Read Your Mind

March 19, 2019

We’re following a path of practice here. And, as with any path, the instructions are going to depend on where you are on the path. It’s like the instructions for getting to the monastery from the post office. You reach one corner and you turn left. You reach another corner and you turn right. If you were to assume that the instructions had to be all the same all the way on the path, you would just turn left, left, left, and you wouldn’t get to the monastery. And it’s the same with the practice. There are stages where you have to hold on. There are stages where you have to let go. And it’s going to depend on where you are. A lot of these are things you cannot learn from the texts. The texts were never intended to be read on their own. To begin with, they weren’t read in the time of the Buddha. They were memorized. You memorized them from someone else. It’s something you learned from a person. And as you were learning, you could ask, “How far does the meaning of this word go?” It’s an interesting way of asking the question, “How far does the meaning go?” In other words, when is this instruction useful and when is it not? There are only two instructions that the Buddha said were categorical, i.e., true across the board. One was the Four Noble Truths, and the other was the principle that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful qualities should be abandoned. That’s it. Beyond that, things will depend on time and place. So you have to get a sense of where you are. It helps to talk this over with someone, a person who’s been on the path for a while and has a sense of where the left turns are and where the right turns are, and also to fill in a lot of the gaps. That’s another problem with the texts. They give some ideas, give some suggestions, but then don’t really tell you in detail how to do them. Like when the Buddha talks about breathing in a way that gives rise to ease, rapture, or when he talks about spreading the sense of ease and rapture throughout the body, he doesn’t really tell you how to do that. This is why the texts also say that when you want to develop concentration, you go ask someone who’s skilled in concentration. When you want to develop insight, go ask someone who’s developed in insight. So the texts on their own are not sufficient. You need someone who’s had some practical experience, and you need to learn how to read your own experience. Ultimately, you’re going to have to be the person who judges whether you’re doing something right or wrong, how much you’re going to be able to absorb, how much you’re going to be willing to absorb. Because we all come to the practice with a lot of ignorance and a lot of preconceived notions. And it’s only to the extent that we see that what we’re doing is not satisfactory that we’re going to be willing to change. This is why the Buddha said one of the secrets to his awakening was discontent with the level of his skill. He’d try something and look at the results, and he had a very high standard for what was going to count as satisfactory. He had teachers who taught him all the way to the dimension of nothingness, or the dimension of neither perception or non-perception, which are very high levels of concentration. But he was subtle enough and demanding enough to see that this wasn’t enough. There had to be something better. So he looked for it. He put his life on the line. Six years of self-torture to see if that worked, and it didn’t work. Then he was willing to put up with the disrespect of the people who had looked after him because they respected people who submitted themselves to that kind of torture. When he gave up, he started eating again. They left. For him, that wasn’t important. What was important was that he found something that was really reliable inside. And then when he found it, he became a reliable person who could teach other people to find the way. So when you look at your practice and you compare it with what you’ve read, be very careful to have a sense of what teachings might be appropriate and what teachings might not. Then be alive to the fact that something you like may not be appropriate for right now, or something you don’t like may be appropriate. One common problem is that we want to skip a lot of the steps. The teaching is about letting go. After all, it’s through letting go that people attain awakening. So we start letting go from the beginning. But that’s not how it works. The texts themselves have analogies. They say it’s like taking a raft across a river. You let go of the raft when you get to the other side, but you’ve got to hold on in the middle. Otherwise, you get swept away. That part of the analogy is there in the text, but all too often people miss it. The Forester Jones had similar images. One of the John Fung’s images was based on the fact that when I went to study with him it was soon after the American moon landing. He was saying one time that the practice is like taking a rocket to the moon. The capsule has to be attached to the boosters up to a point, and then it has to let go. So your boosters here are your confidence that you can do this and that you’re capable of doing it. That is a sense of self. It is a sense of identity. You want to identify with your desire to practice. You want to identify with whatever skills you have or whatever skills you can develop that are going to see you through. You don’t abandon them. You have to put a lot of work into them. That’s something you hold on to. And that’s a good identification. The Buddha calls it the self as a guide. It’s the governing principle. In other words, a sense of self that you put in charge, the sense of self that wants to find an end to suffering and doesn’t want to give up. The text also recommends that you hold on to your conviction that you can do this, that you’re capable of doing it. That, too, is