Confident, Steadfast, Resolute

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Two of the big obstacles to concentration are worry and doubt. You can be worried about the past, in other words, thinking about things you did in the past that could have consequences on into the future. Or worried about the future, what’s going to happen. As for doubt, there’s part of the mind that has been deceived so many times that it’s unwilling to put its trust in anything. Those are both obstacles. Even though they may feel virtuous in and of themselves, when you worry you tell yourself you’re being heedful and you’re preparing for the future. But you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future. But you do know that you will need some good qualities in the mind, like mindfulness, concentration, discernment. So you keep reminding yourself that by meditating you’re not running away from problems. You’re actually developing the qualities that you’ll need. Because no matter what happens, good or bad, you’ll need mindfulness to handle it well, concentration to not be upset by events, and discernment to see how you don’t have to suffer. You tell yourself when you meditate you’re developing the qualities that are most protective for the mind and for your true well-being. As for doubt, there are two kinds of doubt, skillful and unskillful. Skillful doubt wants to know, it’s curious. Of course the only way you’re going to know about the practice, how good it is, is if you actually do it. Unskillful doubt doesn’t want to know. You have to ask yourself why would you want to identify with that? So learn how to pull yourself out of these attitudes. Reason with yourself and keep reminding yourself that the meditation, as we develop mindfulness, concentration, and discernment with the breath, is the most skillful way of dealing with past problems, future problems, and your uncertainty about the world in general. To have some confidence in the breath. As the John Ferguson said, if you doubt your breath, then you’re going to doubt everything. Right now you know whether the breath is coming in, whether it’s going out. There’s no reason to doubt that. So place your hopes for happiness right here, on something that you can really know directly, and then get to know it well. The Buddha talks about it. You know, in his practice, as he was getting onto the right path, he realized that he needed to put aside the thoughts of sensuality and all the other hindrances. He realized that that would enable the mind to be peaceful. But as he said, his mind didn’t leap up at the idea. It wasn’t confident in the idea. It wasn’t steadfast. It wasn’t resolute. In other words, it was like a person looking at a cold lake, wondering, “Should I jump into the lake?” And you dip your toe in and pull it out. You dip your toe in and pull it out. You don’t really commit yourself. He said the cure for this uncertainty, this unwilling to commit, was to think very carefully about the drawbacks of not committing. If you don’t stay here, how are you going to live? Learn about the potentials of the breath. We read about the Ajahns, Ajahn Lee and all of his psychic powers that he developed through staying with the breath. We read about the Buddha, how he gained awakening by focusing on his breath. So if you don’t really look into the breath, devote yourself to it, you’re never going to learn what the potentials are. How could someone gain awakening focusing on the breath? It would just be a question in your mind. So do you want to be that questioning person who doesn’t really know, but is unwilling to do what’s needed to know? That’s the unskillful doubt that we’re trying to get past. So think about those verbs that the Buddha used for how you should relate to the topic of your meditation. Your mind should leap up with the idea that now you have a whole free hour. Nothing else you have to do. You can learn to explore your own breath. And you can learn to explore the mind as it relates to the breath. See that as a joyous prospect and not as a chore. Then you go confident. As I said, this is something you can really know better than anything else. Is your breath coming in right now? Is the breath going out? That much you can know. And where do you feel the breath in the body? You may be uncertain about that because in the West we don’t talk much about breath sensations in the body. So you wonder, I’m feeling something in my arm, I’m feeling something in my leg. Is that breath? Is it not? Well, just assume that it’s breath. Every sensation in the body, label it as breath. And then ask yourself, if that were breath, would it be a free flowing breath or would it be a stagnant or blocked breath? If it’s blocked, what can you do to open it up? If you assume that it’s something solid in the body, you can’t open solid things up. But if it’s an energy flow that’s been blocked, that can be opened up. That opens up new possibilities. So the more confident you are in just staying with whatever sensation seems like breath, staying with whatever focus you have on the breath, you open up more possibilities. So this way that you can settle in and become steadfast is stay right here. And then be resolute in pushing through. In other words, any other obstacles that come up, just push right through them. That doubting mind that says, well, I’m wise because I doubt, push right through it. The worrying mind that feels it’s being virtuous and worrying, push right through that. Tell yourself you’ve had enough of these things. You’ve assumed that they were your friends, but they’re getting in the way right now. So think of those attitudes. You want to have the mind leap up at the prospect of what we’re doing. You want it to be confident. And the confidence here, you may find, has to be adjusted as you get more familiar with what’s going on in the breath, what’s going on in the mind. But you won’t know until you say, I’m just going to commit myself to staying right here. And then the more you stay, the more you’re going to learn. It says with all aspects of the path. Say with right view. We can repeat what’s in the books, how the Buddha defines suffering, how he defines the cause, the cessation, the path. We can know that. And that’s right on that level. But it becomes even more right as you commit yourself to getting the mind still. And you start seeing subtle aspects of stress that you didn’t notice before. You begin to see the movements of the mind that would constitute craving. You can see how the craving is related to the clinging that is the suffering. They’re both forms of desire and passion. Craving is like thirst. Clinging is like eating. And there’s a desire and passion both in the thirst and in the eating. You begin to see this in your own mind. You see how you feed on things and you understand clinging a lot more. So it’s in committing yourself that you take what you know already, which is already right on one level, and you make it more right, more precise, more insightful, more effective. That’s the only way this kind of rightness is going to grow. Then you become steadfast and resolute in what you’re doing. You create a good foundation right here. Think of William James and his description of two kinds of truth. There’s what can be called the truth of the observer. And the truth of the will. And the truth of the observer. You don’t want your desires to get in the way to see what’s actually going on. Think back when they were trying to figure out the orbits of the planets. They wanted them to be perfect spheres, perfectly round. But that got in the way of their calculations. Somebody realized that they’re not round, they’re ellipses. They were willing to be open to actually looking at the data rather than trying to impose an idea of perfection on things. That’s how they found the truth. By not listening to the ones, but just looking at what actually is. That’s one kind of truth. The other kind of truth, the truth of the will, doesn’t become true unless you want it to. Say that you would like to be a musician. If you just sit here, it’s not going to happen. But if you want it enough to actually do what needs to be done, then it becomes true. You do become a musician. And the truths of the path are like that. You have to want freedom enough that you actually do the path. The path becomes a truth inside you. So the more confident you are, the more steadfast, the more resolute you are in staying right here, the more true you are in staying right here, the more you’re going to come to know. And the more good qualities you’re going to develop, so that whatever may happen in the future, you’ve got the qualities you need to handle it. Whatever doubts you may have about yourself, whatever doubts you may have about the path, they’re all going to get resolved only by this way. There’s no other way to do it. So be confident in being right here. That’s how you’ll learn.

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