

# Benefit of **DOUBT**

Doubt can be a nagging habit or a clear signal. Nancy Jackson (Swami Dayananda) discusses how yoga philosophy helps you investigate.

How often does doubt arise in your life? Straightforward should-I-or-shouldn't-I doubt. Do you doubt small decisions or leave it for life-changing situations? Do you press through or ponder? Discuss it with others or keep it to yourself?

You've probably noticed that today's fast-paced culture is filled with doubt. And no wonder. A common response to nearly any statement is, "Are you sure?" Depending on where you live, suburbs and cityscapes are constantly changing, shops and suppliers open and close, and products or services you bought last month may no longer be available. If you watch any television, questions of doubt arise for commonplace shows, reality TV, and especially the news. And, although our society relies on the Internet, it is filled with misinformation and hoaxes.

At its worst, doubt preys on weakness and destroys confidence. At its best, doubt steers you in the right direction and releases your mind to settle into peace. Doubt is more useful than you might think.

## **IMPATIENCE AND CONFUSION**

While it's easy to blame modern life, doubt is inherent in human experience. Yoga masters of many traditions address doubt in both damaging and beneficial aspects. The classical yogi Patanjali notes that doubt is a predictable obstacle, one of the mind's fluctuations that brings distraction. According to Patanjali, when you are caught in doubt, you can experience any number of mental or physical responses, such as unhappiness, lack of coordination, or erratic breathing.

Doubt can manifest as anxiety, mistrust, or self-criticism. You might feel a sense of tightness or tears. You may even have physical mishaps, such as tripping, dropping things, or being clumsy. When you're in doubt, your mind is focused elsewhere, but nowhere specific. You become vague: a niggling feeling that you should be doing something else, you've forgotten something, or you've done something wrong. Doubt also arises after making a choice—doubting your decision over and over, sometimes for years.

In time, doubt erodes stability and creates more doubt. Once it latches on, other negativities join. Fear about the future impacts every aspect of your current life, from your job or relationship to what you should buy at the supermarket. Judgment about a friend, family member, or acquaintance will affect how you act to that person. If you doubt the person's motivation, for example, you may doubt other aspects.

The Buddhist meditation master Sogyal Rinpoche says, "Don't let us take doubts with exaggerated seriousness, or let them grow out of proportion, or become black-and-white or fanatical about them. What we need to learn is how slowly to change our culturally conditioned and passionate involvement with doubt into a free, humorous, and compassionate one. This means giving doubts time, and giving ourselves time to find answers to our questions. Doubts cannot resolve themselves immediately; but if we are patient a space can be created within us, in which doubts can be carefully and objectively examined, unravelled, dissolved, and healed."



### CONTEMPLATION ON LEVEL OF DOUBT

Can you identify the types of things you doubt? Are you a person who places everything under scrutiny and may be a bit jaded? Or have you noticed you doubt only certain situations or people. Is it possible that you absorb most information as true and don't doubt enough? Even when you usually have a balanced approach to doubt, it can arise when you are feeling low or are at a crossroads. If you'd like, take a moment to contemplate your engagement with doubt.

If you find that self-doubt chokes your ability to act, then exposing your thinking is your best friend.

### PATIENCE AND RESOLUTION

The Sanskrit word for doubt is "samshaya," which also means uncertainty or hesitation. Here's where you can take advantage of hesitation to investigate further. To doubt is to question. There's power in asking questions and investigating doubt itself. By acknowledging doubt, you can then forge ahead, knowing you will be able to find resolution.

Meditation master Lama Surya Das says, "Wise lamas encouraged me to meditate on the difficulties themselves—just to be present with the difficulty, instead of trying to get over it as quickly as possible. To face the doubt rather than try to avoid or suppress it. Often the greatest doubts occur just before a breakthrough. My lamas encouraged me to view doubt as a great teacher. I encourage you to trust your inquisitive, sceptical, postmodern inquiring mind and find out for yourself the answers to all your questions. Things are not really as difficult or complicated as they sometimes seem. Truth can be extraordinarily helpful in a crisis."

Doubt is the state of mind that makes you suspect something is not true. Regardless of how information comes your way, you may ask, "Do I want to believe this before I check it out? Should I wait until I'm sure?" Doubt also manifests as a waiting period to mull things over, especially before making big decisions. It's particularly helpful in times of confusion, letting things settle.

Basic to daily life, doubt stimulates the process of gathering and assessing information before you take action. You can review your options.

Doubt also serves as protection. You may not try to squeeze into a small parking space because you doubt you have enough room. You may gauge emotional responses or question someone's words because you are measuring their intensity or doubt their veracity. When you doubt other people's conversations you clarify the differences between facts and opinions.

Doubt leads away from the mundane and towards what matters most. It brings truth to light. Not only facts but also inner resonance. What does your intuition tell you? You may not take a certain job because you doubt it is the best for you.

When you use doubt to make decisions, it can be your beacon. As you become aware of doubt, ask yourself, "What kind of doubt is this?" Here are some examples.

**WORRY:** Worry is based on imagining something bad might happen, or pushing yourself into thinking of every contingency for the future. Rather than asking yourself,

"What if," ask, "Did I make this up? Is this based on reality? Is this thinking useful?"

**SCEPTICISM:** Healthy scepticism is the attitude of keeping back, or being reserved before agreeing or believing. This is where you might want to dig deeper. Don't rely solely on what you are told by one person. Be sure you have all sides of a story and any particulars pertaining to the situation.

