

A Sense of Yourself

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The Pali word that we translate as conceit, *mana*, is not quite the same as what “conceit” means in English. It’s simply the sense that “I am.” And there’s a skillful sense of conceit and an unskillful one. The skillful one, which is actually necessary for the path, is a sense of “I am competent of doing this. I can do this. I am capable. I am responsible. Other people have done this. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. Why can’t I?” You need that attitude in the practice.

As you’re sitting here focusing on the breath, you have to have the confidence that, yes, you can do this and that you really want to do this because you’re concerned about your future. That’s another aspect of conceit. You’re going to be receiving the results of your actions so you want to do them well.

But this sense of conceit, this sense of being competent, has to be based in reality. It can’t be just a floating confidence, the kind they give you as a little kid by putting gold stars all over your test papers. That kind of confidence can actually get in the way. Think of that cartoon of the mouse: Over the cartoon it said “Teenaged Mouse.” The mouse was stepping into a trap and saying to itself, “I can so get away with this.” Of course, you know what’s going to happen. The trap is going to snap shut on him.

So your confidence has to have some basis in reality. This is why the Buddha said that an important part of the practice, in addition to conceit, is having a sense of yourself, of what your capabilities are and where you are in developing the qualities that are needed to practice: where your strengths are; where your weaknesses are.

He lists six qualities. The first one is conviction, the extent to which you really do believe that the Buddha was awakened. That also means that you believe in the principle of kamma, that whatever progress that’s going to be made on the path is going to be made through your actions. You’ve got to be responsible, because that’s what the message of the Buddha’s awakening is: Human beings can find true happiness. It requires that we develop some qualities that are within all of us in a potential form, but that we have to actualize them through our own efforts. So you have to ask yourself: To what extent are you really convinced of this? At the very least, you’re asked to take this on as a working hypothesis. Base your actions, base your decisions, on this hypothesis, and see how it affects your actions.

The Buddha himself said he couldn't prove the principle of kamma to people. The best he could do was give a pragmatic proof: that if you take this principle on, your actions are going to change, all for the better. Whereas if you don't believe in the principle of kamma, what reason is there to be careful in your actions? When you're not careful in your actions, of course, your actions are going to get sloppier. So see your actions as important. And remember that the principle of kamma is not like a traffic law, where you can't park on this side of the street on just Tuesdays and Thursdays from four to six, but can park here at other times. Kamma is 24/7. While you're here at the monastery, when you're away from the monastery, your actions always have results depending on the quality of your intention. So make sure your intentions are good.

That leads to the second quality the Buddha asks you to look at, which is your virtue. To what extent are you actually causing intentional harm? He gives five types of harm you want to avoid across the board: killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. But there's also the harm that comes by inciting greed, aversion, and delusion in yourself by the way you look at things or listen to things. How careful are you as you go through the day? What kind of fantasies do you indulge in? Are they actually helping you on the path or are they not? That's an aspect of virtue, too. Lack of restraint in this area is not the kind of offense that, for the monks, would count as an offense. But it is harmful to yourself.

The third quality is learning. How much do you know about what the Buddha actually taught? And "learning" here covers not just listening or reading. Try to memorize some of the passages, especially the short things that you find really inspiring or that are particularly useful for your problems so that you can bring those teachings to mind when you need them. This is one of the reasons why we memorize the chants, and in particular the chants where we have translations. It's good to have those messages floating through your head instead of all the garbage that you've picked up over the years from the media. So learn the Dhamma. Try to remember it. And if you find yourself weak in this area, it's an area where you've got plenty to explore.

The fourth quality is generosity. How hard do you find it to part with your things? How hard do you find it to give of your time or your energy to other people when they ask for it, or even when they don't ask for it, but you see that they could use it? What gets in the way of your generosity? When you feel that you're holding onto something and part of you knows that it's not really necessary, but another part wants to hold on, sometimes it's good to simply give it away. And listen to the mind to see if it complains while you're doing this. That way you get to know what's standing in the way of your generosity.

The fifth quality is discernment: seeing where you're causing yourself suffering. This, of course, requires that you work on your concentration so that you can see things more clearly. Discernment is not just a matter of having learned things or having thought them through. It means actually seeing, when you're about to do something that's going to be unskillful: How can you talk yourself out of it? If you feel lazy about doing something that's skillful, how can you talk yourself into doing it? This is a real test of your discernment, because otherwise you can have all that learning about the Dhamma, but if you can't actually use it to push yourself in the right direction, it's pretty useless. This is one area where, if you want to learn how to trust yourself, you really have to work to become more and more effective at talking yourself into doing things that you know are right even though you don't want to do them; and to talk yourself out of doing things that you know are wrong, but you like doing them.

And this directly connects with the final quality, which is quick-wittedness or ingenuity: your ability to come up with solutions to problems on the spot. There's a lot that's not taught in the texts. There's a lot that's not going to be taught in Dhamma talks. This is a quality that the ajaans stressed again and again: that you've got to learn to think things through on your own and come up with solutions on your own.

To begin with, learn how to read your problems to begin with. Figure out what the problem is.

I remember when I was small, we moved to a town that had a town newspaper. It was the first time I'd ever been in a town that had a town newspaper. And it had an Ann Landers column. I was always impressed by how wise her answers seemed. Then as I got a little bit older, I realized that, as her readers handed their questions to her, they were handing her the answers. It had taken them time to formulate the question, and once the question was formulated, it was pretty easy to see what the answers should be. So when you face a problem in your life, sit down; try to formulate the question. What exactly is the problem here? Use your powers of observation. Use your discernment. Use the guidance that's provided by your learning. And once the problem becomes clear, then the solution will be there. All too often our difficulty is that we don't see the problem or we haven't sat down to think it through. We just know something's wrong and leave it at that. But if you try to sharpen the outlines of the problem, sharpen the outlines of what you can see is going on, then it's easier to arrive at the answer.

So look at yourself. To what extent are you lacking in any of these six qualities: conviction, virtue, learning, discernment, generosity, quick-wittedness? Where are your strengths? Where are your weaknesses? Use your strengths to work on your

weaknesses. And that way, your confidence in yourself as a practitioner won't be just empty ideas. It won't be just floating around. It'll have a solid foundation. As you try to rely on yourself, depend on yourself, trust yourself in the meditation, you'll have something that's really trustworthy to keep you confident.