

Caring Enough to Doubt

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There are two ways you can have doubts about the practice or doubts about your own ability to do the practice. One is from caring a lot, and the other is from not caring at all. The second kind is not encouraged, of course. You say, “Well, I doubt that anyone could overcome sensuality or I doubt that I could overcome my anger or I doubt I could get anywhere in my concentration.” If doubt comes from not caring, it’s going to be fatal to the practice.

But if the goal is something you really want, true happiness is something you really want, and you really do care about your own true well-being, then any doubts you have about the practice come from caring. That kind of doubt is encouraged, because it’s doubt based on curiosity: “Will this work?” And there’s a solution to that, a solution found by giving it a try. If you just sit around and wonder, wonder, wonder, “Will this work? Will this not work?” without actually trying it, you’re never going to know. That’s a kind of wondering that comes from not caring.

So you have to look inside yourself. Do you really care about happiness? Are you serious about it? Not serious in the sense of being grim, but have you had enough of false happiness, happiness that’s let you down? If you decide you’ve had enough, okay then, focus on the practice.

One of the ways to you get yourself motivated to practice, the Buddha said, is to have the self as a governing principle. You realize that you started the practice because you really did want to put an end to suffering. If you give up, what does that say about your desire to put an end to suffering? If you really love yourself, you devote yourself to the practice because the practice simply makes sense. The stronger you can make your concentration, the stronger your mindfulness, then the better position you’ll be in to judge things.

Was the Buddha right when he said that there is a deathless happiness that doesn’t depend on any conditions at all? To know that, you’ve got to make yourself a reliable judge. That’s why you need more concentration. You need more discernment, more mindfulness, all the good qualities that are developed, as you can see, by focusing on the breath.

It’s interesting that when the Buddha talks about the cure for doubt or uncertainty, the cure is the same as the program you follow for developing discernment—in other words, looking at what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in your mind, and seeing what happens as a result of those qualities. “If I develop the

skillful qualities, what happens? What happens when I learn how to let go of some of those unskillful qualities?”

You hear the Buddha say that sensuality is a bad thing. Well, do you understand what he means by that? He means the mind’s obsession with thinking about sensual pleasures, either ones you’ve had in the past or ones you plan to have in the future. You can think for hours about those things. But then when the actual pleasure comes, it doesn’t live up to the billing. And what else is involved in getting that pleasure? What activities did you engage in to get it? You begin to see that there are often a lot of drawbacks that go along with those kinds of activities. A lot of energy goes into sensuality and there’s not much payoff. What happens if you learn how to put those thoughts aside? Part of the mind will complain. It wants its instant pleasure, because there is a certain pleasure that comes out of just fantasizing about things.

But here you’ve got the breath. You’ve got the body sitting here, being energized by the breath. Can you use that energy to create a sense of pleasure right now? What would feel really good right now? Now, this may take work, and it may require energy as well. But you begin to realize that the pleasure that comes from focusing well on the breath is totally without drawbacks. It’s a hit that you can take again and again and again without harming yourself.

And unlike a lot of the pleasures of the world that dull the mind, this pleasure doesn’t. It gives you a sense of well-being, a sense of strength, and clarity in the mind. As you pursue it, you begin to see, “Oh, yeah, it is possible to let go of unskillful qualities.” Maybe not everything right away, but you see that the mind is clearer. More stable. You feel better about yourself when you actually put this into practice. You’ve gained some discernment.

So we overcome doubt not by just trying to force ourselves to believe. We overcome doubt by developing our discernment to see what really is skillful. The Buddha gives some general guidelines on this, but there are a lot of details we’re going to have to work out for ourselves—as in this distinction between different kinds of doubt: the doubt that encourages you to practice to find things out as opposed to the doubt that says, “I don’t really care. I don’t want to bother with this anymore.” They both qualify as doubt, but they really are different things.

There’s skillful doubt and unskillful doubt. And because skillful doubt is based on curiosity, then the resolution of that doubt lies in developing all the qualities you can to make the mind sharper, to understand itself better as to what you’re doing, what you’re thinking, what you’re saying that’s going to lead to suffering; and what you’re going to do and think and say that will lead to well-being.

Now, if you find that your doubt is based on not really caring, you've got to make yourself care. This is where the Buddha gives all those talks about the drawbacks of sensuality, the drawbacks of not practicing, the drawbacks of staying in this process of samsara, wandering around through who knows how many lifetimes—the uncertainty of it all. It's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end. Sometimes it lands on that end. Sometimes it lands flat splat in the middle. That's been pretty much our course through all this wandering-on that we do. And it doesn't have any end in sight.

Craving fosters your consciousness that keeps going. The consciousness fosters the craving. They go around and around and around and around. They can feed each other forever until you decide you've had enough. The Buddha has you look at someone who's extremely poor, sick, destitute. You have to remind yourself that you've been there, and you could be there again if you're not careful. If you see someone who's extremely famous, surrounded by all the pleasures and friends you can imagine: He says you've been there, too, in the past. And, again, if you're not careful, you can be there again—even being very wealthy is not unalloyed pleasure.

You may decide, "Well, I want to design my life so it's just right." How many times again and again and again do you have to design things? And it's never quite just right because there's an element in your own mind that's not right. It swings in this direction. It swings in that direction. As long as you can't trust your own mind, you'll never find anything trustworthy in life. And if you can't even trust yourself to care about your own happiness, what are you going to find that you can trust?

So there are these two kinds of doubt, and you want to take any doubt that's based on not caring and turn it into the doubt that's based on caring, because the second kind of doubt is something that can actually become a motivation for the practice. You hear the ajaans in Thailand saying this. On the one hand, as they say, with stream entry, your doubts are gone. Now, those are two specific doubts.

One, any doubts you might have about the truth of the Buddha's teachings. And two, any doubts you might have about your own ability to gain that goal. At stream-entry, you find that, yes, you have this evidence inside that what the Buddha said really is true, and that you will attain the goal at some point. But as the ajaans say, that doesn't end all of your doubts, because the next doubt is, "What is it like to go all the way?" Until you've gone all the way, that doubt is not gone.

But as for the doubt of not caring: That totally ends with gaining results in the practice and seeing that this really does make a difference—and that what the

Buddha taught really is special. It wasn't just some fly-by-night kind of thing. It wasn't a truth that's true only for people in India back 2,500 years ago, while we've got better pleasures; better, more advanced ways of finding happiness in a regular modern day-to-day life. That's not the case.

The happiness he found, the end of suffering, is something that shakes everything when people encounter it. So those kinds of doubts are gone. But still, you want the doubt that says, "Well, what's the next step like?" You have to learn how to modulate that doubt so that you actually do the steps without trying to rush past them. The doubt that's based on wanting to know, that's based on caring, keep that doubt focused on curiosity. You've been hearing the Dhamma for who knows how long now. What is it talking about? There's only one way to find out. That's simply by testing the Dhamma by testing yourself.

You've got the chance to do that. Don't throw it away.