Overconfidence & Underconfidence

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Chan Phuong once said there are two kinds of meditators in the world—people who think too much and people who don’t think enough. But there are other ways of dividing up meditators, too. An important one is people who are overconfident and people who are underconfident. Confidence is an important quality in the path. If you don’t have confidence, you just can’t do it. You get debilitated. All you can see are your weaknesses. You read the stories of the great Ajahns, and they seem light-years away. And you can give up trying. That’s the underconfident extreme. The overconfident extreme are the people who like to do things at their own convenience. If you get a little bit tired, well, we don’t have to do it today. There’s always tomorrow. If there’s something you’re being put off to a little bit later, put it off to a little bit later. That’s okay. The worst types are those who overestimate their achievements already. That, of course, totally blocks off the path as well. So the question is, how do you tune your confidence so that it’s just right? There are three factors that the Buddha said were important in his own practice, and it’s good to look at them in your practice as well. First, resolution. Second, heedfulness. They all tend to push you a little bit more than you tend to think you would like to go. Heedfulness is a quality that sees that there are dangers in life. Life can end easily. Aging can come. Illness can come. These are things that really hobble you as you practice. Especially the illnesses that take away your energy, both physically and mentally. These can hit at any time. So you want to be careful to do what you can while you have the opportunity. If you have the strength, use it. You have an opportunity to be more skillful, to look more carefully at the results of your actions. Do it right now. Don’t wait, because you have no idea how much more time you’re going to have to practice in this lifetime. This is why the Buddha, when he was talking to the monks gathered around his passing away, stressed heedfulness as his final message. “Attain completion,” he said, “through heedfulness.” Because heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities. Realizing that your actions are important, that they can make the difference between happiness and suffering, between having something to hold on to when aging, illness, and death come, and having nothing to hold on to at all. Ardency is the desire, then, to do things as skillfully as possible. If you notice anything unskillful coming up in your mind—laziness, complacency—you have to recognize it as something unskillful and get rid of it. You also have to recognize self-doubt and low self-esteem as unskillful mental qualities as well. It’s all too easy to think, “Well, if I’m supposed to be pushing, pushing, pushing, and getting someplace in my practice and I’m not getting anywhere yet, that’s something wrong with me.” That seems to be the voice of the Dhamma saying, “You’re bad. You’re not up to snuff.” That’s not the voice of the Dhamma. It’s Mara, Mara coming to discourage you. This is where the Buddha’s simile to Sona comes in. When you’re going to play the lute, you want to make sure that your strings are tuned just right and realizing that whether it’s too slack or too taut, neither way of falling off is going to work. It comes down to looking at how much energy you have. How much energy can you put in right now? So you adjust to all the other factors of the practice in terms of your conviction, your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. Those get tuned to the amount of energy you have. For example, tuning your conviction. There are passages when the Buddha talks about practicing as if your head was on fire. You’re not going to get up from your seat until you’ve pushed yourself all the way to awakening. That’s one level of conviction. But then you have to look at your energy. Where are you in the path? Can you make that kind of vow yet? What kind of vow can you make for the evening? What kind of vow is appropriate for your level of energy, your abilities? And how are you going to find out? You find out by pushing things, testing things, adjusting your practice. As the Buddha said, if you find that by living at your ease, the mind does develop, okay, live at your ease. But if you find that by living at your ease, laziness creeps in, other unskillful states creep in, that’s a sign that you’ve got to push yourself. You’ve got to push yourself with a certain amount of pain. But how do you deal with pain? You’ve got to learn how to give yourself pep talks. This is, again, the generating of desire that’s such an important part of ardency. And this depends on your own skills and learning how to encourage yourself. Sometimes you can encourage yourself by looking at how much suffering there’s been in your life so far. You can say, “Look, do you want to come back to this again? The same old stupid mistakes? Or would you like to try something new?” Sometimes it’s useful to look at the cases where you have been skillful in the past. I’ve mentioned a couple of times now how I never really heard any praise from Ajaan Fuang during my time with him. But one thing did get me. I was encouraged very early on. I heard it secondhand