practicing in this way not only does not help the afflictions go away any faster, but furthermore amounts to making the mind "rehearse" those afflictions again and again, making them increase, and making it harder for the mind to try to resist them in the future.

As I listened to your explanation, I could not help but thoroughly agree with it from a logical point of view. But at the same time, I felt quite torn, because the way I was understanding your point seemed to raise serious qualms about certain methods of Western psychological intervention which in my experience truly can be extremely beneficial for reducing negative emotions. I personally believe that many methods of Western psychotherapy are at odds with the Buddha's teaching and are not actually effective, so my concern is not on the theoretical level—I am referring specifically to a very specific technique that (I believe!) I have seen work many times, and which I have experienced benefit from myself many times.

The technique in question is perhaps best exemplified in something called the "wave skill," which is one of many techniques used in a form of psychotherapy called DBT.

DBT ("Dialectical Behavior Therapy") was designed to help people suffering from severe emotional dysregulation, often leading to suicidality, but it is increasingly being found to be helpful for all sorts of different mental health disorders, and even for the daily emotional ups and downs of people without mental health diagnoses. The wave skill basically involves allowing ourselves to experience whatever negative emotion is arising within us without trying to fight it, but merely trying to notice it without projecting our judgments upon it. Instead of focusing, for example, on the thought, "I am so angry with that idiot for having done that," one would focus on the thoughts, "I am experiencing the thought that that person is an idiot; I am experiencing a hot feeling in my chest; I am experiencing tension in my muscles; I am experiencing a wish to yell at that person," etc. One is furthermore encouraged to accept these experiences in the present moment, even as one wishes to change them as soon as possible. This technique is called the "wave" skill because when one practices it one invariably notices that the emotional experiences that one often assumes are steady and unchanging as long as they last actually rise and fall in intensity from moment to moment like waves.

¹ Changed from actual name to protect the persons privacy. Distributed with the persons permission.

Initial Thoughts by Illusory Fedor

Dear Mr. Smith,

it would be hard for me to write a comprehensive essay on the topic, but I shall insert answers below, and also first list perhaps pertinent points.

As initial information: What I taught that evening and am teaching generally is the result of my own experience, the teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and a conversation I had with Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Different Patients

Reading through your notes it clarified for me that you and me are dealing with different “patients”, different states of mind, and different motivations.

I am teaching in the context of a person who wants to totally purify the mind of afflictions and obscurations, or who at least has some notion of the concept and is already committed to, or has propensity for the buddhist path. In my personal practice I am challenging the most profound afflictions, such as sexual desire, desire for sensory input, desire for material wealth, reputation, recognition and the like.

In the context of anger, also here the aim is to rid the mind of the generality of anger, something probably not attempted in psychology, where the issues are probably certain instances of anger, and the issue of managing anger.

You are probably dealing with a person who is only coming to psychology because of dire malfunctioning in daily life. They would not necessarily have an interest in spiritual development, never to mention liberation and enlightenment.

The Buddhist Model

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths as the basic blue print for the path to enlightenment. The basis to be transformed is our mind, and the four noble truths clearly delineate what is contained in cyclic existence and has to be abandoned and what is contained in the pure truth and is to be generated.

The idea of spiritual success is not the struggle with the afflictions and not to succumb to the affliction, but for the affliction not to be generated in the first place. The struggle happens initially a lot when the afflictions are strong, and the antidotes weak, but also to win the struggle, one needs a slightly stronger antidote.

The antidotes are the different cognitions explained in the Lam Rim and the treatises, such as the cognitions of impermanence, impurity, suffering and selflessness. These need to be generated very powerfully in the mind.

Perhaps a good analogy here is the one of a drug addict. It is possible to overcome the addiction, but for this to happen the mind that says “No”, to the drug is essential. This mind, that clearly, decisively and actually says “No” to the drug, the counter-positive, needs to be generated and then sustained and increased.

To generate these minds, which say “No” to attachment, anger and ignorance, we have a battery of methods in buddhism, that facilitate their development, such as purification, accumulation of merit, prayers to the buddhas etc. Without this mind saying “No”, simply watching the craving arise and being there, the craving will sooner or later overwhelm the mind once again, and one finds oneself in the “I cannot help myself” situation.

This “I cannot help myself situation” is very pervasive, and the cause for much suffering.

The buddhist model differs strongly from the psychological model in that in buddhism it is possible totally purify the mind of the craving eventually. It is also possible for the “person” to change, or to change the person.

