

Healthy Conceit

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When I was teaching in France, I noticed a theme that developed on its own. It wasn't planned. But the theme of the committee of the mind turned into *the* topic of the retreat and a lot of the instructions outside of the retreat.

Toward the end of the stay, there was one woman who was commenting on how her committee seemed to have three types of members: There was the committee member that was creating a situation, another committee member that was actually playing a role in the situation, and then there was a third, the critic, who was commenting on the other two.

I thought it was a pretty good analysis, because our members tend to fall into these three roles. The fact that we have so many different committee members is what allows that third role to take place.

In other words, your committee members are each based around a desire. They've gained a seat at the table because at some point in the past they were actually able to deliver on a desire. Whether they delivered well or not, that's another issue. But they delivered to some extent, so that they've become part of the committee. Then one desire will come and then another desire.

That's where the critic comes in, as the members try to jostle among themselves for who's going to get attention, who's going to dominate the discussion. A lot of the training in the meditation is training the critic, the one that looks at your actions and passes judgment on them—because the critic has a large role to do with conceit, which can either be totally debilitating in the practice or else can actually be useful, depending on the kind of conceit you develop.

After all, conceit is one of the fetters that keep tying us to suffering. But it's one of the last ones to be cut, and the Canon actually holds a role for it.

It's interesting that the suttas that talk about conceit, desire, and craving as having a role in the practice are all said by Ven. Ananda. In the case of desire, it's the question of, "Can you use desire as part of the path to the end of desire?" The example he gives is of walking to a park. You have to have the desire to walk there in order to get there. Once you've gotten there, though, then the desire is gone.

And it's pretty much the same with conceit. You have to learn how to use conceit skillfully as part of the path to focus you on getting to the goal. Once you've gotten to the goal, then you abandon it. Here the skillful conceit is, "Other people can do this, why can't I?" An important part of healthy conceit is recognizing that it's not the case that you're already good. If you want to have

some pride on the path, it should be pride in your willingness to learn, knowing that you will make mistakes, everybody makes mistakes.

If there's a critic in your mind that denies the fact that you could ever make a mistake, you've got to stifle that critic, kick it out, because it's not useful at all. If your pride is based on the fact that you're already good, it's constantly ready for a fall.

In the forest tradition, there's no room for people who are already good. They have a phrase describing people who "know about things before they happen and are already masterful before they've even tried something." In other words, you've read all about things, you've heard all about things, and you know this is this and that's that, and this is the way it has to be done, but you haven't even tried it. They have no use for people of that sort.

The sort of people they *do* have a use for are those who see that they're suffering and who realize that a lot of their sufferings are coming from within—and they want to learn how to stop causing that suffering.

In a case like that, you need to have some confidence. If you don't have the confidence that you can do it, you cut the ground from underneath your feet.

This is one of the common themes that a lot of the ajaans had to teach: "Don't underestimate yourself, saying, 'I don't have the merit, I don't have the perfections, I don't have what's needed for the practice.'" That's probably one of the main attitudes that they had to counteract in their students.

You see this in some of the students' recollections of what Ajaan Mun would teach: "You're a human being. You have everything that's needed in order to do the practice." You have to remember in their case, a lot of these were children of peasants; they came from poor families. Thai society tends to dump on people like that. So they were used to having a very low opinion of themselves, especially in terms of this sort of activity.

A lot of Ajaan Mun's instructions were encouragements: "You've got what it takes. Have confidence that you have what it takes and then work with that."

This is a lot easier if you have some background in a manual skill of some kind, where you can reflect on what's needed to master a skill.

This is one area where our educational system is really lacking. We tend to channel kids very early on. If you see that so-and-so has a talent for art, you channel them into art. Somebody else has a talent for science, you channel them into science. Somebody else seems to have mechanical abilities, they go into mechanics.

The kids aren't trained in how to learn how to be good at things that they're not automatically good at—which is probably one of the most necessary lessons

you can learn: how to figure things out, how to look at yourself when you're doing something really poorly and yet not get discouraged. You sit down and take it apart, "What exactly is going wrong?"

From there, you develop a lot of important qualities. Healthy conceit is the number one quality. Okay, you may not be really good at this, you may be making a lot of mistakes, but, one, you're willing to learn, and two, you're *able* to learn. This means you have the ability to recognize your mistakes, the willingness to talk them over with other people, and the willingness to try something new, something you didn't do before.

