

Self Esteem

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Life doesn't teach lessons. It's up to us to learn lessons, which means that we have to take the initiative. We can't wait for the things we need to know to be automatically presented to us as our birthright. Ajaan Fuang stressed this point when I first went back to stay with him. He told me, "You have to think like a thief if you want to learn the Dhamma." In other words, don't expect everything to be handed to you on a platter. It's up to you to be observant. When you're listening to somebody talk, whether they're aiming at teaching you a lesson or not, what can you learn from what they have to say? When events happen in your life, when events happen to people around you, what can you learn?

When you make the willingness to learn the basis for your self esteem, that cuts through a lot of other issues as well. And it's one of the few forms of self esteem that actually keeps you open to change. For many of us, self esteem means thinking that basically we're good people – which means that we have to keep trying to look back on our past actions to see evidence of that. And then, of course, we run across things that *don't* support that idea, and so we block them out of our minds. We don't like to think about them. In many cases those are precisely the things we need to learn from.

So when you detect a tendency not to want to reflect on your past mistakes, try to look into the fear around that: Why are you afraid of looking at these things? Fear in and of itself is not a bad thing. The problem is when fear is conjoined with greed, anger, and delusion. The greed, anger, and delusion are what create the problem. Fear in and of itself can often be skillful. After all, a lot of the Buddha's teachings are based on the very rational fear of the suffering that comes with aging, illness and death. There's the word, "*ottappa*," which means the fear of the consequences of unskillful actions. That's something the Buddha encouraged. He says it's a treasure.

There's also the word, "*samvega*," which is sometimes translated as dismay or shock. It's related to an adjective, "*samvigga*," which means terrified. You look at the way life goes aimlessly on and on and on, and the appropriate reaction is a sense of terror. One thing leads to another, and often nothing seems to lead anywhere worthwhile at all. As the Buddha emphasized, the only way out of this sense of terror or dismay is to develop strong confidence and conviction in the principle of karma, the principle of action. And that requires that you be willing to learn what's skillful, what's not.

So when you see the mind refusing to look at mistakes you've made in the past, you have to ask yourself, "What's being threatened by the idea of looking at those mistakes?" Often you find that it's your sense of self esteem, your sense of, "I'm basically a good person, I wouldn't want to hurt people." You don't want to

admit the things you did to hurt yourself, to hurt others. You don't want to look at feelings and emotions that you feel guilty or ashamed of.

But if you're really serious about putting an end to suffering, you need to develop the strength of mind to look into those things, for otherwise the consequences of *not* looking into them are even more fearsome. So it's not an issue of learning not to have fear; it's learning where fear should properly be focused. And where it should be focused is on the idea that if you don't learn from your past mistakes, you're never going to learn. At the very least you're not learning anything right now, and in not learning anything right now you're leaving yourself open to all kinds of mistakes in the future.

So look at the sense of self esteem that wants to say, "I'm already good," that wants a nice pat on the head, and – if nobody else gives one – gives itself a pat on the head. Look at the price of trying to keep that sense of self esteem shored up, of trying to protect it when it's so obviously fragile. If you try to maintain that kind of self esteem, you're setting yourself up for a fall because you can't continue to stay in denial forever. Even while you're in denial, the suffering that comes from your actions just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back.

We see this pattern in other people, and as the Buddha says, "The wise person is someone who learns lessons from other people's actions as well." There's that famous sutta about the four types of horses. The quick, well-trained horse only has to see the shadow of the whip and he does what he knows should be done. Next down, there's the horse who has to feel the whip on his coat. Then there's the horse who has to feel the whip cutting into his hide, and finally the horse who has to feel the whip cutting into his bone. In other words, if we're wise we learn to look at the dangers around us and not wait for them to hit us full force before we say, "I've had enough of this dangerous samsara; I'm ready to get out." Or, "I've had enough of this particular way of acting; I'll have to learn how to stop."

They say in AA that someone really has to hit rock bottom before he's willing to learn anything from the program. That's the way human nature normally is. Even then, there are people who hit rock bottom and still don't learn. So it's more a question of your discernment in seeing when it's time to give up a sense of self esteem that's based on a rickety foundation, one that constantly has to be shored up to the point where people suffer. Most people never learn: They suffer horribly just because they want to retain a little scrap of self respect here or there. So take that lesson and apply it to yourself, looking back at your past mistakes. Don't be afraid to look there, for if you're afraid to look there you're maintaining a delusion. And that delusion is going to hurt you further down the line.

So it's either/or. Which sense of wellbeing are you going to choose: the wellbeing built on the shaky ground of already being a good person, or the wellbeing of having the attitude that you're always willing to learn? The first attitude is the one to drop. The second attitude is the one that offers hope, that's based on a much more solid foundation, for there's always the possibility to keep

learning and learning and learning. When you're dealing with difficult things from the past, have the attitude that, "At least I'm going to learn from this." That shifts the foundation onto something much more solid, so that you're not making your happiness depend on something you *know* is going to be washed away by the waves of time. It's a foundation based on a much more clear-eyed sense of fear, focused on what should appropriately be feared – the unwillingness to learn – for that's what keeps people blind. That's what keeps people suffering.

This unwillingness to learn is something we all suffer from, and we all need to learn how to overcome it. Only when we can overcome it do we actually start learning lessons. Otherwise we go through life refusing to learn the lessons that are potentially there. So try to be the sort of person who picks up lessons quickly, because the more quickly you pick them up the less you suffer. It's as simple as that. And the suffering that comes from being slow to pick up lessons or from being unwilling to pick up lessons: *That's* something really worth being afraid of.

The Buddha encouraged his son, Rahula, to make the willingness to learn at all times the basis for his practice. And he explained to Rahula how to learn: You look at your actions and you look at the results. When the results turn out to be harmful, you're not ashamed to talk them over with someone else. Talk them over with someone who has experience on the path. Get that person's perspective and then resolve not to make that mistake again.

When you do things properly – your intention is skillful and no unhappy results come – then you can take joy in the practice. This is where that sense of self esteem is properly placed: Take joy that you're continuing to grow in the practice.

And just that shift in attitude makes all the difference in the world.