

## *Doubt*

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Doubt, which is the last of the hindrances, is one of the more complex and tenacious. As you're setting out on the practice, you have to realize that doubt will not be overcome until stream-entry. So until that point, you're going to be dealing with it. Sometimes it'll be stronger, sometimes weaker. It'll come in different shapes and forms: doubt about different things.

Some forms of doubt are more insidious than others. There are a lot of issues, the Buddha said, you don't have to think about. He's not asking you to have any particular view about whether the world is eternal or not, or finite or not. But you do have to develop right view about what's skillful and what's not skillful, and the best ways to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not. You can have a lot of doubt about that, because the only way you're going to find out what's skillful and what's not is through the practice.

If you start having doubts about whether this practice is really worthwhile, that'll cut things off right there. That's probably the most serious of the doubts: Is there such a thing as skillful and unskillful?

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how to feed and starve the hindrances, and how to feed and starve the factors for awakening. He makes an interesting pairing: that the cure for doubt is the same thing as food for the discernment factor for awakening, which is analysis of qualities.

In other words, to starve your doubt, you have to develop your discernment. It's not simply a matter of wishing it away, or denying the doubt. The cure for doubt, he says, is to look into the mind and apply appropriate attention to the question of which events in the mind are skillful and which are not.

This means watching what's going on in the mind when you give rein to certain states of mind. Or if you think in terms of the committee of the mind, what happens when you follow certain voices? When you follow other voices, what happens? And look into the voices themselves, because you'll learn a lot.

The voice that says, "The path is impossible": That's a destructive voice. The voice that says, "You don't have any choices; you just have to go with the flow; everything is totally

predetermined”: What hope would there be? None at all.

If you have any hope for happiness, you have to hold to certain views: that you do have choice in the present moment, and choices will make the difference between whether you’re happy or you suffer. And there’s a pattern to all this that you can learn.

If you really care for happiness, these are some of the things you’ve got to take on faith at the beginning. The Buddha can’t prove them for you. But they are assumptions that are directly concerned with your well-being. So if there’s any voice in the mind that starts calling them into question, you’ve got to recognize it as really unskillful. It’s going to lead you to a lot of suffering—or in the Buddha’s terms, leave you bewildered and without protection.

Like a person I met one time: He’d been on many retreats doing vipassana practice. He was the sort of person who would work nine months out of the year, so that he could attend a three-month retreat. He’d taken to heart the idea that, while meditating, you shouldn’t do anything, you shouldn’t respond when anything comes up in the mind: good, bad, whatever. You just note what’s happening. You shouldn’t try to stop things from arising and passing away.

He got into a really bad depression, and some very dark states arose in his mind. The vipassana teachers told him, “Hey, step back. Don’t go into those states.” And he told them, “Well, you told me not to try to change anything.” He got very paranoid, afraid that they were deceiving him. By the end of the three months he was so disoriented that they had to let him stay on there at the retreat center to recover.

This is what happens when you tell yourself, “There is no choice.” What the Buddha said is right: If you believe that, you’re bewildered. You’re left without defenses. So recognize that voice as destructive. That doubt is a destructive doubt. It’s not really doubt, it’s more orneriness.

But there are other times when you actually have legitimate doubts as to what is skillful and what’s not. So you have to remind yourself: Here as we meditate, we’re putting things to a test. We’re experimenting. The only way you’re going to learn is through experimenting.

So if the doubt pulls you back from trying the meditation or continuing with the meditation, ask yourself, “What kind of experiments have you done? What other ways could you experiment with the meditation?” That way, you’re not being told to deny your doubts. After all, if you deny your doubts, how are you going to learn?

There has to be some inquisitiveness in the mind that asks questions, that wants to know.

That kind of doubt is actually encouraged. The one that ranks as a hindrance is the doubt that's *not* curious, that just gives up, discouraged, defeated—the one that says either: “I can't do it,” or “This is a bad path”: That kind of doubt has to be dealt with.

Again, you have to look to see: Where is it coming from? What voice is saying that? What is its motivation? What is it looking for? If you find it alluring, what's the allure? When you start asking questions like this, you're actually engaging in *analysis of qualities*, which is precisely what you need in order to overcome doubt. If the answers are not coming very quickly, you might remind yourself, “Well, maybe the mind needs to rest.”

