Worthy of Trust

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Years back, I read a science fiction story based on the idea of spaceships that traveled by changing their frame of reference. They didn’t need any fuel. All they needed to do was change their frame of reference, and that was what made them travel. They would stay constantly in line with whatever their frame of reference was. In other words, if the spaceship was on the earth, it would stay on the earth. If it changed its frame of reference to the sun, it would zip away from the earth at the same speed that the earth was moving around the sun. If it changed its frame of reference to the sun or the galaxy, you can imagine how fast it would go. On the main plot device of the story was that when the ship changed its frame of reference, everybody inside the ship would conk out for a little while, lose consciousness, and then come back. Some of the people lost consciousness longer than others. This meant that those who came to first had an advantage. They could do all kinds of things while the other people in the ship were unconscious. Of course, the nature of these ships is a metaphor for the mind. Our mind very frequently changes its frame of reference. Sometimes it’s so fast that we can’t keep track of it. And in between each change, we conk out, lose track of where our old frame of reference was, and suddenly find ourselves in a new one. Many times we don’t know how we got there. Think about it. You can sit down and try to trace through your train of thought, say, for the past five or ten minutes. Many times you find it hard to do, because the mind was so thoroughly blacked out, even if it was just for a moment. Just as the people on the ship could do all kinds of dastardly things when their friends were conked out, the mind does all kinds of things as well. It can shape all kinds of worlds, throw up all kinds of walls around itself. So you suddenly find yourself in a world where your basic values or the values that you claim don’t have any power. This is how people compartmentalize, thinking and doing all kinds of things that they wouldn’t consciously justify. But they suddenly find themselves in a world where, say, the principle of karma doesn’t apply, so you can do anything and think anything and say anything you want. Then you find yourself in another frame of reference, and you wonder, “How could I have said that? How could I have done that?” This is why we have that sense that the mind is out of control, or that we don’t have total control over our actions. It’s basically why we can’t trust ourselves. So this is the prime issue we have to work on as we meditate. It means not only that we can’t trust ourselves, but people around us can’t trust us either. So for our own good and for the good of the people around us, we have to learn how to break through these barriers, learn how to maintain consciousness, and every time the mind moves so that we know why we’re moving, where we’re moving, we can keep our values intact. We can always keep them in mind, so that we’ll act on the values that we really consciously believe in, not hide them away, put up walls or screens, between our values and our actions. So when you start meditating and you find yourself suddenly blanking out in someplace else, don’t view it as a minor irritant. It’s one of the most important issues in training the mind. You want to learn how to watch for the signs that the mind is going to move. It’s going to throw up some walls or pull up a curtain. It’s the way they draw the curtain when they’re presenting a play—between one act and the next. Put down the curtain, change the scenery, pull up the curtain, and now you’re someplace else. If you watch them changing the scenery, it would destroy the illusion. That’s what the mind is trying to do. It’s trying to maintain illusions. So watch for the signs that the curtain is about to come down. Or as soon as you realize it is down, pull it back up again. Don’t view this as a minor thing. And don’t be surprised when it happens. That’s been happening all along. And now you’re just suddenly aware of how radically the mind can hide things from itself. So be prepared. The more quickly you can sense when the mind is about to change its frame of reference, the easier it will be to stay with your meditation object. This is why mindfulness has to be coupled with alertness. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind, remembering why you’re here, what you’re doing. And alertness is checking on things to make sure that you keep your frame of reference in mind, that you’re not losing it, that you’re not ready to jump off to something else. The mind is often like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. Part of it is on the leaf, but some of its little legs are waving around, hoping for another leaf to come along so it can jump. So try to have a sense of when the legs of your mind are starting to wave around, looking for something else to think about, somewhere else to go. The signs are there if you look for them. That’s when you see it happening, you can remind yourself, “No, we’re going to stay right here, put the legs back down on the original leaf.” That way you can become more and more in control of your mind. When you’re more in control of your mind, you can trust yourself more, not only as you’re meditating, but in terms of all your activities. When you can trust yourself, people around you can trust you as well. This is one of the basic principles of the teaching. We take refuge frequently in the triple gem. What does that mean? We take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha on one level as examples to follow. On another level, we internalize their virtues. We make the virtues of the Buddha our virtues. We build them into the mind. The virtues of the Dhamma become our virtues. We build them into the mind. The virtues of the Noble Sangha. We become members of the Noble Sangha. And in doing that, we not only become a refuge to ourselves, but also become a refuge for other people. They can trust us. This is one way in which our practice connects with the practice of other people. Oftentimes you hear it said that we try to develop a sense of oneness or a sense of our interconnectedness. But what makes interconnection real or what makes interconnection valuable is the issue of trust. You simply try to feel one with other people, but if you don’t really trust them, if you don’t have reason to trust them, it’s just a sentimental idea. And if they don’t have reason to trust you, it’s a sentimental idea as well. The basis for a sense of connection has to be trustworthiness, which means you have to make your mind trustworthy. You have to get rid of all the walls and barriers, all the curtains and barriers inside your mind that make it devious. Once you can do that and you can trust yourself, then other people can really trust you as well. The sense of barrier that they have between you and them can get broken down as well. So breaking down the inner barriers makes it possible to break down the outer barriers, not simply by cultivating a sense of oneness or interconnectedness, but by giving people reason to trust you, giving yourself a reason to trust yourself. So the mind really does become something you can take refuge in. And the people around you can take refuge in you as well. So that even when they don’t trust you, they have their lapses in mindfulness. They can trust you not to do anything underhanded. So barriers are overcome by trust, and trust can be established only when you are trustworthy. And it’s these little gaps in the mind. These are the main barriers. So watch out for them and learn to develop the continuity of awareness that can break through them. So that no matter what you’re thinking about, that larger state of mind in which all your thoughts are present, that state is always there. This is why we’re practicing not only mindfulness, but also concentration. The concentration in which you have what the Buddha calls the enlarged mind, or the expanded mind, maha-gatang, jittang. Awareness and concentration. Just filling the body. Thoughts can come and go, but that enlarged awareness is always there. It’s the arena in which they come and go. An arena with no walls, no curtains. That’s what we’re working toward. you

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