

## *When Things Regress*

*December 21, 2022*

One of the facts you're going to have to face as a meditator is that there are times when there's progress, there are times when you seem to hit a plateau—nothing seems to go up or down—and there are times when things regress and seem to fall apart. The states of concentration you used to have, you don't have anymore, or at least you don't have right now.

The important principle is that you don't let the mind get worked up about any of those things. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the early years of his practice when his mind would settle down in ways it hadn't before. He got really excited about it. But then it would deteriorate. He'd get upset. He began to notice a pattern. It would go up for a while, and then go down for a while, and he finally realized he couldn't let himself get worked up about the ups and the downs. He should just do the practice. Stick to the basics. And he found that he was able to get the mind into concentration more and more consistently.

So you have to apply the same principle to your own times of regress. It's a normal thing that's going to happen. The mind is a complex phenomenon. You're dealing with lots of different defilements, not just one. Ajaan Lee's image is of the difference between a banana tree growing and an oak tree growing. A banana tree has only one soft stalk to grow only in one direction. It does it pretty fast, and then dies pretty fast. The oak tree has to grow sturdy branches in many directions. Its branches tend to twist around, so it's going to take a long time. Sometimes this branch gets nourished, and that other branch doesn't grow so much. Then the tree starts growing in the second branch, and the first branch stops for a rest. So, given that your mind is complex, it's going to have its ups and downs. It's going to take time.

But the basics are, to begin with, to think of the Buddha's recommendations to Rahula. The very beginning of his instructions of meditation: Make your mind like earth. We tend to forget that. When things are going really well, we get puffed up. When things are going poorly, we get deflated. But notice the earth. It doesn't get puffed up or deflated. You can pour garbage on the earth and it doesn't get upset. You could pour perfume on the earth and it wouldn't get excited by it. It just stays right there.

Now, this doesn't mean that you'll just stay right there all the time. Simply that this becomes the foundation you need for the work that has to be done. The Buddha's not saying simply, "Be passive, just accept whatever comes and don't try to do anything about it." You *will* have to do something about it. But to do something skillful about it, you first have to have the right attitude and

not get upset by what's happening so that you can remember the lessons the Buddha taught.

Think about the qualities that the Buddha said are an important part of every practice: mindfulness, alertness, ardency. So you go back to the basics. Make your mind like earth, and then try to be mindful. Here mindfulness means not remembering everything that happened in the past, but remembering what's useful to remember right now.

You may know that story by Borges about a character who can't forget anything. He has total memory of everything that's happened in his life, and he's miserable because it's just so overwhelming. Our memory has to be selective. You have to choose what's useful right now. And your memory of how good the meditation used to be is not going to be useful right now. It's like remembering that you had a piece of cake a while back and it was really good, and wanting to have that same cake all over again. Well, where is the cake now? It's down in the septic tank. And even if you didn't eat it then, or there was an extra piece of cake left over that you kept all this time, it'd be mouldy right now. So think of your memories of how good the meditation used to be as mouldy memories. You don't want to eat mouldy food.

Remember that if you want the results in the meditation, you have to focus on the causes. So you're mindful of the breath: each breath coming in, each breath going out. All too often, we're in so much of a rush to get on to the next step that we don't have the time to watch each breath as it's coming in, watch each breath as it's going out. Try to be right here. As for the mind's anticipations of what's going to happen next, remember that right anticipation is not part of the path. There's a lot of anticipation in craving, but that's not what you're trying to develop. You do have a desire to do the practice, and without that desire, you can't practice. But the desire has to be focused on the causes.

So be right here as much as you can—that's the alertness part. You watch what you're doing—those are the causes—and watch the results you're getting from those causes right now. Don't worry about the results you had last year, or a month ago, or whatever. Focus on what's actually happening right now. And you can make adjustments.

