

The Fangs of Conceit

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Focus on your breath. See how long you can keep the focus there. If you lose focus, well, get back into focus. Don't count the times that you lose focus. Just deal with distraction each time as it comes—one by one by one. The important thing is that you don't let yourself get discouraged. The mind has lots of habits that go against the meditation, so it's obvious that those old habits will kick in at times, even if you've been meditating for quite a long time. You're going to go through some bad sessions and you'll have to learn how to take that in stride. Part of taking it in stride is having what the Buddha calls conceit.

There's a passage where Ven. Ananda's talking to a nun, saying that even though we practice to overcome conceit, we still need conceit as part of the practice. And here it is: basically the sense that other people can do this; they're human beings; I'm a human being. They can do it. Why can't I? The confidence that this is something you can do will see you through a lot of things—but you have to be careful with conceit.

After all, it is a fetter and something we want to get beyond—and it has its teeth, or as Ajaan Maha Boowa calls them, the “fangs of ignorance,” when you start measuring yourself against other people: Who's better? Who's worse? Remember: We're not here to practice to be better than anybody else, or worse than anybody else. We're here because we're suffering. There's stress in the mind. There's suffering in the mind, and we're causing it to ourselves. That's the big irony.

There's enough stress and suffering in the world without our additional piling it on. And everything we do should be for the sake of happiness. You'd think that's why we would act to begin with, or to speak or think. But often the things we do for the sake of happiness turn around and bite us. This is why, when Ajaan Suwat was talking about ignorance, he would often translate it with the Thai word for stupidity. We're all pretty stupid. We know that fire is hot, that if you stick your finger in it, you get burned. And yet we go sticking our fingers into the fire. We know that red ants bite and yet we go sticking our finger down in their nest. That's our stupidity. We have to figure out why we do these things. What's the impulse? Fortunately, we have the ability to see through our own stupidity. That's something you have to have confidence in.

This is where the conceit comes in—the good side of the conceit. Remind yourself, “I am capable of doing this. I am capable of figuring these things out.” So

try to maintain the healthy side of conceit and watch out for the fangs—the fangs where you start comparing yourself to other people, because no matter how you define what makes somebody better than somebody else, it's always possible to move the goal posts. Your mind is very clever at doing that, so that when the issue of being better than someone else comes up, and you want to measure yourself as better, suddenly you find yourself measuring yourself as worse. The goal posts have changed and they keep moving around. And there's a part of the mind that likes to sabotage your efforts to practice, so watch out for that.

Also keep in mind that we're not here to impress anybody. We're not here to be better or worse than anyone else. We're here because we're suffering. Now, don't make it sound grim. One of the things that keeps you going in the practice is having a sense of humor about the whole thing. See the irony in the fact that, yes, you want happiness and, yes, you're still doing things that cause suffering. If you want to keep insisting, in spite of all that, that you're still very clever and intelligent, then you're setting yourself up for a fall. This is why if you can laugh at your own mistakes and admit your own stupidity with a good natured laugh—and it's important that it be good natured—that helps cut through a lot of the discouragement that can come. It can also cut through a lot of the unhealthy pride that can come along in the practice as well.

There are people who count their jhanas. There are people who count their attainments. As Ajaan Fuang would say, "They're counting the different ways in which they're stupid." If you can see that tendency in yourself, laugh it off and get back to business, which is: Okay, where is the stress? Where is the suffering?

We talk about comprehending stress. This is probably one of the most difficult parts of the path. On the one hand, we know there's pain. But then, precisely where the pain comes into the mind, we often miss that. It gets blurred. When they define the first noble truth as 'life is suffering,' that's totally useless and it's totally inaccurate as well. The Buddha said you have to be very precise: Where is the suffering? He lists different things that we suffer from and then he points out that they all basically come down to clinging to the aggregates.

How do you catch yourself clinging? What are these aggregates? You have to ferret that out. They're basically the movements of the mind and things coming up in the body as you sense the body from within. You want to see how you cling to these things. You want to see how you feed off these things. There are the movements of feelings—when you feel things, when you perceive things, when you fabricate things in the mind for certain purposes.

When you fabricate a thought, it doesn't mean that you're lying about it. It's simply that you cobble things together for whatever purpose you have in mind.

This is how we get through the day. This is how we get through our lives, by cobbling things together. These are all activities, and you want to see, “How am I clinging to them and how does my clinging cause suffering?” That’s the big question. It requires that you be very precise.

