

## *Don't Be Afraid of Mistakes*

*November 16, 2016*

When we talk about the committee of the mind, or when Ajaan Lee talks about all the various consciousnesses that may be hovering around your body, or when the Buddha talks about your thoughts being not-self, the purpose is to get some distance from those thoughts. But it doesn't mean you have to distrust them. It simply means that you want to get in a position where you can see them more clearly and think about their consequences.

The Buddha himself talked about the point where he got on the path. It was when he started dividing his thoughts into two types: skillful and unskillful. In other words, he looked at his thoughts not in terms of their content or how much he liked them but in terms of where they led. If you think a particular thought for a while, where is it going to take you? What will it incline you to do? And if it inclines you to do something, what would be the results of that action? Based on these questions, you sort through your thoughts as to which ones you can trust and which ones you can't trust.

Of course, there are times when you're not really all that sure about where the thoughts are going to lead. This is when you have to decide, "Well, what seems best right now?" There's no magic lodestone that, when you place it over a thought, will show whether it's skillful or not. You have to be willing to put things to the test. And that means you have to be willing to make mistakes. If you're afraid of making mistakes, you won't get anywhere in the practice at all.

I had a student one time who didn't like the fact that I couldn't tell him that he would focus on a particular topic of meditation and that it would take him all the way and he wouldn't have to think or evaluate his thoughts in the meantime. In other words, there is no foolproof way of gaining wisdom. If there were a foolproof way, you'd still be a fool at the end.

You have to be willing to take a few risks, based on what you think is the best option available to you. You don't take any option that you know for sure is not the best. But when you're not sure, okay, give something a try. Have that much trust in it, but not so much trust that you're blind to the results. Because we have two types of attitudes. One is too uncertain and the other is too trustful. And finding the right point of balance is difficult.

I remember reading a passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's instructions on how to meditate: *Wisdom Develops Concentration* or *Wisdom Fosters Concentration*. He was saying that an important part of the practice is when you

learn how not to trust the mind.

I, however, had just gone through a period when I was too distrustful of what was going on in my mind, and as a result wasn't able to get the mind into concentration. I'd get a little bit of concentration and then say, "Is this the real thing or not? I'm not sure. I'd better back off." And that got in the way. There were other times when you just say, "I'll ride through with this," and you're causing damage to yourself and you don't realize it. So there are two extremes. And the way between the extremes is to be willing to practice by trial and error, and to be willing to make a few mistakes—the important point being that you would then learn from them.

Ajaan Fuang gives a nice example. He says back in his day when he started meditating, "We didn't have all these instructions in how to meditate." He was simply told, "Okay, meditate until your mind settles down. Bring your mind down." And so he'd try to bring it down, down, down. And it got heavier and heavier and heavier. And really unpleasant. So he said, "Hmmm. Maybe I should try it the other way around?" So he thought, "Bring it up, up, up, up." But it got too wired. Finally, he realized he had to decide exactly what was the right spot. But notice, he made some mistakes and then he learned from them. He wasn't afraid to make mistakes.

It was the same being his attendant. There were a lot of things he wouldn't explain. And if I asked him to explain, then he would just drive me away. He wanted me to be willing to make the effort, and take the risk, to see what seemed right, seemed best. And if it wasn't, well, I'd learn.

In other words, I had to learn how not to be afraid of criticism. That attitude that's snuck into our society nowadays, that if you criticize somebody you're harming them: That has no place in the practice. After all, the Buddha said, if someone criticizes you, and the criticism is valid, then you should regard that person as someone who's pointed out treasure. You now see room for improvement in an area you didn't see before. Or maybe you saw it but you didn't think it was important and now you realize the importance. Well, that's a gift. Now, the principle of cause and effect will sometimes point things out to you. You follow a certain line of thinking and then you begin to realize that things are not going well. Okay, cause and effect have pointed out treasure to you. You've learned something that you didn't know before.

This is how you become an experienced meditator. Experienced meditators aren't the ones who just do everything right, right from the very beginning. They have to make mistakes. And in making mistakes, they learn: Where's the territory of what's skillful and where's the territory of what's not skillful? Where's the

dividing line between the two? When a particular problem comes up, how do you go about finding a solution?

The people who've had trouble getting the mind into concentration are the ones who can tell you all the ins and outs, at least of their own minds. The ones who found the concentration smooth sailing have a hard time explaining things. They say, "Well, just meditate until your mind settles down and then you're okay." But, what if your mind doesn't just settle down?

This is why it's useful to have Ajaan Lee's instructions for working with the breath, but even then you have to play with his instructions. Sometimes he says to breathe down the spine, and other times he says to breathe *up* the spine. I've found in my own experience that you don't breathe in just at the spots where he talks about. Sometimes you have to breathe into your right hip, sometimes you have to breathe into your left jaw. In other words, there are parts of the body that tend to be starved of breath energy, and they're doing all the work to get the breath energy to other parts. But they themselves get kind of tight. So you have to think of letting them get some breath as well.

This is not written in the instructions, but these are things that you can learn by noticing how the breath energy goes around your body, what feels good, what doesn't feel good. And you may find that you've been breathing for a long time in a way that has an adverse effect on the body. Well, that doesn't mean that that long time was a waste. It just means that it took a while to see that what you were doing was not quite right. In other words, it wasn't a long time of a total mistake. The fact that you stuck with it, tried to see it through until you could gauge the results: That's to be encouraged.

So when thoughts come up in the mind and the question is, "Can I trust them or not?" the answer is, "Watch them. If they look good, okay, put them into practice. And then watch them again." Trust them enough that you actually are sincere in putting them into practice. But be wary enough so that if bad results start showing themselves, you're willing to change your tactics.

I have a student who used to be a professional chef. And he told me that once a year the French restaurant where he was working in Singapore would hold an amateur cooking contest where people who would come in and show off their ub skills making French food. And he said that no matter how good the amateurs were, they were all good because they'd read the books. But if you put them in a situation where things weren't quite like they were in the book, they'd be lost. In other words, if Julia Child is there to tell you all the steps, it doesn't make you a great cook. To be a really good cook you have to be in the kitchen long enough so you've made some mistakes and have learned how to correct for them for yourself.

That way, you can go anywhere. You don't have to lug the book with you, because the knowledge is something you've learned from your actions. You've seen for yourself that certain things are unskillful, certain things are going to lead you down the wrong path—because you were down that wrong path for a while. But then you realized it was wrong and you got out.

That's the quality you're trying to develop. That's what discernment is all about, learning how to look at your actions and to judge them properly. We hear all too often that meditation is about being non-judgmental. Actually, even though you don't want to be judgmental, in other words jumping to conclusions, you *do* have to develop your powers of judgment. In fact, insight is a judgment call as to what's skillful and what's not. There are some basic rules, basic instructions, and they help sensitize you in ways that you might not have been sensitive before. But then you've got to develop your sensitivity even further, as you get into the details.

So when a choice comes up in the mind as to go with a particular thought or not, and you're not really sure where it's going to go, try whichever option seems best, and try it sincerely. Give it a fair test. That way, if it turns out that it was wrong, you know why it was wrong. You gave it its best. And if it turns out that it's right, okay, you've learned something as well.

Developing your insight means developing your powers of judgment. It doesn't mean having some sudden wonderful vision. It means exercising your powers of discernment so that they become strong, through exercise, to the point where you can really learn how to trust them.

Trust becomes one hundred percent at the time of stream-entry. Up to that point, there's going to be a little bit of wariness. But stick with what seems best, and, as I said, give it a fair test. That's how your discernment deepens and grows.