

Deep Understanding

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There are three kinds of understanding: understanding that comes from listening, understanding that comes from thinking, and understanding that comes from meditating and developing the mind.

The first kind of understanding is obviously the shallowest of the three. You listen to something, and what wasn't clear before suddenly makes sense. You can figure it out. This is an important part of the practice: learning how to listen so that you benefit from other people's understanding.

But you can't stop there. You've got to think things through for yourself as well. That's the second level of understanding. You take the various things you've listened to and try to sort them out, to figure out how they fit in with one another, which teachings seem to have more weight than other ones. You work out the implications.

But both the understanding that comes from listening and the understanding that comes from thinking things through can lead you astray. Something may sound very clear and make a lot of sense but simply not be true. It doesn't work. The same with the things you think through. Once you start dealing in abstractions, your abstractions can take you in all kinds of directions.

Which is why you need the third kind of understanding, the understanding that comes from developing the mind. In other words, instead of dealing with concepts, you're dealing directly with qualities of the mind itself as they're happening. On the level of listening and thinking, you can hear about mindfulness, you can hear about alertness, you can hear about concentration and discernment, but it's when you actually try to develop these things in the mind you come up against issues you might not have thought of before, things that weren't in the plan.

And you find that as you develop the mind, if you develop just one or two qualities, it usually doesn't work. The mind gets one-sided. This is why, when the Buddha talks about his most important teachings, they come in lists: lists of four, five, seven, eight. You've got to develop lots of qualities together and figure out how to bring them into balance.

So it's a practical skill. It's a doing, rather than just a thinking and listening. The word for meditation, *bhavana*, literally means developing. It's something you do. And it's more hands-on: how you develop alertness, how you develop mindfulness, how you develop concentration. You run into practical problems. Working through those practical problems is how you come to a real understanding.

Now, it's true that the insights you gain in the course of meditation, in the course of developing the mind, need guidance from what you've learned by listening and thinking things through. Because it's possible that meditation can lead you astray, too. You get focused on one thing and you just run with it.

I noticed when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, sometimes I'd come across something that seemed like *the* answer to everything, and I was just going to run with that and nothing else. And yet he'd always find jobs for me to do when I got in that state: cleaning something out, working on this, working on that. Of course, the work was interfering with that particular type of meditation and often I'd end up having to drop it. And it felt frustrating. Why did it seem that as soon as I was finally catching onto something he'd stand in the way? Finally, though, I realized that he could sense when I was getting too one-sided in the practice.

So it's good to remember as we're meditating that there are eight factors to this noble path that we're working on. Awakening requires seven factors. There are four noble truths, four frames of reference, five strengths. You've got to learn how to develop all of these groups of qualities in a balanced way.

And the process of keeping that balance: That's when you really learn a lot of interesting things that you never hear or you would never think about. Because they're known only through a hands-on approach.

It's like the distinction they used to make between scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribes know all the names for things, can describe them. Warriors know how to do certain things. They may not be able to describe them but they know what works in a particular situation. They have to know what works. Otherwise they die. And they may learn that some unexpected things work in specific situations. Basically, warrior's knowledge is learning to read the situation to see what's needed. And if you don't have any background knowledge or any ready-made knowledge for something, you learn how to cook it up, how to develop it.

Meditation is warrior's knowledge. When you're sitting and meditating, it's not a matter of remembering everything you read in the books. It's seeing the problem and trying to figure it out from what you've got. Sometimes the solutions fall right in line with the texts. And sometimes they're a little outside of the line of the texts, but if they work, they're fine. But you can't know what's really out of line and what's only apparently out of line unless you actually work with developing the mind.

Try to get away from all the thoughts that come from listening and thinking: This is why we work with the breath, get things grounded in the body. Don't think of the body as an inconvenient thing that's getting in the way of your focusing on the mind. If you really want to understand what's going on in the mind, you have to deal with your awareness of the body. It's a

huge area of the mind—the way it interacts with the body—and the interplay between mind and body will teach you an awful lot of interesting things as you work with it.

So as you work on developing the breath element in the body, developing mindfulness and alertness and concentration around that, you learn a lot of things about the mind that you wouldn't have learned otherwise. You learn to pull yourself out of your scribe knowledge that comes from listening and thinking and reading, and gain a knowledge that comes from actually working with the things in and of themselves—not just the idea of mindfulness or the idea of concentration, but the actual experience of mindfulness, the experience of concentration.

And it's through this kind of understanding that you can really open things up in the mind. You see directly how the mind is causing itself suffering. It's not a theoretical proposition.

Now, you can understand it on the level of theory, you can listen to it being described, but as Ajaan Lee once said, if insight were simply a matter of things you could listen to, he could explain it all in less than three hours. But for actually mastering just one of these principles, five years might not be enough. Because it's a different kind of knowledge: a knowledge that doesn't deal in words and abstractions but deals in the actual events in the mind.

So this is why we focus on the present moment: to see these events in the mind as they're happening and to deal with them as they're happening. This way, we're not just playing around with their shadows, arranging their shadows in interesting patterns. We're dealing with actual events as they happen in the mind, qualities as they develop in the mind. And that takes the understanding to a whole new dimension.