

November 23, 1986

Yesterday I was tutoring a young college student who is a Cambodian refugee. The subject was mathematical set theory, something I had never studied before myself. So just before our tutoring session I gave myself a ninety minute cram course by reading through the text up to page fifty-five, the page upon which the student's homework assignment was given.

The material seemed perfectly logical to me, and I thought I was understanding it all as I went along. Yet when it came to the problems on page fifty-five, I found that I could not do them. In fact, I only finally succeeded in doing the problems on page fifty-five after I went back and did some of the problems on page ten, some on page twenty, and on through the book. The knowledge I had gained through mere reading was somehow too flimsy and insubstantial to actually be put to use. Practice with the earlier phases of the material was necessary before I truly had any real grasp of the subject.

It is interesting to reflect upon how this might relate to the substance of spiritual knowledge--knowledge of human relationships, of the meaning of life, of humankind's role in the Creation, of our relationship to God. Is it possible to advance on the spiritual path merely by reflection, or is it necessary that in order to move to higher levels of spirituality we must first put into practice what we already know? Is it possible to advance spiritually through study and reflection alone, or must we also act?

The teachings of Jesus seem not to emphasize mere study or contemplation. His emphasis seemed to be on action. True, he often spoke about the only proper motivation for action, which is love. But his words were about people who did things, or who failed to do things, for good or for ill. And so we read about sowers, the good Samaritan, the rich young man, and the prodigal son.

As Friends we often talk about the relationship of worship and service. But often when we talk we imply that the service flows out of the worship, whereas in truth the worship and the service feed each other. For it is only through our worship that we are enabled to know how we are to act rightly, but it is also only by putting into practice what we know, through service, that we can move to the next level of spiritual perception in our worship.

It was said by Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. But it is also true that spiritual principles, unless they are lived, cannot usefully be pondered.