

Self-Knowledge

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When you meditate, you learn a lot about yourself. You sit here watching your mind. As you go through the day, you should be watching what you do, what you say, what you think. If you're really alert and mindful, you see a lot of things about yourself you never saw before, some of them good, some of them not so good. As Ajaan Lee says, when you practice, you come to see your defilements. For many of us, it's very discouraging. We don't like the idea that the mind has defilements. We'd like to hear that the mind is naturally pure, the mind is naturally awakened, and that it's simply all that horrible social conditioning that makes us unhappy. If we could get away from our social conditioning, everything would be fine.

That's partly true, partly not. One of the important things you have to learn about yourself is not to fall into the pitfall of asking the wrong questions. The Buddha has a list of inappropriate questions, and right at the top is, "Who am I? What am I?" Back in Buddha's day, it was primarily a metaphysical question: "What is your self? What kind of being is this?" Nowadays, though, it goes more to the direction of personality: "What kind of person am I? Am I a good person, a bad person? Am I too talkative, not talkative enough? Too negative? Too judgmental?" When we come to meditation, thinking, "I should improve myself," it means you've already answered the question of "What am I?" You don't like the answer so you want to do something to change "what I am."

But that kind of thinking gets you tied up in all kinds of tangles. Back in the Buddha's days, the question, "What is a person?" would get people into huge discussions. Nowadays it doesn't excite that much interest. But the question, "What kind of personality should a person have?" does excite a lot of interest. There's even one meditation teacher who has come out with "an enlightened person's personality quiz," a profile of what an enlightened person should be like around issues of money, sexuality, openness, cheerfulness, acceptance, and all those nice psychological qualities that get prized by personality tests. But that's asking the wrong question. As the Buddha said, getting into this issue of what you are gets very complicated, very uncertain. How do you grab hold of your personality? How do you scrub it, how do you put it in a shape?

This issue is compounded by the fact that there's a Pali term, *sakkaya ditthi*. It means identity view, but for a long time it was translated as "personality view," the view that you had a personality, or the view of your personality, or simply in some cases simply having a personality. We've had people come up here trying to erase

their personality. And it's a horrible sight to see. Fortunately, that's not what the Buddha meant. The problem is just your identification of what you are, and he asks you to put that aside. When we develop self-knowledge in the practice, what kind of knowledge are we developing? Knowledge about what we're doing, thinking, saying. Those are the terms in which you want to look at things. So you put the whole issue of personality aside.

You look at the great *ajans*. They have very different personalities. Some of them are very quick to yell at their students. Others are very calm. Some have a very active sense of humor; some are very reserved. Neither trait is a sign of being awakened or not awakened. You simply learn how to use whatever personality traits you have in a skillful way. And the only way you can learn that is by looking at your actions, to see what's skillful and what's not, what habits you have that are skillful, what habits you have that are not skillful.

If you see you have lazy habits, you've got to learn how to light a fire under yourself. And the best way to do that is to do it one action at a time. Try to notice which parts of the day you find yourself laziest. Tell yourself, "I'm going to change the way I act in those times." Say you wake up in the morning and you have a tendency to just look at the clock and then turn over. You say, "Well, tomorrow morning when I wake up, I'm going to get up. I'm going to meditate regardless of the time." Or if you're lying there, the body seem so heavy you can't get up, ask yourself, "Which part of the body is too heavy to get up?" And test them. Test your hands, test your arms. Pretty soon you find yourself sitting up.

So you take these issues on one at a time. If you try to take on the whole of your personality, it's too big, too amorphous. But if you break your habits down into individual actions, individual decisions, then you can work on them one decision at a time.

What this means, of course, is that self-knowledge is knowledge not of what you *are*, but of what you can *do*. And it keeps changing as you develop new skillful habits, putting more effort into the practice, being more alert to what you're doing, trying to be more sensitive to the results of your actions, the impact of your words on yourself, the impact of your words on other people. Break it down into manageable bits.

If you see anything that's unskillful, remind yourself of what the Buddha said. If people couldn't be taught to drop their unskillful habits and develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have taught them to do that. It turns out that that's one of his teachings that was most categorical, the most basic teaching. He also said that if doing skillful things instead of unskillful things would make you miserable, he wouldn't have taught people to do that. It's only when you make a

problem too big to solve—by the way you look at it, by the way you understand it—that you can't get anywhere. But if you break it down into individual decisions, see where a decision is unskillful, and see what skillful decision might be to replace it, imagine yourself actually doing it the skillful way, then after a while you find yourself actually doing it the skillful way. It's not just a matter of imagination. You see that it is a possibility, and you're doing it.

So self-knowledge is not a static thing. It's not a knowledge of essences, it's a knowledge of actions. It's what you might call a moral knowledge, in the sense that you get a better and better idea of what you should be doing. And you learn whatever tricks of the trade are needed so that you actually do it. As you find your actions changing, you may notice that your personality seems to change in some way or another. But there are a lot of things that don't have to change. It's just the unskillful parts that have to change. Quiet people can be happy. Talkative people can be happy. There are a lot of aspects of personality that are totally neutral. What we're focusing on is the unskillful side. People who are quick to see what's wrong in a situation can do that either skillfully or unskillfully. People who are more laid back can do that skillfully or unskillfully.

So that's the issue you want to focus on. Whatever habits you have, look for where they're unskillful and see what you can do to change them. That's what self-knowledge is all about: seeing where you are and getting a sense of the possibilities of where you can go in causing less suffering, less harm, through your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. That's a task you can tackle and actually get results.