Trusting Yourself

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In the Vedas, there are two kinds of people who come to the meditation. Those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. There’s hardly anybody who comes just right. The ones who don’t think enough find it easy to get the mind into concentration, but then they just stay there. They don’t want to move, they don’t want to think, they don’t want to analyze anything. And as a result, the concentration doesn’t lead to any discernment. The mind just slips down, stays, and comes out. The people who think too much, of course, have trouble getting the mind into concentration. They’re the ones who keep running into problems and having to analyze things, many times over-analyzing things. But they do have the advantage that once they’ve learned their way around a problem, they know how to solve that problem. Sometimes the people who find it easy to get into concentration from the very beginning will run into days when the mind doesn’t settle down and they have no idea what to do, because they weren’t really paying attention to what they were doing as the mind settled down. You could also say there are two other ways of looking at the people who come to meditation. Those who trust themselves too much and those who don’t trust themselves enough. The ones who trust themselves too much have a little bit of a neurotic breakthrough. Things open up in the mind and they’re automatically convinced that’s stream-entry. The ones who don’t trust themselves enough keep second-guessing things. They’ve seen themselves make mistakes in the past. So they’re constantly questioning their concentration. Is this really a real thing? Could I be mistaken? And as a result, they never get to settle down. You’ve got to deal with that tendency because that’s a common tendency that gets in the way of the concentration. First off, you have to think about mistakes you’ve made in the past. You have to learn how to think about those. Remember the Buddha on the night of his awakening? He started out with memories of past lives, going back eons and eons. You can imagine how many mistakes he saw himself make. But from there, he didn’t go straight into the present moment with a formidable truce. He went through another knowledge, which was the knowledge of all beings dying and being reborn based on their karma, and among other things, that put his own mistakes into perspective. He wasn’t the only one who had made mistakes. Everybody in the world and everybody in the cosmos has made mistakes. Some pretty big ones, too. Even in his last lifetime, the Buddha made mistakes before his awakening. Think of those six years of austerities, just because he misinterpreted an image that he had in his mind about the sappy wood near the water, sappy wood in the water, sappy wood near the water, sapless wood far from the water. It was only the sapless wood far from the water that he could set fire to. So he decided that meant that he had to avoid all pleasures. Actually, what it meant was to avoid all sensuality. And it was all your fascination with sensuality. So what should you do? It should have been an image to get the mind into the right concentration, to find pleasure there. It became an image that spurred him on to try to avoid pleasures of all kinds. It’s a big mistake. But he learned from it. And in the course of learning from it, he developed some good qualities, after all, the persistence that he needed to stick with that for six years. That saw him in good stead for the many years he had to deal with all kinds of problems as he taught. So even the Buddha made mistakes. You don’t have to think about past lifetimes or beings all over the cosmos. Look around us. There are people making huge mistakes. As Ajaan Lee said, the world is going to go through a really bad period because of leaders with no morality. We see that all around us. So thinking that way should get your mistakes into perspective. They’re not so serious. Think of the stories of the elder monks and elder nuns. They tell of the many mistakes they made prior to their awakening. That should keep your mistakes in perspective. Even though they had made mistakes, they could change. They could resolve not to repeat those mistakes. That’s enough for the practice. Think of the Buddha’s advice to that headman. You realize you’ve broken the precepts in the past. You remind yourself, “Okay, that was not right. But if I keep going over and over and over again in remorse, that’s not going to undo the mistake. It actually makes things worse.” What you do is remind yourself, “Okay, that was not good. That was not right. I don’t want to repeat it again.” And then have lots of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people you’ve harmed, and goodwill for everybody. Develop all the brahmaparas. Think of all the suffering you’ve been through because of your past mistakes. Have some compassion for yourself. Think of the suffering you’ve been through. Think of all your remorse. Have some compassion for yourself there, too. Don’t keep digging this past mistake up. Have some empathetic joy for the good things you have done. Then develop equanimity to remind yourself, “Okay, mistakes