My Path

When I started out in the dharma, for some reason I had this idea very strong in my mind that by detaching from and watching the negative thoughts and emotions, they would eventually pass by themselves, leaving a clean clear mind that can abide in its natural state.

For some reason, which I think has to do with karma, this was a fixed and yet partially unconscious idea of mine, despite having on the other hand knowledge of the system of the antidote, and also trying to generate and apply the antidotes.

The karmic loss that I experienced due to this concept, as well as the mental difficulties, are incalculable.

I want to insert here, that this type of watching and letting go meditation does indeed exist. However, it exists effectively only for a person whose mind has already been profoundly purified by the antidotes, and where the mind is already resting 99% in its natural state, i.e., from the eighth stage of calm abiding it is taught that should disturbing thoughts arise,

all the Yogi needs to do is observe this thought, will it to go away, and the thought will dissolve back into the ocean of consciousness.

On the lower stages of calm abiding the advice how to deal with discursive thought is: First try and see whether you can let it go without changing the object, and if you cannot let it simply go, but it is a persistent disruption, then apply the antidote.

In none of the two situations is will be the main meditation however.

For our mind, where we have not really any space free from afflictions, which is the meaning of abiding in its natural state, this advice is not applicable. Not only is our mind populated very densely by the afflictions, these afflictions do not have that nature of arising gently and then floating away like clouds in the sky. They arise intensely, obsessively, and they have the nature of fighting back violently without adhering to any rules, like a extremely strong and resilient, mean, skilled and utterly ruthless street fighter, whose only objective is to survive and to dominate us, regardless of the harm we receive.

To get back to the negative experiences and harm I received from the practice of watching the afflictions and waiting for them to dissolve or go away on their own accord, I do not want to get into the story of my life, but I am going to list three essential points:

1. Falling Into the Same Hole Over and Over Again

For years I practiced being aware of the triggers of my negative emotions and watching/ observing them arise. I then observed the emotion develop and becoming stronger, to finally take over my mind. Once this happens, something changes in the mind, and while aware of the process, I could not stop it, and had to act on the affliction. I had no power in my mind to counteract the affliction. Actually, once the affliction takes over the mind, a change overcomes the mind, and it seems the natural and reasonable thing to do is to act upon the affliction.

This process happened repeatedly, and while definitely not being a mindfulness practitioner per se, considering myself more someone following the LamRim and Textual Philosophic tradition, there was one part in my mind that simply could not believe why the simple observance of the process did not become the antidote. It was like a fixation in my mind, and the process repeated itself to many times to count over two decades.

I have met one other person who had the same problem, and I think in general the “always falling again into the same hole” is a widely shared experience.

Our kind teacher Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been teaching always the necessity of not simply being aware of the affliction, but of keeping awareness of the antidote. I had a discussion with Rinpoche regarding this point and he said: "If you keep mindfulness of the Lam Rim, the affliction will not arise in the first place."

Then I understood what he meant, and from this I also understood later the nature of the buddhist path. The affliction will not go just by itself, but can only be stopped by generating the counter-positive force in our mind, such as compassion against anger, impermanence against attachment, and wisdom against ignorance. Instead of putting effort into being mindful of things, and obsessively observing, it is better to put most of the effort into generating the antidotes in the mind, and keeping them there with mindfulness. This is how we become enlightened.

2. Not Being Able to Actually Let Go of Negative Thoughts

Because of this obsession of observing thoughts and understanding my thought processes, I continuously revisited them, creating the same negative karmas over and over again, just to understand the same thing about myself over and over again.

If the mind abides on the antidote, in that moment it does not abide on the negativity, one has actually let go and so one can be done with the negativity and move on.

3. Loosing the Ability to Say "No" to Negative Emotions

This headline speaks for itself. Waiting for the affliction to arise, and then observing it, one relinquishes control of ones mind to the affliction, and it sets up a pattern that makes it even harder to say "No" to the affliction

The Conversation Continues

The DBT Wave Skill

My own experience has been that practicing in the way of the DBT Wave Skill often actually helps the negative emotions to go away faster. Several times, in my experience with my clients, this has also seemed to be one of the few techniques that would work to change one's emotions during a moment of "emotional crisis."

I think one thing you have to ask yourself: Does this proclamation of the positive effect come because occasionally one has seen some positive effect, or because it brings with it is a deep and consistent ability to counteract the affliction, or even to change the mind?

