

## Spring 2005: Depression

*Question: I've been practicing in the Theravada tradition for six years. About seven years ago I was diagnosed with dysthymia (chronic mild depression), which occasionally escalates into full-blown depression. About two and a half years ago I began taking anti-depressant medication to control the deeper depressive episodes. The first medication I tried helped for a while and then seemed to quit. The one I'm using now keeps the deep depression at bay but I think it's destroying my mind. I'm finding it difficult to concentrate, my memory is deteriorating, and I'm becoming somewhat apathetic.*

*My state of mind is interfering with my meditation practice. My doctor wants me to give the medication another three months, but I'm afraid my mind will become mush and there will be no hope for my enlightenment in this life.*

*Since becoming a Buddhist, I've wanted to ordain in the Theravada tradition and devote the remainder of my life to intensive practice. But I'm married. I'm also concerned that my current state of mind would lead to failure as a monastic. Any ideas?*

**Narayan Liebenson Grady:** As a meditation teacher who has worked with students facing depression, I know that the relationship between medication and meditation is complex. Medication can help people enormously, but its long-term effect is an area of ongoing investigation in the medical field. In speaking with both medical professionals and practitioners who are taking antidepressants, I understand that the correct dosage is critical.

Recently a practitioner who is a psychiatrist suggested a book to me called ***Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Depression***, which seems to shed some light on the issue. In it author John Teasdale points out that an increasing number of studies are showing that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, applied in conjunction with medication, can be far more effective in treating depression than medication alone.

You seem to be thinking in extremes and contradictions (destroying your mind/seeking enlightenment; being married/wanting to ordain; failing as a monastic when you are not a monastic), which points to being out of balance. So right now you might want to emphasize whatever brings you into balance. Specifically, you might direct your attention toward developing steadiness and contentment in your everyday life, rather than focusing on possible future ordination.

The monastic life is a calling, suitable for some and not for others. Thoughts about ordaining can be simply an escape if one is not exploring them for the right reasons. From what you say, it sounds like ordination is not possible now, nor is it necessarily advisable.

Rather than valuing "intensive" practice, what about a more relaxed and dedicated practice? The aspiration to devote the rest of your life to practice is wonderful. But instead of hoping for enlightenment, it may be wiser to commit yourself to the slow and difficult yet utterly meaningful work of living your life where you are and being as mindful as you can be from moment to moment. This truly would be an intensive practice!

Finally, as you begin to build a dedicated practice, you might find it helpful to be part of a community of practitioners. Having contact with others can not only provide a great sense of

support, it can also help bring about a greater sense of perspective. By practicing with others, for example, you will quickly realize that the difficulties you have concentrating are normal. It is not unique to face such difficulties after only six years of practice.

Remember, practice is a lifelong journey; by sitting in a community of supportive practitioners we strengthen our own resolve to keep practicing, no matter how difficult the challenges we face. May you know ease of mind and comfort of heart.