

The Benefits of Practice

by Rebecca Dixon

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Some people are determined to develop their practice as quickly as they can. Others just practice, with little concern about making progress. Teachers generally are reluctant to talk about how our growth unfolds, because it can vary so much among practitioners.

Mahayana stories are full of monks obsessed about how advanced they are, an area of clinging that is unfortunate. Suffering about your practice contradicts the whole point of having one. The Theravada suttas stress the importance of never misrepresenting what's happening in your practice, or claiming an achievement you haven't yet reached.

Most contemporary teachers agree it's very important not to seek after someone else's experience. That's why they downplay the importance of "spiritual progress," or even defining what it is, so people won't try to make their practice grow in the way it's been described.

We are each unique, and so is our spiritual growth. It is wholesome to grow, no matter where we are in our lifespan. As we age, the suttas often urge us to practice like our hair is on fire. So, for some, it may be an advantage not to have so much hair.

Over the years I've watched a lot of people change as their practice developed and matured. There's lots of variety in how they progress, but also some general trends. So, just to get an overview of where we have been, are now, and may go, I'm going to outline some common phases in spiritual development. Please don't cling to this outline.

In the beginning, it usually takes a while to *settle into meditation practice*. The hardest part at first is just stopping and sitting (or lying) down. A lot of people are frustrated when they can't watch the breath perfectly, not understanding that it's just a device to hold the attention still long enough to let the mind calm down so it can see inside itself.

Then, the thoughts that interrupt their concentration usually revolve around some form of suffering. Many people recoil when they encounter their own suffering. There's so much of it, so many varieties, and it feels so bad.

There's usually a period of meeting suffering with aversion, and that only makes it worse. It's so important to bring in metta, to meet our suffering with love and compassion for ourselves. If we can do that, we can go on to important spiritual growth. If we begin by accepting that we cling – a lot – we can relax and gradually let go of much of our dukkha.

After they've settled into a regular habit of meditation and made peace with the contents of their minds, people often look again at the lists of topics that are shared by all branches of Buddhism. The Eightfold Path, Four Noble Truth, Five Hindrances, Five Precepts, etc.

At this point, it's usually curiosity about a particular list that helps people learn the basic aspects of the dharma. What do the ethical suggestions in the Precepts really mean? What five tendencies hinder their practice, and how? What is this Path, and where does it lead?

I love to see this spirit of exploration develop in students. People begin to feel their way through dana, often initially feeling some pressure to support teachers, interpreters, and the sangha as a whole, and then discovering the feelings of gratitude and generosity.

The precepts also feel like commandments at first, but eventually they seem to shine like footlights that keep us walking through life safely, for ourselves and others. Now the practice is not just about sitting and meditating. It has seeped down deeply into the way we live.

The next stage plays out in countless ways. People might practice more often, maybe for shorter periods, incorporating mindfulness into the day. Their foibles and strengths no longer feel threatening or challenging. There's a kind of eagerness to explore the mind that I've come to think of as the psychotherapy stage.

I get a kick out of seeing people who once insisted they weren't Buddhist begin to discover the suttas and other teachings, and want to talk about this with the sangha. Others ask how to practice more intensively and try half-day, daylong and weekend retreats.

Intensive practice in mindfulness and in concentration expand the consciousness. People begin to observe not just their experience but their responses to it. They develop a wise relationship with dukkha, seeing how their thoughts and actions cause it, without being judgmental or averse to it.

Another capacity people acquire in studying basic Buddhist teachings is the ability to watch them play out in each moment's experience. These teachings include the Three Characteristics: that all experience is fleeting, impersonal and prone to dukkha, and the Four Noble Truths: 1) that we all suffer, 2) the cause of our dukkha is clinging, 3) we can learn to let go, and 4) the way to this freedom is The Eightfold Path.

When I taught meditation to court-ordered substance abusers, I told them not to expect improvement in watching their breath. The improvement comes in how they live their lives. Their stress will go down, their relationships will improve and they'll have better judgment.

This is true for everyone, not just addicts and alcoholics. Most practitioners become happier, more inclined to be fair and helpful to other beings. With the guidance of the teachings, we can all make better decisions that benefit us and those around us.