So I was very concerned, and confused, by the apparent discrepancy I sensed between my own observations in this regard and the logical conclusions that seemed to follow

from the points you raised in your teaching. For the last few weeks I have been devoting much thought to this, and have also discussed it with a few friends. This weekend, I finally had a thought about it that seemed like a "breakthrough," and seemed to resolve the question for me. I thought I might run it by you to get your insight as to whether this seems to be accurate. I don't want to be practicing a destructive technique, let alone teaching my clients and friends to do so!

Below are my thoughts, exactly as I wrote them down when they occurred to me. They concern the concept of "secondary emotions," which refers to emotions one experiences ABOUT other emotions one is experiencing. For example, many people, when they start to feel angry, immediately start to feel guilty about being angry. Or again, many people, when something makes them sad, start getting angry about the fact that they are sad. Secondary emotions often build upon each other, such that one feels guilty about being angry about being sad, and so forth. One can then easily get so caught up in this emotional mess that one feels unable to untangle oneself. (I don't know if this sounds silly, but there is much evidence to confirm that these emotional situations really arise, and that they are not rare.)

Sounds reasonable and realistic to me.

My own experience has been that when there is a secondary emotion involved, trying to "fight" the primary emotion (the one that came first and triggered the secondary one) tends to make matters worse, because it makes the person feel invalidated, which almost always tends to exacerbate feelings of anger and guilt, and consequently lead to avoidance of any further discussion or efforts to change—both in the long-term and in the short-term. The degree to which this holds true would probably vary greatly from person to person, but it seems to be very true among those who have extreme sensitivity to emotional stimuli.

In fact, DBT was created because no other type of therapy had been found to be helpful for people with extreme emotional dysregulation. Therapies that challenged these clients' experience too strongly would make their symptoms worse and drive the clients away; therapies that focused only on validating their experiences got them nowhere, of course, and made them frustrated, and drove them away as well. It was only in the 1990's that a psychologist named Marsha Linehan came up with the idea for DBT, which uses many techniques which borrow heavily from the Zen tradition, and which is based on the premise of finding a "dialectic" or a balance between SIMULTANEOUSLY accepting and validating one's current reality and constantly pushing oneself to change and improve. (This is the main dialectic in Dialectical Behavior Therapy: the dialectic of simultaneous acceptance and change.) Countless scientific studies in the last twenty years have found that DBT is extremely powerful in healing those with emotional dysregulation.

If it is proven to work for these patients, I do not see any issue.

It is important to note that DBT would not suggest that acceptance of current emotions (such as through using the "wave skill") is enough on its own—it is considered only a first step to get one to an emotional state of enough balance that one can work on a deeper level to change one's emotional patterns. Likewise, an important point made in DBT is that working only to pacify secondary emotions can never be enough, because it will never lead to any alteration in the patterns that bring up the primary emotions that set the whole problem off in the first place. Thus, DBT insists that we need to work on both primary and secondary emotions—though, arguably, during the peak moment of an emotional crisis we may need to work on the secondary emotions first so that we are able to address the primary emotions without the mind strongly fighting back.

My question, then, is: Would a technique such as the wave skill fall under the category of "being mindful of the afflictions?" If so, is it necessarily a destructive practice—or is it possible that it may be a case of skillfully choosing the lesser of two evils in order to be able to move forward to a truly beneficial practice?

Even if all of the above holds true, it could be argued that the above considerations only apply to those who have significant emotional dysregulation or extreme emotional sensitivity. My thought is that this is probably true, so long as we understand that these things exist as continua, rather than as all-or-nothing "types" (i.e., it is not that a given person either has or does not have extreme emotional dysregulation, but rather that different people might have it to different degrees, and even this might vary based on circumstance and type of trigger). Still, I get the sense that SOME level of this is not rare at all, at least in the United States today.

My own personal thought is that the role of clinical psychology is to help bring people to a level of functioning in which they are able to make full use of the opportunities of a perfect human rebirth. My understanding is that to the degree that emotional disturbances are significantly interfering with one's functioning, it will be very difficult for one to practice the Dharma correctly. So I wonder whether such techniques as the wave skill may have a place in helping those who suffer from chronic emotional dysregulation, or even in helping all of us during our occasional moments of severe emotional dysregulation.

Again, my original thoughts are below. I would be extremely appreciative of any insight you may be able to share about whether these ideas make sense or whether it seems I am on the wrong track.

