Setting Aside Skeptical Doubt

The fifth hindrance on the path to Awakening is *vicikiccha* (vih-see-kee-chah), translated as *doubt* or *indecision*, the function of which is to “paralyze” the mind through a craving and clinging regarding uncertainty. Buddhist analogies regarding vicikiccha compare this state of mind to a clear pool of water that become saturated with mud to the extent one cannot decide what is in the water and what to do about it. Another metaphor compares vicikiccha to being at a crossroads in the wilderness and not being able to decide which road to take.

Classically, skeptical doubt is described as doubt regarding the validity of the Four Noble Truths, of Karma (The law of Cause and Effect), the benefits of an authentic teacher, or about one’s ability to make progress towards Awakening. Beyond the classical understandings, one can doubt the choices that are made in the complexity and inevitable contradictions of contemporary society.

It is important to be clear about the difference between the hindrance of skeptical doubt and the valuable skill of a detached and analytic view of what is forming in the mind as to whether an emerging self-formation is wholesome or unwholesome. Regarding the complexities of contemporary society, one can become paralyzed with indecision or cynical and dysfunctionally distrustful about how to respond to media messaging or how to interact with others, particularly in a social setting that is uncertain. This uncertainty has been significantly amplified and distributed throughout contemporary digital media and represents a significant disruption in social cohesion. The absence of accurate reference sources or trustworthy persons available for consultation is a characteristic of the media that is being taken advantage of by those who have a vested interest in creating distrust and social conflict. One important complication of our culture is the almost instantaneous availability of information without sufficient supporting evidence to assure the reliability and accuracy of the information, especially in social media.

The experience of skeptical doubt represents a conceptual conflict, such as suggested in the metaphor of being at a crossroads. What makes the doubt happen is the degree of attachment in the mind to requiring a perfect solution that has no possibility of being wrong or is certain regarding outcome. There is often an underlying degree of emotional potency that exaggerates the importance of certainty—the more investment of personality or property involved, the stronger the skeptical doubt. The ability to investigate and analyze data available is a key to reducing anxiety and providing confidence in one’s ability to effectively adapt to changing circumstances. The Awakening Factor of Investigation of Mental Phenomena is a very important skill to cultivate; it will be discussed in future reviews dedicated to the Seven Awakening Factors, also found in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness.

There are specific recommendations in the Buddhist commentaries regarding how to set aside skeptical doubt:

* Cultivate the ability to investigate the emerging self-state organizations with detached interest.
* Regulate impulsive reactivity in order to gather more information from a well-trusted variety of sources before committing to action.
* Consult with those whose advice is well-informed and trustworthy.
* Cultivate and maintain the Awakening Factor of Upekkha, equipoise.
* Be willing and able to revisit and reconsider plans and actions, alert to changing circumstances—this builds confidence in the ability to effectively adapt.