

Summer 2005: The Place of Study

Question: I am relatively new to Buddhism (I have been practicing for about a year) and I've been struggling with the balance between study and practice. How should I go about setting up a plan of study for myself? How do I decide what I should study when there is so much material out there, and are there things that I absolutely must study before going on to more advanced material. Also, do you have any suggestions on how I should balance practice and study? Is there an ideal balance between the two?

Narayan Liebenson Grady: Because you are a beginner, I would recommend more practice and less study. Having a framework for the practice is essential for a sense of vision and wise effort. However, if you have a limited amount of time, focusing more on the sitting practice right now would be a better use of your time.

Reading one's own heart is often harder than reading the best of dharma books. Sometimes people depend too much on secondhand knowledge, rather than relying on direct experience and looking deeply at the nature of their own mind. Thus, to renounce reading for particular periods of time can be quite powerful as long as one is engaged in a serious practice.

Of course, after some years of practice, studying more intensively can be very nourishing. But this means reading in a contemplative way - digesting and applying what has been read-instead of relating to dharma books as a kind of entertainment or as a substitute for practice. Reading and contemplating the original discourses of the Buddha is invaluable. There are many books these days that interpret what the Buddha said in contemporary language, and they can be most helpful. Dharma centers sometimes have suggested reading lists and you might write to a center in your tradition and ask for one.

Or, instead of trying to study completely on your own, you could consider taking advantage of a study program, such as those offered at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Finally, if you would like a recommendation for my all-time favorite dharma book, it is ***What the Buddha Taught***, by Walpola Rahula.