Chapter 10 Making Progress

All of us want our Dharma practice to bear fruit, but even with good intentions it is easy to deviate from the path. We can get sidetracked in several ways. Being aware of potential pitfalls in advance helps us to avoid them, and knowing the signs of making progress on the path enables us to accurately assess our practice.

Realistic Expectations

We have both a useful and a useless **sense of self**. The unrealistic sense of self operates without sound reason, just on the grounds of "I want this or that." This sense of self is the root of our duḥkha and is eliminated by the realisation of emptiness. The positive sense of self operates on the basis of reason. It is the basis for bodhisattvas' strong self-confidence, without which they would be unable to confront and subdue the self-centred attitude.

Afflictions are overcome in stages, not all at once. The first time a layer of them is eradicated is upon gaining a direct, non-conceptual perception of emptiness. Before that, when we encounter circumstances that give rise to our afflictions, we must practice ethical conduct and employ the antidotes specific to each affliction in order to prevent harmful behaviour. Two factors are crucial to develop such self-control—a sense of personal integrity and consideration for others. Personal integrity enables us to abandon negativities because we respect our values and precepts. Consideration for others does this because we care about the effect of our bad behaviour on others.

Some people mistakenly believe that if they do some **spiritual practice** for a short time, they will continue to progress even if they do not actively practice. If we practice consistently, progress will definitely occur, but if we do not, our afflictions will arise effortlessly and lead to destructive actions, bringing more misery.

Vajrayāna speaks of **awakening in this life**. Some traditions or teachers speak of a direct, swift path to awakening. Hearing this, some people develop unrealistic expectations, thinking they will have quick results from doing just a little practice. Personally speaking, all these statements remind me of communist propaganda!

Can a person complete the entire path in only one brief lifetime? That person must have collected extensive merit and wisdom during many lifetimes, such that when she meets a particular external situation in this lifetime, realisations or awakening appear to come swiftly. Eons ago, she began the path as an initial-level practitioner and actualised the steps to awakening gradually, life after life. The swift results in the present life are the product of hard work in previous lives.

Westerners are practical and want **immediate results**. Their eagerness to see results motivates them to practice. However, if they go on retreat and return home at more or less the same level, they may think Dharma practice does not work and give it up. Tibetans may go to the other extreme. They believe in the five paths and ten bodhisattva grounds[76] but tend to be complacent and think these things can be developed later. They lack a sense of urgency and do not exert a lot of effort.

"Hybrid" practitioners are best—they are motivated, enthusiastic, and practice what they learn but who are also relaxed and patient. These practitioners seek

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[76] The **five paths and ten bodhisattva grounds** are stages that demarcate a bodhisattva's step-by-step journey to full awakening. On the first two paths—the paths of accumulation and preparation—one creates causes to realise emptiness directly on the third path, the path of seeing. The ten grounds commence at the path of seeing and occur concurrently with the next path—the path of meditation—until the attainment of the path of no-more-learning, buddhahood.

awakening quickly for the benefit of sentient beings but accept that it will take a long time to become buddhas and are willing to practice however long it takes.

To illustrate **the necessity of gradual training**, the Buddha uses a simile about a thoroughbred colt. At first the colt is completely wild, so the trainer must get him used to wearing a bit. Because it is something the colt has never done before, he is obviously uncomfortable, but with constant repetition and gradual practice, he gets used to it and is peaceful wearing the bit. At that time, the trainer introduces the harness, which is new to the colt. Again the colt tries to throw it off, but with repetition and practice, he eventually becomes used to it and wears it happily. Now the trainer progressively trains the colt to keep in step, run in a circle, prance, gallop, charge, and so forth. The colt initially resists each new step but eventually becomes familiar with each task and masters it. When the colt is thoroughly trained and able to do many things that he could not do before, he is fit for the king.

Similarly, when **we train as Dharma practitioners**, we will come up against many things that are unfamiliar. We may be incapable of doing them at present, be afraid of them, or lack the confidence to try them. But if we have a wise spiritual mentor and like the colt, allow ourselves to be trained and continue to train even when we initially feel some discomfort, good results will come. Eventually, we will accomplish all causes and conditions necessary to attain awakening.

