A Sense of Yourself

August 2, 2023

Tonight’s the beginning of the rains retreat. It’s called that because in South Asia, Southeast Asia, this is the rainy season. The Buddha divided the life of the monks into two distinct seasons. The rainy season is the time to stay settled. Then the cold season is the time to wander around. This is typical of societies in the old days. You didn’t have the same role all year round. For the monks, the rainy season is the time not only to stay in one place, but also to gather together and encourage one another in the practice. So as they make a determination to stay here for the three months, from now to the full moon in October, they can also make a determination to accelerate their practice. And lay people can take that as an example as well. When you decide to accelerate your practice, you have to have a sense of what your strengths and what your weaknesses are. In Pali, this is called “adhanyu,” having a sense of yourself. It’s based on having an accurate sense of yourself that you can decide what kind of things you need to determine, what things need extra work. We know that the Buddha would encourage people, in particular, directions. But he also encouraged them to learn how to read their own practice. There’s never any case where he would have to give permission to do concentration or give permission to do inside work. He’d always encourage the monks to do jhana. He never said “do samatha” or “do vipassana.” You do jhana because in the process of getting the mind concentrated, on the one hand, you do get the mind calm, tranquil. And on the other hand, you should gain some insight. It requires some insight to get the mind to settle down properly. You work with the breath. You direct your thoughts to the breath. And you evaluate how things are going. And it’s in the process of evaluation that you develop your powers of judgment, which is basically what discernment is all about. If the breath is too long, too short, too heavy, too light, well, adjust it. If you focus on one part of the body and it doesn’t feel good, well, try another spot. And then learn how to read the results of what you’re doing. And that’s how you gain a sense of yourself. The Buddha lists six qualities in all. Probably you can measure yourself. The first one is conviction. How strong is your conviction in the Buddha’s awakening? Do you feel that it’s just a body of insights that somebody in India would think up and are not necessarily relevant nowadays? Or do you see that it’s an insight into common features, the minds and hearts of all beings, as to why we suffer and what the shape of that suffering is? It’s not just this lifetime. It goes on for many, many, many lifetimes. There’s one point where the Buddha said that people who can remember only 40 aeons of past lives have a very short memory. So you can imagine how long his was. Each aeon is the life of a universe. We look at the pictures coming from the Hubble and the James Webb telescopes, and they tell us how many light years away these things are and how far they’re looking back into the past. Well, that’s just part of one aeon. We’ve been doing this process of creating suffering for ourselves for who knows how long. So when you have conviction in that principle, it gives you a different perspective on your sufferings right now. So if you find that your conviction needs strengthening, okay, work on that. The next quality is virtue. How is your virtue? Are there big holes in your precepts? Is there a particular precept that you have trouble sticking by? Well, work on that one. Often the most difficult precepts are the ones that have to do with your speech. To lay people on the five precepts, there’s just one precept, which is the precept against lying, misrepresenting the truth. The monks have others. There’s a precept against showing disrespect when you’re being criticized. There’s a precept against speaking divisively. There’s a precept against using harsh language. So you have to be very careful about your speech, because of the various precepts. These are the easiest ones to break, but they’re the closest ones to the mind. And they have a very direct impact on the state of your mind. Because the way you speak to others is very directly connected to the way you speak to yourself. If you’re careless in one area, it’s going to be careless, and you’re going to be careless in the other. If you tend to hide things, misrepresent things in one area, you’ll misrepresent them in another. If you see that that’s where your problem is, focus on that. You know, the quality of the Buddha as you look at it is in terms of your generosity. How easy do you find it to give things away? How easy do you find it to give of your time, give of your knowledge, give of your physical energy, give of your forgiveness? Is there an area where it’s hard? Forgiveness is a big one. It should be the easiest form of generosity, but often it’s the hardest. Because forgiveness, from the Buddhist point of view, doesn’t mean that you have to love the person who’s wronged you. Simply that you’re not going to try to seek revenge, or try to find some way to get them punished. You realize that we have a karmic back