

assignments 3B

Contemplative Reading

A wonderful way to work with Dharma material during integrative practice is to employ a different style of taking in the material, which I like to call contemplative reading. Rather than read quickly and cover many pages or topics in a short time, select a small amount of text and read slowly, allowing images and associations to arise as you read.

If a word, phrase, or passage jumps out at you, stay with it, turning it over in mind and teasing out the understanding you have of it, objective meanings or even etymology, and savor the feel of the words and the impact of the meaning. As contemplation, this can be done at any point throughout the day, and you can use other tools, such as a dictionary, a post in our discussion group, journaling, conversation with a Dharma friend, to supplement your reading. At first, just stay with the words and the play of meaning, holding them close.

Meditative Inquiry

TERMINOLOGY

I prefer to translate the very literal phrase “analytical meditation,” as “meditative inquiry,” which includes not only the specific words, but also the experiential quality of the practice. It is vital to understand the meaning of the words beneath the usual sense. Otherwise, we are very likely to simply keep thinking as we sit on the cushion, which is not the intention.

Meditative inquiry is not thinking. It is not contemplation. It is an experiential level of examination and investigation. The use of these faculties is what makes it an “inquiry,” or “analysis.” The experiential medium for the inquiry/analysis is what makes it “meditative.”

That is the first thing to understand about meditative inquiry. Second, a significant distinction is that it is inward-turned, rather than outward-oriented, as in contemplation. What does that mean? It means there has already been significant digestion of the material, such that we can work with it independent of readings or notes as much as feasible.

Third, and most important in actually doing the practice, is that meditative inquiry consists of two phases: inquiry and rest. We alternate between the given inquiry for the session, and rest. We rest when we attain a “clear knowing” or, failing that, before tiring out the mind. Here, rest ideally means remaining poised in a meditative state, as in shamatha, a balance of stillness and lucidity, ideally with “clear knowing” as the object of the meditation.

What is clear knowing? An instance of understanding in which we penetration through the superimposition, or conceptual overlays, which have obscured accurate understanding. It

has the felt sense of a “Eureka!” or “Aha!” moment, of a light bulb of understanding going off in the brain to suffuse the topic with clarity, a moment of revelation or epiphany, even if only about a seemingly minor thing.

Getting to this point, however, requires a significant shift in modality. Meditative inquiry is a far more subtle, inward-turned exchange than the outward-oriented discussion or debate or even internal discourse of contemplation. It helps to develop the skill of subtle experiential analysis before engaging in meditative inquiry per se.

EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS EXERCISE 1

This is a formal meditation practice, to be done on the cushion, at an experiential level, as opposed to an intellectual one. It works best immediately following your regular period of shamatha practice. The questions here are open questions, not meant to yield an answer as much as an experience, a visceral understanding. You may experience that understanding on the level of a “felt sense,” which can be tactile or otherwise in quality.

There is no way to explain this process accurately in words. It is experiential, and individual. The only way to understand it is to feel our way for ourselves.

1. Start out lying down with knees bent and facing the ceiling, feet flat on the floor.
2. As you breath in, allow your awareness to envelop your body as a whole. As you breathe out, slowly allow tactile sensations, such as warmth, cold, tension, numbness, pain, or the like to manifest, noticing where they are. Opening channels of awareness will likely result in tactile sensation becoming increasingly apparent.
3. Continue in this way for as many in- and out-breath cycles as necessary to be comfortable with the cycle and yet remain alert. (Alert is key, lest we fall asleep.)
4. Next, shift your focus to any spot in contact with the ground—the right big toe, your elbow, the center back of your head—whatever. Allow a few cycles of in-and-out breaths with the tactile sensation of that portion of your body touching the ground.
5. Now allow yourself to experience that tactile sensation in details, examining coarsely and investigating subtly all the components of the sensation. Do this for many cycles, staying with the shifting experience of the sensation.
6. Shift again to inquire into the awareness of the tactile sensation—where is that awareness occurring? Is it in the big toe? The mind? Both? Somewhere between? Again, don’t seek an answer as much as an experience of it. The intent is to pinpoint the experience rather than solve a puzzle.
7. Finally, look deeper still inquiring into the conceptualizations around what is sensed and what is sensing. Get into your experience of sensed and sensing, examining it coarsely and investigating finely. Familiarize yourself with this style of inquiry.