

Ups & Downs

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There's no one in the world who can say that in every day in every way their practice is getting better and better.

The practice has its ups and downs—and you have to learn how to live with them. After all, the mind is a complex process, with lots of different things going on all at the same time. And as with any complex system, sometimes one little thing can have a huge effect. Other times, a lot of effort seems to go nowhere. The effects come out some other place far away.

So you have to maintain a certain equanimity about the whole thing.

Not that we're not trying to get someplace. We definitely are. But in the Buddha's teachings on making a determination, one of his determinations is that you try to maintain calm in the face of the ups and downs that are sure to come your way. Otherwise, you're never going to get where you want to go.

If you start getting excited when things go well, you get careless. If you get depressed when things are not going well, you give up. Or all you can think about is how good it used to be and how bad it is now.

But that's not the topic of your meditation. The topic of your meditation is: What are you doing right now? You focus your attention there.

You have to remember that the path is a series of causes, and even those causes have their causes. Some of them you have some control over and others you don't. You're not going to know which are which until you've actually made an effort to exert some control.

This is why the discernment that comes from reading and thinking things through is one thing. The discernment that comes from actually trying to develop qualities in the mind is something else.

In the books, it all sounds very straightforward. One sutta even uses the image of a stairway. You go from one step to the next, to the next, to the next. It all sounds very orderly and linear, very progressive. But when you practice, you may think you're on one step and suddenly find yourself way down on another step that you hadn't expected. You start worrying about yourself. Are you going in the wrong direction?

Remember that the books explain things in terms of steps because that's the nature of books. The Buddha does talk about the complexity of karma. There are some seeds gestating in your field of karmic seeds that may not be showing anything right now. That doesn't mean they're not there. But there are times when

something really positive from the past suddenly blossoms. Then soon after that, something negative from the past suddenly blossoms. As for what you're doing in the present moment, it all seems pretty much the same.

This is why the Buddha said that our first reaction to pain and suffering is bewilderment: How did this happen? What's going on? That inspires us to search to find a way out, to try to understand what's going on.

It's good to keep that point in mind, that your mind is very complex; causality is very complex. What you're experiencing at any one point has to do, to some extent, with what you're doing right now but also something to do with what you did in the past. Of course, what you did in the past is often buried to you. You have no idea what that was. But this understanding helps you maintain an attitude of equanimity.

You may actually be doing the right thing right now, but the conditions are not yet ripe for the right thing to start showing its effects, at least not as much as they *could* show.

You stay confident in the fact that at least right now you're trying to do something skillful. You're not harming anyone; you're trying not to harm yourself. You focus more of your attention not on the ups and the downs but simply on doing what you're supposed to do.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about a period in this practice where he began to discern that there'd be a cycle. Things would go really well for a while and then they'd crash. Then they'd go well for a while; then they'd crash.

He got so that he was anticipating the crash—and perhaps the anticipation helped the crash happen.

He finally decided that this riding the waves was not going anywhere at all. So he was just going to do what he knew he should be doing. In his case, he focused on the word *Buddho* and he wouldn't care for whether it was going anywhere. Whether the results were showing themselves quickly or slowly, he just knew, "This is the right thing to do, so I'll stick with it."

This, of course, is where you start encountering your doubts about this particular practice or this particular meditation method. "Is the breath right for me? Maybe I should do noting, or maybe I should do scanning, or maybe I should do a meditation word."

We start out with the breath because it's the safest of all the meditation methods. Try to see what you can do with the breath, because at the very least you know while you're with the breath that you're at the right spot. This was the spot where the Buddha was when he gained awakening, right where the mind and the body meet at the breath.

There was simply the combination of his past karma and his present karma that enabled him to see a lot more clearly what was going on right here. So you try to focus right here.

Then the questions become, “How much pressure should you put on the focus? How should you conceive the breath? And where in the body are you going to focus?” Those are areas where you have a choice. How much do you want to experiment with the breath and how much do you just want to let it do its own thing? That’s another area where you have a choice.

But jumping around from one method to another, saying, “Well, this doesn’t seem to work, I’ll try that one. This doesn’t work, I’ll try that one,” you’re never going to get anywhere.

You’ve got hold on to one thing. While you’re here, hold on to the breath. See what that can do—because the only way you’re going to overcome your doubts about any particular technique is to actually do it, and not to give up at the first obstacle.

Years back, when I was a young monk, I was in a monastery away from Ajaan Fuang for a while. I was having some problems with the breath. So I went to see one of the ajaans at this other monastery. His first reaction was, “Well, maybe that breath isn’t the right topic for you.” I knew I was getting the wrong advice. I noticed in later years that that particular monk didn’t seem to be getting anywhere in his meditation because he was always jumping from one thing to another. The only way you’re going to learn about a technique—how good it is, how right it is for you—is to do it and give it your best.

Try to use as much ingenuity and discernment as you can while you’re using it, while you’re focused on that technique. And focus on the causes.

As for whether the results are going to happen quickly or slowly, you have no control over that. You’ve a little bit of control, the fact that you’re actually doing the right things. But whether the results are going to come fast or slow depends on a lot of other factors that are set in motion by your past actions. And those you can’t change.

So try to maintain this attitude of calm and equanimity in the face of the ups and downs. When things are going well, remember not to get complacent. Sometimes the mind seems so clear and settled that you think it will never go back to its old greed, aversion, and delusion ever again. And then of course it does. Part of the reason, of course, is that you got complacent.

When you get something good, do your best to protect it, maintain it. When things aren’t going well, remind yourself that they *can* go well. Maybe you’re just suffering from some bad past karma sprouts right now. They’re blossoming and

growing, so you simply have to ride them out.

Just have confidence that as long as you're focused in the right spot, and the breath feels good, you're doing the right thing.

Remember all those in the past who hit troughs in their practice and yet were able to come out of the trough. There was nothing superhuman about them. They simply had the patience and equanimity to maintain a state of calm in the face of all the problems they had.

That's when you can look at the other elements in your determination. Are you using your discernment? Are you really being true to what you told yourself you were going to do? And are you really letting go of the things that are getting in the way?

If you're not, you know what work you've got to do. If you are, just keep on doing what you're doing.

Try to refine your discernment. Try to be quicker in letting go of unskillful thoughts. Then maintain the attitude you're going to stick with this and see it through. Be true to your original determination, because it's only when you stick with those qualities that the practice is going to go anywhere.

And it will go. It does develop. It's not going from point x to point y —it stays right here—but things develop right here.

So you want to stay right here to make sure that when the opportunity for them to develop happens, you're fully present so that you can help them along.