

Ups & Downs

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I saw a chart recently of a famous golfer and the winnings he had earned over the past ten years or so. And it wasn't a nice, smooth line. It didn't gradually rise, and rise, and rise, and rise. It had its ups and downs. It was largely an affair of his body: His body had its ups and downs.

When you think about the fact that the mind is a lot more complex than the body, then it should come as no surprise that when we meditate there will be lots of ups and downs, too. There's not going to be a smooth progress from Monday to Tuesday to Wednesday to Thursday, just up, and up, and up, all the time.

So you've got to learn how to deal with the downs. Which means that you also have to learn how to deal with the ups. Because the problem is that when things go up, we tend to get a complacent. When you get complacent, you get careless, and that's going to turn you down. Then you get discouraged, and that can get you even further down—neither of which attitude is really skillful or helpful in the practice. You have to realize from the very beginning that there are going to be downs. There are days when the mind gets so still and so clear, and the meditation seems so effortless that you think: "Ah, this must be it. I've finally figured it out, and from here on out it's going to be smooth sailing." And then you suddenly discover that the boat capsizes, and you seem to be worse off than you were before.

You see this especially in two areas of the practice: getting the mind into stillness, into concentration, and in using your discernment to let go of your defilements. And in both cases, you've got to learn how to develop a certain stamina, learn how to keep the mind on an even keel, and not be either excited by things going up or upset by things going down. Remind yourself: This is normal. This is the way things are always going to be until you reach stream entry. That's when you finally get something that's a really solid and really secure.

And so when things go down, you have to learn to give yourself a pep talk to remind yourself: "I can do this." Then any thought that comes into the mind that says, "I've had enough of this, I can't take it anymore," you have to ask yourself, "Okay, are you ready to take another eon or two of suffering?" Because if you don't work on the mind now, there's no guarantee that you'll have chances on into the future. Here you've got the opportunity right here, right now, to work on the mind. And even though there may be some setbacks, that's par for the course.

And it's amazing how much you can find unexpected sources of strength inside. I had a friend in high school who went into ROTC. He told me after his

first bout of military training that there had been one day when they were told to run x number of miles. And then, just as they got to the finish line, when they'd run what they were told to run, the instructor said, "Okay another quarter-mile." Some of the guys just dropped down right there. But some of the other ones realized that they could actually do it.

The instructor was teaching them an important lesson: If you're out on the battlefield, there's no telling when the battle is going to end or how long you're going to have to be in there. It's not the case that at 5 o'clock the bell rings and then you knock off for the night and get the rest you need. Sometimes the battle just goes on, and on, and on, where you think something is finally settled, and then some new problem shows up, and you've got to work on it. If you don't, you lose.

So you've got to learn how to find your sources of strength inside, and it's a good practice to realize that they are there. One way of making sure that they're there is not to get discouraged, not to block out of your mind the possibility that they could be there. After all, if it seems impossible to you that you can go any further, it's going to really be impossible, but not for any other reason. It's simply that you've made up your mind that you're able to give only so much. And then when you've given that much, you think, "Well, that's it. There's nothing left." As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "You're still breathing. Okay, there's still something you can do." And then you learn how to give yourself encouragement on the path.

As the Buddha told Rahula, when you find that you've done something skillful, congratulate yourself. Take joy in the fact that you're actually seeing some results in the training. They may not be permanent results, but at least you can see that you're heading in the right direction. And there's no problem with reminding yourself that this is good, that you're beginning to get a handle on this.

It's like when, say, you have an addiction, and there's one night where you really have to struggle with the addiction and you win out. The next morning, when you wake up, you should remind yourself of how glad you are that you won out, and that the addiction didn't win out the night before. Fix that point in your memory, so that the next time you're tempted to give into the addiction, you can remind yourself, "Remember how good I felt the next morning?" That gives you some added sources of strength to use against the voice in the mind that says, "Well, you're going to give in anyhow, so you might as well give in now." Or: "If what you really want is some pleasure, well, here's some pleasure for you right now." You can counter with the fact that you were really happy that you didn't give in that last time. It gives you some more allies.

So when your concentration doesn't quite go as well as it has done in the past, give yourself some encouragement. Tell yourself: "I was able to make progress in the past, and of course there are going to be setbacks, but that doesn't mean I'm doomed to failure." Just pick up where you left off. Go back to the beginning, and try to be very careful, very perceptive, very precise, in how you focus on the breath.

