Honest & Observant

March 20, 2019

The Buddha once listed the qualities he looked for in a student, and he mentioned two. One was that the student be observant, and the other was that the student be honest. In a student-teacher relationship, this is an essential foundation, honesty. If the student’s going to learn, the student has to be observant, alert, discerning. And given that so much of the practice is self-training, you’re training your mind right now. You’re the one telling yourself to stay with the breath. You’re the one telling yourself what to do. I’m up here saying a few things, but you are choosing whether to listen to them or not. And even when you’re listening, it’s not the case that I can get in there and point out what you’re doing right or wrong. You’ve got to judge for yourself. What this means is that in training yourself, you want to be honest with yourself and observant. Honest about what’s going on and observing what’s working and what’s not working. The other thing about self-honesty means that you are honest with yourself about your bad qualities, your less-than-honorable qualities. But it also means appreciating your good qualities, realizing that you do have some strengths, and you want to make the most of them. Because simply being down on yourself doesn’t mean that you’re being honest. Sometimes you’re in a bad mood, and sometimes that’s a part of the mind that really wants to destroy the practice. Sometimes you’re incapable, that you’re never going to get anywhere. Or you’re telling yourself that you have these extremely high standards that nobody can meet, which means, of course, you’re never going to meet them, and you’ll feel like a failure. That’s not what self-honesty means. It means taking stock of what you’ve got, what’s going on. And when the mind needs some really basic training, will you give it? When it needs more advanced training, will you give it more advanced training? The Buddha calls this having a sense of yourself. It involves having a sense of where you’re weak and where you’re strong in terms of your learning, in terms of your conviction, your generosity, your discernment, and a quality that can be translated either as ingenuity or quick-wittedness, your ability to read a problem and figure out which teaching applies and how to apply it. This is your contribution to your practice. So where are you in terms of these qualities? You want to take stock. If that’s too abstract, take stock of where is your mind right now. If it’s not where you want it, what can you do to get it in the right direction? We’re talking this afternoon about some very basic techniques, like counting, using a meditation word. And the feeling that all too many people have is that these are training wheels, and we want to be beyond training wheels. You have to remember, training wheels are there when they’re needed. The problem with that analogy is that once you’ve gotten past training wheels, you don’t have to go back to them again. But here, when you’re training the mind, the mind has its options. There are ups and downs. And there are days when it simply will not respond simply to your desire to be with the breath. You need something more. You think of all those different ways of dealing with distractions, the Buddha lists. And the last one on the list is basically just forcing your mind saying, “I will not think that thought.” Pressing your tongue against the roof of your mouth and, as I said, crushing your mind with your tongue. That’s a lot of brute force, but it’s there as part of your toolbox. So if you use a meditation word, repeat it to yourself really rapid fire, that falls under that particular technique. You’re blotting out whatever thoughts may be in the mind. If you’re having trouble being mindful, count it as a good technique. In other words, you do what you’ve got to do, and you’re honest with yourself that this is what you need at this particular time. And John’s often saying that when you start out meditating, take stock of your mind for a bit. Where is it leaning? What have you been thinking about leading up to the meditation? That the mind has been complaining about something? Okay, you’ve got to do something to put it in a better mood. If it’s thinking about something in the past, thinking about something in the future, do what you can to see that there’s no need to be thinking about those things right now. If you find that you’re thinking about them out of interest, or if it’s out of anger, figure out what’s the proper approach. That way, you get a good sense of cause and effect in the mind. The Buddhist teachings on cause and effect sometimes seem really abstract. This causal principle, “When this is, that is, from the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t, from the passing away of this comes the passing away of that,” sounds simple to begin with. But as you begin to realize that there are two principles operating there, then it starts getting complex. Some causes arise and you see the effect immediately. Other times, the effect comes further down the line. So what you’re dealing with at any one time is your current actions, i.e., your current intentions, and the results of those intentions, and then the results of past intentions. Sometimes it’s hard to sort it out. But instead of thinking in the abstract terms, think simply, “Is the mind settling down?” “What’s the disturbance in the mind right now? What’s doing the disturbance?” Then look for what you’re doing right now that’s contributing to the disturbance. You can’t change what things are coming in from the past, but you can change which things coming in from the past you’re going to focus on, and