Remember that when the Buddha talks about breath meditation, it's not just, "Be with whatever breath comes in." There was a time when he was telling the monks to do breath meditation, and one of the monks piped up and said, "I do breath meditation." This was a monk who was known to be not that good at the practice. So the Buddha asked him, "But what kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk said, "I put aside thoughts of the past. I put aside thoughts of the future. Whatever comes up, I'm equanimous in the present as I breathe in and breathe out." The Buddha said, "Well there is that

kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that's going to give you good results."

Then he went into the sixteen steps. And remember that one of those steps involves trying to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out after you've been watching the breath for a while. So as you're watching this, you maintain a whole-body awareness. Then you try to calm the breath. You don't suppress it. Just allow it to get more and more gentle as you spread your awareness to fill the body so that when the breath gets really subtle, you don't lose your focus. Your focus becomes the sense of breath energy throughout the body. And you do this in such a way that you try to find out what kind of breathing is most pleasant right now.

And here again, don't think how pleasant it was last month. Just notice which ways of breathing are more pleasant than others right now. They may not seem all that gratifying or special. But find a way of breathing that feels okay. If that's the best you can do, stay with okay breathing. The more you can stay with it, the more the mind can settle down, and the more refined the breath can become.

This all comes under ardency. You try to do this well. And here again, the ardency has to deal with what's actually coming up in the present moment. If memories of the past are beginning to interfere, remember that they're not anything you want to focus on right now. They're unskillful thoughts that you try to abandon. The skillful thoughts are the ones that focus on, "What can I do right now? I'll take on whatever I can do right now as best I can and maintain it."

And sometimes, in the simple maintaining, it's going to get better. Say, you want another cake. Well, you have to cook it. You don't just stick the batter in the pan, and then put it in the oven, take it out right away, and say, "Gee, It's not getting cooked as fast as I wanted." So you stick it back in, then take it out again, stick it back in, take it out again. If you keep that up, it's never going to get baked. You stick it in and let it stay there.

The difference, of course, is that when you stick a cake in the oven, you don't have distracting thoughts running around in the oven, disturbing the cake. They may be running around in your head right now, but again, you have the choice. You've found yourself here. You wanted a quiet room with nobody else inside, but the room you're in has people populating it. Well, you don't have to get involved in their conversations.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Try to remember what's important to remember right now and what's important to *forget* right now, where you pay your attention. Alertness is not all about being alert to whatever is coming up in the present moment. It's focused precisely on: What are you *doing* in the

present moment? The other people in the room may be running around, but what're *you* doing?

There was a time years back when I visited a place in Korea where they were teaching classical Korean music. The year before, I had learned the Korean drum to help a friend who was playing the *kayagum*. She had gone back to Korea, and I visited her on my way back to Thailand. She took me to the place where she had taken her lessons. It was a cacophony. They had little booths along the walls of the room, and there were people in the booths playing different instruments or learning Korean opera. Each person really had to focus precisely on what he or she was doing and not pay attention to the music coming from the booths all around.

That's how you've got to focus right now. If there's a lot of conversation in your mind, let other people in the mind carry on the conversation. You're not responsible for it. Just stay right here.

What this means is that you've to get your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency well-tuned: mindful not to keep in mind how good it used to be, but mindful to remember the basic steps that will be the causes for how it's going to be good here and now. Alertness: What are you doing right now? Don't focus on other things that are going on in the mind. And ardency: If memories of the past are getting in the way, recognize them as unskillful thoughts that you have to let go.

So when things are going downhill, remember, you can be saved by the basics. In the process, you'll get to know the basics even better, because you find this happening again and again and again, and you have to keep coming back to the basics and re-examining them. You'll see things there that you didn't see before. Realize that the basics may not be as simple as you thought they were to begin with. The reason they're basic is because they uphold everything else. As you have more and more experience, you get to know the basics better. It's in this way that the meditation finally does become a skill. It requires patience and it requires that quality of making your mind like earth so that you're not upset by whatever happens. You're not excited by whatever happens. You take a matter-of-fact attitude. Then, based on that, go back to your basic skills. That's how the meditation deepens and grows.