

Engaging with Text as Buddhist Practice: Suggestions from the Early Buddhist Discourses

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Note: All quotes are from John J. Holder, 2006, *Early Buddhist Discourses*, Hackett Publishing Co.

My talk today is based on the *Early Buddhist Discourses*, an original source text that preserves early Buddhist thought from the fourth to the early third century B.C.E. According to this text, in order to experience non-attachment and liberation, to escape a life of suffering, we need to do three things: to learn and understand the teachings – the *dhamma* -- through contemplation and questioning; to deepen into the teachings through meditation practice; and to apply this understanding to living a morally pure and holy life. Dividing the path into these three separate activities is not necessary however. They can and do overlap. For example, the *Discourses* suggest that we can experience learning -- reading, listening, and contemplating -- as practice itself, in five ways: first, the text can serve as guided meditation; second, we can question what we read and hear; third, engaging with the text can be actual direct experience of the teachings; four, how guidance on how to live a moral and holy life can be applied during discussion of the *dhamma*; and five, how studying parables can be actual practice in applying guidance on living a holy life. Engaging with the text as practice in itself can help us deepen our understanding of the text, so that we can “experience the *dhamma* for ourselves”. I will conclude with thoughts about how this approach might apply to studying a broad range of texts within liberal studies.

So, firstly, reading the text of the *Discourses* can be experienced as a guided meditation. Within the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha addresses the gathering of monks who have not yet reached enlightenment – the *bhikkhus* – and says:

“ . . . a *bhikkhu* who has either gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty house, sits crossed-legged and folds his legs, makes his body erect, and with resolve he establishes mindfulness all around him. He breathes in mindfully; he exhales

mindfully. Taking in a long breath, he knows 'I am taking in a long breath.' Or, exhaling a long breath, he knows 'I am exhaling a long breath.' Or, taking in a short breath, he knows 'I am taking in a short breath.' Or, exhaling a short breath, he knows 'I am exhaling a short breath.' He trains himself thinking: 'I will breathe in experiencing all of my body.' He trains himself thinking: 'I will exhale experiencing all of my body.' He trains himself thinking: 'I will breathe in calming the processes of my body.' He trains himself thinking: 'I will exhale calming the processes of my body.'

As we listen to this passage, especially if it is read slowly and without attachment to reaching the end, are we not becoming more aware of our breath? We can imagine the *bhikkhus* entering a meditative state while listening to this passage.

Why was this passage written in this way rather than as a description, for example “the *bhikkhu* breathes in and out, training himself to be aware of the breath and how he can use the breath to calm the processes of his body”? In addition to using repetition as a memory aid, perhaps the intent was for this passage to read like a guided meditation; in reading the Buddha’s words, we are guiding ourselves. This passage is part of the teaching that “. . . a *bhikkhu* lives observing the body as body, energetically, self-possessed and mindful, having eliminated both the desire for and the despair over the world.” Just as we observe our bodily processes during meditation, so can we engage the repetitive phrasing to observe our breath as we read.

Secondly, questioning. The *Discourses* indicate that the Buddha encouraged *bhikkhus* to consider and question the teachings that they heard. Responding to a *bhikkhu*’s question about which teachers speak the truth and which ones do not, the Buddha says:

“Indeed, it is proper to be in doubt, . . . and to be perplexed. When there is a doubtful situation, perplexity arises.

In such cases, do not accept a thing by recollection, by tradition, by mere report, because it is based on the authority of scriptures, by mere logic or inference, by reflection on conditions, because of reflection on or fondness for a certain theory, because it merely seems suitable, not thinking: ‘The religious wanderer is

respected by us.’ But when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are unwholesome, blameworthy, reproached by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to harm and suffering’ – these you should reject.”

Here the Buddha is saying that we need to accept a teaching not based on external authorities but based on our own experience. We need to question what he says, and to apply our own judgement based on reflection, meditation, and living in the world, that is, based on our own practice, to what he himself is teaching. The proof of the pudding is whether we observe and experience that the teachings reduce suffering. And, the Buddha also questions his own questions, for example, when he expresses that perhaps his question is too hard for those new to his teachings.

So - how does reading, or listening to, the Buddha’s teaching on questioning, and reading the passages where the Buddha himself is doing the questioning, serve as practice in itself? The Discourses encourage us to question what we are reading. We are encouraged to question the teachings, to question how the *bhikkhus* are questioning the Buddha, and how the Buddha is questioning the *bhikkhus*. As we read, we question what we are reading based on our own experience, and also wonder about questioning itself. Reading becomes an act of – a practice of – questioning.

Thirdly – engaging with the text can be actual direct experience of the teachings. Some passages within the *Discourses* suggest that those receiving Buddha’s teachings are able to experience an actual change of consciousness while listening. For example, at the end of several sections – including one on non-attachment -- the following passage occurs: “And while this teaching was being explained, the minds of the *bhikkhus* in the group of five were liberated from the defilements by non-attachment”. (The three defilements are greed, hatred, and delusion.) How could the minds of these *bhikkhus* be liberated while they were listening, unless they were practicing non-attachment at the same time? They apparently did not need to meditate or discuss further on the teaching with other *bhikkhus* in order to attain actual liberation.

The Buddha clarifies that progressing on the path to liberation and the enlightened state – or *nibbana* -- can happen quickly or more slowly. It can take seven years or seven days after hearing the teachings, or immediately upon

hearing the teachings. It seems that liberation and approaching *nibbana* can happen at any time, through learning and practice and living in the world, or through engaging with the spoken words or text alone.

