

Don't Get Discouraged

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Modern educational systems are good at training us how to be skilled at what we're already talented at. They figure out where your propensities lie, where your skills lie, where your talent lies, and they'll channel you in that direction.

They're not very good at teaching us how to develop skills in areas where we're not talented. Yet there are some skills that, for our own well-being, we all have to learn, whether we're talented or not.

Meditation is one of those skills. Some people find it easy; other people find it hard. But just because it's hard doesn't mean that you shouldn't be going in this direction. This is the skill that everybody needs. It's the skill that gives us a sense of refuge, a real refuge to protect us when the body ages, when it grows ill, when it dies, when we're separated from those that we love. We all want happiness but we've got to face these things in life, and we have to learn how to deal with them in such a way that we don't suffer. That's what the meditation is for.

As the phrase goes, "Pain is normal but the suffering is optional." Physical pain is going to be there for everybody, in one way or another.

Last night we got some analgesic from Brazil, and one of the monks mentioned that one of the occupational hazards of being a monk is that you've got to put up with pain. Well, it's the occupational hazard of being born as a human being.

As we get older, we find that the parts of the body that used to work really well aren't working quite so well anymore. The parts that we didn't really notice suddenly announce their presence by being painful.

And those are just the early warnings. When real illness sets in, when aging sets in, there are further warnings. At some point, we're going to face the pain of death. The body's going to be an area where we don't want to be. We can't be here anymore. It's like being evicted.

What are we going to do then? If the mind hasn't been trained, it loses all sense of security, all sense of safety, and will just grab at whatever comes by. But if it has the sense of well-being inside, when it has a place where it knows that it's quiet and there's an awareness that's not going to be touched by all this other stuff, then we're safe.

Now, you have to take this as a working hypothesis. The Buddha can't show you nibbana first to prove that, Yes, this really does work. But we've looked at all the other possibilities in the world and they don't seem to match this one, because

this is actually a skill you can work on.

It's not a skill that comes easily for everybody. Some people find the concentration easy but then the discernment is hard. Other people find the discernment easy but the concentration hard. Some people find both sides hard. So we have to have a way of reinforcing our conviction until we begin to see the results. Then the results themselves begin to become fuel for our further practice.

But you look at the Buddha's teachings, and you can see that they're reasonable all the way along. He's not asking you to believe impossible things. He's just asking you to realize there are certain areas where you don't know but you have to act on a working hypothesis. If you take on as a working hypothesis the belief that the mind can be trained, then you're ready to follow his path.

The extent to which you can get all the way there in this lifetime: That doesn't matter nearly as much as your conviction that "Yes, this can be done and I can do it." That gives you a real leg-up right there.

So if you find the mind wandering off from the breath, just keep bringing it back. It wanders off again, bring it back again. Do your best not to get discouraged.

Remember, you've been training the mind to wander for who-knows-how-many lifetimes. That's what the word *samsara* means: It's the wandering-on. We tend to think of *samsara* as a place, but actually it's a process. It's something the mind does. And it creates worlds as it wanders. It's the wandering that creates the worlds; it's not that the worlds are there first and you wander into them. You keep creating the worlds for yourself, first through your thoughts, then through whatever you grab on to as you die from one life and go on to the next.

This is a habit we've developed really, really well. And it's something we're good at, or at least we're really used to it. It's going to take a while to resist those old habits and develop new ones in their place.

So learn to be able to smile at yourself and have a good sense of humor around all the tricks the mind plays. That helps you get past a lot of the difficult patches. And you'll find that there will be easy patches as well. They alternate. It's not as if it's always going to be hard. It's just that, in the very beginning, it can seem pretty discouraging. But as you stick with it, stick with it, stick with it, things get better and better. They sometimes get worse for a while, but then you say, "Well, that's just part of having a mind. The mind's very complex."

As I said, it's like a committee. Some members will go along for a while and then all of a sudden they'll start veering off and wandering away. Other members that have been quiet for a long time suddenly come in again.

It's like one of those graphs that generally moves up but does have little valleys

here and there. So if you find yourself in a valley, remind yourself that there is a way up.

Because this is a necessary skill. We've died we-don't-know-how-many times and we've suffered we-don't-know-how-much for all that.

Every time I ride up I-5, I look out across the ocean and remember what the Buddha had to say about all the tears we've shed, all the blood we've shed in our many lifetimes: more than there is water there in the ocean. You look out and it's a pretty big ocean. When you fly over it, you realize how much bigger it is than what you can see from the shore.

So you realize the importance of working on this skill and not letting yourself get discouraged.

There's that story they tell about the Englishman who went across the Northwest Territories back in the 1800s. He was the first Englishman to entrust himself to the Dene or any of the Native Americans. But there was a band of Dene Indians who were going to go across and pass near an area he wanted to explore, so he went with them.

He noticed that on the days when they couldn't get any game, when there was no food and they had to tighten their belts more: Those were the days they joked among one another the most, to keep their spirits up.

In the same way, as you go through the difficult passages, you've got to figure out: How can you keep your spirits up as you go along? Realize those barren passages are not all that bad. You can work with them; you can live through them. Your own tendency to come down hard on yourself: That's the most difficult part of all this.

So you've got to turn around and check that, look at that, and realize that you don't have to believe that member of the committee. This is where the committee image comes in useful again. Just because a voice is going through your head doesn't mean you have to claim it as your voice, or that you have to believe it. Just notice that it's there but you can learn to ignore it. Keep reminding yourself: Meditation is a skill that really has to be mastered, regardless of how easy or hard it is.

So think over your life about the things that didn't come easily but that you learned how to do anyhow. Ask yourself: How did you do that? Usually you focused either on how much you wanted the results or how much you were afraid of what would happen if you didn't master the skill. Then you learned how to channel both the desire and the fear into practical action.

And ask yourself: What did you do to maintain yourself, to keep yourself going even when things didn't seem all that easy? You gave yourself

encouragement.

This is why, as the Buddha said, generating desire is an important part of right effort, as is upholding your intent. Any mental activity that helps you stick with it, stick with it, stick with it: It's going to bear fruit. Now, the fruit may come slowly or quickly. It's not a like a tree where you can calculate that you've got another how-many-weeks before the fruit's going to be ripe. The mind isn't that simple.

But the basic principle's always there: The more good energy you put into this, the more you're going to get out. Whether it's quickly or slowly, you have to teach yourself: That's not the issue. The issue is that you've got some good energy here, so put it in. More good energy, put it in. Can't find any energy? Well, look for it. Put that into your thoughts and your words and your deeds. And the results are sure to come.

As the Thai ajaans keep saying, "Don't doubt this. This does work."