

Friday, November 30th 2012

Practice of the Week: Three Ways of Working with Doubt

I encourage you to spend this week exploring doubt as it manifests in our lives. I spoke at last night's group about two basic kinds of doubt: an open, inquisitive doubt and what the Buddha called "skeptical doubt." The first doubt connects us with reality and our experience, and encourages us to investigate something and learn from it. It is akin to the openness and curiosity of "don't know mind." Skeptical doubt disconnects us from the world as we spin around in thought loops that prevent us from learning anything because we are not willing to take in new information or take a risk and try something. In skeptical doubt we are quite stuck. Few of us like being stuck. Thus, the suggestions below are about working with this kind of doubt.

- The first suggestion is based on the counterintuitive notion that the more we think, the more doubt we experience. This is because thinking, in spite of all its benefits, ultimately cannot capture the truth of things. In response to the question I put before the group last night, "What do you know for sure?", about all we could come up with were birth, death, and impermanence. The rest is uncertain. But let's be clear that it is the thinking mind that is uncertain. There is an out. And it is non-conceptual awareness. When we are connected with the present moment through awareness of one of the five senses, there is no doubt or uncertainty in the experience. If we are feeling the rolling of the sole of the foot a step in walking meditation or the rise and fall of the belly in mindfulness of breathing, we are in simple presence and being, free of the clamor of doubt that the thinking mind creates. We just are and things just are, and it is a great relief.

Based on this, the suggestion this week is to practice mindfulness of your senses – be it breath, body, hearing, stretching in yoga, seeing when taking a walk – and by doing so avoid the debilitating mind state of skeptical doubt. If you do not like doubt, then you like

mindfulness practice, as it is a respite from the doubt.

- A second suggestion is to open mindfully to the mind state of doubt itself. Because the immobilizing tendency of skeptical doubt is so strong, the Buddha listed it as one of the five most common obstacles in meditation (hindrances). But if we can become aware of doubt, we often find that it does not have nearly as much hold on us as we had thought. The trick in being mindful of doubt is to fully allow it. Let yourself be in the state of doubt or uncertainty or indecision and instead of trying to solve it, notice what the state itself is like – is it expressed through body sensation or is it purely mental? What is your energy level like? What is the mood, or coloring, of the mind? What happens as you stay aware of it?

As we work with doubt, we will eventually have the insight that doubt is just a thought, and the only power a thought has is the power we give it through our identification with it. When we see that it is just thinking, there is really nothing more we have to do. As we stay attentive, doubt will often dissipate of its own accord. If it does not it may be because there some pressing need to reach a decision and take action. If so, go the next suggestion may help.

- The third suggestion is based on the recognition that spinning around in indecision is a false comfort. We don't escape a decision with indecision; we are actually making the choice to be stuck. If you keep spinning in choices "A or B, A or B, A or B," you are making a third choice, C. And choice C is being caught in "A or B, A or B, A or B." Often C is the worse of the three, because you don't learn anything, there is no chance for growth or change. Of course there are times you need more information, but there comes a point when it is time to act. The key is to remember that acting and making a mistake is preferable to inaction, because

you will grow from the experience. The practice is to say “what the heck” and just choose an option, take a risk, and see what happens. Pre-forgive yourself for any mistake you might make: “I am only human, doing the best I can with how I am and what I know in this moment.” You can reflect that it takes courage to choose A or B and that

even a mistake, is preferable to option C. Finally, I encourage you to take the risk as a mindfulness experiment. It will likely involve fear, so just be curious what the fear is like as you step into the choice. Notice how you are as the eventualities from your choice unfold.