

Self-doubts

September 24, 2020

When you come across doubt in your practice, you have to remember that there are many kinds. To begin with there's skillful and unskillful. Skillful doubt is basically curiosity: You realize there are things you don't know, and something in the mind wants to find out. That kind of doubt is actually encouraged.

It's the doubt that has *no* curiosity: That's what you've got to watch out for. And that can either be doubt about the practice or doubt about your ability to do the practice. If it's the kind of doubt that just dismisses things, then you've got a defilement. You've got to get around it, realizing that it's not really doubt, it's dismissiveness: belittling yourself, belittling the practice. If you're belittling yourself, you have to ask yourself, "How much longer do you want to do this, put up with this, be subject to this?" You're basically placing a ceiling over yourself. There's nobody else here saying that you can't do the practice—you're the only one saying that.

You have to ask yourself, "Are those voices in your best interest?" Sometimes they'll sound very objective, but just because they sound objective doesn't mean you can trust them. And there's an irony right there: They're teaching you not to trust yourself, but they want you to trust them.

So you have to ask yourself, looking back on your life, "How often have those voices really been in your own best interest?" To say nothing of the Dhamma, even in the world: If you're going to get ahead, if you're going to make something of yourself, you can't listen to belittling voices, dismissive voices. You've got to show some pluck and courage, and that requires that you look at your practice and value the little steps you're able to make, the little advances. Because those voices will say, "Oh, this means nothing."

Think of even Ajaan Maha Boowa, who energized his practice—and it was a very energetic practice—by taking pleasure in seeing, as he said, "Just a scale of bark coming off the tree of my defilements": taking some satisfaction in that. In other words, each time there was a little victory inside, he would celebrate the victory. Now, he wouldn't let it get him complacent, but it would energize him.

Think about the time Ajaan Suwat went to see Ajaan Mun: He was still a very young monk and his mind was still not yet settling down. He was somewhat afraid of Ajaan Mun, and one day Ajaan Mun asked him out of nowhere, "How's your practice going?" And Ajaan Suwat, in embarrassment, said, "Well, it's not doing very well. My mind seems to be all over the place."

And Ajaan Mun encouraged him, saying, "Well, knowing that a scattered mind is a scattered mind counts as mindfulness practice." And Ajaan Suwat took it well. As he said, he

realized that Ajaan Mun was not saying what he was doing was good or that he should be satisfied there, but it was a good step—a step in the right direction.

So learn to notice where you're making steps in the right direction. When you see a step in the right direction, make another, make another. Learn how to urge, encourage, and rouse yourself to overcome those belittling voices.

So that's one kind of destructive doubt: the dismissive doubt.

Another is lazy and impatient doubt, the one that says, "I want to get quick results, and the results aren't coming as quickly as I want them," and then turns itself into doubt: "Maybe I can't do this." But if you don't do this practice, what are you going to do?

The path to awakening may seem long, but the path that doesn't go to awakening is a lot longer. It winds around, and goes up and down, and just keeps going on through *samsara* without any end.

As we were saying today: As you go from one life to the next, it's a very precarious operation. There's so much you have to leave behind, and you're really not sure what you can take with you—or what impulses will arise in the mind at that moment that have been buried for a long time, and will suddenly come out.

So which path is shorter, the path to awakening or the path away from awakening? It's the path to awakening that's the shorter path.

As Ajaan Fuang said, it's one little step at a time, but you have to keep doing it continually. In Thai it was a pun: The word *nit* means *continuous* and also means *little*. Spelled differently, but they're pronounced the same. It's the continuity with which you take your little steps that's going to move things along.

We like to take great leaps and bounds, but as the Buddha said, it is a step-by-step practice. An accountant came to see him one time, talking about how accountants were trained in a very orderly, step-by-step way, and it seemed he had a very orderly step-by-step kind of mind. He wanted to know if there was a similar pattern in the practice, and the Buddha said there was.

You start by developing a sense of shame and compunction, realizing that your actions really do make a difference and you want to be sure that you act only in ways that will be skillful—that will give good results, harmless results.

Then you start developing mindfulness and restraint of the senses. Then gradually you train the mind so that it's more and more inclined to want to settle down.

In each case, you take the joy that comes from accomplishing the previous stages and use that to energize yourself to go on to the next, and the next.

So don't paint a picture of how long it's going to be and how impossible it seems, because that's just going to weigh you down. Look back on what you've done, looking for the good things you've done.

After all, the voices that are belittling are selective, selecting the times when you slipped and fell. But for the purpose of the path, you learn from the times that you slipped and fell, but then you also remember it is possible to get up and move on—and you’ve done that, too. You can be selective, too, but in a positive way.

So when you have your slips, keep remembering, “Okay, I recovered from that one, I recovered from that one, I recovered from that one...” It’s a pattern, and use that to encourage yourself. Because a lot of the time, doubt is disguised. It’s actually something else, another defilement disguised—like dismissiveness.

The Buddha actually lists dismissiveness as one of the sixteen major defilements of the mind. The Commentary explains it as dismissing the accomplishments of other people and the help you’ve received from them, but it can also mean just being dismissive about yourself. And then of course laziness and impatience are defilements as well.

So when doubt comes up, try to ask yourself, “What kind is it? Skillful? Unskillful?” If it’s curious, if it wants to know, you can encourage that kind of doubt. If it’s not curious, if it just wants to give up, then you ask yourself, “Well why? What’s going to be accomplished by giving up?”

Learn to engage in some mental fabrication—using some new perceptions that are true. You’re not making these things up, but just learn how to perceive things in such a way that you give yourself energy, give yourself confidence. You’re able to manage that step? Well, you can manage the next step, and then the next, and then the next.

If you think about “I’ll never be able to make it to the end. I just don’t have it in me”: Well, you as you are right now won’t make it to the end, but as you follow the path you will become a different person.

The change will be gradual. The Buddha compares it to a hammer that you use every day. You’ve seen other hammers getting worn down, and you realize that each time you use your hammer, it’s worn down a little bit, a little bit... You can’t measure how much, but you do know that using it does wear it down. In the same way, as you stick with the path, you’re wearing your defilements down, and over the long term you may begin to notice, “Okay there are signs that I’m getting better. I’m becoming a different person.” Focus on that.

So when the dismissive voices come, you have something to show them: They’re not all that authoritative, not all that believable—you can’t trust them.

And as for the lazy voices, ask yourself that question, “Which path is longer, the path to awakening or the path away from awakening?” And go for the shorter path.