With many, many thanks,

Mr Smith

Further Comments by Illusory Fedor

As touched on above, the non-buddhist patient just wants some functionality in their lives initially. I do not know whether the idea of getting rid of the primary affliction would be part of their motivation. So the distancing and observing would not be seen as a final antidote to the afflictions, but as a temporary aid to get some space.

As it says in the teachings on calm abiding, if one can simply let go of the disturbing emotion, then that is better, because one does not need to change the primary object of meditation. But if it is persistent, the heavy guns need to be brought out.

First of all, the practice in question is not actually mindfulness OF the afflictions that arise. THAT would certainly lead to nothing but reinforcement of those afflictions. Rather, the practice is to focus on the afflictions AS mere phenomena that arise and disappear, and to do this within a stance of non-judgmentally.

☞ What I would question here strongly is: Do the afflictions really go away simply by watching? I seriously doubt this. The afflictions that give us trouble, such as addictions, or choleric anger, will they simply pass?

☞ Will the pedophile or the serial adulterer be able to simply let go of their craving?

☞ Also, perhaps a good and important point: Does one focus on the affliction, and watch it disappear, like a leaf being blown into the distance, or is the mind focussed on the clarity of the mind, i.e., another object, and because of this the affliction is let go?

☞ Non-judgmentally: What I discovered in buddhism is a high level of skill, with eye at the final result of getting rid of the affliction. Those who are too overwhelmed by guilt to practice are being put at ease. Those who are totally reckless and do not care at all are being confronted with the suffering results of their actions.

Initial Summary by Mr. Smith

Now, what has been bothering me these last several weeks has been the apparent incompatibility between (1) Venerable Fedor's seemingly undeniable point that merely doing this (in the absence of having attained shamatha) cannot be enough to make the afflictions go away, and (2) my own experience that merely doing this DOES seem to make the afflictions go away. How to resolve this contradiction, which involves such a fundamental distinction between two seemingly opposite approaches to a most crucial and pervasive practice?

The answer seems to be this: Nonjudgmental mindfulness of the afflictions as mere phenomena that arise and disappear indeed does NOT act as an antidote against those afflictions. However, it DOES act as an antidote against any SECONDARY EMOTIONS that are accompanying those afflictions! And when in a certain circumstance our emotional reaction to something is particularly sensitive and intense, we often find (in my experience) that we cannot counteract an undesired primary emotion until we have pacified the accompanying secondary emotions.

Still, remember that DBT points out that it is NOT ENOUGH merely to target our secondary emotions all the time, as this will never allow us to resolve the patterns that are leading to the arising of undesired primary emotions in the first place. This seems to be the key statement showing that the DBT stance and the Buddhist stance are in agreement.

Further hypotheses may include: (1) the secondary emotions are often pretty much the ONLY thing standing in our way of being able to effectively counter the primary emotions, and thus reducing these (e.g., through nonjudgmental mindfulness) often APPEARS to be enough to counteract the primary emotions themselves; (2) one very common reason why trying to counteract the primary emotions often only seems to exacerbate them is that this process is experienced as blatantly invalidating of those emotions; in this case, what nonjudgmental mindfulness does is VALIDATE the existence of those emotions and our experience of having those emotions, thus clearing the way for us to be able to counteract those emotions with their antidotes (without in any way thereby invalidating ourselves)!

It's almost as if what we were saying were this: FIRST OF ALL, stop judging yourself for feeling angry. NOW let's work on counteracting the anger.

☞ My general experience is the judging oneself does not counteract the affliction, and often leads to the “guilty chocolate” syndrome. What is necessary is a true repudiation of the affliction, a clean clear mind of renunciation.

Perhaps one more point: The “being patient” with afflictions, and not identifying them as the enemy, is identified in the treatises as one main cause for us having so many and strong afflictions. One reason why this point is so important is because after all the self-involvement, the guilt and shame etc., the individual finds that deep down they actually do not want to change the primary affliction at all.

All the guilt etc., is just a smoke screen thrown up by ignorance, and after the dust has settled, nothing changes, and ignorance wins once again.

While it is true, from a Buddhist point of view, that in each moment that we are focusing on the first of these two steps we are indeed further reinforcing our habit of experiencing anger (since the anger continues in our mind throughout that time), it is the insight of DBT that this is often a price we must pay, since to refuse to do so would simply not work, but would instead lead us to feel INCREASINGLY angry and to eventually give up the practice altogether, thus making things even worse for ourselves.