Insight is perhaps the most important and least appreciated benefit of our practice. There's a phrase in The Promises of AA that expresses this benefit succinctly: we will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.

Intuition and insight are very similar in our experience. Intuition seems to come from somewhere outside of us, a gift of genetics, perhaps. Insight presents itself very similarly, and maybe that's why it's often underappreciated. But we've earned it through our practice.

So, we need to practice recognizing when we do have an insight. It's fairly easy when we're sitting in meditation and a realization pops into our mind. It's often accompanied by a feeling of release, as if storm clouds have parted and we suddenly stand in the warm sun. In daily life we should savor these moments and thank our practice for them.

There's a kind of deep insight that people have on retreat that can lead to a clearer understanding of our nature. The sense of self that most people treasure relaxes and expands so that we begin to see through it. This experience, in particular, is unique to each practitioner.

It may occur in such small increments that it also goes unnoticed. At some point, though, it will be clear that the meditator has grown beyond old notions of identity and sees themselves and the world differently.

This isn't the result of logical reasoning, or accepting the words of a teacher, however trusted they may be. It comes from seeing inward during meditation, and in daily life, often enough to really know and understand the basic teachings. This is the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, seeing how the dharma plays out in our experience.

There's a phrase that's cautionary: spiritual bypass. We can only get so far by practicing solely for our own liberation. Usually people who get this far this way seem quite enamored of themselves. The full maturation of our practice depends on our understanding that it's for us, *in the sense* that we practice for the benefit of all beings, and we are part of all beings.

If we are not loving and kind at this stage of our practice, we have bypassed the very heart of what it's all about. Seeing through our misunderstanding of the self brings with it a tenderness toward others that is active and strong. Without love, our practice lacks purpose.

At this stage, practitioners naturally seek to avoid harm to other beings, actively helping when appropriate. There is wisdom to see what is appropriate, or at least to consider the benefit of all concerned when deciding how to act.

In his book, A Path with Heart, Jack Kornfield says, the powerful realizations of insight gives us, “a wondrous sense of wholeness and completeness, transcendence and love, beyond self and other, beyond all endeavors... where even the limited things of the world are filled with an inexhaustible sweetness and purity.”

I repeat Jack’s lyrical phrasing to make the point that the Path leads to what the Buddha often called a “pleasant abiding here and now.” This isn’t necessarily full enlightenment. It’s been attained by many, including seasoned teachers you know. It’s accessible to you.

However, it’s not a good idea to cling to the notion of “getting there.” It turns out that “there” is different for each of us. Some people stumble upon this in various non-Buddhist circumstances, like on an operating table, or solitary confinement, or while on a walk.

There’s a novel about a woman who devoted her entire life to telling others about a satori or kensho experience she happened upon without having followed any spiritual path. These deep insights can leave us dazed until we re-integrate our minds around them.

Jack let me use his kuto, or study cabin in the woods, after I had a lightning-zap of insight on a retreat, so I could just hang out there alone and let my mind reorganize. I spent the time cleaning the hut, as in “chop wood, carry water.”

It’s so important, though, not to cling to our insights, no matter how powerful they are. There’s a story of a Zen monk, who was disheartened to realize he was not really enlightened. He asked for the abbot’s OK to go find a hut on a mountain top.

On his way up, he encountered an old man with big bundle who paused to ask the monk where he was going. The monk answered, “I’m going to the top of the mountain to sit and either get enlightened or die.”

This old man looked wise, so our monk asked, “Do you know anything of this enlightenment?” It turns out this man was really a bodhisattva who appeared to those ready for enlightenment. He just let go of his bundle, and as it dropped to the ground, the monk was enlightened.

The monk exclaimed, “That’s it! Just not grasp anything?” Then he looked back at the old man and asked, “So now what?” In answer, the old man just reached down and picked up the bundle again and walked off toward town.

These great openings of our hearts and minds can be sudden, magnificent, game-changing events. Then reintegrating them into our beings is a gradual awakening that takes – and becomes – the rest of our lives.

Sometimes we go through the whole process without especially taking notice. I urge you to keep looking back on your practice over time and do take notice of how your life has changed. That is the invaluable benefit of practice.

Thank you