

Reflection

Included in the activities at the end of each chapter are various suggestions for reflection. In practicing reflection, we deepen our understanding of where we are, where we need to go.

When I was in eighth grade, my science teacher, Miss Krimper, responding to the halfhearted efforts the class was making, explained that, “Sometimes you have to look at yourself. You have to do some soul searching.” I don’t remember anything I studied in that class, but I remember that. That stuck with me. That was important, I figured. And it is. It’s important to reflect.

Reflection is a skill. It involves taking a step back from the circumstances of our lives, the play of events. The Buddha likened it to going up in a tower and looking down at our lives. It’s an activity most of us don’t partake in. Reflection isn’t a priority. We don’t have time for it. We’re too busy. We have too many important things to do. In the present-day culture, we’re driven by a desire to fill every moment with content. Every crevice in the day must be filled. The mechanisms of the culture are designed to satisfy this purpose. During moments that might’ve previously been “free,” devoid of content, we engage in functions on the laptop, or connect with somebody on the cell phone, or listen to music on a portable device. It’s a dire scenario.

We need to take a step back every now and again, to reflect, to follow Miss Krimper’s injunction, to consider what we’re doing, where we’re going, what’s important.

As a dharma student you need to take time to step back, to pause. If you look, you shouldn't have difficulty finding some time every day to pause. There may be occasions when you're able to take lengthy pauses, when you're able to go for a walk in the park, something like that. But that's not necessary. Small pauses, a few moments here and there, dedicated to reflection, will yield beneficial results. Sometimes you can pause while involved in another activity. When you're riding the bus, for instance. Instead of scrutinizing your smart phone, you can sit quietly, reflect.

Reflection is a skill that most of us haven't ever been taught. We may equate reflection with thinking. But while some thinking is necessary, reflection involves more than "thinking about" something. It transcends ordinary thinking, the thinking we engage in throughout the day. In reflecting we get beyond this sort of thinking. We get "out of the head." This shift doesn't occur magically; it's accomplished in thoroughly pragmatic fashion, by putting our attention on the body.

Let's say you're going to reflect on your propensity to judge yourself. Stepping back from the movements of your life, you'd put your attention on your body. You'd do this by putting your mind on your breath. You'd feel your breath, somewhere in the middle part of your body, in the abdomen perhaps.

Then you'd ask a question. Some questions you might ask are:

Do I participate in self-judgment?

Is this a habit I engage in on a regular basis?

Is judging myself serving me, in my efforts to find happiness in my life?

Keeping your awareness in your body, you'd let the question reverberate. You'd let it echo, through the body. Refraining from answering, you'd simply let the question be there.

You'd try to get a felt sense of the "answer." You'd allow the "answer" to come from someplace other than the thinking realm. You'd allow knowledge to form.

It's a good idea to ask questions as a way of supporting our ability to reflect. We ask questions but don't try to answer. Of course, it can be tricky. We want answers. We want to know right away. In reflecting, however, we have to learn to wait. We have to learn to "be with" the questions.

As we ask the question, "Do I judge myself," we may automatically answer: "Yeah, of course I do." It's in our best interest, in such cases, to put aside the voices in the mind that are attempting to provide immediate answers.

Reflecting, we allow our innate wisdom to respond to the question.

So right now you might want to try it.

Put your mind on your breath, somewhere in the middle of your body.

Feel a few breaths.

Then ask a question.

"Do I judge myself?"

Ask the question, but don't think about it. Don't try to answer. Stay with your breath. Let the question move, slowly, through your body.

See if you can get a felt sense of the "answer." Don't think. Don't try to verbalize a response. See if you can access deeper structures of wisdom.

Allow understanding to form in whatever way it chooses.

As you learn to reflect in this manner you'll begin to acquire knowledge that transcends intellectual knowledge. You'll begin to know things in the place where we want to know things: in the heart.

Work with the reflections. Develop the skill. It's an important skill. It's a skill you'll need as you make your journey along the Buddha's path.

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