So even though the doubt may be unresolved, you put it aside for the time being and try to find whatever rest you can, before returning to your investigation. It's in this way, in overcoming the hindrance of doubt, that you learn how to make distinctions as to which doubts are useful, which ones are not.

There's an interesting word in Thai—*songsai*—which means both to doubt and to wonder. The ajaans often say, “Try to make the distinction between the kind of doubt that's just uncertain and discouraged, and the doubt that's wondering.”

The doubt that wonders can be trained. If it just wonders and wanders, it gets kind of useless. But if you get it focused and you start wondering, “What is concentration like? When they talk about the refreshment or rapture that comes from concentration, or the pleasure that comes from concentration: What is that like?” Then you know where to go.

As Ajaan Lee says, it comes from directed thought and evaluation centered on one object. So you do that. As for doubts that are more abstract, you put them aside. In this way, your curiosity and inquisitiveness get more and more focused on issues that really will be helpful. They stay right there on that issue of: What's skillful? And what are you doing in the mind right now that's skillful, and what are you doing that's unskillful? And if it's unskillful how do you let it go?

You've got to develop dispassion for it. You remember how the Buddha said to develop dispassion: Look for when it comes—the item that you're trying to get dispassionate for; you look for when it goes. You look for its allure: When it comes, why do you go for it? What's the little perception that the mind flashes that makes it attractive?

It's like looking for the subliminal messages they sometimes send on TV. They're there, and if you're quick, you see them. You begin to realize that often the reason we go for these things has very little substance, and yet they lead to a lot of suffering. They really are obstacles.

That's called looking for the drawbacks. When you see that the allure, the pleasure, that comes from it is not worth the drawbacks, that's when you develop dispassion and let go.

This is how you focus on the doubt, to see which doubts are actually useful and peel away the doubts that are harmful. This is one of those hindrances that the Buddha takes really seriously. After all, if you die with doubt, you might wonder, "All that good that I did doesn't seem to be getting me anywhere." That's going to really pull you down. You don't want a mind-state that pulls you down while your body's really weak like that and there's all the turmoil that goes on when the body is about to die.

So you want to be able to peel that kind of thinking away and be done with it. Otherwise, you're going to approach death with a lot of fear. Remember, one of the reasons for fearing death that the Buddha cited was that you don't know what the true Dhamma is, you haven't seen the true Dhamma—in other words, you haven't gained stream-entry.

But at the very least, even if you don't get to stream-entry, you can minimize your doubts by being very observant about your own mind: what is skillful and what's not. That's the only way that you can get past doubt: by focusing on the issues that really matter.

The Buddha had a lay student one time who was asked by some sectarians, "What does this Buddha teach, this Buddha of yours? Does he teach that the earth is eternal?" "No." "Does he teach that it's not eternal?" "Well, no." "Finite?" "No." "Infinite?" "No." Down the questionnaire of the big issues of the day. "No, no, no."

So the sectarians said, "This teacher of yours is a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." And the layperson responded, "No, that's not the case. He teaches what is skillful and what's unskillful—to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not." That silenced the sectarians. The layperson went to see the Buddha and the Buddha said, "Yes, that was a good answer."

There are a lot of questions where the Buddha says it's not worth your time getting involved in them. They just pull you astray. But this issue of what skillful and what's not, how you can develop what's skillful and how you can abandon what's not: That's an issue where you have to work your hardest to answer the question.

And you do it by being observant. The laboratory is right here, in your mind, and this is where the answers are. If you don't look here, you're not rising to the challenge that the Buddha set. And in Ajaan Lee's words, you're not going to find the truth because you're not true.

So be true in looking into the mind, trying to develop appropriate attention as to what's

skillful and what's not. That'll help push aside vagrant doubts, and answer the questions that lie behind your genuine doubts, your useful doubts, so that you can get to that point where everything opens up inside. Then you'll see for sure that the Buddha was right: There is such a thing as the deathless, and it can be attained through human effort. That's when *all* your doubts are resolved.