

You Are Not a Textbook

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Ajaan Fuang once said to me that “Your generation has it easy.” When he started meditating as a young man, there were no books, no explanations, no Seven Steps, no Method One, no Method Two. In fact there were no books from the forest tradition at all. One of his first meditation instructions was to get the mind down. So he focused it down, down, down, down, down. Then he found that it became very uncomfortable, very heavy and restricted. He realized, “This can’t be right.” So he brought it up, up, up, up, up. But that got too giddy. Finally, though, he found a point of balance by figuring things out for himself.

And it’s an important principle. Even though we do have books now, lots of explanations—the suttas are translated, the basic teachings of the great ajaans are translated—still when we take their teachings, we have to apply them, we have to figure out how they fit in with how our minds are right now. Which teaching is appropriate for us right now? We have to learn how to *use* the books.

We tend to have the feeling that wisdom is going to be a textbook affair. But your mind is not a textbook. You are not a textbook. The textbooks are there, but where did they come from? They came from people’s experience and they’re meant to point you back to your experience—and particularly to make you sensitive to what you’re doing.

You’ll notice when the Buddha describes his awakening in the shortest terms, it’s a principle of causality: how actions bring results. And not just any actions, but *your* actions, human actions. He didn’t define awakening as seeing that there is no self or seeing something about the nature of the world, aside from the nature of causality, the nature of action.

And the important teaching’s there in the nature of action. Some of the things you’re going to experience come from the past but some of them come from your decisions in the present moment. So the lesson there is to be very attentive to what you’re deciding to do right now. Be very sensitive to what you’re doing and the results you’re getting from your actions, because as he taught in the four noble truths, some of the things you’re doing now are leading to suffering. There are other things you could be doing that would lead away from suffering. Then he gives you pointers as to what to look for, but you have to figure out what those pointers are pointing to. You have to learn how to read yourself to see what needs to be done.

It basically comes down to two big things. One is figuring out what is skillful right now and what's unskillful. And the second is making yourself want to do what's skillful. This applies inside the meditation and it applies outside the meditation as well. In a situation when people are making strong demands on you and you're tired and you're not focused, what do you draw on inside to say the skillful thing and do the skillful thing? And to figure out what the skillful thing might be? That requires strength and sensitivity.

In some areas, the Buddha gives you some lessons and tips to begin with about the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Period. Those are things he says you don't have to test. You don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel there. But you do have to get more sensitive to how you apply those precepts in a way where you don't break the precepts but at the same time you don't do anything unskillful. That requires sensitivity.

Then you take that sensitivity and you apply it to the mind, because in order to have the strength to do the right thing you need to get the mind into concentration. And the question is, where are you right now with respect to concentration? Are you north of it, south of it, east, or west? Left or right? In other words, which direction do you have to go right now? Do you need more energy or less energy? Do you need to think more about the breath or think less about the breath? That's something you have to learn how to read for yourself.

We noted this afternoon the point in the Buddha's instructions for breath meditation where you get sensitive to fabrication and then you try to calm it down. But in other places he says, before you calm things down you need to activate them, energize them. This of course will depend on what your level of energy is right now, so you have to learn how to read it.

If you find yourself drifting off, you might be getting too calm. You can sit here in kind of a haze. It's what they call delusion concentration, where things are still but you don't know quite where you are. That's because the mind's not active enough. So you try to activate it. You become more conscious in thinking about the different parts of the body and how the breath relates to different parts of the body and how you can breathe in a way that's more nourishing for, say, your toes and your feet and legs and pelvis, torso, arms, your head. Try to get the whole body involved in the breathing process. That way, you can activate the mind, get it running back and forth around your body as you're checking things out.

Then there will come a time when you've expanded the breath as much as you can. That's when you can focus on one of the inner sections of the breath channels where everything comes together so you don't have to be running around checking out your toes, checking out your fingers. You can settle in one spot and

feel connected to everything else. That's how you energize yourself and then calm yourself down.

Other times, the mind is frenetic and you have to say "I'm just going to stay with one spot for the time being and get that one spot as still as I can." Only then, once the mind is really calm, should you think about analyzing the breath. So you have to learn to read what you need.

