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 finally, 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 study (next da

> 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 is 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 in 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 co(c)-1.nls noo2.1 (en)f7

> 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 or 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 nibbāna can happen at any time, through learning and practice and living in the world, or through engaging with the spoken words or texts 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-

> 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 t

certainly question what we read