

When Things Aren't Going Well

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Some of the discourses give an impression that the practice is a smooth upward incline, one surefooted step after another, going progressively up and up and up a staircase. Fortunately the Canon contains other passages confirming that it's not always a steady progress. There are ups and downs. Some of the passages, especially in the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, portray monks and nuns complaining that the practice would go well for a while and then crash, go well for a while then crash; one monk commenting that this had happened so often that he was ready to commit suicide, it had gotten so bad. Those passages are good reminders that no matter how bad things get, it's still possible to gain awakening. In each of these cases where the monks and the nuns had run amok from their dwellings, crazed over the ups and downs of their practice, they finally pulled themselves together and were able to attain total release.

This is why it's good to look to these stories for encouragement. Back in the 19th century, people liked to read the lives of great men and women. It was considered an essential part of a good education to study their examples: how they'd been through many, many hardships and yet hadn't lost heart, how they'd finally come out on top. With modern literature the taste has changed to antiheroes, people you may sympathize with but who you wouldn't want to take as examples. It's a shame that we've lost a taste for genuine heroes and heroines in our literature. Occasionally you find it, though, as in the accounts of the most recent political campaigns. Even the most well-oiled campaign machine would have its ups and downs, but what mattered was how the people in charge managed those ups and downs. One of the important lessons you can learn from these accounts is that when things get bad, it's not the end of the world. You just stop, take stock of the situation, and figure a way out.

Or you can read about expeditions like Shackleton's down to Antarctica. Things got really bad even before they could get to Antarctica. Their ship got locked at sea in the winter ice, so they had to leave the ship and walk across the ice, dragging their dinghies behind them. When they reached the edge of the ice, they set out across the ocean. Most of them thought they were doomed. But even when they thought they were doomed, they kept going because of one thing: their sense of discipline, realizing that as long as you stay disciplined, you can take advantage of whatever opportunities do arise.

That's the first lesson to take from these stories: a strong sense of discipline. As you dig down into this lesson, it reminds you that you need to get back to basics so that the consistency of your discipline has a firm foundation. In our practice, getting back to basics means reminding yourself of why you're here: You're suffering and this is the way out. What is that way out? As the Buddha says, right view comes first. In his analysis of dependent co-arising, the prime factor causing suffering is ignorance. You don't see things in terms of the four noble truths, and your attention goes wandering off to all sorts of other places. Or if you do have little bits and pieces of knowledge, that's all it is: little bits and pieces. Nothing continuous. You need to develop mindfulness and alertness so

that your knowledge becomes more continuous, and the bits and pieces connect up.

So consistency and the focus on how to end suffering are two basic principles to bring to your awareness. You're here to gain knowledge by looking at things consistently in terms of the four noble truths. Get started with the right questions: Where is there stress right now? What are you doing to cause it? What actions help to alleviate it? Then bring more consistent attention to those questions and to how they apply to what you're experiencing right now.

If it strings you out to focus on the stress, then focus on the question, "Where are the good things right now? What can you rely on as your path?" If there's a little bit of mindfulness, hold onto it. Right speech, right action, all the "rights" of the noble path: Hold onto what you've got, realizing that the situation inside and out may not be what you like, but your way out of here is to hold onto whatever you still have of the path, these states of mind. Even if all you've got is just that simple ability to stay attentive, then stay attentive, and keep that attention appropriate, without getting entangled in the story lines, the narratives, and all the other crazy ideas that the mind keeps churning out for itself.

So when things don't look good, try to get some perspective by reminding yourself: What are the basics? Why are you here? What is this all about? It's about developing some skills and learning how to comprehend your stress and suffering, learning how to abandon the cause when you can see it, learning how to develop the good factors of the path and whatever other qualities of mind reinforce the path when they arise. Endurance is important. It's the quality that gives the consistency to the path. Simply following the path one hour a night is not going to do the trick. On-again, off-again: That doesn't help at all. It may help a little, but it doesn't build up the momentum you need. Momentum comes with sticking with things over time.