Still, it is crucial to remember, from a Buddhist perspective, that we should not "accept" anger TO SUCH A DEGREE that we give up on the intention to counteract it as skillfully as we can in each circumstance. (In other words, perhaps, what we need to accept in many situations is that I cannot counteract the anger by applying the antidote RIGHT THIS SECOND, and that doing so will only make the situation worse; and so, for the time being, I have to let go and try to validate myself and use mindfulness in order to prevent the SECONDARY emotions from getting out of control; but the moment the circumstance changes such that applying the antidote would be an effective technique, THAT becomes the crucial thing to do.)

Summary by Illusory Fedor

Perhaps to sum it up, if the method works for your patients on the level desired, then I think that is a good and valuable thing. And it looks like the rest is also in principle and steps in accordance with the Buddhist path in general.

At the start of the meditation one is encouraged to meditate for a few minutes on the coming and going of the breathing, to bring the mind to a neutral state. The analogy used is the one of a person sitting on a chair oneself wants to sit on. By distracting the attention of the person, and telling them of something desirable over there, they will get up, and oneself can take a seat. By “distracting” the mind to the coming and going of the breathing, the mind lets go of the anger or attachment thought. Then one can use this stability to meditate on other aspects of the Lam Rim.

Personally I am doubtful that the awareness meditation alone is as successful as claimed or propagated, because I know of the tendency to exaggerate small successes. But if the person skillfully trains in letting go, perhaps they become more and more skilled in it. In my experience/opinion, this letting go does not work so easily with the afflictions that bother us, precisely because they are so strong and persistent.

So, meditation on the coming and going of the breathing, or clarity of the mind, which seems to be the DBT method, is definitely in accordance with the very beginning of the buddhist path. You can meditate that by teaching this to others, you are starting to guide them on the path to enlightenment, by giving them this first micro-millimeter, which is perhaps all they have karma for in this life, and that you will look after them in all future lives up to enlightenment.

After the meditation on the coming and going of the breathing, or clarity of the mind, I think it is good to have something else, which will counteract the affliction to arise. I also doubt that in the midst of busy daily life the meditation on clarity in the here and now is a reasonable option. Even in the life of a monk it would not really be.

There are also things about the afflictions that may be not clearly understood, such as the afflictions tendency to have a life on their own, and to fight back. It is said that if one progresses, the afflictions become stronger at first.

One also needs flexibility, as even for one person the same method may not work all the time. In my case generally I find it necessary and better to identify the affliction as the enemy, and to clearly counteract it. However, on occasion it happens that the letting go method is necessary, because for some reason the direct application of the antidote makes things worse. It could be also the other way around I think.

For yourself, I strongly recommend you to apply the four points of purifying etc, and also to investigate the emptiness of the self, to get experience.

I also want to thank you for your very good questions and that you did come to me with it. It is a very important and crucial topic, and while generally being deluded, I have tried to do it justice in the time I have.

very best, fEdor

Subsequent Summary by Mr Smith:

P.S.: I certainly do not ask you to spend any more time on this at this time, but since I already wrote down some of my thoughts based on your clarification anyway, I am copying it below.

My current thought: Familiarize your mind with the antidotes when the affliction is not strongly arising, and when if the affliction arises strongly, then before the emotion becomes too strong to counter, apply the antidote. It is only if you are too late--if the emotion has already overtaken your mind beyond your power to change--that the "wave" skill should be applied, because at this point the most effective thing to do is to try to validate your mind and allow it to relax, as if it were a person enraged to the point of insanity, whom you have to calm down before you have any hope of reasoning with them. In short, the "wave" skill is only to be used in moments of emotional emergencies. It can be useful in alleviating the worst heat of the crisis for that moment, but it does not cut the problem away from the root, and it does not decrease the chance or frequency or intensity of the same type of crisis arising again in the future. Therefore, it is best if we practice accustoming our mind to the antidote so that we never get into the situation where we need to use the "wave" skill in the first place, but if we do get into such a situation, then the way to use it is to apply it just until the mind has calmed down enough to be able to "listen to reason" on some level, and then to apply the actual antidote from that point on. (For example, if somebody asks for advice on how to relieve fear of flying, we could teach them the true antidote of selflessness for the long term, or an intermediary antidote of different types of meditation for the short term. But if they only ask for this advice in the very moment they are embarking on the plane, then it is probably too late for them to derive immediate benefit from such types of practice. Then I think the best thing to do is to quickly teach them the "wave" skill to use to get them through this flight, and then teach them the real antidotes as soon as they land on the solid earth once again and have had a moment to take a deep breath and calm down...)