when I first went back to stay with him. He was in Bangkok at the time. So as I stayed there, I was looking around to see what needed to be done. I would clean his platoon and do little things here and there to sort of tidy up. And he mentioned to one of the other monks that this was a good sign, that I was not waiting to be told what to do, that I was actually looking for things that could be done. And so I often fell back on that comment, that if there’s any hope for me, it lies in that willingness to look what for. And it was encouraging to notice that he had noticed that, too. So when you’re looking at your strength, it doesn’t necessarily have to be in terms of what you see yourself doing in the meditation. Is there anything in your life where you feel that you’re adding a little something, giving a little something of yourself? Or more than you have to? That’s your hope in the practice. You’ve got the quality right there that’s going to push you on, that you can build on. So in looking for positive qualities in yourself, it doesn’t have to be major things. Just the little things in your day-to-day life. It’s easy enough to look around. There’s plenty of things that can be done here at the monastery. We’re way understaffed. I remember reading about a Western monk in another tradition commenting how, when he’d first gone to Thailand, he noticed the nuns, as he said, “pottering around.” You can tell that they’re wasting their time. They should be there meditating, doing walking meditation, sitting meditation, all the time. But he found, as he was doing just walking and sitting meditation all the time, his mind got really frazzled. He got more and more discouraged. He ended up finding that pottering around was a way of putting himself in a good mood, cleaning this up, straightening that out. After all, you find that cleaning this up and straightening that out outside becomes a habit. You start cleaning things up and straightening things out inside as well. So you’re not just looking for the major lights, the jhana, the noble attainments. Just little things, like noticing that when you would normally slip off your breath, you’d say, “No, I’m not going to slip off this time. I see this coming. I don’t want to have to fall into that old pattern. Let’s try something new.” Little things like that, those are the things that make the big difference. So when you find yourself discouraging the path, look for the little things in your habits, in your character, that are positive. We all have them. They may seem little, but you can remind yourself, “Hey, redwoods grow from the tiniest seeds you can imagine. All they require is the right conditions. Tend to them, look after them, and they’ll grow.” This relates to the third quality, which is resolution. Once you’ve made up your mind that you’re going to follow this path, you really want to stick with it through thick and thin. Then again, this requires learning how to raise your spirits when they need to be raised, and learning how to take criticism, not just from outside, but also from within. Learning how to take your own criticism. When the comment comes into the mind, “Hey, you could be practicing harder,” or “That was pretty sloppy,” or “That was pretty uninspiring,” or whatever you notice in your own practice or your own meditation that’s not up to snuff, learn to take that as an encouragement instead of just getting into a downward spiral. Because this, as the Buddha pointed out, was the secret for his own success. His meditation was not being content with what he had. So it’s a difficult balancing act, learning how to criticize yourself without getting into a funk, and learning how to encourage yourself without getting overconfident. But this is what the practice is. It’s learning how to balance out these unbalanced qualities in the mind, learning how to fine-tune them, to tune things to the right pitch, learning how to see your own weaknesses and to recognize your strengths, trying to take advantage of the strengths so you really can do something about the weaknesses. This, as the Buddha said, is the quality of a person of integrity, someone who has a sense of himself or herself, where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, where there’s work to be done, and what resources you can fall back on. If the resources you fall back on seem to be meager, well, take care of what you’ve got. Don’t look down on it. Again, going back to that first year I was with the Jon Fu, I would get into what I later recognized were okay states of concentration, but I tended to dismiss them. I was expecting more. I felt I had nothing at all. As a result, I was throwing away a lot of good states of mind. They didn’t fit in with my preconceived notions. It’s when you realize that great things grow from little things, and little things require care and attention. Don’t look down on them. For the same time, don’t get complacent. It’s like raising a child. You encourage them to do something, but at the same time you realize you’ve got to watch out for the child because the child can make a lot of mistakes. So you can’t let down your guard. And although balancing is a difficult thing to do, it’s the only way we’re going to get anywhere in the practice. It’s the only way that our practice can grow. you

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