At present we are **ordinary beings** whose minds are completely under the influence of the three poisonous attitudes of ignorance, anger, and attachment. Day in and day out these difficult-to-control, unwelcome disturbing emotions and wrong conceptions arise in our mind. Because this is the case, is it reasonable to think we will be able to quickly remove the cloud of afflictions once and for all? In fact, it would be difficult. It is hard to have a peaceful mind for more than a few minutes!

No matter what field of knowledge we want to master, **we cannot learn everything at once**. We must study step by step and progress gradually.

Eliminating afflictions depends on **generating strong counterforces** to them. This requires time. These counterforces are virtuous qualities, cultivated gradually, each successive step depending on its own causes and conditions. **It is fruitless to expect an outcome without creating the causes that will produce it.**

On the path to awakening, it behooves us to **study the teachings well** so we'll know how to create the specific causes and conditions for our spiritual goals and the order in which to do the various practices. Then we can practice with delight and enthusiasm, knowing that realisations will come when all the causes and conditions are assembled. Greeting each day with the thought, "Will realisations finally come today?" will only make us agitated. Such impatience is the opposite of the attitude necessary for our practice to be effective.

To grow peas, we first till the ground, fertilise it, plant pea seeds in the springtime, and then water them. When this has been done, we relax and give the seeds time to grow. We don't dig them up every day to see if they have sprouted yet! Instead we remain content knowing that they will grow in their own time.

Once, at a large public teaching, **someone asked me what was the quickest and easiest path to awakening**. I began to weep because I sensed that the person wanted to attain a lofty goal without engaging in the process of getting there. Thoughts of great practitioners, such as Milarepa, flooded my mind. They practiced joyfully even under difficult conditions because they wanted to attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings. They were willing to undergo whatever

was necessary to **create the causes for awakening**, because they were convinced in the depths of their hearts that this was the most worthwhile thing to do. To attain results like these great practitioners did, we must cultivate that same compassionate motivation and enthusiastic effort.

When I cultivate **enthusiasm to achieve buddhahood in this lifetime**, in the back of my mind I have the **idea of numerous lives and many eons**. Thus my prayer becomes, "In order to serve sentient beings, may I attain buddhahood—if possible within this lifetime, but more likely after countless lives." If we think of attaining awakening in this life but lack the perspective of many lifetimes, our wish is unrealistic and may lead to despair when we do not progress as quickly as we would like. A view **accepting future lives** is critical to maintain a long-term joyful motivation free from both idealism and despair.

Some Westerners have genuine interest in Buddhism but have difficulty accepting **multiple lifetimes and eons of existence**. Thinking that this one lifetime is all that exists, they want to see immediate progress—fast food and fast awakening! But the latter is not possible. I do not know how to help them maintain a joyful motivation given how difficult it is to attain buddhahood in this lifetime.

Some goal-oriented people think of nirvāṇa and awakening as things to achieve, yet they do not want to **do what is necessary to get there**. They seek transcendental experiences in meditation but are reluctant to change bad habits such as harsh speech, lying, and taking intoxicants. Here, too, it is difficult to guide them.

Transforming our mind is a process. Awareness of this brings our attention to the present moment, for the time to practice is now. A process-orientated approach rouses us to examine our daily activities in light of the Dharma and see that progress is made by transforming our thoughts, emotions, speech, and behaviour.

Some of my Western students comment to me that Buddhist scriptures talk about either deluded people who consistently create destructive karma or bodhisattvas whose motivation and conduct are pure. They wonder how to practice when they are in between these two extremes.

Bodhisattvas' wonderful deeds are activities to emulate and inspire us to practice. The scriptures always present the ideal; if they didn't, we wouldn't know what to aim for and would think mediocre attainments were the best. But we cannot except ourselves to master bodhisattva practices instantly. Although I admire the abilities of the great bodhisattvas and spiritual mentors, I do not expect myself to practice as they do, given my present situation. By endeavouring to think and act as they do, I hope that gradually these abilities will take root and grow within me.

Thinking of the Buddha as having always been awakened creates unnecessary obstacles in our mind. The Buddha is not an inherently existent awakened being. He was once an ordinary, confused being like us, and through gradual, consistent practice, he transformed his mind and attained buddhahood. We are no different from him; if we joyfully persevere in creating causes, we too will become buddhas.

