

The River Gauge

October 7, 2022

You've probably seen those measuring gauges next to rivers that tend to flood, telling you how many feet the current level of the river goes above its normal level. The important point of those measuring gauges is that they stay in place. They don't go up when the river rises; they don't go down when the river goes down.

When you're looking at your practice, you have to develop that same quality of the mind. There has to be a part of the mind that doesn't go up when things are going well, doesn't go down when things are not going well, so you can gauge the level of your practice and figure out what needs to be done.

In other words, you need two qualities: patience and equanimity. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha told Rahula when he was teaching him meditation, "Make your mind like earth." When people throw disgusting things on the earth, it doesn't get upset. When people pour perfume on the earth, it doesn't get excited. You develop that same quality in your own mind because you're going to have to expect, given that meditation is a complex process, that there are going to be lots of ups and downs. You have to reserve part of the mind to make sure it doesn't go up and down—so that it can stand back a little bit. That means you've got to develop this attitude at the very beginning. In the very beginning, you develop it by talking to yourself. You remind yourself, "This is going to be a long-term project. Ups and downs are normal."

When you find yourself in the middle of a down, you can remind yourself, "Okay, this is to be expected. It's not the end of the world. Your meditation hasn't crashed. It's part of the normal cycle of meditation." When you have that calm attitude, it makes it a lot easier to try to figure out, well, what exactly is going wrong? Is it the breath? Is it the mind?

So: patience and equanimity. Talk to yourself in ways that can develop these qualities. Of course, when the Buddha talks about the qualities of mind you need to get the mind into concentration and he talks about how to make equanimity really solid—and not small-minded or small-hearted equanimity—he mentions that you have to have some joy as well.

So as you begin meditating, think about the things that make you happy to be here. The Buddha gives a long list of things. You're practicing the precepts, you're practicing generosity, you're with people who want to meditate as well. The more harmony we can have in the group, the easier it is to draw joy from the fact that

we're here as a group, meditating. Whatever you find that gives you a sense of joy will make that attitude of patience and equanimity a lot easier.

That's the key to patience and endurance: You're not focusing on the things that are hard, the things that are difficult to bear. You keep in mind the things that are positive.

Does that feel artificial? Well, every new habit feels artificial to begin with.

I was listening to a Dhamma talk by an ajaan the other day, saying that if you have an attitude that you're here trying to improve yourself, trying to improve your actions, trying to improve your mind, that's a lot of fabrication. Yet you're trying to get beyond fabrication. He said that in a way that implied that you couldn't use fabrication to get beyond fabrication. But the Buddha's very upfront about the fact that this path is a fabricated path. You're putting it together with your thoughts, your words, your deeds, all the five aggregates we chanted about just now.

Your concentration is going to require form—the form of your body, the breath.

It's going to require feeling. You have to develop feelings that they call feelings not-of-the-flesh, pleasure not-of-the-flesh. Part of the motivation though, might also be a pain not-of-the-flesh, which is the reflection that, okay, this is a path you're on. It's got a goal that other people have reached but you're not there yet. If you're going to have pain in the mind, that's a good pain to have because it actually motivates you to find this pleasure not-of-the-flesh—the pleasure that comes when you can breathe in a way that feels comfortable, and that comfort spreads through the body, from all the muscles in the head, through the shoulders, down the arms, spreads down the back, down past the hips, down the legs to the toes.

So hold those perceptions in mind—that when you're breathing, what you feel in the head, what you feel in the different parts of the body, is already breath. It's not as if you have to pump breath through those sensations. Just ask yourself, "Okay, if that were breath, what kind of breath would it be? What direction is it going in? Where is it blocked?" Work with what you've already got.

That brings in fabrication. You direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate it. You think about it. You use your ingenuity to figure out what needs to be done. Then when you've got something good, you maintain it and let it spread.

And then there's your basic awareness of all this.

