

## *Progress & Regress*

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It's a common thing with sports and performing arts: Someone gets up on the stage, starts getting very nervous, and can't perform as well as they ordinarily would. You feel sorry for them. You say, If only they didn't get nervous, they'd be a great pianist or a great sports person. Or when someone loses, say, a sports contest because they got nervous and flubbed things, the question always comes up: Who really was actually the better of the two sports people? That ignores the fact that an important part of being a performing artist or sports person is your psychology—your ability to psych yourself up and not be nervous when things get important, not to lose your cool. So good performance is not just technique. The psychology behind the technique is just as important. In fact, it's usually because of the psychology that the technique gets perfected to begin with.

The same principle applies when you meditate. When things suddenly crash, that's when you see who's a meditator. When it looks like you have nothing left for all your months or years or whatever practice, the intelligent thing to do is to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, give yourself a pat on the back or a slap in the face, depending on what's needed, and then just go ahead and start all over again.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a very moving passage in one of his more autobiographical talks where he talks about how his meditation would progress, progress, progress, and then crash. Then he would start progressing again, progressing again, then crash again. He didn't give up, though. He kept trying to figure out what made it crash. In fact, it's like distraction. You know it's going to happen. Wherever there's progress, there's going to be regress, so if you know there's a potential for regress, you just keep watching. If it's going to fall away this time, how is it going to fall away? Watch for it, see what happens—the little unravelings that suddenly lead to larger unravelings—and take it as par for the course.

Of course, it's difficult in the sense that the mind that's overseeing the training is also the mind that needs to be trained. In other words, sometimes just as you need your powers of observation most, and you need your powers of mindfulness most, that's when everything else seems so weak. It seems really hard to get started again, in which case, you've just got to forget about your past progress. Think about it as if it didn't happen at all.

This is one of the meanings of beginner's mind—that you don't dwell on how good things

used to be and how bad they are now. Also, do try to make a division within yourself between the lousy mind states and the disgust or whatever, and the observer that's just watching all this, trying to figure it out. They really do become these two parts of the mind when you discover that they're there. It's just that at any one time, one side tends to get smothered by the other.

So, when things are going well, don't be complacent. Don't let down your guard. Know that there's always a possibility for regress until you hit the noble paths and fruitions. There's always going to be a possibility for regress, so just watch out for it and see how it might happen. At the same time, when things go bad, well, if there's regress, there's going to be progress if you stick with it.

A lot of the problem there is simply impatience. You've gotten used to things going well, the mind settling down quickly, and all of the sudden it doesn't settle down quite so quickly. You get impatient, you get upset, and that, of course, just makes things worse. So, forget about your past meditation, how good it was, because however good it was then doesn't help anything right now. And if it really was genuinely good back then, it wouldn't have regressed. So there was still something wrong with it. The regression teaches you that lesson.

So you've got to watch for where's the potential for regress in the particular mental state you've got when things are going well. Then when things are not going well, remember that there's always a potential for progress in there, too. Look for that. Emphasize that. Dwell on that, because when you realize the potentials are there, it's simply a question of which ones you're focusing on, which ones you emphasize. Then it's not hopeless. Just learn to hold on tight to whatever's good within the mind, and as you stay with that long enough, it'll begin to grow, gain strength, and get to the point where it's more in power again.

So it's normal for there to be ups and downs in the meditation. The trick is for *you* not to go up and down: in other words, when things go well, not to get so carried away that you get careless; when things go poorly, not to get so upset that you want to give up. Just stick with it, stick with it.

A while back there was an interview with President Clinton. He was talking about what helped him most during the times when everything in the world seemed to be turned against him. Nelson Mandela came to a visit and said, "Look, they're going to try to take everything away from you, so keep remembering: Whatever they take away from you, they can't take away your mind." That was what kept the president going.

Here you've got a mind, but it seems as if the mind is turned against itself. Well, you've still got your good qualities. The good qualities are still there. They may be weakened at some

times, but they're still there, and the bad qualities can't really take them away from you. The potential for good is always in there. They'll try to bury it, they may try to deny it sometimes, but the potential for good is always there. So dig down and find it and latch on to it for all that it's worth. That quality of tenacity is what will see you through.

So remember, it's not just a question of technique—what you do with the breath, where you focus on this, that, and the other thing—it's also a question of your attitude toward the technique, your attitude toward success and failure, mistakes and the good times and the bad times. Remember that there's nobody who's hopeless.

Even in the case of Devadatta, who, because of what he did to the Buddha, was supposed to boil in hell for quite a while, but at the last moment, just as he realized he was beginning to get sucked down into the Earth—actually there is a big hole in Savatthi where they say, “That's where Devadatta got sucked down into the Earth”—he regretted what he had done. That element of regret, the Buddha said, was what's going to be the germ for his becoming a private buddha someday. Even the ultimate bad guy, Mara, is supposed to become a buddha sometime in the future. All the ultimate bad guys in the Buddha's stories: There's ultimately a good end for them.

You haven't done anything nearly as bad as they have, so there's always potential for a good end for you, too. So keep these thoughts in mind. It's not just the technique. It's also the attitude. It comes down to your maturity, your ability to deal with difficulty, to work your way through the troughs, so you can get back up on the crests again and not be carried away either by the troughs or by the crests, keeping the mind on an even keel as you go through the waves.