

Ups & Downs

March 24, 2017

Start each meditation session with the determination of what you want to do, focusing on the doing rather than on the results. The results will sometimes come quickly, sometimes slowly, sometimes it seems like they're not coming at all. But you need to have a certain amount of conviction that, yes, your actions do have results—in the same way as when you plant a seed, you're convinced that the seed will give a plant. Sometimes the plant will come a lot slower than you expected, but that shouldn't stop you from planting the seeds.

You read in the texts about the stages of meditation, and everything sounds very smooth and progressive, like, "Every day in every way it's going to get better and better." But your actual practice doesn't go that way. It has its ups and its downs. And that's only to be expected. The important thing is how you react to the ups and react to the downs.

Now, we do want the meditation to go well. The Buddha's not playing gotcha, in which he tells you how nice the meditation can be and then criticizes you for wanting to have it. That's not the game he's playing. He's not playing a game at all.

But you have to realize: The mind is a complex phenomenon. There are lots of you's in there, lots of voices. We sometimes call it a committee, but it's often more like a raucous crowd. You have to learn how to be a patient observer to figure things out, the same way that the people in listening stations during a war listen very carefully to the enemy. They can't let themselves get excited or depressed or impatient. They've got to keep listening, listening, listening. Because you never know when the enemy's going to do or say something that'll be important to know.

So think back on skills you've developed in the past—related to sports or music or any manual skill—and try to think of the attitude you had toward the times you made a mistake. And particularly, think of the *proper* attitude to have: the attitude that allows you to try to figure out the mistake and then figure out another way of not repeating it. This requires a willingness to sit with some mistakes long enough until you can understand them.

We have to bring that same attitude to the meditation. When things go really well, don't get complacent. Try to notice, okay, this is what the mind is like when it's going well. When it's not going well, this is how the mind is like when it's not going well. Then figure out, "Well, what exactly is wrong?" Sometimes you'll have to see it going not well for quite a while before you catch what you're doing.

So try to develop this part of the mind, at least one member of the committee who's the observer and is always on an even keel, who reports just whatever's happening, without getting upset, without getting excited—just noticing, "This is what's happening. This is what's happening."

This is what alertness is all about. It has to be based on a certain amount of equanimity and a certain amount of conviction.

All too often we hear that Buddhism is a religion with no need for faith, no need for conviction, but the simple fact that you're sitting here working with the mind requires some conviction. Especially when the downs go for a long time: You've got to be convinced that you can figure something out, that you'll figure this out one way or another. So you stick with it, stick with it. The determination that you set up with the beginning of the meditation: That's what'll see you through if you stick with it. Of course, if you drop it, if you just give up, you don't learn anything. You've got to make up your mind this is what you really want and stick with it.

The Buddha teaches a principle that can support the determination. He calls it the self as a governing principle. We're told many, many times that the concept of self is something the Buddha wants you to erase. But he doesn't have you erase it right from the beginning. In the very beginning, he actually has you develop a skillful sense of self. The self as a governing principle is when you remind yourself that you're doing this because you wish yourself well. It makes sense that the amount of suffering people have in their lives has a lot to do with the state of the mind, and here's a way of getting your mind in shape. So if you gave up, would you really be loving yourself? That's a skillful use of the concept of self. So bring it out to use when you need it.

Remind yourself: This is for your own well-being. Even though it doesn't seem to be going anywhere right now, watch patiently. Because it's through the watching and the patience that you'll see things you didn't see before. That's what the meditation is all about: things that are going on all the time in the mind but you're not noticing them, usually because your attention is focused someplace else. And yet those things are creating a lot of suffering, a lot of stress.

So you want to be quiet enough and alert enough to see these things you've been missing. Because it's all right here. Everything you need to know is right here. It's simply a matter of catching sight of things. Sometimes a really bad meditation will yield some really good insights. Conversely, it's possible that when the meditation's going really well, you're not noticing anything at all, and you don't learn anything from it.

So just because the level of pleasure you want is not there doesn't mean that the meditation is bad. Or when things are going very pleasantly, that doesn't necessarily mean they're good. We're not here just for the pleasure or the pain, we're here for the understanding. Now, the pleasure, when it comes, will help this along if you learn how to use it properly. It gives you energy. It gives you strength. It's your food for the practice.

But this is the kind of eating in which you're working at the same time as you eat. In other words, you don't just wallow around in the food. It's not like a Roman orgy where you just gobble down all you can get, because then you get bloated and distracted from the task. Instead, you take a little time to eat and you work, take time to eat and you keep working.

That's how you stick with the job and how your nourishment doesn't get in the way of the job you want to do.

So, when the meditation goes up, your mind doesn't have to go up with it. When the meditation goes down, the mind doesn't have to go down with it. Keep your mind—the observer, the quality of alertness—on an even keel. That's how you see things that you never saw before.

When Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about singleness of mind, he says that this is the quality that really counts as singleness of mind: not the fact that your mind is always focused on one thing, but that it has a sense of solidity in the face of whatever happens. So try to determine on this quality of singleness, determine on the *doing* aspect of the meditation. As for the results: Whatever they are, you learn from them. The more you learn, the larger the stock of things you'll have to remember and to draw on.

That way, the next time the mind is in a particular state, you can remember, "It used to be this way and this is how I dealt with it and this is how I got results." And you try that. If it works, okay, you've learned something good. If it doesn't work, you say, "Well, maybe I didn't observe it carefully enough the last time. Or maybe this is not quite the same state of mind as the last time." But at least you've given yourself a fund of approaches to fall back on.

It's in this way that the meditation develops and grows.