The Doubt that Wants to Know

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They’re supposed to say that the cure for doubt is to pay appropriate attention to qualities of the mind that are dark and bright, unskillful, skillful. The forester jhanas say that the cure for doubt is to be true. They sound like they’re saying something very different, but they’re actually saying the same thing. One of the first questions you want to ask about doubt is, “Is this the kind of doubt that wants to know? Or is this the kind of doubt that doesn’t care, doesn’t care about knowing?” And the test is if you’re going to be willing to put in the energy to check out when you’re practicing. “Does this really go someplace? Does this really go where I want to go?” Because sometimes doubt is simply laziness disguised. You don’t want to put out the effort. So you tell yourself, “Well, this is kind of doubtful. I’m not really sure. Because I’m not sure, I’m not going to put in any more effort.” In other words, you’re demanding certainty before there’s any basis for certainty. Because you reach certainty only with stream-entry. It’s only when you’re really for sure, what they call aniyatabhugala, someone who’s certain. Up until that time, there will definitely be doubts, but it’s a measure of your character and a measure of your seriousness. So the question is, as a practitioner, how are you willing to attack the doubt? When the Buddha says, “Apply appropriate attention to qualities that are skillful and unskillful,” what he means is, basically, when he taught the Galamas, you test a teaching by putting it into practice. If you believe this and you act on it, what are the results going to be? In some cases, you can figure out in the abstract what the results will be, but other times you actually have to do it. That’s why you have to be true. When the Buddha says to be mindful, ardent, alert, you really have to develop these qualities if you want to see if it’s worthwhile. If you’ve lived in a world where there was no suffering, and there was no suffering, there wouldn’t be anything to push you in this direction. You could say, “Well, I might try it out or I might not.” But given the fact that we are suffering, and we’re looking for a way out, and we are coming from bewilderment, the only way to overcome our bewilderment is to look for something that makes sense and then to give it a serious try. So when you keep a careful watch over your thoughts, words, and deeds, as you go through the day, looking carefully at what you’re doing and engaging in the results, and developing the qualities that allow you to judge the results fairly, that’s when you can say you’re applying appropriate attention. Then you notice that the big issue is the qualities of the mind. That’s making a major statement right there. The world tells us, parts of the world tell us, that we live in a material universe, that whatever consciousness we may have is totally a by-product of material processes, and everything is determined by material laws. If you believed that, how would you act? Meditation would make no sense at all. The whole process behind the meditation is from the realization that our minds really do make decisions. We have choices. Our choices are going to determine the course of our lives. That’s nothing we can prove scientifically, but you can prove it pragmatically. If you believe that, how are you going to act? If you believe that everything is predetermined, how are you going to act? Which is better? And so it’s a true person who would be willing to put things to the test like this. In other words, the person whose doubt is not laziness disguised, comes from an honest admission that you don’t really know, but you want to know, because the idea of the end of suffering is something really attractive. And the idea that you can be responsible for it is also attractive. Some people don’t like the First Noble Truth because it’s basically, in their eyes, laying the blame on them for their suffering. But the Buddha’s not interested in laying blame. He’s trying to empower you. If the end of suffering depended on the world being perfect, it would never end. Because even if you got conditions just right, they wouldn’t stay that way very long. You’d be powerless to put an end to suffering. But because the causes do come from within, they’re actions of the mind, that gives you the power. You can change your ways. Some people find this attractive. Some people are put off. And the Buddha’s not interested in that people are put off. He’s offering this for those who find it attractive that, yes, we can, through our own efforts, put an end to suffering. So whatever doubts we have on the path, we take not as an excuse for laziness, but as an excuse for curiosity, a reason for curiosity. We want to know. In Thai, the word sung sai, which they use for doubt, means both to doubt and to wonder. And wondering is a good part of the path. I wonder what it’s like to get the mind in concentration. Let’s see. Let’s put the causes into place and see if it really happens. So the doubt that wants to know is encouraged. The doubt that doesn’t want to know is left aside. It’s recognized as a hindrance. And it’s up to you. Are you going to be true in putting the Buddha’s test? Are you going to apply the Buddha’s test to your own actions? It’s only then that you’ll be able to overcome your doubt, because the doubt that is basically a disguise for laziness will never know. But the doubt that wants to know has a chance.

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