When there’s a pain in the body, at what point does the pain come into the mind? You’re holding on to a perception, so you have to get the mind still enough so that you can ferret it out. These things are all right here. They’re all happening right here. Simply learn how to see these things in these terms, as clinging-aggregates, for otherwise you see them in terms of your narratives and, depending on the mood of the day, the narratives can be really nice or they can turn around and bite you. You want to be the kind of person who can analyze a narrative and take it into other terms: i.e., where is the feeling, where is the perception and where is the thought construct? Chop up the narrative.

If you can approach all this from a larger perspective, that helps. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. Before he focused in on analyzing the present moment, first he got his mind into a state of concentration. He started wondering about his past. And he saw that it stretched way back—lots of narratives. You think you’ve got a lot of narratives coming here today. The Buddha had eons of narratives that he could have focused on. But instead of focusing on their details, the questions he asked was, “Is there an underlying pattern here?” Was this true only of him that he had these many lifetimes, or did it apply to everybody else? And what was the pattern that determined how you moved from one lifetime to another? How did that happen? What caused it to be good in some cases and bad in others?

That’s when he turned his mind to thinking about the whole world—all the beings of the cosmos—seeing how they died and were reborn. It was only then that he saw the larger pattern: their karma—their intentions that were informed by their views. He saw the larger pattern and got a much larger perspective, seeing that the universe is not going anywhere particularly. It’s just going around and around and around. Some people find that depressing, but the Buddha found it liberating. It meant that he didn’t have to serve somebody else’s purpose.

We hear about being a part of a larger Oneness, which would mean that we have a role to play in that Oneness—and there are lots of people who want to tell us what our roles are. They get upset when you say, “Well, no I’d rather work on the problem of my own suffering.” They say it’s selfish. But you’re actually free to do this, and once you’ve done this, you’ve set a good example for other people and you’re able to teach them. So it’s not selfish, because we all have our sufferings that

come from within and we have to figure out from within how to solve the problem.

If you can do that for yourself, then, if you're fortunate, you can help other people. But even the Buddha couldn't teach everybody. As he said, he taught only those who were teachable, people who saw that they were suffering and that the problem might be coming from within. And that's not everybody. A lot of people won't admit that they're suffering; others will say, yes, they're suffering, but it's not their fault. So they keep looking outside, outside—trying to change things outside. But often they just make more of a mess.

Look at the history of the human race. You need to have a very strong sense of irony to read it. People try to solve one problem and then, in solving that problem, they create a lot of other problems. That's why we keep coming back again and again and again. So taking this larger perspective gives you a handle on things—and particularly on the narratives that you carry, because you see that everybody has their narratives, which are all wandering around aimlessly. That allows you to chop up your own narratives to see them in terms of these larger patterns.

To begin with, there's karma. There've been some unfortunate, unskillful actions in your past. But there have also been some skillful ones. If there weren't any skillful ones, you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be a human being. So you've got some potentials. Where do you use these potentials most wisely? In taking apart this problem of why you create suffering for yourself. After all, in creating suffering for yourself, it's going to spill out onto other people too.

Thinking in these ways helps get you focused in the present moment in the right way. It helps you shred your narratives, particularly the ones that turn into the fangs of conceit. Just keep that one little part of conceit that says, "Yes, I can do this."

Years back, when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, I was his attendant. I'd always thought that I'd make a pretty good attendant, but it turned out that I was not nearly as good as I thought I'd be. It got to be kind of discouraging. And he kept pointing out areas where I was lacking. I had to realize: There was nobody else there to help him. So at the very least, there must be some merit in what I was doing, even though I wasn't doing it as skillfully as it could be done. And so, bit by bit, I got better at it.

Our educational system tends to encourage us in areas where we're already talented, and they don't train us in the skills we need to develop mastery, or at least develop competence, in areas where we're not naturally talented. But those are precisely the skills we need. And one of the best ways of developing that kind

of competence is to admit, “Yeah, I’m not very good at this. But if I’m observant and truthful, I can do better.” So you learn from other people. Other people who are doing it better. How do they do it? And again, you’re not trying to compare yourself in the sense of stopping with a judgment as to who’s better and who’s worse. You’re using your judgment to learn: “Who’s got some skills that I can develop? Who’s got some skills that I can master?”

In Ajaan Fuang’s words, you’ve got to think like a thief. Try to take other people’s good points and see if you can make them your own. If you come at this with the attitude, “I’ve got a lot to learn but I can do it”; if you base your pride on the fact that you’re always willing to learn from your mistakes, that’s the safest kind of pride there is.

So learn how to pick up the narratives of your life when they’re useful and how to shred them when they’re not. In that way, this quality of conceit actually becomes a help in the practice, and you’re able to avoid its fangs.