Honest & Observant

November 17, 2020

The Buddha looked for two things in a student. One is that the student be observant, and the other is that the student be truthful. Truthful, he means truthful when you’re speaking to others and truthful when you’re speaking to yourself. The two often go hand in hand. If you tend to hide things from others, it’s very easy to start hiding things from yourself. That’s precisely what avijja, or ignorance, is. As the Jhana League likes to point out, it’s not that we don’t know things. We have other knowledge, or what we think is knowledge. The mind is full of all kinds of theories. I remember once hearing someone complaining about the book Mind, Life, Fire, and Bound, saying, “How could people back in the time of the Buddha have had theories about fire? They weren’t scientists.” My observation was, how could they not have theories about fire? Especially in a culture where people had been worshiping fire, holding fire sacrifices? They had lots of theories about how people were burning something that would guarantee that you would get it in the next life, and what it meant for something to catch fire, and where fire could be found. They had lots of theories. Many of them were very strange, but their minds were full of theories. That was one of the discoveries of the structuralists when they were studying the thought of fire. They had their ways of structuring reality, and they had fairly elaborate ways of explaining reality. So the human mind fills itself with all kinds of theories. One of the things we’ve got to learn how to do is learn how to look into those theories and see which ones actually correspond to what’s going on, which ones are helpful. As the Buddha would say, in terms of speech, what’s true, beneficial, and timely also applies to the theories we hold in mind. And the way to check that is by being observant, and particularly by being alert in the sense that the word has in the practice of mindfulness—seeing what the mind is doing and seeing the results. So the more truthful you are, the more observant you are, the more you’ll be able to see through the ways the mind has been lying to itself, or has just been very casual and very sloppy about noticing what’s going on. Because no one else can get into your mind and straighten things out for you. They can give you suggestions, but the actual work is something you have to do for yourself. You have to observe. You have to be truthful in your observations so you can cut through a lot of your old, preconceived notions. So we start with something really basic, like the breath. It’s right here. It’s something you can observe. Then you can ask yourself what’s comfortable. Here it is, something that’s very close to us, and often we can’t answer that question, at least not at the beginning. So you’ve got to stick with it. You have to notice what kind of breathing is needed for different states in the body, different states in the mind. And get used to seeing this as your default mode. When you move away from the present moment like this, you move into abstractions. And one abstraction leads to another, leads to another, and you build this house of cards. And all it needs is a little puff of wind and it all comes tumbling down. Or if you stay with the breath, you’re with what’s really going on right now. So make this your anchor. Think of your establishing of mindfulness, putting aside greediness. The world has to fade, fade, fade into the background. And the breath has to come up more to the fore. And as the breath comes to the fore, your awareness in the present moment will come to the fore, because that’s what you’re really after. After all, it’s the mind that’s going to gain awakening, the mind that’s going to gain release. Not the breath. But the breath is a tool, it’s something you focus on in the meantime, to give the mind an anchor here. So you can be very clear about which part of your awareness is present awareness, and which parts are the little bits and pieces that go creating thought worlds of the past, thought worlds of the future. If you’re not really clear about the breath, it’s very easy to slip off into those thought worlds. And not really realize it, not know what you’re doing. So again, you’ve got to be observant. And one of the things you’ll notice about the mind as you try to get it to settle down is that it’s many minds. This is both a weakness and a strength. It’s a weakness in that you’ve got lots of minds to train here. Sometimes you train more than you train. You focus on one aspect of the mind, and everything seems to be resolved. And then the next day you find, no, it’s not resolved at all. Then you have to go through the process and find some other way of solving the problem. Because it’s a different problem, it’s a different mind. And Jhana Mahaprabhu notices this in terms of physical pain. One way of perceiving the pain that will happen to help separate your awareness of the pain from the pain itself on one day may not work the next day. That’s because something else has snuck into the pain. It’s not so much that the pain itself is different, but your perceptions around the pain are different. The things you tell yourself about the pain may be different. So you’ve got a different knot that you’ve got to learn how to untie. The same goes with emotional problems. You may think, “Oh, I don’t think that you’ve resolved it today.” And then tomorrow you find, “Oh, there’s still some unfinished business, another voice in the mind that’s not satisfied, that’s not satisfied with yesterday’s solution.” And it can get discouraging. You may think that yesterday’s solution doesn’t work anymore. It’s not a real solution. Well, it was a solution for yesterday, for the voice that