

## **Doubting Doubt: Practicing With the Final Hindrance**

*Adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, December 5th, 2004*

Sooner or later all meditators practice with the hindrances. For most, it will be sooner and later-as well as in between. These obstructing mind states should not be seen as unfortunate occurrences. Rather, they are opportunities for strengthening practice-for developing mindfulness, concentration, understanding, and non-clinging.

Without a dedication to practicing with the hindrances, any one of them can derail a person from practice. This is especially so for doubt, the fifth and final hindrance. Whereas the other four can arise from concerns about anything, doubt as a hindrance is directly related to the practice itself. When one's uncertainty about the practice or about one's own ability is strong enough, it is possible to give up on the practice.

### **Manifestations and causes of skeptical doubt**

Doubt as a hindrance is a mental preoccupation involving indecision, uncertainty, and 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, which may be settled quickly with further instruction. More dramatically, doubt can involve deep, fiery inner conflicts and fears stirred up by the practice. All along the spectrum, doubt can keep the mind agitated, perhaps simmering in discursive thought and feelings of inadequacy. Alternatively it can deflate the mind, robbing it of interest and energy.

"Hindering doubt" is not the same as "questioning doubt." Doubt as a hindrance leads to inaction and giving up. Questioning doubt inspires action and the impulse to understand. It can, in fact, be helpful for mindfulness practice. A questioning attitude encourages deeper investigation. It is a healthy doubt that can overcome complacency and loosen preconceived ideas.

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 may not appear until one is actually beginning to practice. A person may spend months happily anticipating a meditation retreat only, upon arrival, to doubt whether it is the right place, time, or retreat to be on.

Doubt is often accompanied by discursive thinking. Sometimes thoughts can appear reasonable and convincing enough to mask the underlying doubt prompting them. But regardless of whether it is reasonable or not, the discursive thinking can interfere with the meditation practice and so 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. 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. 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.”

It is difficult to recognize doubt when caught in it. The challenge is to have enough distance or objectivity to see it for what it is. Doubt may be easier to identify by noticing our indecisiveness or holding back in the practice. Sensing any accompanying physical tension or pressure may help pull us out of the orbit of the doubting thoughts. Clearly noting doubt as “doubt” can be helpful. With enough distance we may be able to stop believing the thoughts: it can be freeing to doubt the doubts!

### **Ways to approach doubt**

Once hindering doubt is recognized, there are various ways of working with it. Occasionally a period of careful contemplation may resolve the doubt. 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. 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. This is especially beneficial when the doubts are minor and perhaps don’t warrant any attention. This is also a good approach when practice itself is what most effectively disproves a doubt. In the case of major or persistent doubts, however, discipline may not be helpful when it entails unhealthy suppression. Major doubts 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. Some people have a strong tendency to resist change of any type, including new perspectives and understandings. Doubt can become a tool of resistance by inhibiting change.

Confidence in one’s ability to practice is very important. For people plagued by doubt in their own ability, it can be useful to develop self-confidence. Many people overlook 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 slowly develop confidence. For instance, resolving to be aware of each breath throughout a meditation session is unlikely to build confidence, whereas resolving to stay with two breaths at a time may be more effective. Once one has confidence in two breaths, one can move on to three breaths. Surprisingly, spending less time thinking about oneself can help with confidence. This is because self-preoccupation tends to undermine healthy self-regard.

Finally, 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 the clouds of doubt. It may even encourage you to rededicate your efforts to transform everything into your path to freedom, including the hindrances.