Self Knowledge

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When you meditate, you learn a lot about yourself. You sit here watching your mind as you go through the day. You should be watching what you do, what you say, what you think. And if you’re really alert and mindful, you see a lot of things happening. Things about yourself you never saw before. Some of them good, some of them not so good. As Ajahn Lee says, when you practice, you come to see your defilements. For many of us, that’s very discouraging. We don’t like the idea that the mind has defilements. We like to hear that the mind is naturally luminous, that the mind is naturally awakened. It’s simply all that horrible social conditioning that makes us unhappy. If we can get away from our social conditioning, everything will be fine. And that’s partly true and partly not. But one of the important things as you learn about yourself is not to fall in the pitfall of asking the wrong questions. The Buddha has a list of inappropriate questions, and right at the top is “Who am I? What am I?” Back in the Buddhist days, that was primarily a metaphysical question. What is yourself? What kind of being is this? Nowadays, though, it goes more into the direction of personality. What kind of person am I? Am I a good person, a bad person? Am I too talkative, not talkative enough? Am I too negative, too judgmental? And we come to meditation thinking, “Well, I should improve myself.” That means you’ve already answered that question of “What am I?” You don’t like the answer, so you want to do something to change “What am I?” But that kind of thinking gets you tied up in all kinds of tangles. Back in the Buddhist days, just the question of “What is a person?” would get people into huge discussions. Nowadays, it doesn’t excite much interest. But the question of “What kind of personality should a person have?” does excite a lot of interest. There’s even one teacher who’s come out with an enlightened person’s personality quiz, the profile of what an enlightened person should be like, around issues of money and sexuality and openness and cheerfulness and acceptance, and all those nice psychological qualities that get prized by personality tests. But that’s asking the wrong question. Because, as the Buddha said, you get into this issue of “What are you?” and it gets very complicated and very uncertain. How do you grab hold of your personality? How do you scrub it? How do you put it into shape? This issue is compounded by the fact that there’s a polyterm, sakkaya, titti, the view of—actually, it’s identity view, but for a long time it was translated as personality view—the view that you had a personality, or the view of your personality, or simply, in some cases, personality. We’ve had people come up here, people who try to erase their personality, and it’s a horrible sight to see. Fortunately, that’s not what the Buddha meant. It’s just your identification of what you are. He asked you to put that aside. When we develop self-knowledge in the practice, what kind of knowledge are we developing? The knowledge about what we’re doing, thinking, saying. Those are the terms you want to look at things in. So you can put the whole issue of your personality aside. You look at the great Ajahns in Thailand. They have very different personalities. Some are very quick to yell at their students, others are very calm. Some have a very active sense of humor, some are very reserved. And it’s not a matter of being awakened or not awakened. It’s simply learning how to use your personality traits in a skillful way. And the only way you can learn that is by looking at your actions, to see what’s skillful and what’s not. What habits do you have that are skillful? What habits do you have that are not skillful? If you have lazy habits, you’ve got to learn how to find some way to light a fire under yourself. And the best way to do that is to do it one action at a time. Try to notice which parts of the day you find yourself most lazy. You say, “I’m going to change the way I act at those times.” So you wake up in the morning and you have a tendency just to look at the clock and then turn it over. You say, “Well, tomorrow morning when I wake up, I’m going to get up. I’m going to meditate, regardless of the time.” Or if you’re lying there and the body seems so heavy you can’t get up, ask yourself, “Okay, which part of the body is too heavy to get up?” And test them. Test your hands, test your arms, and pretty soon you’ll find yourself sitting up. So you take these issues on one at a time. If you try to take on the whole of your personality, it’s too big, too amorphous. But if you break your habits down into individual actions, individual decisions, work on them one decision at a time. What this means, of course, is that self-knowledge is not knowledge of what you are, but of what you can do. And it keeps changing. As you develop new skillful habits, putting more effort into the practice, being more alert to what you’re doing, trying to be more sensitive to the results of your actions, the impact of your words on yourself, the impact of your words on other people, break it down into manageable bits. And if you see anything that’s unskillful, remind yourself of what the Buddha said. That if people couldn’t be taught to drop their unskillful habits and develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn’t have taught for them to do that. It turns out that is one of his teachings that was most categorical, the most basic teaching. He also said that if doing skillful things instead of unskillful things would make you miserable, he wouldn’t have taught people to do that. It’s only when you make the problem too big to solve, by the way you look at it, by the way you understand it, you can’t get anywhere. But if you break it down into individual decisions, see where the decision is unskillful and see what a skillful decision might be to reduce it. Or to replace it, imagine yourself actually doing it the skillful way. And after a while, you find yourself actually doing it the skillful way. It’s not just a matter of imagination. You see that it is a possibility, and you’re doing it. So self-knowledge is not a static thing. It’s not a knowledge of essences. It’s a knowledge of actions. It’s what you might call a moral knowledge, in the sense that you get a better and better idea of what you should be doing and you learn whatever tricks of the trade are needed so that you actually do it. And as you find your actions changing, you may notice that your personality is changing. Your personality seems to change in some ways or another, but there are a lot of things that don’t have to change. It’s just the unskillful parts that have to change. Quiet people can be happy. Talkative people can be happy. There are a lot of aspects of the personality that are just totally neutral. Focusing on taking the unskillful side. People who are quick to see what’s wrong in a situation can do that either skillfully or unskillfully. People who are more laid back can do that skillfully or unskillfully. So that’s the issue you want to focus on. Whatever habits you have, look for where they’re unskillful and see what you can do to change them. That’s what self-knowledge is all about—seeing where you are and getting a sense of the possibilities of where you can go and causing less suffering, less harm, through your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. That’s a task you can tackle and actually get results.

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