

From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects

Class 6 – The Hindrance of Doubt

by Gil Fronsdal

Introduction

Without a dedication to practicing with the hindrances, any hindrance can derail a person from practice, but this is especially true for the fifth hindrance, doubt, because doubt as a hindrance is directly related to the practice itself. When uncertain about the practice or about one's own ability it is possible to give up on the practice.

Doubt as a hindrance is a mental preoccupation recognized by indecision, uncertainty, and a lack of confidence. It causes a person to hesitate, vacillate, and not settle into meditation practice. Its simplest manifestation can be a lack of clarity about the meditation instruction, and more dramatically, doubt can involve deep, fiery inner conflicts and fears. Doubt can keep the mind agitated, simmering in discursive thought or feeling inadequate. Alternatively it can deflate the mind, robbing it of interest and energy.

“Hindering doubt” is not the same as “questioning doubt.” Hindering doubt takes many forms. It can be doubt in the practice, in the teachings, in one's teachers, and, most dangerously, in oneself. Doubt as a hindrance leads to inaction and giving up. In contrast, questioning doubt inspires action and the impulse to understand. It can, in fact, be helpful for mindfulness practice a questioning attitude encourages deeper investigation and a healthy doubt can overcome complacency and loosen preconceived ideas.

Doubt is often accompanied by discursive thinking. Sometimes thoughts can appear reasonable and convincing enough to mask the underlying doubt fueling them. Regardless of whether it is reasonable or not, the discursive thinking can interfere with the meditation practice and thus confirm doubts that the practice is not working. In other words, doubt can be self-fulfilling.

The most insidious doubts are those about oneself, especially when they involve a lack of confidence in one's ability or worthiness. Other times the doubt relates to managing the changes that come with practice. One may be buffeted by thoughts such as, “Can I take care of myself if I am more open and relaxed?”; “Perhaps my family and friends won't accept how I might grow”; or “I won't be able to earn a living if I honestly look at how I am driven by fear and ambition.” The practice can appear too difficult, or one can't imagine having the inner capacity required. Sometimes such doubt arises when one is intimidated by a distant, grand goal. It is easy to forget that a mountain is climbed one step at a time.

Practicing with doubt

It is difficult to recognize doubt when caught in it. Doubt may be easier to identify by noticing any indecisiveness, hesitation or holding back in the practice. Once hindering doubt is recognized, there are several ways of working with it. Clearly noting doubt as “doubt” can be helpful and it can be freeing to doubt the doubts!

When doubt involves uncertainty about the practice or the teachings, it is helpful to study, learn and reflect on the Dharma itself. Asking a teacher or having a talk with a dharma friend may also help in this regard. A period of careful contemplation may resolve the doubt. Having a clear understanding of the Buddha’s teachings on what is skillful and what is unskillful can go a long way toward overcoming doubt.

When doubt involves a hesitation to commit to the practice, in some cases it can be useful to apply discipline and resolve to overcome it. However, in the case of major or persistent doubts, they may need to be dealt with directly - such as by questioning deeply held beliefs, attending to unresolved feelings, or challenging ingrained convictions about self-identity or change.

Confidence in one’s ability to practice is very important. When plagued by doubt in one’s own ability, it can be useful to develop self-confidence by focusing on what one is capable of. Many people overlook or diminish what they are capable of and focus instead on what they think they cannot do. Taking time to consider and feel happy about what one can do - even the smallest things - can strengthen confidence. Approaching one’s practice in small increments may support a growing confidence. For instance, resolving to be aware of each breath, one breath at a time, rather than focusing on expectations for the entire session. In addition, spending less time thinking about oneself also can help with confidence. This is because self-preoccupation tends to undermine healthy self-regard.

Finally, when working with doubt it can be helpful to remember something that inspires you in the practice, such as a teaching, a person, or some experience you have had in the practice. Bringing this to mind may remind you of why you are doing the practice and how much you value it. It may gladden the heart enough to clear away clouds of doubt.

Exercise

Before each session of meditation, remind yourself of those things that give you confidence in the practice. Let that confidence support you during your meditation. How does doing this affect your meditation practice?