**CONFUSION:** Confusion can be immobilising. A key is to separate what you are feeling from what you are thinking. Rather than focusing on the uncomfortable and sometimes panicky state of confusion, focus on the situation itself. Confusion clears when you get more information or simply wait.

**DISBELIEF:** Of course you don't believe everything you see or hear. Here's where you can ask, "How do I know it's true?"

**UNCERTAINTY:** Human experience by its nature is filled with uncertainty. The future is indefinite; at best it is probable. If you can, release yourself from dwelling on what you can't predict.

**DISTRUST:** If you can't trust the situation, trust your own experience and your ability to make decisions and judgments.

**RISK:** Everyone's life is a quagmire of consequences. Action has boldness.

### STEP-BY-STEP THINKING

Regardless of whether you can identify the kind of doubt you are carrying, it's always helpful to break it down into steps. Here's a guideline.

- Identify the feeling of doubt. Notice that it comes in a range of forms, including negative feelings such as anxiety or disbelief, or positive

feelings, such as anticipation or excitement.

- Acknowledge your experience of doubt. When you say, “I doubt,” or, “I am working with doubt,” you know where you are. It has power.
- Avoid retelling the situation or conversations about the story. Repeating events as you have heard them or experienced them can create more tension. Open yourself to new points of view.
- Investigate the narrative behind this emotional state. Do you have a choice to make? What is the timeline for this decision? Is there someone you need to speak to?
- Ask yourself what you want. What is the best outcome in the long run and in the near future?

- Be ready to accept that not every outcome is what you would like it to be. Inquiry doesn’t always lead to a clear yes or no. Inner guidance can be a bit of both or something entirely different.

#### **CONQUERING HABITS OF DOUBT**

Self-doubt is when you turn the focus from situations to your ability to handle situations. On the lighter side, you could be doing something new and wonder whether your experience will be enough. Or you could be forging through resistance to accomplish something. But along the way you may have created a pattern of heaviness, such as feeling incompetent or overwhelmed. If you find that self-doubt chokes your ability to act, then exposing your thinking is your best friend.

Are you hard on yourself? Maybe it’s time to back off. Self-criticism often is just a habit. Here are some tips.

- Can you recognise a tendency towards self-criticism? Possibilities include feeling inadequate or unworthy.
- Do you feel triggered by the fear of repeating a bad experience? Sometimes our inner warning systems work well to help us avoid an unpleasant situation. At other times, fear can hold us back.
- Is this feeling of familiar? You might recognise the emotion, such as sadness or frustration.
- What is your thinking? Some scenarios are, “It must be my fault. What if I make the wrong decision? I always mess things up.”

- Are you ready to drop habitual thinking that doesn't serve you? If you recognise a pattern of negativity, it's time to open to new ways of thinking.

Everyone can recognise that this culture promotes competition and self-doubt, from intelligence, education, and skills, to body image and social standards. Too often our minds are ready with a litany of what we've done wrong or how we could have done better. Like virtually everyone around you, you fit in perfectly when you let doubt arise. Here it's important to find balance. Most likely you have had

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many successes and good choices along the way. You have applied yourself, challenged yourself, learned and achieved. Your experiences are vitally important to remember and carry forward.

#### **CONTEMPLATION ON "NO DOUBT"**

If you'd like, take a few moments right now to consider what it is that you don't doubt. What in your lifetime of relationships has been solid and real? These might include feelings of affection, loyalty, tranquillity, or triumph. How about places you have lived or worked? You might find assuredness in tapping into the past experience of autumn colours, children's laughter or missing a bus. And sensations of the body? Sun on your face after a rain, breathless from

running, itching a mosquito bite. Although now relegated to memory, these experiences are yours to keep.

#### **FUNDAMENTAL DOUBT**

Traditions throughout history have offered philosophies and belief systems filled with possibilities for doubt. Vedanta, a yoga tradition based on the ancient Vedas, suggests that every experience and every thought is subject to being questioned. A common inquiry in this tradition is to explore the dream-like quality of life and to ask, "Who am I? What is this I? What is the source of this I?"

How extraordinary it is that all of our impressions and experiences change into thought when they become memory. In the same way, many of our imaginings of the future manifest but nearly all of them dissolve as quickly as they arise. The yogis say that you can connect to the present moment as true and real. And you experience the present moment through awareness. This allows you to be conscious of the body, the mind, feelings, activities, people, and events. Through awareness you recognise good and bad ideas, positive and negative influences, and emotional states of joy or despair. Only through awareness can we understand love. According to the sage Patanjali, focusing on awareness can reorient you from the scattered experience of questions to the centred experience of just being, or "no doubt."

Author Pema Chodron says, "Either we accept our fixed versions of reality—or we begin to challenge them. How are we going to spend this brief lifetime? Are we going to strengthen our well-perfected ability to struggle against uncertainty, or are we going to train in letting go? Could we start to train as a warrior,

aspiring to reconnect with the natural flexibility of our being and to help others do the same? If we start to move in this direction, limitless possibilities will begin to open up."

You, yourself, are your most intense and genuine experience. Your immediate experience of life is without doubt. You know you are here, in this body and this mind. You know you are experiencing life right now as it unfolds. Considerations about whether you think you make good or bad decisions, how much your choices have created your life, even what you do with your time, are far less important than your primary experience: your aliveness and your consciousness.

Possibly the most famous mystical teacher of all time, Master Yoda of Star Wars, said, "Try? There is no try. There is only do." By its nature, doubt is the basis of brilliant inquiry. It holds us back and it drives us forward. Seemingly unclear, doubt is the propellant of clarity.

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