Doubts about Your Abilities

November 22, 2016

Some skills in life are optional. You don’t need them to survive. And you can often find someone else to do the skill for you. Playing the stock market, for instance. I’ve never felt the need to learn the skill of that. And because there are so many skills like that out there, our society tends to force us to specialize. They figure out pretty early on what you’re good at, what you’re not good at, and then they put you on track in line with your skills or your potential for skills. The idea being that other people who are skilled in other ways are people that you can hire to take care of those things for you. But then there are some skills that are necessary for life. Meditation is one of those. Because if you can’t train your mind, you’re going to be subject to a lot of unnecessary suffering. And this is the kind of skill that you have to work at, whether you’re good at it to begin with or not. One of the drawbacks of having a specialized education system is that it doesn’t train us to try to pick up some skills that we’re not good at. And we don’t learn the skills needed to pick up skills in that way. How to encourage ourselves over a little bit of progress. How to really work on that bit by bit by bit and have the patience. To do at least an adequate job. So it’s good to train yourself in that ability to pick up skills in areas where you may not seem talented to begin with, particularly with the meditation. Part of this comes under right view, realizing that the kind of concentration you’re working on here is not something totally foreign to little bits of concentration that you already know. We’re talking about momentary concentration, threshold concentration, where you’re getting closer and closer to being solidly with the object, and then finally fixed penetration. It’s not like they’re radically different things. It’s simply that with access or threshold concentration, you’re stitching together little moments of concentration, and you’re getting better and better at not dropping a stitch, but to stitch them together. First, you have to appreciate them. This is why the Buddha had to emphasize respect for concentration in that chant we had just now. Because there’s also a line where he talks about having respect for the training, and the training includes virtue, concentration, and discernment. But then he singled out concentration for a second mention, just to make sure that you realize you’ve got to respect this ability to get the mind to settle down. It begins with respecting the little moments of stillness that are there. Otherwise, you look past them, you don’t see them, you get frustrated, and you destroy them. So stop and look carefully. Those little moments are like seeds planted in the ground. Little tiny saplings are coming out, little tiny seedlings are coming out, and you have to recognize which are the seedlings you want and which are the ones you don’t. If it’s a weed, you can step on it with no problem. But say you want a nice tree that can provide shade. Some of the best shade trees start from very tiny seeds, and you don’t want to trample those. You want to figure out where they are and nurture them. So I can think about it as trying to start a fire on a windy plain. There’s not much protection around, so there’s a little bit of spark. And so you’ve got to cup your hands around it. You’ve got to protect it. And it may take a while for it to catch. You can’t be impatient. And just keep reassuring yourself, “If I stick with this, it’s going to work. If I stick with this, it’s going to work.” So you have to learn how to talk to yourself in the right way to protect these things. First, to notice the potential for good, and then to figure out how to protect it. The wind here may blow out the fire. That’s not just winds from outside. There are a lot of winds from the mind itself. You just have to let them blow past. You can’t prevent them from being there. Just say, “I’ll just protect my little concentration here from the winds of discouragement, the winds of impatience, the winds of frustration, whatever.” They can blow through the mind, but you’re going to have your one little spot there that you’re going to protect. And as you stick with it, it’ll begin to get stronger. You have to have faith in the process. And above all, don’t compare yourself with other people. We’re not here to compare ourselves. We’re not in a race. We’re here working on skills that deal with something exclusively inside ourselves. The whole problem of pain is in that area of your awareness you can’t share with anybody else. The solution is also in that area of awareness that you can’t share with anybody else. You can’t peer into other people’s minds to see what their pain is like and how they’re dealing with it. And they can’t move into yours and help straighten things out for you. This is one of those skills that everybody has to work on. You can’t farm it off to somebody else. You can’t hire somebody else to come and do the work for you. So they’re working on their pain. You’re working on yours. And try to take encouragement when you see someone else who seems to be doing better than you. Don’t get jealous. Don’t get envious. Don’t be resentful. And don’t turn back on yourself. Appreciate the fact that they’ve been working on this. You may not see the work in this lifetime, but they’ve been working on this in the past. And now they’re reaping the benefits. Where do those benefits come from? The kind of work you’re doing right now, which may seem to be stumbling. There’s a phrase in Thailand, “falling down, getting up, tripping, crawling.” Lom Luk Luk Han. Those four words, they go together very nicely in Thai. But what it means is the kind of progress you make where it’s not steady and it’s not easy, but you just keep having to go at it, go at it, go at it. So learn how to inspire yourself in whatever way works. And take inspiration from other people. Both people who seem to be in a position better than you are. This is why we develop thoughts of empathetic joy. And take inspiration from people who have not trained their minds to see what their lives are like. I learned this evening of a father-in-law of my niece. We thought he was perfectly healthy, perfectly fine, until a few months ago he was told he had cancer and he didn’t last long after that. It was pretty hard. And because he hadn’t had any way of training his mind, it was a really bad last couple of weeks. You have to tell yourself, “I don’t want to be in that position. I want to have something to hold on to.” And what you’ve got to hold on to is these little moments of quiet in the mind that are not involved with the dialogues and not involved with the discussions and not involved with the monologues or whatever chatter is going on in the mind. Those quiet spots where you can take some refuge. And then the discernment to let go of everything else. Those are the skills you’re going to need. So to whatever extent you can develop them, it’s all to the good. You can’t tell yourself, “Well, I’m not going to die until I’ve fully mastered this.” That’s not the kind of thing that anybody can determine ahead of time. But you can say, “Okay, I’m going to keep at this, keep at this, all the way up to my last breath.” Because this is your hope for not causing yourself a lot of unnecessary suffering. Because these causes do come from within. But they are causes that you can change. The desire that goes into craving that creates suffering can be shifted into the desire for the path. The desire to develop right view. And then learning how to act on that desire so that the desire itself doesn’t become an obstacle. But it’s still there and it’s giving you encouragement. That actually becomes a force on the path. So these are the potentials we have in the mind. They can be turned toward the path. It’s simply a matter of sticking with it and taking one step at a time and learning how to appreciate what you’ve got. Don’t destroy it. Otherwise you plant a seed and the seedling grows. You step on it, that’s it. Then you plant another seedling, and then another. And then you get tired of planting all these seedlings that don’t seem to be going anywhere, not realizing that you were the one who destroyed them. Cup your hands around those little moments of stillness. If there are winds of frustration and winds of discouragement, just let them blow. But don’t let them put out the flame. There’s another passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about respect. He says, “There are some little things that you shouldn’t have disrespect for.” Don’t have disrespect for little snakes, because they can be poisonous. And don’t have disrespect for a little fire. It may seem small right now, but when it takes, it can light up everything. So protect what you’ve got. And that’s how the meditation becomes a skill. Whether you feel that you’re talented at it or not, it’s a necessary skill. It’s like breathing itself. It’s something we’ve all got to do. So remember that doing good in things that are difficult has a dignity. And in this particular area, that dignity is really worthwhile.

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