

didn't like what she saw. Her mother said, "You are so much more beautiful than when you were a little girl; you just don't realize it. A puppy who grows into a large dog is still a dog, and a duckling will not turn into a swan."

The point of this story is this: as you practice, do you worry about your progress? If you tend to belittle yourself like the girl in the story, remember that each moment is a new beginning, a fresh start. Practice is forever beginning, so don't think in terms of time. Forget about being a veteran with years of experience under your belt. For a caterpillar to become a butterfly, it must first crawl, eat leaves, and become a cocoon for a long time. Rushing cannot make it become a butterfly any quicker. Like a caterpillar, we must take time to mature naturally. Again and again I say, do not look for success or fear failure. Just practice. If you can practice diligently on this retreat, that is already success.

Making Progress in Waves

Splitting hairs deviates from the eternal.
Seeking the real, you give up the true.

Splitting hairs means making comparisons and distinctions, like comparing yourself with others, your present with your past or an imagined future, the good with the bad. Making such distinctions, you stray from the right path. People usually split hairs over minor things, but making distinctions of any kind is obstructive. A single thought that you can't let go of is also an obstruction. Whatever your mind dwells on is subject to change, while a true principle does not.

Progress in practice is not steady and linear; it is more like a wave, sometimes going up, sometimes going down. A good day can be followed by a horrible day, and vice versa. It can even change from sitting to sitting, from moment to moment. If you always perceive things as getting worse and worse, you have a mind of comparison. You will be making trouble for yourself, and may become disillusioned; you may lose faith in yourself, in the practice, and in the Dharma. When it comes to practice, making comparisons and distinctions only leads to problems.

Practice is influenced by many factors, including one's physical condition, which can go through cycles. You are not always in control or even aware of these cycles. What seems like regression may actually be a dip in physiological function. In the midst of a down cycle you may see only negativity—there is nothing to look forward to. But if you took a long view, you would see up-and-down, wavelike progress over the years. I asked a young practitioner how her practice was going.

“Horrible. It can't get any worse.”

I said, “In that case it can only get better. Congratulations!”

Recognizing the up-and-down nature of progress is important. Because you go through many states of mind, enduring the cycles requires resolve. As long as you are diligent and consistent in practice, there is no need to compare today with the past, or with an imagined future. Just practice according to your capacity without becoming obsessed. Practice like a fine stream that runs smoothly and continuously, not like a flood which comes all at once, does a lot of damage, and disappears. That is not a good way to expend your energy.

Some people practice a particular method their entire lives and never see any marked results or progress. Did they waste their time? Definitely not. During the time when one works hard without seeing tangible results, effort is not being wasted. Even if you die without becoming enlightened, you will have planted good karmic seeds for your next life. Practice should become a routine like brushing your teeth. Don't worry about what good it is doing. You will be benefiting greatly whether you notice it or not.

There is a famous gong'an in which a monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddha-nature?” and Master Zhaozhou answered, “*Wu*,” meaning “no” or “without.” If you turn Zhaozhou's answer into a *huaou*, it becomes “What is *wu*?” If you practice this *huaou*, even to your very last breath, you will have gained many benefits.

There is also a Chan allegory about a monk who was not enlightened, but who practiced this same *huaou* his whole life. When the monk was dying, the king of the underworld sent two demons to capture the unenlightened monk's mind while he was still alive. But even though he was dying, the monk kept practicing his *huaou*: “What is *wu*?” Because the

monk's mind was completely on the *huaou*, the ghosts were not able to capture it. They went back and informed the demon king, who said, “I don't know the answer to the question, but we should leave this monk alone.” The point is, whether or not you become enlightened, practice benefits you.

People may ask, “What is the use in counting my breath over and over?” The answer is that this method trains your mind. If you always return to your method after losing count, wandering thoughts will not rule your mind. So long as you are practicing sufficiently well, even if not perfectly, you have a lifeline. If you slip a little, you will be able to grab hold again. Right below there could be a deep abyss, but you won't fall to the bottom; you will always be able to grab the lifeline and climb back up.

Someone here practiced a mantra believing it beneficial, but switched to breath counting because he thought he could get better results. To look for better results in another method is a mistake. Standing on top of a mountain looking at a higher mountain, you may think you should be on that higher mountain. It can be like this in practice. You may feel that you are not having enough success, and you want to reach a higher peak, but as soon as you make these kinds of discriminations, right away you drift off your practice.

Seeking the real, you turn away from the true, says that in seeking enlightenment, you are moving further away from it. If a feather is floating in the air, and you try to suddenly grab it, disturbing the air will make the feather float farther away. If you have expectation in your practice and try to seize a goal, it will recede from you.

3.5 ■ Getting Rid of Problems Is a Problem

Discarding both is the cure,
Transparent, bright, pure.

There are two kinds of obstructions in practice; one is trying to get rid of problems that come up, the other is thinking that there are no problems. In the first situation, trying to get rid of problems can lead to exhaustion and vexation. Recall the line we talked about the other night,

Song of Mind

Wisdom from the
Zen Classic *Xin Ming*

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