There you've got all the aggregates. They're all fabricated, but you're fabricating them in the right way.

Even though it may feel artificial to begin with, as you do it more and more often, it becomes more and more habitual. It's like the people who come to the monastery. Often when they come the very first time, they say, "My gosh, that road is impossible. There are no guardrails. How can anybody drive down there without fearing for their lives?" It all feels very strange. But as they come more and more often, what happens is that you see people zipping down the road. It just gets easier and easier every time.

So, yes, we are fabricating a path, yet the fabrications are not getting in the way of the unfabricated. They're actually going to lead us there because they make us more sensitive. As you get use to learning how to fabricate a sense of ease inside, you become more and more a connoisseur of ease. What feels really good? Where are the most sensitive parts of your body?—meaning, sensitive to the breath energy. What can you do for them to satisfy them? That gets your attention more and more focused right here, interested in exploring right here.

In that way, you don't have to talk to yourself so much about why it's a good thing to be meditating. It feels good to be meditating. It's interesting to be meditating. There's a sense of joy that comes with that. And that joy is what nourishes the equanimity and patience you're going to need for the times when it doesn't go so well.

So learn how to manage your attitude toward the ups and downs. If we love the ups and hate the downs, that's a bad way to approach meditation. Think of both the ups and the downs as opportunities to learn. When things are going really well and you begin to think that you're a hotshot meditator, well, the downs are there to teach you a little humility. But if you're the kind of person who tends to get down on yourself, remember that the good days are there to remind you that you can do this sometimes. It's not the case that when things crash or seem to crash that they totally negate what you've been able to do. You just remind yourself, "Well, there are lessons I still have to learn." Draw on the patience and equanimity that are nourished by an attitude of cheerfulness and joy that this is a good thing you're doing.

You look at the paths of success out in the world—what do they involve? Sometimes they involve cheating somebody else or lying to somebody else. In other words, you're doing things that you can't really be proud of. But here everything you're asked to do is honorable. You have to be generous, to be virtuous, to be sensitive to your actions. Develop thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and the equanimity that can allow you to weather the ups and the downs. It's all good stuff and it's a reason for joy that there still is this path made available to us.

The path, of course, is always there but sometimes it's obscured. There are periods when there are no teachings of the Dhamma available, and people who want to find awakening have to figure out the path themselves. But here we've got it all laid out. It's all clear; it all makes sense. It's simply a matter of learning how to cultivate the right attitudes to bring to the practice.

So you can learn from the ups, learn from the downs, and the meditation becomes more and more of a skill. Not that it's always going to go well, but that you know how to handle the times when it doesn't go well—and you know how to handle the times when it does go well.

There's a phrase in Pali, *cittass'ekaggata* usually translated as “singleness of mind.” Ajaan Maha Boowa has an interesting take on that term. He says that it's the state of mind that can be with the ups and downs but doesn't get knocked over by them. That's the quality that you're looking for in the meditation.

So it's not just a matter of your skill in handling with the breath but also learning how to talk to yourself—and having that gauge by the river that doesn't go up, doesn't go down, that allows you to step back and see, “Okay, what does the mind need right now?”—instead of getting swallowed up in your emotions and your moods.

You want to be able to see cause and effect, and have some mastery over cause and effect so that even when you can't get the mind to settle down totally, you can maintain your calm, you can maintain your equanimity and your patience. You learn how to look at it as an opportunity to see, “Well, here's something I thought I knew but I haven't learned it, so here's another opportunity to look at it more carefully.” That's called having the right attitude. Even though right attitude is not listed as one of the factors of the noble path, it's a quality of mind that you want to bring to the practice—the ability to keep the mind steady, on an even keel, no matter what, confident that you can handle whatever happens and, at the very least, come out with more knowledge, more skill.

Meditation is like a friendship. Sometimes the friendship goes through some difficult periods, but if you can weather those difficult periods, they can make the friendship even stronger.