

The 6 ways of overcoming doubts

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4 Spiritual doubt¹

4.1 Why we doubt

4.1.1 Worldly doubt

Doubt simply refers to an uncertainty arising from a lack of experience, from incomplete information, from a misconstrual of information, from being fed with false information, or from unknowing. It leaves us in a lurch of either being stuck in a situation of not knowing what to do, or of retreating in fear, or of rushing blindly ahead. Its sum effect is our being overshadowed in a *meaningless* deafness of ignorance or a *purposeless* rush of delusion. We are, as it were, puppets on the strings of delusion pulled and played by the master puppeteer, ignorance.

Yet, this ignorance is within us, so to speak. We become, to use a philosophical analogy, like blinded persons in a pitch-black room looking for a non-existent black cat. As **H L Mencken** quips, “A philosopher is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn’t there. A theologian is the man who finds it.”² (The wise, we must add, looks for the switch to turn on the lights.) Ignorance, like the dark, does not do anything, and there is no black cat out there in the room. It’s our unknowing mind that acts.

4.1.2 Spiritual doubt

So, doubt is an “activity” rooted in ignorance, but both these terms must be understood in the Buddhist teaching of awakening. “Ignorance” (*avijjā*) is traditionally defined as our not knowing the 4 noble truths as they are, that is, not understanding the true nature of suffering; not knowing what craving is, and so are unable to let it go; not knowing the possibility of nirvana; and not knowing the noble eightfold path, and so have no way of practice to get out of suffering.³

Here ignorance as *avijjā* is not simply not knowing: for, even a great scholar of Buddhism with PhDs in other fields, too, would experience suffering and has not attained nirvana, not to speak of his being ignorant of certain Dharma teachings or meditation practices.⁴ Nor is this the mere ignorance of a child (who might not know the theory of relativity, for example): for, this kind of ignorance has no bearing on his spiritual wellbeing. Ignorance as *avijjā*, in other words, is the absence, negation or misconstrual of the knowledge or action that leads to awakening. In this sense, *avijjā* is the opposite of *vijjā*, awakening knowledge.⁵ Doubt is a debilitating activity of this ignorance, keeping us blinkered and stuck in the loop of samsara.⁶

¹ Parts of this section appear in **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3 (5.2).

² This famous analogy by 20th-cent journalist and satirist H L Mencken was in Laurence J Peter’s *Peter’s Quotations : Ideas for Our Time* (1977:427). Earlier variants of it has been quoted by many writers. The earliest known source is perhaps William James, in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911 ch 1), and the English judge, Charles Bowen, in Edwin Ray Lankester’s *Science from an Easy Chair* (1913) by, p. 99.

³ See eg (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.215/2:4), SD 5.15 & **Avijjā S**, A 10.61/5:116 @ SD 31.10. On the 4 noble truths, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11/5:421), SD 1.1. On the nature of ignorance, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (8) The latent tendency of ignorance.

⁴ In **The notion of diṭṭhi** (SD 4a.1), we discuss how right view is not merely having correct views, but how our conduct is *transformed* in moral and spiritual senses.

⁵ See **Avijjā S** (S 45.1/5:1 f), SD 94.1; also Matilal 1980; Swearer 1992; Gethin 2001:219 f; Fuller 2005:73 f.

⁶ On the nature of doubts, see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3 (5.2).

4.2 HOW DOUBT IS OVERCOME

4.2.2.1 MUCH LEARNING (*bahu-s,sutatā*) traditionally refers to having a proper teacher who is capable of giving us some kind of sustained and systematic instructions on the Dharma based on the early suttas. We could of course nowadays study these texts by ourselves where it is difficult to find a proper teacher. Due to the proliferation of patronizing gurus,⁷ sectarian teachers,⁸ and individualistic wanderers,⁹ we must take great care not to be caught up with them or their teachings.

If you are a beginner, it is good to begin with a simple sutta that you like, and from there go on to read related teachings or accounts in other suttas. If it is a long sutta, first read through it once, to have some idea of it, noting interesting passages or words. Then select those sections that interest you and study them more thoroughly, including the notes and cross-references.

