

You Can Do It

October 25, 2013

Some people, when they come to meditation, have to deal with over-confidence; others have to deal with self-doubt. Both can be pretty debilitating. Over-confidence is debilitating in the sense that you assume everything you do is right. You don't look at your actions, you don't want to see any faults in your actions or your words or your thoughts, so you miss a lot of things. Self-doubt is also debilitating. You start focusing on the breath and you give into all the voices that say, "Who are you to be meditating?"

Think of the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. That was one of the questions apparently that Mara asked him: "Who are *you* to become Buddha? Who do you think you are?" Tradition has it that the Buddha touched the ground, and the Mother Earth Goddess came up and squeezed out her hair. All the water of all the goodness he had done over those many eons came out and washed away all the forces of Mara. If you try touching the ground right now, the Mother Earth Goddess will not come up. But, you're a human being and you're here because you want true happiness. That's all that's needed.

Notice that the requirement is not that you've always been good and this is your reward for always being good. This is a path that's open to people who've made mistakes. Buddhism is one of the few religions where they openly admit that their founder had made mistakes on his way to awakening. When you read the Jatakas, you hear or read all kinds of things about how the bodhisattva broke the different precepts, although he never broke the precept against lying. He was basically learning the ropes. He wasn't perfect yet. He *worked on* perfections: the process of getting better, the process of mastering a skill.

So that's what we're here for. We're people who've known mistakes in the past, done mistakes in the past, done some really stupid things in the past. We want to admit that and then move on to something better. That's what the meditation is for.

Whenever doubts come up in the mind, remind yourself: You're a human being. What do you need beyond being a human being in order to meditate? You need some persistence and you need some truthfulness, so you stick with it. These are two qualities that are emphasized over and over in the forest tradition: that if you stick with this quest for true happiness and you really are serious about it—not grim, but serious—that's what'll see you through.

This quality of truthfulness is what gets you to sit down and do it and then to

watch what you're actually doing and watch the results of what you're doing. Then you get to choose if you're satisfied with the results or not. Some people will stop after a certain spot. The Buddha said, though, that the secret to his awakening was never resting satisfied with what was skillful in his practice until he had gone all the way. Which means there has to be a certain edge to the practice: knowing that the work is not done yet but learning how to live with that. This is part of having a mature attitude toward goals.

When I was practicing in Thailand, especially at Wat Dhammasathit, I always had the sense that someone was watching me. That always kept me a little bit on edge and helped with my heedfulness. It got me to sit longer than I might have otherwise and to do more meditation, more walking meditation, and just all in all trying harder than I might have otherwise. So it's good to have that inner motivation.

I was reading this awful piece recently where someone... and you see this all too often in Western Buddhism where people suddenly decide they figured out the trick that the Buddha was playing on everybody. There's the one that says, you may desire awakening but there's no desire in awakening, so if you have desire for awakening, that's going to prevent it. That's one way of talking yourself out of doing the practice. Another one is that if you have to make an effort, it requires motivation, and to stir up your motivation requires having a sense of self, and of course we know we're not supposed to have a sense of self, so that means you don't make any effort.

Of course, the Buddha never said that a sense of self is always bad. You need a healthy sense of self, that you're competent to do this. Think of that passage where Ven. Ananda talks about the conceit that's needed to overcome conceit, realizing that other people have gained awakening, they're human beings, they can do it—I'm a human being, I can do it, too. Or as he said, why not me?

It's good to have a lot of respect for the ajaans, in the sense that they've really put a lot of effort into this and were as observant as possible. It's one of the things that Ajaan Mun kept hammering into his students, forcing them to look around themselves. Still, they were not super-human. They were human beings and they simply pushed themselves a little bit harder than other human beings. They listened to that last word that the Buddha said, which is to attain consummation: in other words, to master the skills. The path itself is a whole set of skills to be mastered. The Buddha himself was, as we chant, consummate in knowledge and conduct. I can't remember all the qualities of the conduct and the knowledges, but they included knowledge of past lives, knowledge of beings dying and being reborn in line with their karma, and most importantly the knowledge of the

ending of the effluents.

As for consummation in conduct, that includes restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, wakefulness, being consummate in your virtue, working on the four jhanas. Then there's a set of qualities which are the ones I can't remember, but they're very similar to the seven treasures: They include conviction, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, learning, generosity.

These are all things that human beings can work on, human beings can master. Some of those knowledges might be beyond us, but the ability to see a defilement and put an end to it is not, the ability to get your mind to settle down is not. These things are not beyond us as human beings. But we need to be motivated to do this.

So learn how to stir yourself up and remind yourself that this is something that human beings can do. We may start out with all our imperfections, but the development of the perfections is something you perfect. In other words, you master them, step by step, and as with any skill, it takes a while to get the hang of it. But step by step by step, you develop your skills, and there will be insights and breakthroughs along the way.

The important thing is that you keep at it—and that you have a sense that this is something you can do. The Buddha's not asking you to do anything more than a human being can do. Notice what you're doing and notice some of the results of what you're doing and where the results are satisfactory and where they're not. That's basically all it comes down to. When the results are not satisfactory, what can you do to change what you did? You can't go back and undo that past action, but the next time around, how would you change it?

Always think of that questionnaire, the ideal questionnaire for a would-be brain surgeon going to medical school. One: Can you tell me about a mistake you made? And two, how would you do it differently the next time? If the candidates couldn't think of any mistakes, they wouldn't get in. And if they hadn't really thought through how they would do it more correctly the next time, they wouldn't get in, either.

Those are the qualities we're looking for, not only in brain surgeons but also in meditators: the ability to recognize a mistake and to figure out how not to repeat that mistake. That's what lies in the essence of becoming consummate. And it's something we all can do.