

# *Trustworthy Judgment*

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One of the basic principles of the practice is that we take refuge. Formally this is called taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is why we have those chants about the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha every evening, to keep our refuge in mind. We think of them, we think of the Buddha's life, the lives of the members of the noble Sangha. We think of their qualities. And it's not so much that we take refuge in people way in the past. We take their qualities and try to develop them in ourselves right now. The Buddha was wise, so we try to develop our own wisdom. The Buddha was pure in his behavior, so we try to develop purity in ours. The Buddha was compassionate, wanting true happiness for himself, true happiness for all living beings, so we try to develop compassion as well, for ourselves and for the people around us. Only when we've developed these qualities in our minds do we really have a refuge. Because there's another principle in the teachings: that you have to be your own refuge, your own mainstay. The only way you can do this is by developing reliable qualities in your mind.

Most people can't really depend on themselves. They say they want happiness and then they turn around and do all kinds of things to cause misery. They want peace but they create war. They want the world to be a good place to live in, and yet they make a mess of it. This is called being a traitor to yourself. And yet that's the way most people live, because they haven't trained their minds. It's only when you train the mind that you can learn to depend on it.

It's like training an animal. If you have an untrained dog in your house, it causes a lot of problems. It's going to pee on the rug and create messes all through the house. You tell it to come, and it doesn't pay any attention. You tell it to go sit, go to bed or whatever, it doesn't pay any attention at all because it's not trained. Well, the mind that's not trained creates a lot more problems than a dog. It can mess up your whole life, not just your house. You suddenly get a notion in your head this might be good, that might be good, and without really looking at it carefully, just because it feels right or you have a hunch, you can run with it. In this way the mind ends up being a traitor to itself. It can't depend on itself because it doesn't know how to test its ideas. It doesn't know how to test its notions.

As we practice meditation we're trying to make the mind more reliable, more trustworthy. Just this simple process of focusing on one object: Can you do it for a whole hour? You make up your mind to stay with the breath, and two breaths later another mind has taken over, wants to think about this problem or that. Sometimes the problems are big and important problems, but how can you trust the solutions you come up with if the mind can't even stay with one object for a while?

So this is basic training in learning how to be more reliable, how to be more trustworthy, so that you can trust yourself. To begin with, just stay with the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it right back, again. The same as with a little puppy: You tell the

puppy to come, and if the puppy doesn't come, you have to pull the leash. The next time you say, "Come," and it doesn't come, you pull the leash again. After a while, the puppy gets the idea, not only because you pull the leash but also because you have a reward for it. When it comes, you give it a little piece of food. It's the same way with the breath. You try to make the breath as comfortable as possible, so that when the mind comes back, it feels good, feels right.

In this way the mind becomes more and more your own mainstay, so that when you have to make big decisions about your life, you have a mind state that's capable of making the decisions. And you can trust your ability to judge what's a good decision, what's not. This requires all of the skills involved in concentration: mindfulness, alertness, discernment, tranquility. If an idea comes in your mind, you don't get swept away. You watch it for a while. You think about it. If you were to make that decision, where would it lead you? Go through the steps. If something strange comes into the mind, learn how to recognize it as a strange idea.

Several years back when I had my last visit with Ajaan Suwat, he had been in a car accident and suffered some brain damage, but his training in meditation hadn't abandoned him. He was able to tell when the mind was sending him weird perceptions, skewed perceptions. As he said, that thing he got from his meditation, that didn't change; but he began to notice that his brain wasn't working properly. What saved him from falling for those perceptions was the mindfulness and concentration he had developed in his meditation. Even in his last months, he could recognize when the mind wasn't functioning right.

In contrast, a couple years back I was visiting my father for the last time. He was suffering from Parkinson's dementia. His case was very different. He hadn't meditated much—a little bit, but nothing really continuous. And in his dementia when he saw things, he couldn't tell that they were illusory. He'd see big black dogs coming into the house, and no matter how much you told him there were no big black dogs in the house, he insisted that there were, because he had seen them.

The difference between these two people was that one had trained his mind and the other hadn't. The person who had trained his mind to be reliable was the one who could trust his mind. He could know if weird things were coming in, and could trust his judgment that they were weird. If you don't train your mind, you have no standards for judging things. This doesn't mean that an untrained mind can't have good ideas; many times it does have very good ideas, but the problem is it can't sort through its ideas in a really trustworthy way to see what's reliable and what's not. Because it can't trust itself.

The Buddha, who was a master of similes, once said that there was one thing for which there is no easy simile, and that's how easily and how quickly an untrained mind can change. He said that there is nothing else you can think of that's nearly as fast. The untrained mind can turn on itself. What you like one moment turns into something you don't like the next. And unless you develop good strong concentration, you don't have a solid foundation for noticing when the mind has changed, when it's turned on itself, when you can rely on it and when you can't.

So this is how we find refuge in life, for ultimately we can't depend on anyone outside. We can depend on the Buddha to be a good example, but he can't do the

work that needs to be done inside us. We have to do that work ourselves. He can't do it for us. He sets the example, but it's up to us to be inspired by the example and do the work that's needed to be done so we can have the same virtues in our mind that he had in his. Once we can learn to trust ourselves, we can find refuge in our own reliable mind. Because we've trained it, we've made it reliable.

This is why when you have big decisions to make in life, it's a good idea to sit down and be very, very quiet. Set up the question in your mind and then put it aside, focus on the breath, stay with the breath. Get the mind so that it's really solid and still, and then from that perspective you can start contemplating the issue. Then do it again, and then again, just to make sure. You want to develop the kind of habit where you don't jump for a quick answer. You wait and you test things again and again and again until you know you can really rely on them. In that way, you learn how to rely on yourself.

So make sure as you're meditating that you don't become a traitor to your initial intention. The intention is to stay here with the breath, make it comfortable, make it a good place to stay. Learn to simply put aside anything else that comes in the way. That way you can begin to see through all the tricks that the mind uses to deceive itself. And that ability to have a steady gaze, a penetrating gaze through all the subterfuges of the mind: That's where you're going to find your refuge. That's where you can begin to find what's certain in life.