Another method of building your Dharma learning is to centre your research around a teaching or a theme, say, the 5 aggregates.¹⁰ Then go on to read all you can find on the each of the 5 aggregates, or ask every teacher we meet about them. An important aspect of Dharma learning is to focus on instructive, inspiring, and reasonable aspects of the teaching and to relate or connect them to one another, and how they, as a whole, helps us in mental peace, inner joy and self-understanding.

Finally, we need to relate what we have learned about ourselves and our daily lives. How does our knowing the Dharma help us understand our personality and problems better, and help us relate to the situations and events around us? The Dharma, in other words, is a living and life-bettering experience.

“Life-bettering” here refers to a constant self-reviewing not of how much knowledge we have accumulated, but of how well we have *accepted* our weaknesses and *worked* to overcome them. We remind ourselves to forgive our enemies and send lovingkindness to those whom we have hurt. Such knowledge, as such, is “life-changing,” gradually lightening us of our negative qualities so that we progressively rise to greater levels of joy and creativity, expressed in our Dharma-moved activities.

4.2.2.2 INVESTIGATIVE QUESTIONING (*paripucchakatā*) refers to questioning about the aggregates, the elements, the sense-bases, and so on. Note down the difficulties and questions as they arise to us. Whenever there is an opportunity, ask a teacher, or connect them with a sutta passage, and make a note of that sutta passage. Go on questioning until we have a good idea of the teaching. If the teacher is not helpful, just leave him.¹¹

Even when we think that we have understood a teaching, we should never assume that that is all there is to it. We only have a partial view, even if a clear one, of a teaching. Even a partial view is still a view, and still *partial*. In time, we will notice that our understanding must grow and connect with other teachings, and the picture becomes bigger and clearer still, as we begin to see the whole picture for ourselves. Our old views, then, have served their purpose, like a rung in life’s ladder. We can only move up by properly stepping on the next rung and so on. We must change as we mature spiritually; we are transformed when we directly see true reality. A very vital quality of right view is that it makes us *better persons*: right view leads to right conduct.¹²

⁷ See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

⁸ See **The teacher or the teaching**, SD 3.14. On “testing the teacher,” see SD 35.4a (6).

⁹ Basically, these are those who reject the early teachings or teach some kind of self-centred hodge-podge philosophy. See **Wanderers of today**, SD 24.6b.

¹⁰ SD 17 deals with the 5 aggregates in some detail.

¹¹ On bad teachers, see (**Sāla,vatika**) **Lohicca S** (D 12), SD 34.8 esp (1.2.3); on the qualities of a good teacher, see **Dūta S** (A 8.16/4:196), SD 46.7.

¹² See **Notion of ditṭhi**, SD 40a.1.

4.2.2.3 FAMILIARITY WITH THE VINAYA (*vinaye pakataññutā*). If we are monastics, make sure we know the Vinaya, especially the Pāṭimokkha, well.¹³ Our first 5 years as a monk or a nun are called “dependence” or “tutelage” (*nissaya*) for a very good reason: this is the formative period when we learn to be true renunciants under proficient teachers.¹⁴ If we miss this formative period, we will be like a rootless tree. It is only a matter of time before we fall, especially if and when we grow big with success and followers.

As lay practitioners, it is vital to understand the nature of moral virtue, that is, the cultivation of the body and speech.¹⁵ We should understand what the 5 precepts are, their natural sequence, and their purpose, that is, as a basis for our humanity. The precepts act as a tool of quality control over our lives. If we have broken any such moral precept, it means that a certain area of our lives needs to be strengthened. We should reflect on the conditions that led to our breaking the precept, and how we can prevent future breaches, and to cultivate their respective virtues.¹⁶

The precepts are best kept with lovingkindness and compassion. As such, we need to regularly cultivate lovingkindness.¹⁷ Such a meditation encourages us to reinforce happiness in our lives and let go of emotional pain. We also should keep wholesome friends and cultivate true-hearted friendship.¹⁸ And if we have the chance of meeting a good teacher, we should cultivate spiritual friendship with him and build up our meditation practice [4.2.2.5].