Advanced Practices at the Right Time

In their enthusiasm for the Dharma, some beginners enter into advanced practices without sufficient preparation. They may make serenity and meditation on emptiness the focus of their practice, receive tantric empowerments, and enter a three-year retreat and later become discouraged by their lack of progress.

Although the union of **serenity and insight on emptiness** is the actual path that liberates us from cyclic existence, we must still practice the initial meditations.

Without doing that, trying to gain deep concentration while living in the city will only make us frustrated because our minds are unfamiliar with the antidotes to afflictions and the external situation isn't conducive to progress. Tsongkhapa gave some excellent advice in this regard:

> Some say to expend your energy only to stabilise your mind and to understand the view, ignoring all earlier topics, but this makes it very difficult to get the vital points. Therefore, you must develop certainty about the whole course of the path.

In other words, our journey to awakening will be successful if we start at the beginning of the path. When we are ready to cultivate serenity and insight on emptiness, it is imperative to receive instructions on the methods to do so and to practice these correctly. Gaining the correct view is not easy. Emptiness is not nothingness, and meditation on emptiness is not simply resting the mind in a vague nonconceptual state. We must be able to negate all fantasised ways of existence and still establish the conventional functioning of karma and its effects that is the support for ethical conduct. Also, our concentration must be vivid, unclouded by subtle laxity or excitement.[77]

Accomplishing the entire path to awakening is like building a house. A solid foundation is necessary before erecting the walls, and stable walls must be in place to put on the roof. Similarly, beginners would do well to gain an overall understanding of the path by **contemplating the four truths**, **meditating on the practices in common with the initial- and middle-capacity beings**, and **practicing the six perfections** according to the Sūtra Vehicle. Furthermore, **doing a lot of purification and collection of merit will eliminate obstacles**. If they then receive an empowerment, their tantric practice will bring the desired results.[78]

The great nineteenth-century Nyingma lama Dza Patrul Rinpoche said:

> Any Dharma that does not benefit one's own mind
> is just sanctimonious, not meaningful Dharma.
> Unless it makes some difference to your mind,
> even doing retreat for a hundred years would just be a pain.

Rigorous physical disciplines do not necessarily transform the mind; they may simply be a test of one's willpower. Someone may have physical and verbal discipline but an unruly mind. Dza Patrul Rinpoche said:

> Even if we have completed our quota of years and months on retreat
> and managed to recite millions and millions of mantras,
> unless attachment, hostility, and ignorance have decreased in our minds,

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[77] Tantra is an advanced practice that requires lengthy preparation. In their excitement to enter tantra, some people find contemplation of the disadvantages of cyclic existence tedious, meditation on death and impermanence uninteresting, and teachings on ethical conduct inconvenient. They skip over practices to generate renunciation and bodhicitta and take many empowerments, which entail assuming tantric precepts and commitments. After some time, they become confused and find keeping tantric precepts and commitments burdensome. Not progressing as rapidly as they would like, they become discouraged and either neglect their tantric commitments or abandon Dharma practice altogether.

We may ask why Tibetan masters give highest yoga tantra empowerments to relatively inexperienced practitioners. I too wonder about this! It could be to please the students who request them or to plant seeds in their mindstreams so in future lives they will encounter tantra. Perhaps in the audience there are a few people who are able to practice at this level. However, it is sad when this ends with someone giving up the Dharma.

[78] Some beginners hear about three-year tantric retreats and are eager to do one. However, because they are not well prepared, at the end of the retreat their major accomplishments are being expert in playing ritual musical instruments, chanting pūjās in Tibetan, and making tormas (ritual cakes). Not much internal transformation has occurred, and their disturbing emotions remain almost the same. A few who have done many tantra visualisations and recited millions of mantras may boast that they are accomplished tantric practitioners. Some adopt the title "lama" after the retreat, but personally speaking, I believe doing a three-year retreat is insufficient to earn that title.

that Dharma I consider as just pointless.

These people have put the cart before the horse. Building a proper foundation by learning the four truths and practicing bodhisattva deeds would do them well.

