Your Inner Teacher

November 21, 2005

When you listen to a Dhamma talk while you’re meditating, don’t put much energy into the listening. Put most of the energy into the meditating. Otherwise, the talk interferes with your meditating, which is not what we want. The talk is here to act as a fence. If your mind wanders off the breath, if it wanders away from your body, here’s the sound of the talk to send you back, to remind you of why you’re meditating, and sometimes to point out things that you might not have thought of otherwise. But still, the talk is meant to be here in the background. If there’s anything that’s really relevant to your meditation, it’ll come in. You recognize it immediately. And you should put it to use immediately. Don’t try to store it away. Because old insights tend to get old pretty fast. Especially insights that are not really relevant for what you’re doing right now. Maybe those comments are meant for somebody else. Maybe the person giving the talk means them for himself. So it’s not that you have to catch everything that comes in the talk. Just make note of the things that are really useful, put them to use, and see what results you get. Because one of the most important skills in the meditation is training yourself to be your own teacher, your own observer, your own advisor. The role of the teacher is to eventually fade in the background. As your own internal teacher gets more and more skilled, more and more reliable, what this requires is that you learn to be really observant. Observant of your intentions, observant of their results. And that you use your ingenuity. When issues come up that you haven’t dealt with before, what of your past experiences is going to be useful, is going to be helpful? Ingenuity doesn’t make up things out of whole cloth. It takes old things and rearranges them. John Foon once said of his experience as a teacher, those seven steps in the Ajahn Lee’s Method Two, what are the basic principles that he worked with? He said, “Any issue that comes up in the course of concentration practice can be related to one of those seven steps.” So keep those in mind as your basic principles. A problem comes up and one of those seven is lacking, and all you have to do is figure out which one and work out variations on how to apply it. Because the principles admit of a lot of variation. So it’s not like you’re cast out at sea with nothing to hold on to. You’ve got these instructions. But the ways of the mind are many, and there are a lot more ins and outs to the mind than there are ins and outs to the breath. But they don’t lie beyond your power as a human being to observe them, if you take the time, if you pay attention. The Buddha once said of people, “It takes time to know them.” And not just time, you have to be observant. He said if you want to know a person’s virtue, you have to live with that person for a long time and be very observant. If you want to know that person’s purity, in other words, the person’s honesty, uprightness, you have to have dealings with that person. You’ve got over a long period of time and you have to be very observant. If you want to know a person’s powers of endurance, powers of resilience, you have to see that person dealing with difficult situations. And again, over a long period of time, and you have to be observant. If you want to know a person’s discernment, you have to see how that person deals with a question. The question needs to be rephrased if the question needs to be put aside, answered with a counter-question, or given just a plain old straight answer. That’s how you can get a sense of the person’s powers of discernment. But again, it takes time and you have to be observant. The same qualities, or the same requirements, apply to yourself. It’s amazing how many of us can go through life and not really know our own minds. When we talk about the subconscious, it’s not one big cellar out of which monsters sometimes creep up through the heat registers or up through the stairway. What it basically means is events that go on in the mind that you’re not paying attention to, or that you sometimes consciously or subconsciously, willfully, ignore. They get into denial. This is why it’s so difficult to train the mind. The mind does have this tendency to denial, to block things out. What we’re doing as we meditate is putting the mind in a good place so it can begin to look at these things for what they are and not have that immediate aversion that makes us block them out. But it takes time and you have to be observant. In this way, you begin to know the virtue and the purity and the endurance and the discernment of your own mind, in the same way that you try to get to know somebody else. This is why meditation takes so much time. But the important thing is that you do it in an attitude of goodwill. Just a few days ago, when we had that all-day course in Laguna, one of the women who’s been practicing meditation for years now said she finally had an insight into why there’s so much emphasis on goodwill. She thought it was self-indulgent. But then she realized that we make goodwill the basis for this practice because if the mind is going to understand itself it has to have goodwill for itself. If it’s going to deal with the difficult issues that it has inside, you have to do it in an atmosphere of goodwill. Basically, you’re working here for your own best interests. Everybody in the mind is trying to work together for your own best interests. When you have that attitude, then it’s a lot easier to deal with difficult issues as they come up. Just start looking at things that you’ve been hiding from yourself. This is one of the attributes of a good teacher. It’s an attribute of a good internal teacher, too, that you’re not afraid to look at things. You’re not afraid to call a spade a spade, because then you can figure out what to do with the spade. So, as you work on this internal teacher, try to develop this quality of being observant and being able to stick with things for a long period of time. Stick with a breath. Stick with your intention to be alert, to be mindful. Because in this way, you’re not afraid to call a spade a spade. The things that you observe, the insights that you gain, will not just be little dots here and there that you have to connect afterwards. All the lineaments will be there. All the lines will connect of their own, because you’re watching them. You’re with the line all the time. When you can make yourself a more reliable observer in this way, you become a more reliable person. And you become a more reliable teacher for yourself. That’s when you can become a reliable teacher for yourself. That’s when you can be helpful to other people as well. But it’s got to start within.

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