

Humility & Confidence

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When you come to the practice of meditation, there are two attitudes that can be pretty lethal for your practice, two extremes. One is the belief that you have everything all figured out before you come, you've read the books, you know all the concepts. That puts the mind in a position where it can't learn. The other extreme is when you believe that you can't do this. It's too big a job, too frustrating. It seems like a long, long path: You look at the goal, what's going to be required to get to the goal, and you don't seem to be made of the stuff that can get there. Both attitudes can block your practice.

The ideal attitude is one that combines humility, the realization that you do need to learn, with confidence that you *can* learn. After all, the Buddha himself had to be humble. He had some preconceived notions about what the path would be, he tried them out, and they didn't work. Which meant that he had to submit himself to what was actually required. He didn't simply make up the Dhamma and teach it to people because it sounded nice. It was through trial and effort that he had to shape his understanding of what actually worked. Then when he got results, he came out and taught what he had learned.

As for the confidence, he believed that life wasn't worth living unless you at least tried to find what didn't die. He seems to have been pretty super-human in his determination, his persistence, and his endurance, but those are qualities he had to develop. They were potentials that hadn't yet been actualized when he started out. It was through the practice that they actually became the qualities of a Buddha.

It's the same when we practice. When we start out, we're not capable of doing the high levels of the practice, but by doing the basic levels we train ourselves, we become new people. Our capabilities grow. It's like starting out at school. If someone gives you a calculus textbook in first grade, you think there's no way you're ever going to be able to do that. But as you take math year after year after year, when you finally get to calculus, you can do it. You've developed certain skills, certain qualities of mind.

So you combine humility and confidence. Humility doesn't mean a low opinion of yourself, it means simply realizing that you have a lot to learn—and you're willing to learn, to keep your ears and eyes open. In particular, you have to be open to how things feel inside the body. This is an area where we tend to be pretty ignorant. A lot of our knowledge goes outside. We don't have much of a

vocabulary to describe how we feel things inside. That's why it tends to be unknown territory. So come with the attitude that you're going to learn from the breath. This is the ideal combination of humility and confidence: a sense of exploration, the joy of exploration. There're going to be challenges but you'll be able to do them. There're going to be new things to learn, and you want to learn them. That's the ideal attitude to bring.

When you come to the breath, how does the breath actually feel in the body? The perceptions you have of the breath: How do they color the way you experience the breath? Ajaan Lee gives lots of examples of how to think of the breath: different types of breath energy in the body, different levels of breath energy in the body, breath energy going up, breath energy going down, energy spinning around in place, breath energy that doesn't move but suffuses everything. These are all potentially there. It's simply a matter of sensitizing yourself and exploring, trying different ways of breathing, trying different ways of focusing, seeing what works.

When things aren't working, learn to give yourself pep talks. That's what the confidence is for. After all, the Buddha said that if this were a path that human beings couldn't follow, he wouldn't have taught it to human beings. Well, you're a human being, so you've got the basic requisites. You've got a body. You've got a mind. You've got a quality that the Buddha calls luminosity of the mind. It doesn't mean that the mind is already awakened or already pure. What it means is the mind can observe itself. You'll be observing not only the breath, but also the mind as it relates to the breath—and that, in fact, is going to be the important part of the practice: observing the mind in action.

Who else can observe your mind better than you? You've got a front-row seat. And you're pretty familiar with the ins and outs of the mind, but you're going to find there are a lot more ins and outs that you may not have suspected, but they're there. You'll dig them out as you come up with different problems. And as long as your attitude is that you're willing to learn, you're happy to learn, and you take some joy in exploration, then your attitude has reached the right mean, avoiding those two extremes, putting the qualities of humility and confidence together in a way that's just right: a way that actually does lead to progress.

The humility also has to do with the realization we're not here to learn a body of knowledge, a framework of words. We're here to learn a skill. And as with any skill, when you start out, things may not come out so well. But as long as you realize that this is a skill you really want to learn, you're willing to learn from the mistakes and not let them defeat you. So you observe your actions. You can compare your actions. The idea that meditation involves dropping your judging

mind is one of the most destructive teachings you can imagine. How else are you going to learn unless you can judge whether one thing is better than another?

As the Buddha said, you learn the quality of analysis of qualities, which is the discernment factor for awakening, by comparing things. When the mind acts on this kind of intention, what are the results? When it acts on that kind of intention, what are the results? Which is better? This is comparing, seeing things in pairs. As you get a sense of what's better, then you try something else, and you compare the best results you've had so far with what's new. You find some things that you're going to throw away, or some things that you put away, saying they're not right for right now but maybe they'll be useful later on. But then you learn some things that really are useful right now. So you explore and compare, explore some more and compare some more. This is one of the functions of mindfulness.

If you're simply aware of the present moment, without making any reference to the past, there's no way your discernment is going to develop. You try to notice when you meditate: When the mind settles down, where are you focused? What is the breath like? How do you maintain that? The next time you meditate, try to remember all that and to re-create those conditions again. See if you can bring the mind down more and more quickly. Get to know it better.

Like the cook in the Buddha's analogy: There's the foolish cook who just fixes food for his master and doesn't really notice what the master likes to eat. He doesn't really observe the signs of when the master is pleased or displeased, so the cook is not going to get a reward. It's the cook who notices how the master reaches for this, or praises that, or eats a lot of this, and so makes more of that: That's the cook who's going to get the reward. In the same way, when you meditate, try to notice what the mind likes to settle down with. Then provide more of that. After all, it is your mind.

You get ideas from the teachers, you get ideas from the texts as to what might work. But what's actually going to work for you right now, during this session: That's something only you can try out, only you can observe. And it's something really worth learning about. After all, here we are: We want happiness and yet so many of our actions, so many of our thoughts, our words and deeds create suffering. Stress. Dis-ease. Why is that? What is it about our minds that we don't know? That should be the most interesting question you can ask yourself. And here you've got the opportunity to learn, to explore, to figure out the answer.

So if you approach the practice with the right combination of humility and confidence—in other words, the ability to anticipate that you're going to enjoy the exploration and you're looking forward to all the things you can learn: That's when your meditation is sure to progress.