Confidence

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There are two basic emotions you want to bring to the practice. It may seem strange to say that. We think that emotions are a given. You have a mood. You wake up in the morning and you have no idea where the mood came from. Then, after a while, it changes. It all seems to happen on its own. But you do play a role. You develop your motivation, your emotions, by the way you breathe, by the way you think, the things you choose to think about, the way you perceive them. All of these things can foster an emotion. And it’s what’s actually happening all the time. So you want to learn how to do that. The first emotion the Buddha has you develop is sanghvega. This is largely the result of the way you look at the world. You look around and what do you see? I was listening just now to the coyotes howling. You think, “Well, I’m glad I’m not a coyote.” The slightest little thing can get them spooked, and there’s no one to explain anything to them. And if you tried to explain it, they wouldn’t understand. But then you look at the human world. What do you have there? All sorts of unfairness, all sorts of injustice, out-and-out stupidity. Let’s say the deva realms are a lot more pleasant, but even those are places where you can’t really stay very long. You come back down. And sometimes when you come back down you fall really hard. You start thinking about this, and the prospect of just going on and on and on develops a strong sense of dismay, actually terror sometimes. You find yourself caught in this web that just keeps pulling you, pulling you, pulling you. And there seems to be no way out. This is the kind of thinking that sometimes drives people to suicide, but that’s not a way out. It just makes things worse. But you can’t pretend that things are actually nice and rosy. If you’re really honest with yourself, you look at human life and it’s pretty sad. Because it all ends in aging, illness, and death. You come back for some more, and some more, and some more. The amount of water in the ocean is still less than the amount of tears you’ve shed over this long, long time. It’s even less than the amount of blood you’ve shed, having your head cut off in different lifetimes. You think about that and it gives rise to a sense of sanghvega. But the Buddha doesn’t leave you there. The second emotion is passada, or confidence. There is a way out and you can do it. This is necessary as well, otherwise sanghvega turns into depression, a sense of hopelessness. You think of the young prince, Siddhartha, reflecting on aging, illness, and death. Everything seemed pretty hopeless to him. And then he saw a wilderness wanderer. He told himself, “If there’s a way out, that’s it.” And he was willing to place his life on the line to see if that way out was the right way out. His family tried to dissuade him. His friends tried to dissuade him, saying, “It just doesn’t work that way. You’ve got it good right now. This is as good as it gets. All the great kings and princes of the past, this is what they enjoyed. They found satisfaction here.” The prince said, “Well, if that’s what they found satisfaction in, then they’re never really great. They’re not really admirable. Nothing to be taken as an example.” He was willing to do something more heroic than their feats in battle to see if there was a way out, if there was a true happiness that wasn’t subject to aging, illness, and death. And it took a lot of confidence on his part. He left home. When he studied with the various teachers, he came to the conclusion that what they had really wasn’t good enough. He wanted something better. He underwent austerities for six years, they say. Then he finally had the good sense to realize that that wasn’t working either. You can imagine the amount of pride he developed around those austerities. He realized that no one had ever gone further in the way of austerities than he had. And some people would stop right there and say, “Well, maybe it’s not the best thing, or maybe it wasn’t what I hoped it was, but at least I’ve outdone these other people.” But he was in it for outdoing other people. He wanted to find an end to suffering. So he tried something else, kept at it, kept at it, kept at it, until he finally found the way out. Now that required a lot of confidence, both in the possibility of a release from suffering and confidence in his own ability, confidence in his own honesty, confidence in his own strength. But if he didn’t have the qualities needed to do this, then he was going to develop them. And although our path of practice is not as difficult as his—after all, we do have teachings to point the way, and the example of others that this really is possible—still, we have to learn how to develop that sort of confidence as well, that this path really does work, and that we’re capable of doing it. As the Buddha said, that’s using conceit as a governing principle. Ordinarily, we have conceit as being a negative thing, but it doesn’t work. It does have its uses. You see that other people can do this. Why can’t I? So you see that you’re lacking in confidence. Learn how to think in ways that give you confidence. It is something you can choose to do as a Buddhist. In the beginning it may seem artificial, but you have to reflect. What do you need? You need a mind and you need a body. You need a breath coming in and out, and you need to have the desire for happiness. Think of the forest dachshunds. They were born in a time when people in Thailand really looked down on the peasants of the Northeast. And the word coming out from all the authorities in Bangkok was that nirvana was not possible, jhana was not possible. This couldn’t be done—especially not by