4.2.2.4 DEEP CONVICTION (*adhimokkha, bahulatā*). Buddhism should not be a hobby, if we want it to uplift our lives. For the Dharma to really transform our lives, we must commit ourselves to the spiritual life. “Commitment” means giving a high priority to Dharma, that is, setting aside some time for our involvement with some Dharma-inspired group, spending time with sutta study, and some meditation or mindfulness practice.¹⁹

If we are new to Buddhism, we are likely to be fascinated by a certain teacher, or be attracted to a speaker who seems to endorse our views. It is good to investigate the teacher further to see if the teacher practises what he preaches.²⁰ Whenever we are in doubt, be moved to seek for wisdom: remember that even a great teacher may hold wrong views (they often do and on a more significant scale),²¹ and to put the teaching above the teacher.²²

Occasionally, we may feel alienated from the crowd or the “elite,” because of our views, especially when we feel that the suttas are right. Our gut feeling may sometimes tell us that the conduct of a certain teacher or monastic is not right. A lay person has every *right*, indeed, it is our *duty* to politely question a monastic at an appropriate time about his monastic training (such as how many years of training he has, who is his teacher, etc). We should not however ask personal things, such as the level of his attainment, as it is against the Vinaya for a monastic to make any such claims or even hint at them, especially for gain.²³

¹³ Monastics need to instruct the laity sooner or later; thus it is helpful to know the 5 precepts thoroughly. See eg (**Sīla**) **Bhikkhu S** (A 5.286), which gives a unique set of “5 precepts” with this 3rd precept as “he is one who abstains from incelibacy” (*abrahma, cariyā paṭivarato hoti*) (A 5.286/3:275 f), SD 89.3; also **Niraya, sagga S 1** (A 10.200.4/5:284), **Niraya, sagga S 2** (A 10.201.4/5:286), **Sāmsappanīya S** (A 10.205.5/5:290).

¹⁴ See esp Mv 1.32.1 (V 1:60), 1.53.4 (V 1:80).

¹⁵ On moral training, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

¹⁶ On the precepts and their virtues, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7) @ SD 1.5 (1+2).

¹⁷ On lovingkindness, see (**Karaṇīya**) **Metta S** (S 1.8), SD 38.3.

¹⁸ On true-hearted friendship, see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.21-26/3:187 f), SD 4.1; **Dūta S** (A 8.16), SD 46.7 (8.2); **Group karma**, SD 39.1 (7.1).

¹⁹ On commitment, see **Ādhipateyya S** (A 3.40/1:147-150), SD 27.3.

²⁰ See esp **Vīmaṃsaka S** (M 47/1:317-320), SD 35.6.

²¹ See (**Ahitāya**) **Thera S** (A 5.88/3:114), SD 40a.26.

²² See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

²³ On how to know a person better, see eg **Satta Jaṭila S** (S 3.11/1:77-79), SD 14.21 & **Thāna Sutta** (A 4.192/-2:187-190), SD 14.12.

4.2.2.5 SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP (*kalyāṇa, mittatā*) specifically refers to a wholesome relationship between a meditation teacher and us, the pupils, which facilitates our meditation practice and spiritual development. In other words, it is a spiritual mentoring. A **spiritual mentor** not only instructs us in meditation, but also helps to mould our general character in terms of moral virtue [4.2.2.3]. This mentor is someone we can discuss our meditation difficulties with so that we are able to improve our meditation.

A dedicated spiritual mentor might even have sutta study or give Dharma instructions with us, so that we are more familiar with the Buddha's instruction in moral conduct and mental cultivation. This is in fact a good foundation for training us to become Dharma speakers, and in time, even Dharma teachers. In due course, we may mature into experienced meditation teachers and counsellors ourselves.²⁴

4.2.2.6 SUPPORTIVE TALK (*sappāya, kathā*). Since speech is our main means of communication and instruction, understandably, it should be wholesome. As **right speech**, it should be truthful, in terms of the form of the communication, which should be the Dharma, such as sutta teachings. Communication between teacher and pupil should itself be truthful, with the purpose of personal development. Right speech is unifying in the sense of reinforcing the fellowship and lovingkindness with our teachers and others. Our communication with others should be pleasant by way of using our speech to inspire others to mutually see our inner goodness and creativity. Our communication with others should be beneficial, in that it is somehow connected with the spiritual training and awakening.²⁵

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²⁴ On characteristics of spiritual friendship, see **Meghiya S** (A 9.3/4:354-358 ≈ U 4.1/34-37) & SD 34.2 (2.1.1); also **Spiritual friendship**, SD 8.1.

²⁵ See **Abhaya Rāja, kumāra S** (M 58.8/1:395) & SD 7.12 (3).