Fourthly – guidance on how to live a moral and holy life can be applied and experienced during discussion of this guidance. At the heart of living a holy life are the four virtues: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Hearing or reading passages on the four virtues holds the possibility of engaging with the text as practice in itself:

“. . . a noble disciple is one who is freed from covetousness and malevolence, not confused in mind, attentive and mindful, with a heart filled with loving-kindness, he lives, having pervaded one direction with such a heart, and likewise a second direction, a third direction, and a fourth direction. Upward, downward, across, everywhere, and in every way, throughout the whole world, he lives endowed with a loving-kindness that is widespread, great, boundless, free from hatred, and untroubled.” (and he lives this same way with compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity).”

The passage above gives a strong sense that the virtues do not only reside within us when we live them, but that they pervade the space beyond us in all directions, infinitely. Perhaps this sense of the virtues diffusing into our surroundings can extend from our actions to experiencing the text, and to questioning our reading of the text. How can we engage with the text in a way that applies these virtues to a consideration of the text itself? How can we read the text at the same time applying the four virtues -- loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity? When reading a passage that does not make sense to us, that describes the Buddha or a *bhikkhu* saying something that seems inconsistent, we can go beyond our initial judgements, using compassion and questioning to try to understand why the Buddha or *bhikkhu* said a certain thing.

For example, when Buddha is speaking with the *bhikkhu* Sati about consciousness, Sati offers his definition of consciousness and Buddha responds by calling him a “misguided person” for stating that he, the Buddha, promotes the mistaken view of consciousness that Sati stated. The Buddha asks the other *bhikkhus* “Has this Sati even a glimmer of this discipline and doctrine?” This response may seem harsh. We can ask why Buddha responded in this way – we can have compassion

for Buddha -- perhaps he is not just being harsh, judgmental and punishing – perhaps his response is part of the teaching. Perhaps Sati needed to be treated this abruptly for him to be able to open his mind to the teaching.

Fifth - The parables in the *Discourses* serve as examples related to the teachings, and they can be another opportunity to read and discuss as actual practice. Parables can be good ways of explaining the teachings. Stories appeal to our emotions and we can identify with the characters and events and compare them to our own lives. For example, the Buddha tells the parable of how, after many years of rule by kings who ruled justly by the *dhamma* and of their people flourished, there came a king who did not rule by the *dhamma*, but who “. . . ruled the country by his own whim . . .”, and who did not give money to the poor. Since poverty is the cause of a string of evils, his actions including not giving money to the poor precipitated many years of decline of the kingdom, and the worsening of theft, killings, lying, “improper desire, excessive greed, and wrong conduct,” and disrespect for one’s family and elders. The people’s life-span and beauty declined, and “for such people there will be no concept for ‘moral’”. The Buddha relates how war became widespread, and then how events turned around due to the actions of a specific group, whom the text identifies as “these people”:

“Among those who live for ten years, there will be a seven-day ‘weapon-period,’ during which they will consider each other as beasts. Sharp weapons will appear in their hands, and with these sharp weapons they will deprive one another of life, saying: ‘That is a beast!’ Then there will be some persons who will think: ‘Let me not do that to anyone! Let no one do that to me! Suppose I were to enter a grass-thicket, a jungle, a dense stand of trees, a place made inaccessible by rivers or a mountain recess and live off the roots and fruits of the forest. After seven days, they will emerge from those remote places unsullied: they will embrace each other and sing together in the assembly hall, saying: ‘Good fellow, it is wonderful! You are alive!’ Then this thought will occur to these people: ‘By undertaking evil mental states, we brought about the prolonged destruction of our kinsmen, so let us now do what is good. And what good things shall we do? Let us refrain from taking life. That is a good deed to undertake and practice.’

And so they will refrain from taking life; undertaking this good deed, they will practice it. By undertaking this good deed, their life span and beauty will increase. As a result of increasing their life span and beauty, the children of those who lived for ten years will live for twenty years.”

This turn of events precipitates further good deeds, and a resurgence of moral actions, which in turn precipitates the arising of “a just king who will rule by the *dhamma*.” In this parable the turn of events comes about when “these people” decide not to kill, and to return to moral ways. Why do they decide to do this, and why then? This is not explained. On their own, they start following the proper path. Perhaps the teaching here is that anyone – not necessarily a king or sage, but you or I, a community or a future Buddha -- can just, as an act of will, start following the right path.

And perhaps this teaching can extend to engaging with this text, as practice in itself. As we engage in the story, identifying with characters and living the story in our minds as we listen or read, we can meditate on the story, question the story, and experience the story as we listen or read. We can reflect on how we might serve as one of “these people” who decide to start following the proper path at a time of general decline. Parables, as well as discussion of concepts, can lead to immediate liberation.

So - we can engage the text as practice in itself. While we may not intend to become Buddhists, we can integrate practice into our reading and discussion experience to enhance our understanding and realization of Buddhist principles. Just as Buddhist practice can include meditation on the deeper meanings of specific teachings (for example, by focusing the mind on key sayings and questions), so can reading and discussing text within community be practice in itself, in ways that the *Discourses* suggest and which I have discussed. We can experience the text as meditation, we can question, we can treat each other with compassion, we can be open to immediate liberation, and we can engage with parables to help set ourselves on the right path. Engaging with the text as practice in itself can help us deepen our understanding of the text, so that we can experience the *dhamma* for ourselves.

To conclude – how can we apply these practices to studying a variety of texts? Not all texts lend themselves to reading like guided meditation, but we can

certainly question what we read and compare it to our own experience. We can question our questioning. We can be open to being changed personally by the text, whether discussion of principles or stories. This change may serve as some kind of personal liberation. We can identify with the characters in stories and consider if we would make the same choices or not. We can read with loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – compassion for the author, for the characters, for ourselves, and for our fellow readers and discussants.