how you’re going to do it. That can make all the difference in the world. There are two major kinds of discerning suffering. There’s simply the suffering or the stress that comes when you’ve got a body, you’ve got a mind, and things are changing. There’s a constant adjustment that goes as things change. There’s some stress there. That’s natural stress in Ajahn Lee’s terms. And then there’s unnatural stress in his terms. That’s stress in the four Noble Truths. That’s caused by clinging and craving, in other words, something you’re doing right now. So taking stock of yourself points you in the right direction. The analysis may not be all that subtle to begin with. The simple question is, is the mind wandering around or is it not wandering around? Or if it’s with the breath, how solidly is it with the breath? But as you keep looking here and keep asking, “What’s going on here? What’s it coming from? What am I doing right now? What’s contributing to the problem?” You’re looking in the right place. And as you keep looking in the right place, the analysis is going to get more subtle and more effective. Ajahn Fun, Ajahn Suet’s teacher, makes the point that when the Dhamma invites verification, in other words, the kind of thing where you literally say, “Come and see.” He doesn’t say, “Go and see the Dhamma.” He says, “Come and see. Come right into the present moment. Come into your mind right here.” Watch this carefully. Take stock of it. Try to be observant. It’s a combination of alertness, seeing what you’re doing, and the results of what you’re doing. And then discernment. Figure out what you’re doing that’s actually helpful and what’s not. I was reading a book, “Passages and Translations from the Canon,” and there was a footnote. It was a sutta that was on the seven factors for awakening. The footnote was related to the factor of analysis of qualities. And the author of the footnote was saying, “We know that analysis of qualities is, as he called it, the wisdom factor among these factors. But,” he said, “here it’s defined as seeing the distinction between what’s skillful and what’s not.” I was surprised at the word “but” there. Because what is discernment? It’s about what you’re doing that’s skillful and what’s not. But, as the Buddha said, the question that leads to discernment is, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” Wisdom is all about, and discernment is all about, your actions. So here you are. You’re right here. It’s simply a matter of being honest with yourself about what you’re doing and the results, and using a little bit of ingenuity, figuring out, “If it’s not going well, what can I change?” Try various things and be observant to see what works and what doesn’t. And don’t be too proud to use a very basic method if that’s what the mind needs right now. This is another disease here in the West. We all want to go to the ultimate. We don’t want to hang around with what we think are the kindergarten methods. But if you start worrying about more subtle things, sometimes you miss things that are perfectly obvious. I was told one time of a tennis pro whose game suddenly went into a slump and he couldn’t figure out what was going wrong. He tried a new racket, he tried a new coach, tried all kinds of things, and finally realized he hadn’t been keeping his eye on the ball. You know, number one lesson in tennis. So sometimes when you start thinking that you’re getting involved in more advanced things, you drop what’s basic. It’s basic not because it’s something that you will learn first and then go past. It’s basic because it’s necessary all the time. So don’t be afraid of going back to the basics. You’ll learn a lot that way. Be observant and be honest. That’s how progress is made. After all, this is how the Buddha himself gained awakening. There was nobody there to teach him, and he had to rely on what? He had to rely on his powers of observation and on his honesty. He carried them into all areas of his life, holding himself to a high standard, because he realized that the stakes were high. They were facing aging, illness, death. And the question is, do we have the skills we need? Do we need to be with those things and not suffer? Remembering the distinction between the two types of suffering. There’s the pain that comes with illness. That’s normal. But then there’s the suffering that the mind adds on top of that. That’s optional. And when suffering is optional, why take it? Why take the option? We take it because we’re not observant. We’re not observant about what we’re doing. We’re the ones that are causing it, and we’re the ones complaining about it. So try to hold yourself to a high standard. Try to meditate every day, even when you’re away from the monastery. The skills here are not for simply sitting here nicely in the sala. They’re to take with you. So as you begin to observe, because there’s suffering in the mind, you know where to look and you have some idea of what to do about it. That way you’re beginning to arm yourself with the tools and the techniques that you’re going to need. So even though there is the first kind of suffering, the first kind of stress, that doesn’t have to be the second. And it turns out it’s the second kind of suffering caused by craving and clinging. That’s the one that weighs down the mind. Without that, the mind is not weighed down. That’s an option. It’s a better option. So always keep that in mind. It is possible. The suffering in the mind is not necessary. And if you look carefully and are observant and honest about your actions, you’ll see that you’re on the right path of putting that suffering to an end.

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