you were dealing with yesterday. Today’s voice requires something else. And John Lee makes a comparison with different kinds of trees. Some people, he said, have minds that are like banana trees. They go very fast in the practice, but they have only one leaf. In other words, they go fast, but they’re not able to last. They go fast because there’s only one leaf they have to produce. But then the tree dies very quickly. Other trees, he said, are like big oak trees. Lots of branches, and you’re growing lots of branches all at once. It’s going to be slow, but it’s a lot more steady, it’s a lot more lasting. The banana tree has no core. It has no hardwood. The oak has some hardwood, and that’s what you’re looking for. So when the practice seems slow, learn how to talk to yourself in a way that you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. This is a quality that the Buddha talks about when you look at yourself, how far you’re going in the practice. You look at your own ingenuity. You look in terms of your conviction and other qualities as well that are usually listed, but then ingenuity gets added to this list. It’s your ingenuity in talking to yourself and figuring out a solution to today’s problem, and then figuring out a solution to tomorrow’s problem when tomorrow comes, and then talking to yourself in a way that you don’t get discouraged when yesterday’s solution doesn’t work today. In other words, you have to give yourself some perspective. Remind yourself that you’re in this for the long term, over the long haul. And it’s going to require stamina. And as with any long-term project, you’ve got to learn how to talk to yourself all the way through the project to keep your spirits up. To keep yourself on course and not give in to the voices that say, “To hell with this. It’s taking too long. Just think of how much longer samsara is when there’s no path to follow. It goes on and on and on, so long, the Buddha says, that it’s inconceivable.” So again, learn how to talk to yourself. And be observant so you can see when a defilement is hiding behind what seems to be a reasonable complaint. Because the defilements have their reasons. They can be very clever. That’s why we’ve been following them and falling for them for so long, so long. If they were stupid, we would have figured them out a long time ago. But like any power block, they’ve got lots of ways of justifying themselves. And again, it’s going to be your honesty and your powers of observation that will teach you how to see through these things. This is why, in the forest tradition, they develop these things on all levels of the practice—being observant about how to keep a place clean, being observant to see how the Ajaan does things. Don’t just write it off and say, “Well, that’s just the way he is.” The Ajaan’s been trained, and he has reasons for the way he does things. It’s up to you to figure them out. Because if everything were explained, it wouldn’t encourage you to be observant. You can’t be around the Ajaan all the time. When something comes up in your meditation, you’ve got to observe. This is the problem. Learn how to frame the problem. Then you’re halfway to a solution. I remember when I was ten years old, the first time I read an advice column in the newspaper. We had moved out to Kansas, and the local paper had an advice column. And the woman who wrote the column said, “You seem so wise.” But then after a while I began to realize it was because the question came to her already framed. That’s the problem. Learning how to frame the question. That’s the real problem. So that’s where your ingenuity comes in. You test different ways of framing an issue and see what works. See what gives you a key. The Buddha basically gives a list of questions that are true across the board or useful across the board. Where’s the stress? What’s going to be originating in the mind? So you look in the mind to see what the origination would be. And what can you do to see that clearly? You’ve got to develop certain qualities in the mind. You’ve got to abandon other qualities. And you have to learn how to delight in doing these things. You have to learn how to delight in abandoning your craving, which is something that goes against the grain. You have to learn how to delight in sitting here and developing concentration and then maintaining it, looking after it. Again, this goes against the grain. The mind likes a little bit of rest, but then when it’s had a little bit of rest, it says, “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s move on to something more entertaining.” You have to say, “No, we’re working on a skill here.” It’s a skill of learning how to get a mind to be still and get that mind to stay still and see through anything that’s going to disturb it and pull it out. Because it’s in the seeing through those disturbances. It’s in those temptations that you develop not only concentration but also discernment. Again, it’s your powers of observation and your truthfulness that are going to see you through here. So look around you. There are lots of lessons. As long as you’re honest with yourself that, yes, the problem is that you have to be able to see that you have suffering, you are suffering, and it’s coming from within. You can’t blame the world outside. That’s an admission that a lot of people don’t want to make, but it’s the only one that’s going to get you on the path. Once you’re honest enough to see that, it gives you all the more encouragement to want to be observant. So as you can see, these two qualities keep playing a role. From the very beginning of the path to the end. So make sure they’re strong, because you’re going to need them all the way along.

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