a sense of self. And as you’re holding on to the precepts, you’re holding on. You don’t let them go easily. In fact, the Buddha praises people who don’t let them go at all. We hear about attachment to rites and rituals and precepts and practices. But that attachment is the kind of attachment that says, “All I have to do is follow the rules and that’ll be okay and that’ll be enough.” But there’s more. You have to let go of that idea and do concentration. Here again, you’ve got to hold on. Hold on to your object. Don’t let it go. Don’t be concerned that by focusing on one object, like the breath, you’re not going to make progress. One of the things that’s most destructive to concentration practice is the idea, “Well, I’m going to do a little concentration and then move straight on to insight. Let’s get this over fast.” You have to be willing to stay here. With the breath, not worry about where it’s going. Think of it as a piece of fruit on a tree. The fruit grows, it develops, it doesn’t go anywhere. If it decided, “Oh, I don’t like being here at the end of the branch. I want to be a ripe fruit that falls from the tree.” Well, you fall from the tree, but it’s not ripe. The fruit has to hang on to the branch, get the nourishment from the tree. Then, when it’s really developed, then it will let go on its own. And same with concentration. You have to learn how to be nourished by the concentration. Take some time. Try to get as sensitive as you can to how the breathing feels. Allow yourself, as the Buddha says, to indulge in it. Not to the point where you are simply indulging in the pleasure and you forget the fact that you’re focusing on the breath. You stay with the breath. The pleasure will be there. And you’re sensitive to the fact that what you’re doing, i.e., focusing on the breath, is what’s creating the sense of pleasure. So as long as you want the pleasure, you stay with the breath. Hang on right here. If you let go of the breath to focus on the pleasure, things get very blurry and after a while you just go into delusion concentration. Or you fall asleep. Or your mind just starts wandering around aimlessly. So stay with the breath. But allow that pleasure to stay. Get sensitive to it. Then see what you can do with it. The Buddha says to let it spread throughout the body. And John Lee gives some examples, gives some advice on how to do that. Think of the different nerves and blood vessels of the body as being like breath channels. And the sense of ease can flow along those channels. Try to get a sense of which direction the flow should go. Sometimes when you’re tired, you think of it going up. If it goes up too much, though, you might start getting headaches. So think of it going down. You can think of the breath coming in from the outside. You can think of the breath originating inside the body. After all, the energy of the breathing does originate in the body. Focus on that, on that sense of the breath is already there in the body. You’re not trying to take the breath and stuff it into the solid parts of the body. You’re trying to get the energy of the in-breath to mingle with the energy that’s already there in the body. There are lots of ways of perceiving the breath that can help get that sense of ease. So it fills the whole body. Then you want to maintain that sense of awareness filling the body, and breath and pleasure filling the body. They’re all here together. It’s when they’re together that they all mature, they develop. And this is not the time to be comparing your meditation with what you’ve read in the text. You can look at the text when you cut out of meditation and ask yourself, “What do the texts seem to correspond to?” And you might put a post-it note if you think you’ve attained a certain level of concentration. But keep it just as a post-it note. You may have to rearrange those notes as you get to know your mind better. Because different people, as their minds settle down, will settle down in different ways. And the problems that different people will have will be different as well. Your path is to get to know your mind and learn how to read your mind so you get a better and better sense of what you need. Now we’re sitting here together and we talk about the practice to give you some pointers, especially to make sure you don’t go way off. But the sensitivity is something you’ve got to develop yourself. Because, after all, that’s what the Discernment is all about—becoming sensitive to your actions and the results, and seeing which actions lead to a genuine happiness and which actions lead to a false happiness. Developing the sensitivity of judgment. So you can begin to trust your sense of judgment. Because there does come a point in the practice where, as the Buddha said, you become independent of others in the practice. When you’ve seen for yourself that what the Buddha taught was true, there really is a deathless element that can be touched in the mind. And that becomes your touchstone for understanding what’s in the text and how to apply it. Up to that point, you’re still groping around. But as long as you know you’re groping, and whatever labels you apply to what’s going on in your mind, you keep them as post-it notes, then you’re relatively safe. But you’ve got to be heedful. There’s always the possibility that you’re misreading your mind. So you’ve got to be willing to check again and again and again. But that is the important thing. That’s the important part of the practice. We can read the text, and sometimes all we see are our own preconceived notions imposed on the text. It’s when you really get to know how to read your mind that you can start seeing through some of your preconceived notions. And learning how to be with the breath puts you in a good place where you can do just that.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2019/190319_Read_Your_Mind.mp3>