peasants in the Northeast. And yet there were peasants in the Northeast who found the way. Jon Mun, many times in his sermons, would have to give confidence to his students. What do you really need? You have a human birth. That’s all that’s required. You’ve got a body, you’ve got a breath you can focus on, you’ve got the mind, and you’ve got this desire to find true happiness. That’s really all you need. It has nothing to do with your social status, nothing to do with your nationality. I remember one time someone came to the monastery in Riong. They were surprised to see a Western monk, and they commented on this to Jon Fore. “How is it that a Westerner can ordain?” He said, “Well, don’t Westerners have hearts? Don’t they suffer? Don’t they need a way out of suffering?” So it’s not a matter of nationality. It’s not a matter of anything else aside from your willingness to teach yourself to think in the right way. This is an important element in the meditation that’s often overlooked. We’re told not to think, just note, note, note, or scan, scan, scan, or whatever, just this, just that, or whatever. And above all, don’t think. But that impoverishes the mind. And you have to have some way of thinking that’s going to allow you to do whatever the practice is, encourage you to do it, and encourage you to do it skillfully. Because there is no practice. There’s nothing in the Buddhist teachings where he says, “Well, just do this one thing and that’ll take care of everything.” There are all those lists of dhammas where he says, “These are the qualities you have to develop as a set, as a team.” And that requires that you develop your powers of observation. And a sensitivity to what’s working and what’s not. What you’re doing, what are the results? Are the results what you want? If not, go back and look at what you’ve done. Maybe you can change it. This requires that you think. And you’re going to encounter ups and downs in your practice. If we were to ask for a show of hands here, how many people have a practice that in every way and every day gets better and better all the time? Nobody would raise their hand. So you have to have ways of thinking to get you through the rough passages, to remind you that this is possible, this is worthwhile, and you can do it. It’s this kind of thinking that develops the endurance that you need, because it is a path that takes time. We like to hear the stories of the people who gained instant awakening, listening to the Dhamma once, like Danyanga and Danyava, the first of the Buddha’s disciples to gain the Dhamma-I. Listen to that short talk we chanted just now. There he was, the first taste of awakening. But what we don’t have in the stories of the people who gained instant awakening is how long he’d been practicing up to that point. And it has to be that way for everybody, because there’s so much in the Dhamma that goes against the grain. Even the Buddha said when he started out in his practice, realizing what needed to be done, his heart did not leap up at the idea of renunciation. He gained states of concentration that had rapture and bliss. His heart didn’t leap up at the idea of having to abandon the rapture and bliss. He wanted to go deeper into concentration. But then he realized there were going to be benefits. He had to teach himself, he had to motivate himself in order to do the practice. And so we have to do that too. It’s not just a matter of being obedient, because even that runs out after a while. You have to be in charge of your own practice. There’s nobody who’s going to stand inside your mind and tell you, “You’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that.” Crack the whip. You have to see the value of the practice, and you have to be able to convince yourself that you can do it. You have to have confidence both in the possibility of an escape and confidence in your ability to attain that release. So remember that thinking properly, and this is what the Buddha calls “fabricating a fabrication.” It really is an important part of the practice. Some things that come up in the mind, you can deal with them instantly just by looking at them calmly, consistently. You can see, “Oh, there’s something wrong with this way of thinking,” and you drop it. Other times, though, you really have to fabricate a new way of thinking. And develop that as a new habit. It’s called verbal fabrication. It’s one of the ways that you can fabricate a fabrication that actually gets the mind into concentration. You can think your way into concentration. There comes a point, of course, where you have to drop that thinking, but the thinking steers you in the right direction. So if you find that your thoughts are steering you in the wrong direction, try to change them. This is one of the roles of right resolve, that you really do want to go in the right direction here. It’s part of right effort as well, learning how to motivate yourself, as the Buddha says, generating desire, seeing that this really is a good thing and that you are confident that you can do it. It may take time. That’s not the issue. Everything takes time. Everything of value takes time. So you want to straighten out your attitudes so that they become right as well. They become part of the path. So it’s not a matter of trying to abandon all your mental faculties and reduce them to a noting, or reduce them to a scanning, or whatever. You actually have to make use of your full range of mental faculties. Because after all, you’re dealing with a full range of defilements. And if all you have is one weapon, they’re going to beat you up. If you have many weapons and many strategies and many approaches, they won’t be able to catch you.

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