And don't try to take on too much. Ajaan Lee gives the example of someone who's planting a new orchard. It's not a good idea, he says, to clear all the land you've got and plant all the land you've got with all the trees you can afford. Because it might come about that there may be a drought soon after you plant the trees. They're all going to die, and then you won't have anything left. He says instead to take on what you can manage. If you can manage only a quarter acre at the start, okay, just start out with the quarter acre, and clear just that part of your land. Plant it with some trees, and as the trees grow, they start giving more fruit, and the fruit of course then yields seeds, and then you can plant the seeds. The trees plant your orchard for you. And you find bit, by bit, by bit, that things will grow, so you're not totally wiped out by any setbacks.

So ask yourself, "Can I stay with this breath?" Okay, you've got that breath. "How about the next breath?" Okay, you've got that breath. "How about the next one?"

And as for the progress you've made in the past, you don't have to focus on that. Because after all, you're not here to focus on past or future, you're here to focus on the present. And, of course, in the back of your mind there's going to be this desire to get back to where you were or past where you were, but you can't make that the focus of your attention right now. You focus on just the next step, just the next step. Break everything down into manageable bits.

Here again, learn how to give yourself pep talks. As I mentioned earlier, look into the books of Dhamma talks from the great ajaans. It's not that they explain very much in their Dhamma talks. Their talks are mostly encouragement: that the paths and their fruitions are still within reach, and you've got the basic resources you need. You've got a body, you've got a mind, and that's all you really need for the practice. That, plus the determination that you really do want to put an end to suffering.

You can fuel that determination by reminding yourself of all the sufferings you've been through, those that you can remember. Think also of the sufferings the Buddha tells you about that you can't remember: all the times you've had your head cut off, all the times you've lost a loved one. And then you look to the future: Do you want more of that? And as for the sufferings in the various realms of rebirth, you don't have to worry about hell, just look at the animal realm: all the

sufferings that we see that the animals have to go through, all the fears they have, with no one to explain anything to them. Do you want to slide back there? That's one form of encouragement.

Another form of encouragement, of course, is to read stories of people who actually made it to awakening. The Theragatha and Therigatha are really good in this area: the stories of the nuns and the monks who went through an awful lot, and had an awful lot of obstacles in their path, but were able to finally break through. Many times the obstacles they were facing were a lot greater than the ones we are. As Ven. Ananda said, there is a point where conceit can actually come in helpful: "They can do it, why can't I?" That may be a form of conceit, but it's a useful aid on the path.

In other words, you make use of anything that gives you energy, anything that gives you strength, in generating the desire and upholding your intent to let go of what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful.

The same holds true for different thought patterns, different attitudes, different defilements, that we know are not skillful, and yet the mind keeps going back to them. Sometimes you think that you've dealt with one of these defilements, and then you find a few days later that it's come back again. Or it may go away for a couple of months, and then it's suddenly back in full force. You ask yourself, "I thought I dealt with that before. Why is it coming back?" And if the thought comes up, "Maybe this is something I can never give up," don't ever give in to that thought. It's possible to give up any kind of unskillful activity. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to do that, he wouldn't have taught. Here it is: He's taught.

What this actually means is that when you dealt with it before, you were able to deal with it on a partial level, but there may be more to it. It's like pulling out a vine. You think you've got the roots pulled out, and you come back and the vine has grown up again. Well, it doesn't mean that you can never conquer the vine. It just means you didn't get all the roots. So you dig around a little bit more.

Years back we had a very persistent vine down in the southeast corner of the monastery. We arranged for somebody to go down and dig it out, and we thought it had been taken care of. Then a few months later we went back, and it was spreading all over the place again. We had somebody else to go down and dig it out. And again it came back again. Finally, we had a group of people coming down from Vancouver, and so I said, "Okay, see if you can get the whole root system this time." And it was huge, about the size of a child, but they were able to get everything out, and the vine never came back.

So if you see something coming back, remind yourself: “Okay, I didn’t get everything the last time. Let’s go back and look at it again.” This is where the image of the mind as a committee comes in useful: You were able to take care of some of the committee members, but others are still active. They may have been quiet the last time you went through, but now they’re showing that they’re still there. It’s time to go back and look at the situation more carefully.

It’s also important to remember that discernment is not just a matter of knowing what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. It’s also a matter of learning how to talk yourself into doing what’s skillful, and talking yourself out of doing what’s unskillful. In other words, it’s strategic.