have been made.” You recognize your responsibility. But again, think of all the beings in the world. Your mistakes don’t have to be an obstacle to the practice. Then you focus on what you’re doing. As the Chan Fung said, you focus on the breath. You know it’s coming in. You know it’s going out. If you can doubt that, you can doubt anything. So have some confidence. You’re with the breath coming in. You’re with the breath going out. And then you’re with the next one and the next one. You’re doing fine. Whether you’re properly expanding the breath energy through the body or breathing at the right rate, remember, you’re the one who decides. There’s no outside measurement saying your breath should be this long or it should expand your awareness this far. Sometimes for the mind to settle down, it doesn’t quite fit in with the textbook, but it is settling down. Allow it to settle down. In other words, it seems that your awareness is focused on one spot. Okay, let it be there for a while. If that’s what feels good, stay right there. And then stay right there. Stay right there. If a voice comes up in the mind and says, “Is this right?” say, “Well, it’s right enough for right now.” However long the breath is going to be, if it feels good, it’s good enough. When a voice comes in asking again, “Well, should I check on this?” say, “No, just keep staying, staying, staying right here.” It’s only when you stay in place that things can grow. Now, sometimes things will grow in a way that you realize was not quite right, but you’re not going to know that unless you’ve really committed yourself to stay. This is why the Buddha said you don’t just do reflection, you have to commit as well. He didn’t just say, “Just do it and then reflect.” He said, “Commit and reflect.” Stay. Then if things start getting uncomfortable, you can ask yourself, “Okay, what would feel better?” As long as things feel okay, they’re okay. And if you’re afraid of being too confident, remember that the problem with confidence is not believing you’ve hit jhana when you haven’t. The problem with confidence is believing you’ve gained awakening when you haven’t. Keep telling yourself, “As long as I don’t delude myself into thinking I’m awakened, I’m going to stay where I am.” The longer you stay, the better you’re going to know what it means to stay, how to stay. But you’ve got to stay first. Commit first. As for the reflection, you can do that after the meditation. Right now is the time to commit to whatever you’ve got. And as for what jhana you’re in, if it feels like it’s a good absorbed state, stick a little post-it note on there. Remind yourself of the foolish, inexperienced cow. The foolish, inexperienced cow knows there’s a meadow on the other side of the ravine. It’s on this hillside. It’s got a meadow. It sees another meadow on another hillside. But to get there, it has to go down to a ravine. And because it’s foolish and inexperienced, it loses its way. Then it’s stuck down in the ravine and can’t get back to where it was before, much less go over to the other side. So stay where you are. If the grass is good, if the water is good, stay right there. Where the image breaks down is that when you move on to another level of concentration, you don’t have to cross over a ravine. It’s not on the other hillside. It’s right in the meadow where you’ve been. This is where the image of a fruit tree is. The fruit that ripens is better. When the fruit is unripe, it’s right here. As it ripens, it’s right here. It’s right on the stem. It lets go of the stem when it gets ripe enough. There will come a time when you realize, “Okay, I’ve done the thinking and evaluating to get the mind comfortable with the breath, the breath comfortable in the body. My awareness around the body, the breath spread around the body. I keep on thinking about it and it’s not getting any better. I’ll just plow right in to where I am.” Other times you don’t even have to make that decision. You lose interest in evaluating the breath because it feels so good, it feels so right, that you just stop thinking about it and you’re right there. Just as long as you’re mindful, just as long as you’re alert, you’re doing fine. You may have heard that comment that Ajahn Chah made about how, observing the mind, one of the first things you learn is how much it lies to itself. But before you’re going to see how it lies to itself, first you have to learn how to trust it some. Because it does have its trustworthy side, too. There’s a part of the mind that really wants to be comfortable right here. Learn how to trust that part of the mind. It’s the part of the mind that tells you that you have no defilements, that you have no greed, aversion, or delusion. That’s the one you have to watch out for. But the one that tells you that you don’t really know where you are in the world, that you’re in a concentration, ignore that voice, too. It’s lying to you as well. It’s the one that eats away. So that’s the voice you don’t listen to. Listen to the voice that says, “I want to stay right here.” You haven’t trusted that voice enough in the past. So give it some credence now and see how far it can take you. (whooshing)

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