Quality

April 13, 2005

When you want to gain knowledge that’s certain and sure, you have to start out by asking yourself, “What do you already know that’s certain and sure?” Sitting right here, right now, what do you know? You know that you have memories and you know that you have expectations. But how true are they? Even your memories are uncertain. They say that every time you pull a memory out of your mind, you make use of it. When you put it back in, if you’ve changed it in any way, that change is going to be permanent. So even your memories aren’t sure, and your anticipations of the future, those are totally unknowable. So you don’t have much. All you have is what you know right here, right now. You’ve got the body sitting here, you’ve got the breath, and you’ve got the mind that’s both thinking and aware. That’s what you know. As for anything that goes out of that, you don’t know that for sure. So stick with just what you know. Bring all these things together. And as for anything else, just keep reminding yourself, “I don’t know that. I don’t know that.” What’s going to happen in the next few minutes? You don’t know. Use this as your razor to shave off all the extraneous thoughts that can get in the way. Because all too often when you sit and meditate, all your anticipations that you want things to be like this, you want things to be like that, how much longer are you going to be able to take this meditation? All these things are unknowable. So shave them away, because they distract you. Once you’re distracted, then you get carried away from what you really can know for sure, and get carried off into lots of unknowable things. So when these voices come up, “Well, what about this? What about that?” Just say, “I don’t know. I don’t know.” How much longer are you going to sit here? “I don’t know.” How long have you been sitting here already? “I don’t know.” If there’s a pain someplace, how much longer is it going to last? You don’t know. How long has it lasted so far? You don’t really know. Our eagerness to pin things down means that we often pin down things that are uncertain. Of course, they don’t stay pinned down. But once we have them on a leash and they start stirring around, they get us stirred around as well. So let them go. As Ajahn Lee once said, “Big things come from small things.” The training of the mind is really big, which means that you have to be very careful about the small things, the small steps. It’s like physics. If you understand the atom, you understand a lot of other things as well. Then you have to keep looking back into the atom. This is what all the great physicists do. They keep going back to first principles, the tiny building blocks, and look at them again and again and again. They keep finding new things they missed the last time around because they had brought all these presuppositions along with them the last time they looked. Keep things small. Keep things focused right here. As for everything else, just let it be as uncertain, as unknowable. Or even if it is knowable, you just don’t know it at the time being. So let it be. Let it be. If you’re trying to take on too many things all at once, Ajahn Lee has the analogy of starting an orchard. You’ve got a large piece of land, so you mow the whole thing, and you plant the whole thing in trees. It turns out that there’s a drought, and so everything dies. The best way to do it is to start small. Plant only the part that you can manage. Then, as the trees give fruit, you can take the seeds from the fruits and plant those. Ultimately, the orchard will grow bit by bit by bit. And you won’t have overextended yourself. Things that grow slowly tend to be solid. Look at the trees around here. The big pine trees, the ones that we planted a few years ago, are huge pine trees now. Those are the first ones to fall down in the wind because they grew too fast. So content yourself with growing slowly. An important part of the practice is that you be willing to be patient. Take things step by step by step, because that’s where the knowledge comes. One of Lumpu Dune’s teachings was in response to people who meditate a little bit and want to get fast results and want to see fast results. He says the purpose of meditation isn’t to see the results; it’s to build the qualities of mind—patience, endurance, restraint. And it’s those qualities that bring the results, not your desire for fast results or your efforts to push things fast. This is why the Dhamma is so amazing. It requires really good qualities of mind in order to know it. You can’t be known by people who don’t have those qualities of mind. So work on the quality, not on the quantity. You’ve got one good moment of meditation, that’s a good thing. And then you try to string it up to the next one moment of meditation, and then the next, and then the next. Take it step by step by step. Be very observant. Observe each step. That’s where quality comes from. It doesn’t come from taking on a whole lot of things all at once. It’s like the avocados here in the orchard. Suppose there were only one avocado in the whole world. Think of what price it would get. As opposed to the times of the year when they’re just dumping avocados. You’ve got a lot of things going on in your mind. None of them has any particular quality, any particular value. It’s when you have only one thing going on. That’s when it has price.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2005/050413%20Quality.mp3>