And of course there are times when you know what you need to do but the mind is inclined in another direction. And here, too, you have to learn to read yourself. As the Buddha said, it's a sign of mature wisdom that you know how to talk yourself into wanting to do things that you don't like doing but you know will get good results, and you know how to talk yourself out of wanting to do things that you like but will get bad results. You need to be the one to figure out what your mind responds to, where it finally will admit, "Yes, I need to do what has to be done." At first it may wiggle and it may squirm. But who else is going to know the wiggings and the squirmings of your mind better than you? This is an area where you have to exercise your own judgment and your own sensitivity. And try your ingenuity, because the wiggling and the squirming are pretty clever. They know how to wiggle their way out of all kinds of things.

You have to ask yourself how much longer you want to follow them. How much longer do you want to identify with them? They look very much like you because you've taken them on as your identities in the past. But just because they look like you doesn't mean that they *are* you. And you can say, "No, this is not me now. It may have been me in the past but it doesn't have to be me now." Otherwise, you get stuck in the same old ruts again and again because you're not observant, you're not reading yourself, you're not sensitive to what you're doing. What does the mind like about unskillful habits? What does it dislike about skillful ones? What is the allure around unskillful things? You have to track these things down. And you may have to go through many layers before you find out what the real reason is.

In the meantime, you have to energize your desire to figure this out—and to see these wiggings and squirmings not as your friends or not as yourself but as your enemies. Because if you can't divest yourself even of these unskillful things, how are you going to learn how to apply the perception of not-self to things that are more and more skillful? And how are you going to even see the perception of self as an action?

We tend to think of ourselves as a solid thing. There's the "me" in there that's doing all these things. But the Buddha has you step back and say instead of looking for the "me," look at how you create the "me," how you construct the

“me.” That’s an activity, too. And if you’re not sensitive to your more blatant activities you’re certainly not going to see this.

So the practice is largely the practice of getting to know yourself. We think we’re getting to know the Dhamma, and the Dhamma says that insight means this, insight means that. But the practice basically means getting sensitive to what you’re doing, realizing where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering. That’s what the four noble truths are all about.

I was reading a passage a while back, a footnote in a book of translations of suttas, and there was a passage about analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening: the discernment factor, the wisdom factor. The translator was saying in the footnote, “This is the wisdom factor, and yet it’s defined as to be sensitive to what is skillful and what is unskillful in the mind.” I was puzzled by the “and yet.” Apparently the translator was thinking that insight or discernment means seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. But the three characteristics have their meaning basically as three perceptions. And the perceptions are there for you to look at what you’re doing and learn how to dis-identify with what you’re doing when you find that it’s unskillful, when you find that it’s causing suffering. In other words, the real issues of wisdom and discernment are what’s skillful and what’s not.

And as I said, you can learn lessons in blatant ways from the texts, but then you have to learn how to apply those lessons to your life, to what you’re doing right now. Because what you’re doing is where the real issue is. The issue is not there in the textbooks. The issue is in your decisions right now: Why are they causing you suffering even though you don’t want to suffer? Why are they causing you stress even though you don’t want to experience stress? There are times when there is *dukkha* in your concentration. And it’s certainly not suffering, but it is stress.

This is why we have to translate *dukkha* with that phrase, “stress and suffering,” to remind us that it covers the whole gamut from blatant suffering of aging, illness, death, and separation to the more subtle stress or disturbance in the concentrated mind. When the mind gets into deep concentration, there’s still going to be a disturbance there. If you’re looking for suffering there you’re not going to find it. You have to look for stress. And that means you have to learn how to be really sensitive to what you’re doing. And to the results.

So discernment grows out of alertness, and it grows out of ardency: the desire to do things well. When you combine it with mindfulness, it becomes cumulative: You gather up lessons that you’ve learn and they go deeper and deeper and deeper, they connect in more and more useful ways.

So work on these qualities. Be really alert to what you're doing and to what the results are. Try to do things well. Try to figure out what needs to be done. And when you've learned something good, remember it and see if you can apply it again and again. That way, you get more sensitive to which lessons apply when, and you remember that as well.

This is how you learn how to read your mind. That's when you can get it to what really is skillful in a way that it can take itself beyond all this suffering and stress it's causing itself to a dimension where there's no suffering or stress at all. That's something that's not *done*. You know that you've arrived there because you become really sensitive to what your actions are in the mind, and at that point there are no actions at all.

So again, your sensitivity is what's going to be your guarantee, what'll detect any clinging around that dimension. And it'll also be your guarantee so that you know when you've hit that dimension you're really not fabricating anything because you've learned fabrications really, really minutely as you develop your sensitivity to what you're doing right now.