

Overconfidence & Underconfidence

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Ajaan Fuang once said, there are two kinds of meditators in the world: people who think too much and people don't think enough. But there are other ways of dividing meditators, too. An important distinction is between people who are overconfident and people who are underconfident.

Confidence is an important quality in the path of practice. If you don't have confidence, you just can't do it. You get debilitated. All you can see are your weaknesses. You read stories of the great ajaans, but they seem light-years away and you can give up trying. That's the underconfident extreme.

The overconfident extreme consists of people who like to do things at their own convenience. If they get a little bit tired, "Well, we don't have to do it today. There's always tomorrow. There's always something that can be put off till a little bit later, put it off till a little bit later. That's okay." The worst are those who overestimate their achievements. That, of course, totally blocks off the path.

So the question is: How do you tune your confidence so that it's just right? There are three relevant factors the Buddha said were important in his own practice, and it's good to look at them in your practice as well: ardency, resolution, and heedfulness. They all tend to push you a little bit more than you think you would like to go.

Heedfulness is the quality that sees the dangers in life. Life can end easily. Aging can come, illness can come. These are things that really hobble you as you practice, especially the illnesses that take away your energy, both physically and mentally. These can hit at any time. So you want to be careful to do what you can while you have the opportunity. If you have the strength, use it. If you have an opportunity to be more skillful, to look more carefully at the results of your actions, do it right now. Don't wait. You have no idea how much more time you have to practice in this lifetime.

This is why the Buddha, when he was talking to the monks gathered around at his passing away, stressed heedfulness as his final message. "Attain completion," he said, "through heedfulness."

Heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities, realizing that your actions are important, that they can make the difference between happiness and suffering, between having something to hold on to when aging, illness, and death come, and having nothing to hold on to at all.

Ardency is the desire then to do things as skillfully as possible. If you notice anything unskillful coming up in your mind—such as laziness or complacency—you have to recognize it as something unskillful and get rid of it. You also have to recognize self-doubt, low self-esteem as unskillful mental qualities as well. It's all too easy to think, "Well, I'm supposed to be pushing, pushing, pushing and getting someplace in my practice, and I'm not getting anywhere yet. There must be something wrong with me." That seems to be the voice of the Dhamma saying, "Here, you're bad. You're not up to snuff."

Well, that's not the voice of the Dhamma. It's Mara, Mara coming to discourage you.

This is where the Buddha's simile to Ven. Sona comes in. When you're going to play the lute, you want to make sure that your strings are tuned just right. If they're too slack or too taught, neither way of falling off the mark is going to work. In meditation, it comes down to looking how much energy you have, how much energy can you put in right now, so you adjust all the other factors of the practice in terms of your conviction, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment to be in tune with the amount of energy you have.

For example, tuning your conviction: There are passage where the Buddha talks about practicing as if your head were on fire, and you're not going to get up from your seat until you've pushed yourself all the way to awakening. That's one level of conviction. But you have to look at your energy. Where are you on the path? Can you make that kind of vow yet? What kind of vow *can* you make for the evening? What kind of vows are appropriate for your level of energy, your ability so far on the path? And how you are going to find out? You find out by pushing things, testing things, adjusting your practice.

As the Buddha said, if you find that, by living at your ease, the mind does develop, okay, live at your ease. But if you find that, by living at your ease, laziness creeps in, other unskillful states creep in, that's a sign that you're going to have to push yourself with a certain amount of pain. And how do you deal with pain? You've got to learn how to give yourself pep talks. Generating desire is such an important part of ardency, and it depends on your own skills in learning how to encourage yourself. Sometimes you can encourage yourself by looking at how much suffering there has been in your life so far and asking yourself, "Look, do you want to come back to this again? The same old stupid mistakes? Or would you like to try something new?"

