

Read-ready

We learn more from looking and listening than from being told. Here, “looking” means close observing, and “listening” means closely hearing what someone is saying or not saying. “Being told” means the person is telling us about someone or something. Here, being told is third-hand knowledge; listening is second-hand knowledge. First-hand knowledge is when we experience the whole situation for ourselves. “The whole situation” refers to observing habitual patterns over time, and making sense of them.

We learn more from listening than from talking. It should be a deep curious listening, a desire to find out. Whenever someone talks (or does not), he is telling us a lot about himself. Yet, these words and silence are only dabs and strokes of colours on an unfinished canvas that the person is painting before us.

Now, notice the mental chatter while we are listening to others, or even while we are reading this. There’s a lot we can learn about ourselves by just listening to this inner chatter, and asking “why” we chatter so. This kind of reflection is inviting us to think and feel for ourselves. It is not always easy to do so, as we can sometimes be rather harsh with ourselves – like a worried parent who restricts a child’s activities – and so stunt or skew ourselves.¹

If we are patient enough, we quickly see the whole picture – of self and other, closely inter-linked – at least a glimpse of it. It is only a momentary picture, a shifting view through a window into the artist’s heart. As artists, as long as we are alive, our masterpiece is never finished. We are beings in process. We may sometimes think that we’re done, even done with life, but then we find ourselves going back to the canvas, making changes and adding new colours and strokes to our picture.

Observe how children – true little artists – play with building blocks. They put small blocks on top of large ones. They put large blocks on top of small ones. They stack them together by colour, by size, by shape. In this playful process, they learn how the pieces fit together and improve their spatial and motor skills, and how things connect.

One reason children learn so easily is that they have no preconceptions of how they are supposed to learn (that is, before we put ideas into their heads). A child’s eye sees the world as big, yet he is fascinated by small things. An adult eye tends to see the world as small, yet are always looking for big things. In this interesting sense, a creative person is still a child in a remarkably positive way.

Children, too, do not see play and work as mutually exclusive activities. Play is a vital part of our learning experience. When we have fun learning, when we enjoy it, we learn better. Here, too, it is to our benefit to be a child at work. A child easily finds joy in the simplest or smallest of things.

Even in meditation, joy or gladness (*pāmojja*) is vital for meditative progress. When our mind is glad, it becomes zestful (full of joyful interest), then the body becomes tranquil. When we are tranquil, we become happy. When we are happy, the mind becomes happily still and concentrates on the meditation object.²

By being curious, we try things out and see what happens. A curious mind readily learns, and learns better. Although this sometimes occurs spontaneously, we must begin by habitually preparing ourselves by focusing on the interesting aspects of a subject. One of the best ways to do this is to ask questions, especially imaginative ones.

¹ See Reflection, “Hearing voices,” R201, Simple Joys 3, ch 15, 2013: [link](#).

² See *Sāmañña,phala Sutta* (D 2,76), [SD 8.10](#).

Curiosity is a fun way of living, not taking life for granted. It inspires us to be more creative and to feel more fulfilled. Here are some ways of readying our minds for sutta study as a creative and joyful learning process.³ This works best with the Sutta Discovery series.

(1) **THE SUTTA THEME.** Start by taking a few minutes to prepare yourself mentally. Sit comfortably at the study table or a quiet place, and simply focus on the breathing “in” and “out” for a few minutes, or as long as we like. Then, look at the “Theme” of the sutta (this is found just below the translated title at the top right-hand corner of the sutta’s first page). Take a couple of minutes to recall what we know of the subject, or write it down, if you like. We don’t have to be right all the time. Happily correct ourselves whenever necessary. This is learning.

(2) **SKIM THE SUTTA.** Then keep our mind completely open, like a blank slate to receive the Dharma. Let go of all the ideas we have listed earlier, and skim the whole sutta (if it is a short one), or a suitable section of a long one. Highlight or make a note of key terms and teachings, and look up the meanings of difficult ones right away. When we have finished, review the whole process.

(3) **CONNECT THE FACTS.** Discover what we don't know about a teaching or subject. A good way of doing this is to relate it to a teaching we are familiar with, for example, the 3 universal characteristics⁴ or the 3 trainings.⁵ Close our eyes and visualize all this, if we like. Ask ourselves, “How does this relate to me and the real world?” In other words, witness the truth for ourselves.

(4) **FIND OUT THE TRUTH.** We might often find that what we have learned confirms and extends what we have already known. Yet, often enough, we will be surprised with new perspectives of the Dharma, some of which may challenge our present ideas. Remember that learning Dharma is not about confirming our views, but rather to find out the truth of the matter.

(5) **ANCHOR OUR LEARNING.** If we are confused or baffled by some point, take some time to go back to some anchor points, some idea or teaching we are familiar with. Go back to where we felt comfortable with the material, and define what specifically is confusing us. Deal with one area of difficulty at a time. Where the problem remains difficult and unsolved, mark it with an asterisk (a star) or use our own highlighting method, so that we know where to return to when we have understood better.

(6) **BE READY TO LEARN.** It seems that there is no right or wrong: we seem to have no free will. Yet, as long as we keep an open mind and joyful heart of learning, the Dharma will somehow fit together, giving us a larger and clearer picture of true reality. In fact, the Dharma is always there, waiting for us, as it were. It’s just that we must ready ourselves to see it, be it.

The Dharma is always there for us, but not *out* there. Actually, it is *here*, right here and now *within* our hearts. That’s why we do not see it, because we are looking outside, at other people, at things. So we keep looking out, chasing after teachers and people, listening to them talking. If they have never listened to us, how would they ever know what to tell us, or how to help us? They are merely talking about themselves, endless soliloquies, often full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

If they are not yet on the path, nor do they aspire to reach the path, how can they really speak of it? They are sleep-talkers, legless talking dolls, talking about imaginative places they’ve never been to. They do not even have the proper maps, or know how to read them.

³ See Reflection, “Translating suttas is very enjoyable,” R33, *Simple Joys 1*, 2011 (rev), ch 13.1: [link](#).

⁴ The 3 universal characteristics are that all things of this world are *impermanent*, and *unsatisfactory*, and all principles underlying them are *non-self*: see **Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134), [SD 26.8](#).

⁵ The 3 trainings are those in moral virtue, in mental cultivation, and in insight wisdom: see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, [SD 21.6](#); also see [SD 1.11 \(5\)](#).

If they have not awakened from their own talking sleep, how can we, listening to them, ever awaken ourselves?

There are, of course, Dharma speakers worth listening to: when they tell us of their dreams, especially if they are sweet dreams. For, such dreams give us a vision of our own journey, a vision of the ancient city⁶ we should be heading for. Such dreams should move us to make the journey.

Even if we have the right maps, we cannot merely look at them all the time. We need to ready ourselves and step out to make the journey. We need to explore the territory for ourselves, and enjoy the landscape and the happy surprises it presents us.

Yet, we must remember that we are still learning to walk, like a toddler learning to walk. It often falls as it perseveres to walk, but even the falling is part of learning to walk. The toddler never gave up: we were that toddler.⁷

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⁶ See the parable of the ancient city: see **Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65,19-21/2:105 f), [SD 14.2](#).

⁷ See Reflection, “Buddhism is as easy as walking,” R37, *Simple Joys 1*, 2011 (rev), ch 10.4: [link](#).