Checking Our Meditation Experiences

Unusual or exotic forms may appear when we're meditating, or we may experience strange sensations in our body. Most are distractions and should be ignored.[79]

Remaining humble is an essential quality for genuine spiritual practitioners. A disingenuous person may praise himself or disparage others due to attachment to receiving offerings, fame, or status. We should not be led astray by this. The Buddha described several ways to differentiate a true from an untrue person:

> But a true person considers thus: "It is not because of one's renown that states of greed, hatred, or confusion are destroyed. Even though someone may not be well known and famous, yet if he has entered upon the way that accords with the Dharma, entered upon the proper way, and conducts himself according to the Dharma, he should be honoured for that, he should be praised for that." So, **putting the practice of the way first, he neither lauds himself nor disparages others because of his renown**.

The Buddha spoke about true persons who do not laud themselves and disparage others due to their family's socioeconomic status, how many offerings they receive, how ascetic they are, how strictly they keep their precepts, or what levels of samādhi they have attained. The Mahāyāna mind-training texts emphasise the same points: "Do not be boastful" and "Do not turn a god into a devil" by using Dharma practice to increase our self-centred attitude and self-grasping ignorance.[80]

Dreams are illusory, although sometimes they may indicate future occurrences. I have met Tibetans who dreamed of Dharamsala before they came here, and some people dreamed of being at temples before having gone there. However, attachment to dreams increases grasping at true existence, which leads to obstacles, so it's important to remember that dreams are empty of true existence. When we face obstacles due to sentient beings, meditation on compassion is best; when we encounter other obstacles, meditation on emptiness is the best antidote.

An actual realisation should bring about a change in our life. The sign of having gained the wisdom of studying the Dharma is that our outward behaviour has become calm. The sign of having experientially realised the teachings of the

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[79] Some students talk of having extraordinary meditative experiences, but when something upsetting happens in life, they are unprepared and cannot handle it. This usually occurs because they have overestimated their meditative experiences. Unusual experiences such as visual appearances, special dreams, or feelings of bliss are not necessarily indications of spiritual realisations. They may occur due to an imbalance of the winds (prāṇa) in the body, external interferences, or an overactive imagination. For this reason, it is important to consult our spiritual mentors, who will help us evaluate these experiences.

Some experiences, such as having premonitions of future events, arise due to karma. They are not always accurate, and not everyone will welcome a prediction of future illness when they haven't asked us for advice!

Once I met a Westerner who considered himself a tantric practitioner. In a hopeful voice, he told me of a dream in which he saw many deities and related it to the passage in Candrakīrti's *Supplement to the Middle Way*, "At that time you will see one hundred buddhas," which refers to a bodhisattva on the path of seeing who has a direct perception of emptiness. This person thought that because he dreamed of many deities he must be an ārya bodhisattva and waited for me to confirm that. I replied, "Seeing a hundred buddhas is not the only quality of bodhisattvas on the path of seeing. They have many other qualities as well—they can live one hundred eons and emanate one hundred manifestations. So examine whether you can do these as well."

[80] See the Seven-Point Mind Training by Geshe Chekawa and Mind Training Like Rays of the Sun by Nam-kha Pel.

middle level is that our coarse afflictions have diminished in strength. If we meditate properly on bodhicitta, we become kinder human beings who are courageous in practicing the Dharma. In adversity, yogic meditators remain impartial, open, and compassionate. From such behaviour we can infer they have subdued their minds through deep meditative experiences. However, this alone is not an indication that they have realised emptiness directly.[81]

REFLECTION

1. Have you inadvertently fallen into any of the above pitfalls?
2. What were the factors that led to this?
3. What must you do now to get back on track?

Signs of Progress

If we devote our lives to familiarising ourselves with the Dharma, we will definitely see a change in our mind. As a Buddhist saying predicts, "You will be able to see the whole world and everything in it as Dharma instructions." This occurs when, through daily practice, our mind becomes familiar with the Buddha's teachings and we can practice in most of the situations we encounter. When we have gained some experience of **impermanence**, we become aware of things changing, arising and ceasing in each moment. With this understanding prominent in our mind, our clinging to people and things that are unable to provide us lasting happiness decreases. Automatically, our mind becomes more relaxed and at ease.

When doing analytical meditation on the stages of the path, contemplate each point, considering it logically and relating it to your own experience. While thinking about these points, do not let the mind wander to objects of attachment or become sleepy or dull. Try to have a mind that is clear and concentrated that stays on the points you are contemplating and is able to penetrate their meaning.

