Peaks & Valleys

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If you were looking at a sales chart that showed a steady, smooth rise in income, or sales figures, or if you were to look at a temperature chart that charted the temperature from January up through July and showed a steady, smooth rise in temperature, you wouldn’t believe it. You know from experience that these things go up and down, even though there may be general trends. There are always little bumps and valleys. So the question is, when you come to meditation, why do you expect smooth, steady progress? There have to be ups and downs. In fact, it’s from the ups and downs that you learn to be a good meditator. It’s how you handle the ups and downs that teaches you how to be a mature meditator. In other words, when things go well, you don’t get complacent. When things go poorly, you don’t get discouraged. You learn to look for cause and effect. When a meditation goes well, it’s good to sit down and reflect afterwards. What did you do? How did you focus the mind? When results started coming, how did you deal with them? Take that as a lesson. When the meditation falls apart, sit down right in the middle of the meditation falling apart and ask yourself, “What’s going wrong now?” Try to step back. It’s this ability to step back and look at things in terms of cause and effect. That’s what the teachings on the Four Noble Truths are all about. That’s what the teaching on not-self is all about. As long as you’re identifying with what’s going on, it’s impossible to gain a perspective. Step back and look. What’s going well? What isn’t going well? What’s connected to what’s going well and what’s not going well? If you think in those terms right there, you’ve got the basic framework for the Four Noble Truths. So however the meditation goes, you’ve got to learn to be circumspect. You have to have the level gaze of a dispassionate observer, even though you want very much to get results in the practice. We’re not denying that you want results, but in order to get good results, you have to be able to step back and look at yourself. This is how you get skillful. It’s how you’re effective at anything in the world. Whether you’re playing music, playing a sport, or working on a skill, the observer is an essential part of the skill. So you can check yourself and see where you did things right, where you did things wrong, and where things can be improved. Then there’s the side that they call emotional intelligence, the ability not to get too upset when things go poorly and the ability not to get too careless and complacent when things go well. When the Buddha gave his final instructions before he entered total nirvana on being heedful, he wasn’t talking to beginning meditators. He was talking to stream-menders, at the very least. Even they have to be heedful, how much more so us. So even when the meditation is going well, you can’t let yourself just ride with a sense of pleasure or ride with a sense of ease. Don’t destroy it. Don’t do anything to drive it away. But you have to be very careful to stick with the cause of the ease, stick with the cause of the pleasure. In this case, being very mindful of the breath, being sensitive to the breath, learning how to be the pursuer of your breathing, detecting even the slightest hint of carelessness, the slightest hint of boredom, whatever is going to get the mind out of phase, out of focus. The more precise your powers of observation, the more quickly you can settle down in meditation, the more steadily you can stay there. John Fung used to talk of students he had, the ones he said that were the most disappointing, were the ones who would start out very well. They could sit down and meditate and stay with the breath, no problem at all, sometimes have visions. It was fun to teach them for a while. But then when they ran into difficulties, the people who had it easy all along were usually the first ones to leave and give up, because they hadn’t had any experience with dealing with problems. He said it was the people who had difficulties from the beginning. Those are usually the ones who stayed in for the long haul, because they worked, they knew they had to work, and they learned from the problems they had in getting the mind down. So the next time there was a problem, they’d had experience already. They’d know, “Okay, this comes from that, and that comes from this, and you go focus here, work with that, be very careful about this, careful about that,” and the mind settles down. So you learn from the downs. You learn from the ups as well, because there’ll be times when things go very, very well, and then suddenly it crashes. You have to look back. What did you do wrong when things were going well? Can you notice carelessness? Can you notice complacency when it sets in? The next time around things go well, you remind yourself, “Can’t be careless, can’t be complacent.” So it’s in dealing with the ups and downs that you learn things about the mind. When distraction comes, try to learn from distraction. Exactly what are the steps? How does the mind leave its object? Sometimes you know before you leave that you’re going to leave. If you learn to look for the sides, you can see them. Once you recognize the signs, then the next time around the mind starts getting ready to go. You sense it in time. Focus back in on the breath. Try to make the breath more interesting in one way or another so the mind doesn’t get bored with it, doesn’t get tired of it. And you can abort that particular distraction. Sleepiness is a bad sign. How does that happen? What kind of breathing leads to sleepiness? If you watch, you’ll know. What are the other signs of sleepiness? Where do you first notice it? In other words, when a distraction comes or something pulls you away from the meditation, either through too little energy in terms of drowsiness and sleepiness or too much energy in terms of distraction, restlessness and anxiety. View these things as opportunities to learn about the mind. That way, even though the mind may wander off course a little bit, next time around you’ll be able to catch it in time. And the next time after that, catch it a little bit more quickly. And the next time after that, lose it entirely. This is common. This is normal. Over time, you begin to learn. And it’s a willingness to learn that enables you to learn. A lot of people don’t really want to learn. They want everything to go smoothly and easily and get the reward and go home. But it’s in dealing with the particulars, dealing with the difficulties as they come up. That’s how you learn about the mind and how you become a skillful meditator. And as long as you’re willing to encounter difficulties and knowing that there is a way around them, that’s how the meditation progresses. Even though there may be peaks and valleys, the general trend is then up. It’s going in the right direction. If meditation were entirely smooth, it’d be like riding in a car across the country just on the interstates. You see some things, but you don’t see very much. With valleys and troughs and the peaks, it’s like going down little side roads. You see a lot of things you would have missed otherwise. And sometimes the most important stuff is down the side roads. So whatever’s happening in the meditation, learn how to have the right attitude toward it, that you’re here to observe, you’re here to learn. That way, everything becomes grist for your mouth.

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