

## Conceit

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Conceit is one of those qualities we all have—and it's a slippery friend. There are times when it's useful, as in that passage where Ananda teaches a nun that we practice to overcome conceit and yet we have to use conceit in the practice. The example he gives is that when you hear of someone who has put an end to suffering, has made it all the way to the goal, you can reflect, "That person is a human being; I'm a human being. That person can do it; so can I." To that extent, you need conceit in the practice. If you believe that you can't do the practice, or if it seems way beyond you, you end up giving up, you set your sights low. And as we all know, you never hit higher than you aim. So to that extent, conceit is helpful.

But it has its fangs. Ajaan Maha Boowa calls it the "fangs of ignorance" when you have the conceit that, "Well, this is going to be easy," and you get careless, complacent. And conceit has another side as well. The Buddha talks about comparing yourself to other people: thinking that you're better than they are, or equal to them, or worse than they are. All of these comparisons count as conceit. In other words, the idea "I am this," "I am that" gets brought into every issue, and this is where it grows fangs: "I'm really good at everything, therefore I'm going to be good at this," and you get careless. Or you may think, "I'm not up to this. This is beyond me," and you give up. You make the practice harder than it has to be. So it's a fine line, realizing where conceit is going to be helpful and where it's going to bite.

First, there's the issue of confidence. On the one hand, it's important to realize that this path you're on is a hard path to follow, so you can't go on the complacent assumption that, "This is going to be easy for me." On the other hand, you don't want to discourage yourself with the thought, "It's going to be impossible for me." The problem isn't the path, or how easy or hard it is. It's the *me* in there. That's the fangs. So try to put that word aside as much as you can. Remind yourself simply, "This is what has to be done." "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it."

That's what Ajaan Fuang said to me once. One evening, after a long day of work, he told me to sit up all night. This was very early on in my time with him, and I was dumb enough to say, "I don't think I can do that." He looked at me and said, "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." This didn't mean that it wasn't going to be hard. It *was* hard, but after all, this is a hard

practice. It goes against all our inclinations. We like our greed. We like our anger, sometimes. We like our delusions, and yet all these things have to be put aside, let go of as we practice. But it's within human capability to do this. Even if you do die in the practice, it's a good way to die. It's better than dying without having accomplished anything or dying doing something really stupid.

So try to think in those terms: Realize that even though it's hard, this is part of being a good friend to yourself. One of the definitions of a good friend is someone who is able to give what's hard to give, to do what's hard to do, to endure what's hard to endure. If you meet friends like that, associate with them. Value them. Treasure them. These are the people you really want as your friends. And you want to be able to make yourself your own best friend in just the same way.

Ask yourself, "What's hard for you to give, and yet something that's actually a burden for you?" Forgiveness is one thing. It's funny how sometimes material things are easy to give, but forgiveness, which is totally free, can be very hard. Just go down the list of the people in your life who you find it hard to forgive, and try it: Forgive them. Try not to carry a grudge and you'll find that that's a really good gift to give to yourself.

Do what is hard to do. Meditate longer than you might want to. Do walking meditation longer than you might want to. Put more effort into the practice than you want to, and you'll find that you benefit. This ties in with enduring what's hard to endure. Pain is hard to endure. Other people's dislike is hard to endure. Well, learn to endure it. It's not going to kill you. This doesn't mean that you sit there and grit your teeth through the pain. Learn to use your wisdom. As Ajaan Chah once said, if you could gain Awakening simply by endurance, chickens would have attained Awakening a long time ago—they can sit for really long hours. You have to use your wisdom. When something seems burdensome, why is it burdensome? Exactly what is it placing a burden on? And why do you want to identify with what's being burdened? Can you learn *not* to identify with it?

A good way to learn these lessons is to force yourself into situations where you've got to face this difficulty head on. Okay, it's there, it's a problem, and try to use your ingenuity to get around it. It's when you're cornered that you realize that you've got to find a way out. And that you can.

So learn to be your own best friend. It's not a matter of being pessimistic or optimistic. It's a matter of learning to be heedful. Heedfulness involves an interesting combination of qualities. On the one hand, you're confident that your actions *do* make a difference, so heedfulness is not negative or pessimistic. On the other hand, you realize that there are dangers out there, dangers inside as well. There are difficulties you've got to work with. You respect those difficulties but you don't get overwhelmed by them. In other words, you've got to drop the

element of conceit from your grasp. Don't bring your "*self*" into what you're doing. Don't bring "I can do this really easily" or "I can't do this at all." Just put them aside and see what you can do. Even if things don't work out well the first time, try, try, try again. This is how people grow.

One of Ajaan Fuang's terms of criticism was of someone who was "good even before he'd tried something" — in other words, the sort of person who's got it all figured out beforehand. He didn't trust people like that. At the same time, though, if he found that you were getting very pessimistic about your ability to practice, he didn't want you to stay there, either. Being overly optimistic or overly pessimistic were, as far as he was concerned, really unskillful ways of approaching the path. They're both forms of conceit. Admit that things are difficult but do what you can.

And learn to develop your discernment. Watch out for those fangs of ignorance: the "I am this" or "I am that" or "I'm not used to this," "I can't stand this," "This is hard for me." Drop the "I," the "me," and things get a lot easier.

So even though it may be hard, you can do it. The things that are hard to give, you can give. The things that are hard to do, you can do. The things that are hard to endure, you discover you can endure. It may not be easy the first time. You may find yourself running into a brick wall, but even brick walls can be battered down. They have their cracks. There are ways around them, under them, over them, through them. All you have to do is find where they are. So learn the proper use of conceit: the confidence that, yes, you can do this; other people can do it, it's something human beings have done — you're a human being, you can do it too. Once you've got that amount of conviction, drop the "you," drop the "me," the "I," and then set to work. That right there makes it a lot easier. And this way you become your own best friend.