OVERCOMING SKEPTICAL DOUBT

Skeptical doubt is the last of the five hindrances described in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. The Pali term for skeptical doubt is *vicikiccha* (vee-chee-kih-chah), and is described by Nina Von Gorkem as: “…not the same as what we mean by doubt in conventional language. Vicikiccha is not doubt about someone's name or about the weather. Vicikiccha is doubt about realities, about nama and rupa, about cause and result, about the four noble Truths, about the “Dependent Origination”.

For clarity, *nama* is *the internal narrative process* the mind creates in *response to sensory stimulation*, *rupa.* Cause and result refers to karmic influences—*cause* is *a moment of initial stimulation* and *result* refers to *the self-state organization and behavioral response regarding the stimulation*. The four noble Truths refer to (1) the experience of distress and confusion, (2) the cause and result process, specifically craving and clinging, (3) liberation from distress and confusion, and (4) the Noble Eightfold Path that provides the ways and means for that liberation. Dependent Origination refers to the conceptual structure that explains how the extraordinarily complex process of self-state organization operates.

Experientially, skeptical doubt involves indecision regarding how to relate to emerging self-state organizations, that is, is this organization self or not-self, is the organization wholesome or unwholesome, and should this organization be acted on or inhibited? The manifestation of skeptical doubt hinders confidence—in the teaching, the trustworthiness of the teacher and one’s ability to practice effectively.

The antidote for skeptical doubt is confidence, faith in what one is doing. Faith is one of the wholesome mind conditioners and is termed *saddha* (sah-dah) in Pali. Saddha is one of the universal mind conditioners, that is, every moment of wholesome self-state organization includes confidence.

Of course, a person can have too much faith in a belief or action which produces mental rigidity, so some degree of skeptical investigation is wise. How can a person be clearly aware of the difference between detached investigation and self-discipline compared with skeptical doubt and the internal hesitation that hinders effective action?

Buddhist commentaries suggest different levels of confidence. The first is confidence through logic. Someone might make a plausible argument for an issue, and that faith might be justified. However, no matter how logical an argument might be, that person might be mistaken, or misleading. The next level is through an example. Someone might model the benefits of a particular practice authentically. That model is inspirational, but still might be flawed. *The ultimate confirmation of confidence is one’s own personal experience; even that requires a high degree of internal awareness and discipline*. One of the commentarial antidotes for doubt is to consult with someone who is knowledgeable regarding practice. In that case, the definitive proof of confidence emerges from the development of mindful investigation of mental phenomena. This investigative capability is represented by one of the seven Awakening Factors, *dhamma vicaya, investigation of mental phenomena*. This factor will be discussed in another talk focusing on the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness.

As has been the case for all the five hindrances, the primary antidote for skeptical doubt can be found in the practice of mindfulness of breathing. First of all, the commitment to meditate overcomes doubt about the practice. The repeated, conscious intention to bring attention to the breath sensations and then sustain that focused attention brings clarity of awareness, an antidote to the hesitancy of skeptical doubt. Of course, attention will be drawn away from breath awareness; it’s the nature of the mind to be alert for novel stimuli. One of the attributes of the Four Noble Truths is to investigate the nature of the mind’s operation carefully, including how the mind makes meaning from stimulation. This curiosity also overcomes skeptical doubt. Repeatedly deciding to bring attention back to the breath sensations cultivates the ability to renounce craving and clinging, which realizes Right Effort, and this also increases confidence in the benefits of practice. Finally, working in community with others who are knowledgeable about the concepts and practices brings the benefit of consulting with her or him about meditative experience.