Sometimes we get a sense that the Buddha’s wisdom is a bunch of lists and vocabulary lessons. We’ve got this list of faculties, that list of hindrances, and somehow you think if you learn all the lists, that’s it. But that’s not why the Buddha taught the lists. He wants you to use those lists to analyze what’s going on, and to figure out what to do about what’s going on. It’s all strategic. He wasn’t like the kind of philosopher who likes to contemplate abstract forms in and of themselves. He was much more pragmatic. He was a craftsperson. And the knowledge of a craftsperson is that you take what works so that you can get the effect that you want.

There’s that passage where the Buddha talks about four types of activities in the world: things that you like to do that give good results, things that you don’t like to do that give bad results—and those are not hard at all. The difficult ones, the ones that really test your discernment, he says, are the skillful things that you don’t like to do, and the unskillful things that you like to do. In other words, things that give good results, but for some reason you don’t like to do them; and things that give bad results, but you like to do them. That’s where you really learn how to measure your discernment by how skillful you are in getting yourself to want to do the right thing.

So discernment is a matter not just of knowing the words, but also of knowing strategies: how to talk your mind into doing things that you know are skillful, but it doesn’t really feel like doing them. You can ask, “Who in here doesn’t like doing them?” In other words, this is a good place to not see the mind as a unified entity, just lots of little conflicting desires in there, and you’ve got to sort them out.

One way of sorting them out is to remind all of the desires, “Okay, we are all here for the sake of happiness, and we want a happiness that really lasts, right?” And some will say, “I don’t care.” And you’ve got to ask them, “What do you mean, you don’t care?” You’ve got to question that voice. Ask yourself, “Okay, the sufferings that you had in the past, were you glad to have them? When there was

suffering, when it was really hard, did you not care about them at all? No, you really cared at that point. You say don't you care for yourself anymore, what is this?" Because you find that the defilements, even though they have their reasons, have pretty bad reasons. And if you can get them out and examine them, you begin to see where the reasons fall apart.

They're like people who know that their reasons are bad, so they get more and more insistent, just like politicians who have got nothing really good to say, so what they *do* have to say, they say very loudly, very insistently, as if it's just through force of will that they're going to beat down their opponents. Well, the mind has those types of politicians inside as well.

Here, again, is where you have to be patient, and show that you have some stamina, that you're not going to give in.

But as for which techniques are going to work, which techniques are not going to work, that's up to you to test for yourself. You have to learn to read your own mind: That's a large part of discernment. You learn how to read what works and what doesn't work. Some things may work for a while, then not work. Okay, then come back again. Don't get discouraged. We're dealing with complex problems.

It's not the case that unskillful actions have only one root. Often they have many roots, and they spread out in all kinds of directions. But you can take comfort in the fact that when you've pulled out one root, at least you've weakened the plant for a while. It puts you in a better position to come back and look at those roots again, and again, and again.

As Ajaan Mun said in his final sermon, the most important thing in the practice is to keep up the determination that you're not going to come back and suffer again. Now, that determination depends on your sense of possibilities, that it really is possible to bring the mind to a point where it doesn't have to suffer, and that it really is possible for you to do this. You realize this is going to be a big job, but, as with any big job, you learn how to break it down into small pieces, into manageable pieces, and just work on them one by one. Work on what you can manage. And don't hope for the magic bullet that's going to make all the problems go away at once.

If you develop a mature attitude toward the practice, the attitude in and of itself gives you a lot of stamina. It makes it easier to deal with the ups and downs as they come. You don't have to go up with the ups, or down with the downs. You learn how to keep the mind on an even keel. Like that story they tell of, I think he was a Korean monk or a Japanese monk, accused by a woman of getting her pregnant. When the accusations came, he said, "Is that so?" That was it. He didn't defend himself or anything else. When she had the child, she came and put it on

his doorstep, and said, "Okay, it's yours. You've got to raise it." He said, "Is that so?" And so he raised it. Then several years later she came back and confessed, "I'm sorry, it wasn't really your child. I knew all along." He said, "Is that so?" And gave the child back.

So you've got to develop that attitude in your mind: "Is that so?" When things are good: "Is that so?" When things are bad: "Is that so?" That helps cut through a lot of problems. That way, when things go really well, you're not fooled by the reality of what seems to be good. You want to say, "Is that really good? Well, let's watch for a while." When things get bad again, "Are they really bad? Well, let's watch for a while." That attitude right there does an awful lot to carry you through.