It's like planting a tree. If you plant the tree and water it only occasionally, or water it just once and forget about it, the tree is not going to survive. You have to be consistent in looking after it, committed to looking after it. That's how it grows.

Take a lesson from your breathing: The body breathes continually. If it breathed just while you were focusing on it and then stopped breathing when you were thinking about something else, you'd be dead. So take some lessons from the breath because it's consistent. It keeps coming in and going out whether you pay attention to it or not, whether you like it or not. It's there. It keeps coming in and going out, keeping you alive. Take that as a lesson for the mind. You've got to be consistent. Even though the path is not yielding the quick and exciting results you'd like to see, remember that nobody promised it was going to be quick and easy, that it was going to be exciting all along the way. When the practice has its ups, you have to be heedful. When it gets down, you have to be heedful. You can't be complacent either way.

In other words, when things are going really well, you can't take your hands off the steering wheel, assuming that the car is going to drive itself. You can't let yourself get complacent or careless. Keep being attentive very, very consistently, moment by moment by moment, to what's happening. If things are going well, do what you can to keep them going well. When things are not going well, again, you can't be heedless. You can't let negativity take over your mind. It'll have lots of things to complain about—"This is not the right place to practice; these are not

good people to practice with,” on and on and on—diverting your attention from the real problem, which is that you’re not paying careful attention to what the mind is doing. The mind is a very clever politician. It can very quickly distract you from what’s really going on.

This is why the Buddha said to obtain completion through heedfulness, through being very careful, uncomplacent. That’s the discipline that will see you through. That expedition that Shackleton ran: I once got into a disagreement with someone who said that Shackleton made all sorts of wrong decisions, so his followers shouldn’t have listened to him. But if they hadn’t listened to him, the whole thing would have fallen apart. People would have died. He got people through—and inspired them to get themselves through—even though he did make mistakes. A sense of discipline is what can correct for those mistakes to make sure that they’re not disastrous.

So always remember, whenever there’s a problem, that more attention is required. In particular, you have to pay more careful attention to what’s happening in terms of the issue of stress and its causes. Everything you need to know for awakening is right here. All the factors are right here, simply that at the moment they’re out of control, they’re causing suffering. When you learn how to bring them under control, then this process of fabrication, for example, can turn into the path. Many of the elements of dependent co-arising have the potential to become path factors. Attention, in name-and-form, can become appropriate attention. Fabrication can become the comfortable breathing and directed thought and evaluation of right concentration. So it’s all right here. When you get bored or discouraged with the practice, remind yourself that it’s because you’re not paying careful attention. You’re letting your expectations get in the way, or your moods get in the way: *Something* is getting in the way so that you’re not really seeing what’s going on.

This combination of focused attention and consistency means that you pay more and more careful attention—appropriate attention—to the issues of the four noble truths. The truths are not just truths *about* something; they’re ways of looking, categories you can apply to anything going on in the mind. You can watch all the crazy thoughts in the mind and, if you do it from the perspective of the four noble truths, knowledge can arise. Learn to find what in the mind you can rely on as a path factor that will give you the strength you need to withstand the negative factors. The ability not to get discouraged by events comes down to your ability to keep talking to yourself with the right tone of voice, saying the right things to yourself. That’s what right view is all about. Remind yourself that no matter how bad things get or how long the dry stretches seem to last, it’s not the end. The possibility for knowledge is always there. This is one of the amazing things about the mind: It’s always aware. There’s always that potential for knowledge, for understanding. Sometimes it may seem weak, but it’s there, and you can encourage it.

That’s how, when things get bad, you can become your own best counselor, your own best advisor, so that when things crash, not everything gets demolished. Your determination not to keep on suffering: That’ll see you through. Ajaan Mun talked about this in his last major sermon. The one thing you hold onto all the way through the path, he said, is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again, not having to suffer ever again. The Buddha calls this taking yourself as your governing

principle, reminding yourself that you're suffering and that deep down inside you want to find a way out. So discard your unnecessary baggage and hold onto the basics—consistency, discipline, appropriate attention—for those are the things that'll see you through.