There are times when it's useful to look at the cases where you have been skillful in the past. I've mentioned a couple times now how I never really heard any praise from Ajaan Fuang during my time with him. But one thing did get me

encouraged very early on. I heard it secondhand. When I first went back to stay with him, he was in Bangkok at the time, so as I stayed there. I was looking around to see what needed to be done. I cleaned his spittoon and did a lot of little things here and there, tidying up. He mentioned to one of the other monks that this was a good sign: There was hope for me as a meditator.

I wasn't waiting to be told what to do, I was actually looking for things that could be done. So I often fell back on that comment, that if there's any hope for me, it lies in that: the willingness to look what further could be done, not waiting to be told. And it was encouraging to notice that he had noticed that, too.

So when you're looking at your strengths, it doesn't necessarily have to be in terms of what you see yourself doing in the meditation. Is there anything in your life where you feel you're adding a little something, giving a little something of yourself more than you have to? That's your hope in the practice. You've got the quality right there that's going to push you on, that you can build on.

So in looking for positive qualities in yourself, it doesn't have to be major things, just the little things in your day-to-day life. Look around. There are plenty of things that can be done here at the monastery. We're way understaffed. I remember reading about a Western monk in another tradition, commenting on how when he first went to Thailand, he noticed the nuns, as he said, puttering around, and how they were wasting their time. They should be meditating, doing walking meditation, sitting meditation all the time: That's what he thought. But he found as he was doing walking meditation and sitting meditation all the time, his mind got really frazzled, got more and more discouraged, and he ended up finding that puttering around was a way of putting himself in a good mood. Clean this up. Straighten that out. After a while, you find that cleaning this up and straightening that out outside becomes a habit, and you start cleaning things up and straightening things out inside as well.

So you're not just looking for the major highlights: jhana, noble attainments. Just little things, like noticing that when you would normally slip off the breath, you say, "No, I'm not going to slip off this time. I've seen this coming, I don't want to have to fall in that old pattern. Let's try something new." Little things like that. Those are the things that make a big difference.

So when you find yourself discouraged on the path, look for the little things in your habits, in your character that are positive. We all have them. They may seem little, but you can remind yourself, hey, redwoods grow from the tiniest seeds you can imagine. All they require are the right conditions. Tend to them, look after them, and they'll grow.

This relates to the third quality, which is resolution. Once you've made up your mind to follow this path, you really want to stick with it through thick and thin. Now again, this requires learning how to raise your spirits when they need to be raised, and learning how to take criticism, not just from outside but learning how to take your own criticism, when the comment comes into the mind that says, "Hey, you could be practicing harder. That was pretty sloppy, or that was pretty uninspiring." Whatever you notice in your own practice, in your own meditation that's not up to snuff, learn to take that comment as an encouragement instead of just putting you into a downward spiral. After all, as the Buddha pointed out, this was the secret for his own success in meditation: not being content with what he had accomplished in terms of skillful qualities.

So it's a difficult balancing act, learning how to criticize yourself without getting into a funk, and learning how to encourage yourself without getting overconfident. But this is what the practice is: learning how to balance out the unbalanced qualities in the mind, and learning how to fine-tune them, to tune things to the right pitch, learning how to see your own weaknesses and to recognize your strengths, trying to take advantage of the strengths so that you really can do something about the weaknesses.

This, as the Buddha said, is the quality of the person of integrity, someone who has a sense of himself or herself: knowing where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, where there's work to be done, and what resources you can fall back on to do it. If the resources you fall back on seem to be meager, still, take care of what you've got. Don't look down on it.

Again, going back to that first year I was with Ajaan Fuang: I would get into what I later recognized were okay states of concentration, but I tended to dismiss them at the time. I was expecting more. I felt I had nothing at all. As a result, I was throwing away a lot of good states of mind because they didn't fit in with my preconceived notions of what a good state should be.

So when you realize great things grow from little things, and little things require care and attention, don't look down on the little things. But at the same time don't get complacent. It's as if you're raising a child. You encourage the child but at the same time you realize you've got to watch out for the child, because the child can make a lot of mistakes. You can't let down your guard. And although balancing is a difficult thing to do, it's the only way we're going to get anywhere in the practice. It's the only way our practice can grow.