Look at Yourself

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The Buddha’s teachings are all about action, and particularly about your actions. What you do, the results you get, why you do those things, and how the results you get is determined by why you do those things. Which means that action is not just a matter of physical actions or the words you say, but it comes down to the actions of the mind. His teachings on suffering, his teachings on causality, are all aimed at understanding the actions of the mind, so you can learn how to master them. You learn how to act in such a way that ultimately you can get beyond action. And so the teachings point at your actions. The Buddha wants you to look at yourself, basically, and look at yourself in the sense of your actions. What are you doing? Why do you do it? What are the results that you get? This is why an important part of the training is learning how to be observant. We’re not just here going through motions or unthinkingly following instructions. The whole point of the instructions is that you start doing something and then you watch yourself do it. It’s like learning how to play a musical instrument. At first you’re taught how to play the scales, and then it’s a matter of following instructions. But ultimately you want to get to the point where you can listen to yourself play. Then learn from how you’ve played. So you’ve got three things going on—your intention and how you want to play, and then watching yourself as you actually play, and then listening to the results. The same principle applies to the mind. Being aware of your intentions, watching yourself as you try to put those intentions into practice, and then seeing what actually happens. Does the action follow your intention? And does it come out well? This is something you have to learn how to observe. This is why, in the forest tradition, so much time is spent on training the student to be observant. All my time with the Chan Fuyang, when I was his attendant, a lot of it depended on learning how to watch. To watch him and also to figure things out. He didn’t explain everything, as he once said. To study with him, you have to think like a thief. Don’t expect that everything was going to be handed to you on a platter. Thinking like a thief means you’re going to go down to this house and you want to steal something from the house. You can’t go up and ask the owners when they’re going to be away and where they keep their valuables. You have to figure out some way of noticing on your own. With the Chan Fuyang, it started out with simple things on the outside. When it was my job to clean up his hut, to arrange things on the porch outside the hut, he never told me where the right places were. If I put something in the wrong place, he’d pick it up and throw it. Not at me, but he’d throw it someplace. But he wouldn’t tell me where it belonged. After a while, I began to realize that if I was going to learn, I have to watch him. When he put things in order, where did he place things? After a while, I came to rely more and more on my own powers of observation. The purpose of all this is so you can start learning to apply those powers inside as well. Things on the outside may seem small, but they’re part of the training in the sense of learning how to watch, learning how to listen, observing, and not just going on your own preconceived notions. Observing yourself is a lot harder than observing things outside. The details of self-observation are even more minuscule than the things you have to learn outside. So you want to make it a habit as a meditator not only to watch your own mind, but also learn how to watch and listen outside. For instance, while we’re chatting, what’s the proper way to pronounce the words? Which syllables are long syllables? Which syllables are short syllables? Some of you have been chanting these syllables for years and still haven’t gotten it right. You don’t listen. And you may say, “Well, it’s minor. It’s small.” Well, as I said, the issues of the mind are even more small, more minute, and you have to take them very seriously. Just a little slip of an intention in the mind can make all the difference between whether your actions are skillful or not. So you start from the outside, learn to be observant outside, learn to listen, learn to watch, and then try to put what you’ve learned into practice and see if it works, see if it’s right. And if it’s not right, we’ll be willing to adjust it again. Try to be the type of person who’s always willing to learn, rather than the person who wants to be patted on the head all the time for having done everything right already. You have to look at yourself in action on the outside so that ultimately you can look at yourself in action on the inside. Because as a meditator, you have to learn how to observe yourself, not only while you’re meditating, but as you approach the meditation. Have a sense of knowing what kind of person you are, where your weak points tend to be, and always try to take those into consideration. If you know you’re the sort of person who tends to be complacent, okay, watch out for that. If you tend to be too hard on yourself, watch out for that as well. Complacency is essentially heedlessness, which, as the Buddha said, is the basis for all unskillful qualities. I mean, everything comes out of that. It doesn’t matter. This is too small. It doesn’t really matter. Lack of skill in all areas starts in that way. That article on the physical genius that appeared in the New Yorker years back pointed out the fact that people who are really good at a particular skill, one of the reasons that they’re good at it is because they are very alive to the dangers of not mastering the skill. If a brain surgeon knows a tiny slip of the knife can make the difference between a cure and a person who’s permanently paralyzed or whatever, they’re going to learn to be very skillful at guiding the knife. If you’re an airplane mechanic, if you realize, okay, one slip on the