Long-term Trends

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When people are trying to lose weight, they’re advised not to weigh themselves every day, because it’s the nature of the body. The weight goes up and down. If you get too excited by a weight loss of, say, two pounds over a day, or if you get too lazy, your weight is actually going up from one day to the next. It’s very easy to get knocked off course. When you think things are going better than they are, then you tend to get sloppy and lazy. If you seem to have setbacks, you get very discouraged. So they recommend that you weigh yourself maybe once a week or so, so you can start seeing general trends. The same principle applies to your meditation. Don’t read too much into your present mood, or how things are going right now in the meditation. You want to look for general trends. Otherwise, you get excited by the fact that you had a good meditation, and then you get sloppy and lazy and careless. Or, if things are not going well, then you get discouraged. You think, “Well, maybe I just don’t have it in me.” Either way, you get knocked off course. You’ve got to learn how to look at the long-term trends, a general calming down of the mind. Even if the long-term trend seems to be going in the wrong direction for the time being, just learn how to watch. You have to be observant, see exactly what’s going on, without allowing yourself to get depressed, discouraged, disheartened, because the mind has its rhythms. Like waves in the ocean, you have to learn how to ride them so they don’t drown you. Remember, this is a long-term project we’re working on, routing out ignorance. Ignorance has many forms. Some of them are connected. Ultimately, they’re all connected. But in the beginning, you have to knock off this bud, knock off that bud, and new buds will grow back, because you haven’t found the root. But you keep at it. You keep weakening the tree. Over time, you have a better sense of where the connections are, so you can lop off whole branches at a time. That leads ultimately to the major roots. So after you’ve lopped off a bud or two, don’t get discouraged when they come back. It’s not that you cut the root. It’s not that the practice doesn’t work. It’s just that you’re learning to get acquainted with the plant. Ignorance is such a big thing in the mind. It takes a long time to get to know your own ignorance. So don’t let yourself get waylaid by the temporary setbacks, because they are temporary. Everything in the mind is temporary, which means you have to have an attitude of persistence, endurance. You keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, because otherwise things just go off course very easily. As Ajahn Manwaran said, the one thing you’ve got to maintain all the way through the practice is your determination not to be fooled by the defilements. That determination is important. You do what you can to feed it, to encourage it, to strengthen it. An important part of determination is learning not to get pushed back by setbacks. You realize things aren’t going quite the way you thought they would, but that doesn’t mean you’re not making progress. And if you abandon your determination, what happens? Where does that leave you? Swimming around in the cycles of samsara, this wandering on that is so aimless. Determination to find the way out is the only thing that will get you out. It’s like being lost in a forest. If you’re convinced that there’s got to be a way out of the forest, you’re going to find it. If you give up the search, decide that there’s no way out, you’ll never find the way out, even though there have been many, many people who’ve found that way. They’ve left their directions all around. But the directions don’t mean anything for anyone who’s not determined. So remember the factors of determination. One is discernment. Discerning what you’re doing right now, what kind of results it’s getting. Having discernment about the goal that you want, and whether your current actions are in line with the goal or going away from it. The second one is truthfulness. You’re true to your determination. Then there’s willingness. In willingness, you learn how to give up the things that get in the way. The fourth is peace. Learn how to keep your mind peaceful in the midst of whatever is happening. In other words, when distracting thoughts come up, anxious, restless thoughts come up, it’s normal that they’re going to come up. Then there’s that great fear of the future, “What’s going to happen to me?” That doesn’t really get settled until stream entry. So naturally, you’re going to have to live with that for a while. You’ll learn how to maintain a certain measure of peace in your mind, so you can have your wits about you as you face the problems that are sure to arise in the meditation. Whatever agitation arises at any time, learn how to keep at least part of your mind still. That observer that you’re working on, that’s going to be your little still corner. That’s a precious thing to have in the meditation, a precious thing to have in the practice as a whole. Because as long as you’re observing the turmoil in your mind, it means that at least part of you is outside of the turmoil. It’s that part that gets a greater and greater sense of separation. It’s that sense of separation that begins to free you from the turmoil, even as it’s going on. So even though the sense of separation may not be total, you’re working on it. That’s the important thing. So think about these qualities, discernment, truth, relinquishment, peace. See what you’re missing in your practice, because those are the things that keep the determination strong. Keep it on course. And when the determination is on course, that helps take care of everything else. Whether it’s fast or slow is not the issue. As long as you keep going in the right direction, that’s what matters. This is how any large project is completed. If you’re worrying about how long it’s going to take, that saps your strength. So do what you can to keep yourself on track today, today, today, each day, each day. At some point, you’ll find you’ve come to the end of the problems. You’ve found the root and you’ve cut it. The whole tree dies. All that is gone. Ignorance has had so many branches in the mind. Once the root is cut, everything dies. Whether that will happen quickly or slowly, you can’t set out a timetable beforehand. But you can make it inevitable that that timetable will come at some point as you nurture your determination. Do whatever you can to keep it strong.

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