

Doubt vs. Questioning

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Doubt is one of the hindrances in meditation, but it turns out that there are different kinds of doubt. Some kinds of doubts are actually helpful. Doubt as a hindrance is the doubt that makes you afraid to do anything. It makes you unwilling to commit. When you try something, you say, "Well, this can't be right." Then you go someplace else before you've even given it a chance.

For example, a common complaint about concentration, as you begin to fabricate it, is that you notice, "Hey, this is fabricated. This is willed. There's got to be something wrong here." You'd think that concentration should be something that happens naturally. Sometimes it does, but other times you really have to will it. You really have to work at it. After all, it's part of the noble eightfold path. The path is something fabricated, and concentration is, too.

The real problem here is that you're doubting the wrong things. Instead of doubting the practice, you should be doubting your preconceived notions, ideas that you haven't really put to the test. When you doubt those things, that's a healthy kind of doubt, because it's through that kind of doubt that you start being observant. All too often we believe this or that must be right, so we just plow ahead regardless of the consequences because it seemed so logical, so reasonable. But as the Buddha said, you can't take logic or and reason as your guide all the time. Some things that are logical and reasonable are actually wrong, sometimes they're right. The logic and reason they have are not guarantees that they're true.

So this is a fine line, and it requires you to figure out exactly what you should doubt and what you shouldn't. If it's the kind of doubt that paralyzes you and makes you unable to commit to the practice, that's an unskillful doubt. But if it's a kind of doubt that questions a preconceived notion, that opens the opportunity to be observant.

As I've said many times, this was one of the most frequent terms Ajaan Fuang used in giving meditation instructions: Be observant. Watch. Watch what you do and look at the results of what you're doing. If you're not observant, there's no way the meditation will go anywhere. You might like to think that meditation is something simple, that it has certain set instructions and you follow A-B-C-D until you finally get to Z, which is where you want to go. That's it. And the less you think, the less you reflect, the better a meditator you'll be.

That's totally wrong. How are you going to gain discernment unless you look at cause and effect for yourself? If you simply follow instructions, then you're

placing all the responsibility on the instructor. You're not taking on any responsibility at all for your actions. If anything goes wrong, it's the other person's fault.

That's a very cautious and cowardly way of looking at the world, trying to make sure that nobody can criticize you, but it doesn't gain any real results. The whole point of the meditation is that while you're doing the meditation, unexpected things are sure to come up, things that you wouldn't see otherwise. How you deal with those unexpected things, what understanding you come to about those unexpected things: That's where the real discernment arises. That's where you can really make a change in the mind.

The purpose of the instructions is to give you general principles and some warnings. If you hit this particular point, you've got to watch out for this. You hit that particular stage, you've got to watch out for that. But a lot of it is left up to your own powers of observation. If you're not willing to use your powers of observation, you get nowhere. It's as plain as that. If you're not willing to question your preconceived notions, you might as well go back home, because the meditation is designed to do precisely that: question your preconceived notions. If you don't question them, you don't learn anything new. If you don't learn anything new, nothing new will happen in the mind.

So you have to be a questioning person, but you have to learn how to question the right things. Some of that you can pick up from people who've meditated before, who have some experience. Notice how they look at things. I noticed when I was with Ajaan Fuang, there wasn't all that much that he explained in a very systematic way. It was more hints and suggestions. "Try this. If that doesn't work, well, try that. If that doesn't work, use your ingenuity. Use your powers of observation."

In other words, you can't expect everything to be handed to you on a platter, because otherwise what would you do if the platter wasn't there? You run across a particular problem and if you're not used to approaching it from different angles, trying out different solutions, you'll be lost.

This is why the ability to be observant on a day-to-day level is such an important prerequisite for being observant as a meditator. Look for the unexpected. Be sensitive to nuance—because the mind has lots of nuances. It's not a machine. It wasn't designed by an engineer who was thinking logically and systematically. It's a chaotic system. Chaotic systems are often unpredictable. You get a feel for them over time in a nonverbal way, by trying this, trying that, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't work. As for what seems to work right now, well, try it again tomorrow and see if it works tomorrow, because maybe the mind will

have changed in the meantime. You've made a discovery, but maybe not a major discovery.

So you look again, observe again, ask questions again. Over time, the body of knowledge that comes from your powers of observation will build up. That's a lot more trustworthy than the knowledge that you gain simply from books, from words, or from what you've thought through on your own.

The Buddha talks about three levels of discernment. The first two are the discernment that comes from listening and reading, and then the discernment that comes from thinking things through. Ajaan Lee compares the first to elementary education and the second to high school education. But the really useful discernment, he says, is the discernment that comes from developing qualities in the mind. This comes from being observant, and it's part of the whole practice of mindfulness and alertness.

Alertness is a matter of watching what you do and seeing what comes about as a result. If you refuse to learn from your actions, there's no alertness. It goes nowhere. But if you learn from your actions, then you're developing good qualities in the mind. And in the process of developing, you come to your own understanding of what mindfulness really is about: What's the difference between mindfulness and alertness? How do they relate? How do they do good things for the mind? How do they enable you to see things you didn't see before?

That kind of discernment can really have a telling effect on the mind, opening you up to new things. As the Buddha said, we practice to reach the as-yet-unreached, to attain the as-yet-unattained, to realize the as-yet-unrealized. If you're looking for the meditation simply to confirm the that you already know, well, it will do that, but it won't be worth much. An important part of discernment is seeing the new things that you didn't see before that will have an effect on the mind, that will change the mental landscape.

One of Ajaan Lee's shorthand ways of developing discernment is that when you come to an understanding, ask yourself, "What if the opposite is true? In what ways would the opposite being true make a difference? In what ways would it be useful?" This way, you have two eyes, not just one. When you have two eyes, you gain perspective. You see things as three-dimensional and not just two.

So try to be a person with two eyes. Learn to question. Force yourself to be observant if you're not already observant, because that's where the path lies. It doesn't lie in hammering things out from your preconceived notions. This is why there's so much emphasis on letting go. It's not just a letting go of material things, or sensual pleasures. Many times it means letting go of the things you hold most firmly to as being right. So learn to question precisely those things.