

## *Measuring Progress*

*November 28, 2010*

This is a path that we're following. The Buddha's first teaching was about the noble eightfold path, and his last teaching was about the noble eightfold path, and the fact that he called it a path underscores the point that it's meant to go someplace. Yet if you try to measure your progress on the path, it's difficult. If we were to ask for a show of hands—"Who in here has a practice that in every way, every day, is getting better and better?"—there wouldn't be any hands. There's progress on some fronts, and what seems to be regress on other fronts. And yet we still keep at it. Partly just on the general principle: You know that if you're developing meditation, if you're developing concentration, you're better off than if you weren't. Because many things that we would need to make an objective measurement are not there. If you could wind up two doll versions of yourself and say, okay, this doll version is not going to practice, and this version is going to practice, and see where they would end up, you could actually make a comparison. But you can't see what you'd be like if you weren't practicing. At the same time, as you develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness, you get more sensitive to what's going on in the mind, so that in your measurement of what's skillful or what's quiet in the mind, what counts as good concentration, what counts as a good insight, your standards are going to change. Like that old issue in relativity: When you go faster, the ruler that you would use to measure things would change in its length. Time would change. So it's difficult to make comparisons.

But in general you should be able to notice that you're getting more and more sensitive to what's going on in the mind. Today's concentration may not be better than yesterday's, but as long as you're aware of what's happening, you're doing it right. Because it's only when you're aware that you can deal with what's going on in the mind.

So much of this has to do with how much you admit to what is going on in the mind, how sensitive you are to those little voices in the mind that used to be below the radar, or used to be inaudible, and now are audible. That's progress. Because only when you can hear those voices, and only when you can see what's going on, see the movements of the mind, can you do something about them.

But there's also that principle that today's practice has got to be better than yesterday's because yesterday is not around anymore. It's like that man who sold Chinese dumplings near Wat Dhammasathit. He would drive down the road in front of the monastery every day. He had a loudspeaker on his truck calling out

that he was selling Chinese dumplings, Chinese dumplings, and he sounded a little drunk. “Today’s Chinese dumplings,” he would always say, “are better than yesterday’s.” Then tomorrow he’d come and say, “Today’s Chinese dumplings are better than yesterday’s.” And he would keep it up every day. Every day they would get better and better, according to his slogan, and you’d wonder at what point they’d reach the Platonic ideal of a Chinese dumpling. But then someone pointed out to me: Well, think about where yesterday’s dumplings are right now. Either they’re still in your intestines or they’re down in the cesspools, so whatever the guy’s going to sell is obviously better than yesterday’s.

So always think about the breath you’re breathing right now, and the concentration you’re practicing right now, is better than they were yesterday, because yesterday’s is gone. You’re dealing with what you’ve got right now. That’s where you want to focus your attention. This is especially important when things went really well yesterday and they don’t seem to be going quite so well today. You can get fixated on that if you’re not paying full attention to right now, and that makes today’s meditation even worse. So you drop that thought and stay where you are. Focus on this breath, this breath, knowing that by exercising your mindfulness, exercising your concentration, it’s got to get better.

The one thing you do have to worry about is the tendency to think that if the meditation is going better, then it should automatically make your life better. And that’s not the case. Because it’s very easy to develop increased mindfulness, increased discernment while you’re meditating, and just throw it away for the rest of the day.

Ajaan Fuang once had a student whose powers of concentration were really strong. And she complained to him that she didn’t see that it was having any influence on the rest of her life. She still got angry, she still got frustrated with people; she had a real problem with the anger. It was because she wasn’t developing any discernment, and she wasn’t using the discernment she did have, consciously applying it for the rest of the day. Part of the problem was that when she was in concentration it was very intense, and she couldn’t even think. And she didn’t have that ability that Ajaan Fuang was trying to teach her, which was to pull out just a little bit, not enough to destroy the concentration, but just enough to observe what was going on. She was either in it or out of it, and that was it. So of course when she was out of it, it was like she had been resting, but that was all.

So an important part of the practice is learning how to watch what’s going on right now right now, right now, right now, and learning how to develop that talent in the rest of the day as well. When you’re speaking to people, what’s going on right now? Right now. Right now. What are you saying? What’s your

motivation? The more you actually apply these principles, the better chance they have of developing.

So when you're with the breath, be prepared for the fact that the mind will wander off, or something else will come up, and it's possible that you would suddenly decide—or something in your mind will hijack the process and decide—that you want to think about that other thing. Your ability to catch that happening and to come right back to the breath: That's how you make the meditation progress. And the more quickly you can see how a distraction forms, the more quickly you can drop it. That's how you develop your mindfulness, that's how you develop your alertness. It's not a matter of simply sitting here very still and trusting in the process. There is a kind of momentum that develops. But the possibility of its really developing and also being an influence on the rest of your life depends on your alertness right now, your sensitivity right now, your ability to catch little things going on that might pull you away, and your ability to cut through any ties or any attachments that may develop. That's what makes the meditation progress.

And you find that you can sense progress almost in spite of yourself. It's the unexpected things: Something comes up in the course of the day that would normally set you off, and you realize it didn't set you off. Or you can see it setting you off, and you realize that you're pulled back from it a little bit. This ability to pull back and watch is one of the most important things you're trying to develop as you meditate, so that when an emotion arises, or a thought arises, you don't automatically go with it.

It's like something running out of your chest, or running out of your mind, and you can see it because you're staying right here instead of running with it; you're watching it run away. And when you don't run with it, it doesn't go very far. So when you notice that happening, you realize, "Okay, something new is happening in the mind. A new ability has developed." And what may happen is, of course, now that you've got this improved ability, you see defilements you didn't see before.

That can be discouraging, but don't let it discourage you. Remember Ajaan Fuang's image: You have a room that you never dust, so you never notice how much dust fell on the floor today, because you haven't been dusting at all. But if you dust every day, you'll notice even the slightest little bit of dust that appears. That doesn't mean you have more dust. It just means you're more sensitive.

So, on the one hand, you do have some trust in the process: that by working on mindfulness and alertness, you're better off than if you didn't. But at the same time, you also have to push a little bit by trying to be as observant as possible, try

to heighten your sensitivity, knowing that the more sensitive you are to the movements of the breath, the movements of the mind right in the present moment, the better chance you have of doing something about them. That's what really counts.