There's a book that Richard Sennat wrote called *The Craftsman*. It talks about the character qualities and personality qualities that craftsmen develop. And number one is the sense of their own competence, their own responsibility, and their own ability to learn. In the really good cases, there were people who were willing to use their ingenuity. Some craftsmen simply learn to do the craft as well as somebody else has done it. Other people push the frontiers a little bit.

Nowadays, of course, we tend to idolize the frontier pushers, even to the extent of thinking that they don't have to learn the basic skills. Well, they *do* have to learn the basic skills, they have to go through all the steps that everybody else has to go through, learn how to do things well that they're not automatically skilled at. Only then do they reach the point where they're ready to push the frontiers. Their frontier pushing is actually useful because they've already explored everything that's available and they want to move on.

So as we're meditating, remember that there are certain skills we've got to develop. They start with really basic stuff, how you stay with the breath and, when the mind slips off, how you bring it right back.

A lot of people like to skip over this part and go straight for all the wonderful things that you read about. But you're not going to get to those wonderful things unless you've figured out the process of distraction.

So when you encounter distraction, don't get totally discouraged. Some people say, "I can't meditate. My mind is full of distractions." But that's like saying, "I can't go to the hospital. I'm sick." If you're really sick you've *got* to go to the hospital.

So recognize that this is a necessary skill. And even if it doesn't come naturally, you're going to do what you can. Instead of getting discouraged by the distractions, try to figure them out: Exactly what happens when the mind is distracted? Where does it go? You might think that a lapse in mindfulness would be impossible to see because, of course, there's no mindfulness in that moment. But remember, you've got different committee members and some of them are watching you.

So take advantage of that fact. There's somebody observing the meditator here,

and you want to train that observer to anticipate, Yes, there's going to be a distraction and you want to look for the warning signs before the mind leaves the breath. How does it start surveying around to see where else the mind might want to go? When the mind starts getting bored with the breath, when it starts getting impatient, what are the warning signs? And once you see the warning signs, what can you do to make sure you stay with the breath: Make the breath deeper, make the breath more interesting, make the breath larger—whatever gets you back on board. When you've slipped off, how can you come back as quickly as possible?

One important rule of thumb is that no matter how fascinating the thought that you've gotten distracted into, don't feel that you have to tie up the loose ends before you leave it. Leave it unfinished—because these things never really finish.

It's like those movies that seem to end and yet they always have a few seeds for the sequel. Our thoughts are like that. You see the evil person fall over the cliff. You think he's dead at the end of one sequence. Well, you know that people who disappear off the cliff can always magically reappear.

And it's the same with our finished thoughts. You've taken care of that issue then you're going to back to the breath – NO – you don't have to take care of anything, drop it immediately. Come right back. Notice the mind's resistance to that and learn how not to give in to it.

When you do this, you learn an awful lot about the process of becoming, how you create worlds in the mind, how you take on identities in those worlds, how you start getting committed to those worlds—even though they're not committed to you, that's for sure. Then there's the skill in untangling yourself from them.

That's high-level Dhamma. And where are you going to find it? Looking at this messy business of distraction. If you're too proud to look at your distractions and figure them out, if you just want to jump over them to the next wonderful stage in the concentration, you're going to miss the really important lessons.

As Ajaan Lee said, one of the big problems with meditators, especially who've read a lot of Dhamma, is that they mistake high-level Dhamma for low-level and low-level for high-level.

There are lessons to be learned from the simple process of untangling yourself from distraction and learning how to anticipate and head off distractions. Those are key for overcoming your clingings and cravings and becomings and birth.

So be willing to learn lessons from the little things going on in the meditation that you'd rather just jump over. That type of conceit that's willing to learn from anything: This is where it shows its stuff, where it's really useful.

If you're going to have a sense of pride, build it around this: that you're not too proud to learn from the little things. That's the pride of a craftsperson, the pride of

a mediator: the desire that leads to the end of desire, the conceit that leads to the end of conceit.

So look at the critical voices in your mind, the observers and the commentators, and teach them a proper sense of values this way, so that they actually become useful parts of the meditation.

This is what directed thought and evaluation—especially evaluation—are all about: getting good at observing how to get the mind to settle down.

So train these voices well.