Be Observant & Ingenious

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There’s a passage where the Buddha lists seven things that you should know as a practitioner. And of the seven, only one is the kind of knowledge that you can get out of books. Having a sense of the Dhamma. Knowing what the Buddha taught. Having a sense of the underlying principles. So that when you hear something new and someone claims that it’s Dhamma, you can ask yourself, “Does this fit in with the basic principles? Or is it something outside?” This is a principle that Ajahn Mun would use. He noticed that a Ajahn Fuang had a tendency to get visions in his meditation. People coming to visit him, teaching Dhamma. Devas coming to visit him, teaching Dhamma. As Ajahn Mun said, when he had experiences like that, he had to ask himself, “It doesn’t matter who this is, whether this really is a person coming to see me, or whether it’s a figment of my imagination, the question is, is it really Dhamma? Does it fit in with what I’ve learned?” This is why learning is considered to be a treasure. You have a good fund of knowledge about what the Buddha taught. So not only when you read other people’s Dhamma, but also when things come up in your own mind, you can ask yourself, “Is this in line with the Dhamma or not?” That much you can learn from books. The other six things you have to know are things that require that you put the Dhamma into practice and then reflect on the results. This is in line with one of the principles the Buddha set out, which is that to nourish the Dhamma requires, one, commitment, and two, reflection. You commit yourself to doing it. Then you reflect on the results and ask yourself, “Are the results satisfactory? If not, what can you do to change?” The first of these remaining six is having a sense of meaning of the Dhamma. You can read the books, figure things out, think it through, and come to some conclusions. But then you find that as you practice, and then you go back and read the suttas again, you read the ajahns again, you’ll see things and understand things in ways that you didn’t before, based on the fact that you’ve had some experience, you’ve had some results in your practice already. In fact, you don’t really understand the Dhamma until you’ve had at least an experience of the deathless. This is in line with the fact that the word for “meaning,” “atta,” can also mean “goal” or “benefit.” When you see the benefit that comes from putting the teaching into practice, then you can understand the meaning. So even though you can explain things and tell yourself, “Well, this must mean this, and that must mean that,” you’re going to find that your understanding of the meaning is going to change. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha didn’t define a lot of the important terms in his teaching. He teaches you how to train the mind to put it into suffering to find true happiness. “Mind” is a word he doesn’t define. “Suffering” is a word he doesn’t define. “Happiness” is a word that he doesn’t define. What he defines is the training. Focus there, and you’ll find that your understanding of your mind is going to change. Your understanding of suffering will change. What qualifies as suffering? What qualifies as happiness? That will develop and grow as you practice. There’s no other place where the Buddha said, “If you want to know a person’s virtue, you have to be with that person for a long time.” And be very observant. Well, it’s the same with the Dhamma. You have to practice it for a long time and be very observant. That’s how you come to understand its meaning. Another thing you have to learn to know is having a sense of yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses as you practice? And if you notice that you have a certain weakness, what can you do to overcome it? The Buddha lists five areas, actually six areas, in which you can measure yourself in terms of your conviction, your virtue, your generosity, your learning, your discernment, and your ingenuity. We’re not here just to follow things rotely. The Buddha never taught a technique that you can follow and basically stick to the steps and have guaranteed awakening at the end. Even when he gives meditation instructions, there are a lot of questions that the instructions should spark in your mind. He says, “Breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. Breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure.” How do you do that? He doesn’t say. He simply says there is a potential for a rapture in the body. There’s a potential for quietness in the body and in the mind. Look for it. That’s all he tells you. The instructions are there to make you think. And of course, when you’re gauging the results of your practice, come to some insights. You have to test them. You have to be ingenious in testing them. The Upasaka Ki recommends that when you have an insight, look at the mental moment that falls right on the insight. Is there pride? Is there anything unskillful that comes up when you realize, “Oh, I understand this”? Watch out for that. And John Lee’s test is, “To what extent is the opposite true?” In other words, how far does the truth of this particular insight go? And where does it not apply? One of the worst things you can do is latch on to a Dharma teaching and just apply it everywhere. There are some teachings that the Buddha did say were categorical. In other words, they apply everywhere. But they’re pretty general. Abandon unskillful behavior. Develop skillful behavior. And follow the duties to the Four Noble Truths. Everything else is something that must be sensitive in time and place. So you have to use your ingenuity. In fact, that’s another one of the members of that list of things you should know, is having a sense of the right time and place for things. When you should speak, when you should be quiet. When you should study, when you should put the books aside and just meditate. That’s something you have to learn for yourself. One of the big issues for time and place, of course, is when you’re meditating. When should you simply let the mind rest? And when should you start asking questions? Which questions? Another member of the list is having a sense of enough. How much is enough food? How much is enough sleep? How much is too much? How much is not enough? There are no hard and fast rules for this. The texts say that Venerable Sariputta, when he would eat, would eat until he felt that, okay, five more mouthfuls of food, he’d be full. Then he’d stop, drink some water, and that’s it. But that’s not a general rule for everybody. You have to figure out how much food you need given your physical condition, how much sleep you need given your condition. And here again, you have to use your own powers of observation. And use your own ingenuity and figure out how to test what is too much and what is not enough. Another member of the list is knowing different groups of people. In other words, with this group of people, how do you talk to them? With another group of people, do you use the same words? Do you use the same level of language? Some people appreciate it when you speak in familiar terms. Other people get offended. So you have to notice different types of people, different types of groups, and how they should be approached. And there are no hard and fast rules here either. You have to learn. You have to observe. As Ajaan Fuang used to like to say, “We have two eyes and two ears, but only one mouth.” Which means we should use our eyes and ears more than we use our mouth. That’s how you learn. And finally there’s the question of knowing which people are worth hanging out with and which people are not. People who are eager to learn the Dharma, those are better to hang out with than people who are not. People who like to think the Dharma through, those are better to hang out with than people who don’t think things through at all. People who want to put it into practice are better to hang out with. So you do use your powers of judgment when dealing with people. The judgment here is not a final judgment as to their worth as a person. It’s a judgment as to, “Is this a person that’s good for me to hang out with?” And you find that as you practice, a lot of your old friends, if they’re not interested in the Dharma, become less interested in the Dharma. You feel that the friendship is actually holding you back. So it’s right to question, “Is that a friendship you want to continue with or not?” And if you do want to break off the friendship, how do you do it in such a way that you’re not coming across as cold and unfeeling, but simply letting it drift apart? These are all things you’re going to have to learn using your own powers of observation. That’s an important part of the practice, is learning how to observe things for yourself. Again, this relates to the fact that there is no guaranteed, automatic, foolproof way to gain Awakening. If it were foolproof, any fool could gain Awakening. You have to develop your ingenuity, your powers of observation, your ability to ask the right questions, and figuring out how to get the answers. That’s when your practice of the Dharma is complete and all around. Which is why there’s a tradition, I think it’s in the commentary, of a monk who is really good at knowing all the texts. But he would come to see the Buddha, and the Buddha would call him “Venerable Empty Text.” The message being, “Okay, you don’t just learn these things so you can talk about them. You learn them so you can practice them.” And practicing means you’re going to have to use your own powers of observation. That’s why in John Fulton’s “Instructions in Meditation,” centered around two words, centered on two words, “Be observant and use your ingenuity.” That’s how the discernment you develop is not just a copycat discernment or a cloned discernment. It’s the real thing that comes from your sensitivity and your development of your powers of judgment. So keep this in mind.

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