Certain signposts along the path help us check whether our **meditations** are progressing in the right direction and bearing fruit. If we meditate consistently on how to rely on a spiritual mentor and come to a point where we do not pick faults in our spiritual teachers and feel genuine respect for their qualities and gratitude for their kindness, we have achieved a good result from this meditation. If we meditate on precious human life and have a stable feeling, "My present life with so much freedom and opportunity to practice the path is difficult to receive and very precious. I do not want to waste it but direct it toward familiarising my mind with bodhicitta and emptiness," we are proceeding in the right direction. If we pay less attention to the happiness of this life and prepare for future lives we are experiencing the result of meditation on impermanence. If acting destructively repulses us and we want to avoid it like poison, we have benefited from meditating on the sufferings of unfortunate rebirths. The mark of gaining experience of the meditation on refuge is that we understand the qualities of the Three Jewels and have deep trust in their ability to guide us on the path. Such feelings may arise during a meditation session, but the sign of real progress is when they occur repeatedly.

How do we know we have generated true renunciation of cyclic existence? Tsongkhapa said that when, through habituation, day and night we do not wish for the pleasures of cyclic existence and **yearn for liberation**, we have developed true

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[81] Sometimes we meet people who have practiced for years and seem to have deep meditative experience but act in ways that appear ethically questionable. When a contradiction exists between someone's seemingly high realisation and their ethical conduct, that realisation may not be as high as it seems. Although the ability to remain in single-pointed concentration or in a non-conceptual state is a realisation, it is not a very deep one. It is not a realisation of emptiness, and the person is still afflicted by ignorance and karma.

determination to be free. Such an attitude has ramifications in our life. We cease being obsessed with the pleasures of cyclic existence, and things that used to irritate us cease to do so. This does not mean that in deep sleep we still aspire for liberation, for that is not possible. Nor is our determination to be free manifest when we are in deep concentration realising emptiness. Nevertheless, it has not been lost; it is present (but latent) when our mind is focused on other objects.

We have realised **bodhicitta** when, through habituation and practice, great compassion and aspiration to attain awakening arises spontaneously in our mind whenever we hear, see or think about any sentient being. Tsongkhapa's "Three Principal Aspects of the Path"[82] explains the measure of having found out the **correct view of emptiness** is seeing that dependent arising and emptiness are not contradictory but are mutually reinforcing, such that the mere reminder of dependent arising brings understanding of emptiness and vice-versa.

Generating virtuous qualities and realisations involves both undistracted focus and analytical discernment. Tsongkhapa says:

> The Buddha explains that to develop a good quality or virtue, you need two key mental states. First, you need to be able to focus calmly and steadily on something positive without getting distracted. Second, you need to be able to think deeply about this positive thing, understanding both its real nature (what it truly is) and how it's different from other things.[83]

If we take "good qualities" and "realisations" to have similar meanings, serenity and insight (or mental states similar to them) are needed to gain them. This is certainly true for the realisation of selflessness, which may be conceptual and inferential (on the path of preparation) or direct and non-conceptual (on the paths of seeing and meditation). For good qualities like renunciation, compassion or bodhicitta to be definitively achieved, we need serenity or a state of one-pointedness like it. To realise selflessness—be it the conceptual, inferential realisation on the path of preparation or the direct non-conceptual realisation on the path of seeing—both full serenity and insight are necessary. To realise selflessness before that, similitudes of serenity and insight are required. For those of us who wish to gain attainments quickly, this may seem a high bar to reach. However, this description makes it clear that a realisation is not a flash of understanding that comes and goes. It is a stable state of mind that can be sustained with undistracted focus. Unlike fleeting flashes that are difficult to replicate, experiences from gradual cultivation can be generated repeatedly and enhanced through single-pointed concentration.

REFLECTION

1. What are realistic expectations for you on the path?
2. What can you do to accomplish them?
3. How can you keep a happy mind and cultivate patience while you go about creating the causes?

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[82] See in books

[83] Using Unriddle. Original is The Buddha says that any achievement of a virtuous quality in the three vehicles requires a state of mind that is: (1) an actual serenity (or a similitude of it) which rests one-pointedly on its virtuous object of meditation without wandering from it; and (2) an actual insight (or a similitude of it) which carefully analyses a virtuous object of meditation and distinguishes both the real nature and the diversity of phenomena.