

Self-Doubt

March 11, 2021

I've been talking about the hindrances. The other day I talked about the hindrance of doubt, and I focused on one kind of doubt, which is doubt in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, the Sangha. But there's another kind of doubt that can also get in the way of your practice. That's doubt in yourself.

It often comes when there's a setback. You've been trying and trying and trying, and then suddenly you trip over something. You seem to be back at square one—or worse than square one. A voice comes up in the mind: "Maybe you don't have it within you to do this." That's a voice you cannot listen to, because the meditation is a necessary skill.

There are a lot of skills in the world where you realize you don't have a talent for it, and it's not all that necessary, so you can let those skills pass. But there are others you're going to need. You have to work on them, no matter how talented or untalented you are. Part of the problem, of course, is our educational system in this country. They channel you very quickly into areas where you're talented and they don't teach you how to get good at something where you don't have talent. So you have to pick up these skills on your own.

One of the important skills is learning how to talk to yourself. This fits in with the Buddha's description of how to get past doubt. It's the same as getting past doubt in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha: You have to analyze what's going on. If your concentration crashed, okay, why? What happened? What tripped you up? If you broke one of the precepts, what was the temptation? What was the mind saying to itself when it gave in? You have to watch out for that the next time around, and you have to think up a good response ahead of time—so that the next time that particular argument comes, you don't fall for it.

Of course, the mind will try other arguments, and you might not be up on those. But you can't simply go on the determination, "Well, I'm not going to fall for that the next time," because you haven't yet looked into why you fell to begin with. If you say, "It's never going to happen ever again," you're setting yourself up for another fall, and that gets more and more discouraging. After a while, that sabotage voice, the saboteur inside your mind that wants to undermine your practice, will get more and more evidence that you can't do this, that you might as well give up.

But you've got to keep telling yourself that this is a skill you need to work on, no matter what, and even if you're not really good at it, it's better than not doing

it at all. It's like moving into a foreign country when you're old and you have to learn another language. You're never going to get really good at the language at that age. But there's no reason to give up. You're going to need to use it every day. So you make do.

As you get more observant, sometimes you can get better than make-do. But the important principle is realizing that this is a skill you've got to master.

Think of Ajaan Fuang. He was orphaned at age 11. His relatives put him with different monasteries until he finally got a monastery where the abbot wasn't cruel. He told me some stories of some of the first monasteries he went to where the abbots sounded really sadistic in their treatment of the little temple boys. So he finally got one where the abbot was kindly. The abbot saw that here was a kid who had no relatives. No property. If he didn't learn some skills, he might be looking at a life of crime. So he tried to teach him some skills. First he tried music, but music didn't work. He was going to teach him medicine. But Ajaan Fuang saw that if you become a doctor, you're at everybody's beck and call all hours of the day and night. He didn't want that.

So as he got older, being around the monastery—you'd think the temple boys would have heard a lot of Dhamma, but it goes in one ear and goes out the other until a certain age. Then they start listening. For him, it was 16.

He got to thinking about kamma: Here he was. Poor. Without a family. Nothing to support him. He told himself, "I've probably got lots and lots of bad kamma in my past. I really have got to do something." So he made up his mind that he wanted to ordain.

When he reached the age of 20, that's what he did, but then he was disappointed. He started studying the Vinaya and the Dhamma, and realized that the Vinaya as it was practiced in his monastery was pretty sloppy. As for the practice of the Dhamma, nobody spoke anything about meditation. He felt that something was really lacking.

Finally, in his second year as a monk, he met Ajaan Lee, who happened to wander into Chanthaburi. He went to listen to his talks, looked at his behavior, and was really satisfied. He decided that that was the life he wanted. It wasn't easy. He had to put up with a lot of hardships, but that realization kept him going: that this was skill he had to work on. If he didn't have this skill, he wouldn't have anything.

So try to have that attitude: that no matter what, you've got to work at this. It's a necessary skill. Then look at the voices in the mind that would pull you away. Look at each of them. What's the argument this one uses? What's the argument that one uses? How can you outwit them? Plan ahead of time.

Think of that story of the medical school where they taught brain surgery. They wanted to make sure they had good candidates. Now, everybody, of course, who applies for the brain surgery section has good grades, but good grades don't necessarily mean you're going to be a good surgeon. So they had to figure out what questions to ask in the interview that would weed out the bad candidates. They came down with two. One was: Can you tell us about a mistake you've made recently? If a candidate said, "I can't think of any mistakes I made recently," he was out. Or she was out. But if the candidate did mention a mistake, then the next question was: How would you avoid that mistake the next time around? That was to see if this was kind of person who would actually try to improve. If the candidate hadn't thought about it, he or she was out.

A good surgeon has to learn how to look back on a mistake and to analyze it to see: Where was the weak point? Then he or she has to figure out how to compensate for that weak point the next time around. That's precisely the attitude you need as a meditator when you slip up in the precepts, slip up in the concentration, or let yourself get embroiled in the kind of thinking that's antithetical to the practice. Once you can pull yourself out, you have to ask yourself: Why? What was the weak point this time? You may trip again. But make sure you don't trip over the same trip wire. That's the important thing.

So when doubts arise about your ability to do this, you have to remind yourself, "I've got to do this no matter what. I may not be the most expert meditator or the most expert practitioner, but I've got to do my best." This is one of those cases where you have to take your mistakes seriously, but not so grimly serious that you let them defeat you. Just go back and review what happened. You may not like to see your weak points, but if you don't allow yourself to see your weak points, how are you going to solve them? You can't just push past them, pretending they're not there, because they'll get you the next time around.

Look at how you talk to yourself. Ajaan Lee makes the point that of the various fabrications—bodily, verbal, and mental—the really important one is verbal. It's through the way we talk to ourselves that we can destroy ourselves, we can sabotage the practice. It's through the way we talk to ourselves that we can pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and encourage ourselves to move on. It's through the way we talk to ourselves that we make our decisions.

So learn to look at the conversation in your mind. Who's saying what? Who can you believe? Which voices are random? Which voices are in line with the practice? Which ones sound like Dhamma but really are not? And which ones are out to get you? You have to admit to yourself that all these voices are there. Then you can figure out what to do with them. Just as the Buddha said, the cure for

doubt is not just to say you believe in yourself, or to have Rock Star written all over your meditation record. The way they try to give confidence to kids at school these days doesn't work. You need to have some basis for confidence. In this case it has to be your determination that regardless of how good or bad you've been in the past, each present moment is an opportunity to make a turn.

Remember that the Buddha has said the mind is very changeable. It can reverse direction more quickly than anything else in the world. Sometimes that's dangerous. You're going along, things are going fine, when all of a sudden you find yourself wondering if you want to practice at all. But there's a way in which you can take that changeability and turn it to your advantage: When you're going in a wrong direction, you can turn around. Once you start slipping, you're not committed to the slip.

This is one way in which the mind gets you. It says, "Well, you've already slipped a little bit, you might as well go all the way." Turn that around. You slipped a little bit, well, you *don't* have to go all the way. You can stop. Just the intention to be skillful is in itself meritorious. Then you back it up, back it up, back it up with your subsequent intentions.

As for the cynical voices in the mind say, "You know you're going to give in again," say "Okay, I gave in to that particular voice that time, but I'm not going to give in to it again. There may be other voices that I'm going to figure out." Try to go at this systematically. You'll find that you have a better and better track record. You can build some confidence inside that way.

This way, when you do slip, you don't have to slip very far before you catch yourself. You don't have to fall down into the chasm of doubting your ability to do this at all. Just jump over the chasm and keep going.