checkup on the airplane could kill people, so you want to be very skillful about the checkup to learn how to observe yourself. If you notice that you’re complacent, you’ve got to get more alive to the importance to be very observant, to be more on top of things. Because oftentimes, tiny slips of the knife in areas of sloppiness can start growing, and they affect everything you do. On the other hand, though, if you tend to be too hard on yourself, it gets debilitating. You have to learn how to be careful, but at the same time not get tied up in guilt, not get tied up in self-recrimination. As the Buddha once pointed out, loads and loads of remorse over past mistakes is not going to go back and erase the mistake. At the same time, it debilitates you in the present moment. It saps your energy to do the right thing now. So you have to ask yourself this habit you may have built up of being too self-critical. Where did you pick it up? Why do you feel you should continue in that way? Because sometimes we have a sense of self-worth, “At least I’m critical enough.” I can prove it by being really, really harsh on myself. But then you find yourself debilitating yourself that way. You’re less able to practice. So what this comes down to is learning how to step back and look at yourself, look at your actions. This is a lot of what the meditation is all about, that stepping back. Just because there’s a particular habit in your behavior or a particular thought pattern, it doesn’t mean you have to identify with it. This is the essence of the teaching on not-self—these many things that we identify with one way or another. If you want to see them clearly, you have to step back and say, “Well, what is going on here?” Look at it simply in terms of cause and effect. Stress arising, stress passing away. Attentions arising and having results. This is why the essence of the Buddha is awakening. It’s causality, dependent co-arising, learning how to look at things simply as events coming and going and see how they’re connected and figure out where in that connection you can make a difference for the better. So we focus on the breath as a way of providing ourselves with a place to step back. You’re with the breath. Notice how the breath feels in the different parts of the body. So when an emotion arises, you don’t have to get into the world of the emotion. Simply notice, how does it affect your hands? How does it affect your feet? Where is there tension in your arms or your legs or in your gut or in your chest? Look at it as a complex of physical and mental events, that factor independent co-arising of fabrication. There’s the breath, bodily fabrication. Then there are directed thoughts and acts of evaluation in the mind. When you pick up a topic and then you deal with it, you might worry it to death or simply evaluate it. Then there are the feelings and the perceptions that go along with it. Learn how to take your emotions apart in that way when they’re skilled. How do you breathe? What are you directing your thoughts to? How are you evaluating things? What are the standards you’re applying? Are they good standards? How do you perceive things? What are the physical and mental feelings of pleasure or pain or neutral feelings that come up with that? In other words, get the “I” out of there and just watch it as events. This is why the breath is so helpful. It gives you a physical point of reference so you can get out of your head and the back and forth that goes between laziness and self-incrimination. So you can look at events simply as events. That way it makes it a lot easier to see what was skillful and what was not skillful. Where does this come from? What can be changed so that the results get more in line with what you really want? This is why there’s so much value in staying with the teacher. You start looking at yourself from the teacher’s perspective. Hopefully it’s a good teacher. Someone whose perspective puts things into the proper light. I remember coming back to America with Ajahn Fu back in 1983. For me, it was a real revelation because I started seeing America through his eyes. I’d gotten to know him—at that time it was, what, seven years? I had developed a pretty good sense of his point of view as perspective. Then, suddenly, seeing him in America, looking at things that I had already taken for granted, and realizing how strange some of it may have seemed to him, noticing the things he appreciated and the things that he didn’t really care for, and even without his saying anything, I started seeing America in a different light as well. So when they talk about the importance of having a good teacher, this is a lot of it right there. It’s learning how to look at yourself through the teacher’s eyes, getting an outside perspective so that you can begin to step back and start observing things on your own as to what’s skillful and what’s not. Because even when you’ve picked up the teacher’s perspective, sometimes there’s a possibility that you didn’t understand it. You may have picked it up partially. But as you develop your own powers of observation, you can begin to make adjustments for yourself so that your powers of observation become more reliable, so that the things you see when you do step back become more and more useful. So learn how to look at yourself. Learn how to observe yourself to see what you do is getting good results and what you do that’s not. Learn to develop the maturity and the balance so that you don’t keep swinging back and forth between complacency and being too hard on yourself. This is where the maturity of the practice comes in. And this is why it’s a gradual path. Your powers of observation, your powers of evaluating things, your sense of what’s skillful and not is going to develop over time. It’s not an all-or-nothing affair. The important thing is that you keep at it and that you identify yourself with that desire always to be willing to learn. That will carry you through.

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