and forth that has been going on again for who knows how long. And the best thing is just to put an end to it by making the resolve that you’re not going to hold any animosity toward that person. So if you find that forgiveness is a difficult thing to do, okay, work on it. Another area the Buddha has you look at yourself is in terms of your learning. How much Dhamma do you know? It’s not necessary to read the whole Tripitaka. But the Buddha said it’s good to know the wings to awakening. He said as long as these sets of teachings are maintained, then the religion as a whole is going to be maintained. And they basically contain everything you’re going to need for the sake of awakening. So how many of the sets do you know? And knowing, not just in the sense of having memorized them, but having thought through them. They’re the four establishings of mindfulness, the four bases of success, the four right exertions, the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening the Noble Eightfold Path. If you’re not clear about these things, learn about them. Take some time. And look for Dhamma talks, look for suttas that will explain them further, more than just the lists. Then there’s a quality the Buddha has you look at in terms of your ingenuity. In other words, your ability to take a teaching and see how it applies to your case. And use some original thinking on your part. It’s interesting that the Buddha would highlight this as a quality that you should develop. Because we don’t gain awakening simply by following rules, or memorizing and parroting back what the Buddha taught. We have to think about it, think about the implications, and think about how it applies to any particular circumstance. And look for connections. If you develop physical skills, what in those physical skills teaches you about the things you need to develop in order to be a good meditator? Because meditation is a kind of skill as well. That’s basically what ingenuity is, is seeing how different experiences you’ve had in the past apply to what you’re learning now. And how that can expand your understanding of the Dhamma. The final quality is discernment. The Buddha defines this as penetrating insight into arising and passing away. That leads to the end of suffering. Some people interpret that as simply being able to watch things coming and going. Maybe even being able to label them. But for the Buddha, your knowledge is going to be penetrative. You have to see what kind of arisings are skillful, which kind of arisings are not. Which things should you actually try to make arise, and not just wait for them to come. Which things should you make go away, and not wait for them to go away on their own. Because the knowledge is penetrative, it’s not only seeing things happening, but it’s having a good sense of your duties with regard to them. As we chanted just now, those four noble truths all have duties. So you could ask yourself, how well do you understand those four truths, and how well do you understand the duties? Comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its sensation, developing the path. Each of those duties requires a different skill. Or set of skills. To look to see where you’re weak or lacking. When you learn how to read yourself in this way, seeing where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, then you can think about what kind of determination you want to make. As you look forward to the next three months, you’ve got the opportunity here, the monks are going to be here for most of the three months. There is an allowance that if there’s a legitimate reason, they can go away for up to seven days at a time. But by and large they’re going to be here. The fact that there’s a settled community gives a sense of reliability. And a sense of common purpose. That it’s good to tap into. So once you’ve determined what you want to develop, as what Ajahn Fung would say, there’s a memorial to your life. A memorial in the sense of doing something good that’s special. Or as I said the other day, something that impresses you, extra effort during that period, and I got these results. Because those are the kinds of memorials that really work, are really worthwhile. We see statues to people of the past, and we wonder, what did they do? And who wanted that statue up there? There’s always a question mark. Did they deserve a statue? And the fact that they have a statue, what does that mean anyhow? But the goodness that you do, that’s a memorial that stays in your heart. And Ajahn Fung tells the time when John Lee took some of the monks up to see Khao Phra Wee Hain, which is a Cambodian temple. It was right on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. It’s up on a cliff on the Thai side, overlooking at lowland on the Cambodian side. So the monks spent the night there, and he said, you think of all the effort that went into building this. Can you put out some effort of your own in your practice? Because stone is just stone. But the goodness you do, that’s a genuine homage to the Buddha, and it’s a genuine gift to yourself. That kind of memorial really stays with you.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230802_A_Sense_of_Yourself.mp3>