Milestones on the Path to Freedom: Assessing Progress in Practice Wisely

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 42:25

Thanks to Insight Meditation South Bay for hosting me tonight and all the dedicated volunteers here. It's really touching to see the dharma service here. It's beautiful.

I am the last person in a series on goals that's been happening here at IMSB. My talk tonight is called "Milestones on the Path to Freedom," and it's about assessing progress in practice. You can assess it wisely or unwisely. Some assessments are the flip sides of goals—we set a goal to become more regular in our sitting practice, and then we can assess whether or not we're regular in our sitting practice. Others are more general, just a sense of how is it going?

I'll offer my perspective on these, and it is limited to my own experience and my own learning. I'm going to offer it in two broad areas. The first is assessing day-to-day practice of meditation. The second is more broadly looking at our progress over the arc of our practice. That can be a few years or many years, and I know for some of you it is many years.

The start of my own journey towards meditation was through the secular meditation doorway. Even though I'd been doing Tai Chi and yoga for years, I started sitting biofeedback meditation because of chronic pain. That's what actually got my butt on the cushion. I didn't really have any expectations about what was supposed to happen when I was sitting, and in retrospect, that was a huge gift. I'd actually been told by the physical therapist and the nurse who taught me, "Don't expect the pain to go away while you're sitting. You'll notice benefit over time, but don't look at it every time you sit." Sure enough, the pain didn't lessen for years, but the suffering started lessening much faster.

I gradually noticed that meditation was having these small but noticeable beneficial effects on my day. This typifies one approach you can take to meditating: hold it really lightly. Notice that you're doing it. Don't have any expectations at all for what happens on the cushion. But check in—how's it going on a day-to-day level? Am I feeling more grounded, more aware, more patient?

The Dalai Lama suggests looking back at one's practice regularly, about every five to seven years or so. Spacious. Big picture. The other piece to that is noticing the day-to-day. How am I showing up? Am I a little bit less anxious? Am I a little bit more grounded? Am I a little bit kinder in traffic? That's where the rubber hits the road for a lot of us. I know it does for me.

I notice for myself, and many other practitioners have noticed, that this kind of attention can be really

helpful. As the practice starts to gain momentum, it's nice to take a slightly closer look. Unfortunately, most of what we notice when we take a closer look—or at least I should speak for myself—most of what I noticed when I took a closer look for the first number of years wasn't exactly good news. I've heard Joseph Goldstein and Gil both speak about this: the first few impressions we get of our minds aren't exactly flattering.

This can make assessment a little bit tricky because it's not always the most pleasant process to start to see that unfold. It's been really helpful for me to trust that the system will right itself, that the mind will change itself.

Ajahn Sumedho actually talks about this. He's quite eloquent, so I'm just going to read a bit of his passage here. This is from *Kamma and the End of Kamma*, for those of you who like citations, in a chapter entitled "Is There an End?"

He says: "If you just assess how you're doing in terms of daily occurrences, the conclusions aren't that reliable. The mind gets stressed out over having to handle many options and look out for potential mishaps, and also blown around by input that we have very little say over—such as the actions and speech of others, or the input of media, or just life on the streets. And then there are the physical ailments, which may bring up difficult and uninspiring mind states all of their own. Moreover, the ongoing process of meditation exposes some most ungratifying mental programs: escapist fantasies, finding fault with oneself or others, hunger for attention and praise, the need to be in control in all situations—they're all common enough. And along with it becomes the impression that this is what you are, and you should be something else, and you shouldn't be like this at all. Hence, there's a cross-current of mind states that well-meaning people go through when they attune to Dharma practice. It's because we're waking up, and waking up from the accident of life makes us aware of the bruises. We accumulate hurt over what we've been through and things that seemed like they might have been a good idea at the time but ended up causing us headaches. There's the need to feel good and on top of things, but an untrained mind constructs unskillful and unreliable ways of bringing that about. So in waking up, we need to meet our own tangles and dysfunctions with a willingness to glean some understanding from them. And that means taking refuge in the Dharma—in the understanding that it is exactly through the process of meeting stress, conflict, and dis-ease that something wider and wiser unfolds."

I know that was quite long, but I read it because when I first encountered this passage, it struck me that it gets to the heart of how assessment and practice interweave. There's a trust in the arc of the practice, ideally—a trust that the mind is opening to something wider and wiser precisely by doing that very counterintuitive move towards pain, towards suffering. And this makes assessment tricky, because generally we want to feel like we're moving closer to ease. Yet the process has all these bumps. "Oh, that's suffering. And so is that. And so is that."

So there's this—not quite paradox, but a kind of spaciousness required to gently hold that both things

happen. The mind moves towards ease, and there are bumps and bruises, as Ajahn Sumedho calls them, along the way.

It can also be helpful to consider meditation itself in our assessment. So far I've been talking more about the antics of the mind, which one or two of you might have noticed during the sitting. But there are also little micro-assessments, little micro-noticings that can happen during practice. This isn't so helpful to do if it becomes a discursive evaluation or a story about what's happening, but more a noticing about what's happening—a wise investigation. For example: Is the breath feeling easeful or not, if one is doing breathing meditation? Is there additional pleasure happening, if one is doing concentration meditation? Or simply noticing the conditions of each moment: "Ah, this conditions distraction; this conditions ease."

There are different assessments depending on the form of practice you're doing, and there are many forms of practice that work just fine. It's going to vary if you're doing mindfulness of mind practice, concentration practice, classic ānāpānasati. You can suss it out for yourself. But those little in-between goals and assessments of those goals are just fine, as long as they're held with a lot of space, a lot of lightness.

Some assessments are broader than any technique. How am I relating to this practice? Can I meet what's happening right now? Am I clinging? Can it be met kindly? And there's also practicing with your practice—that might not make a whole lot of sense, but what I mean is examining our relationship to practice itself.

For example, I went through some years of clinging to retreat practice. Not the most unwholesome thing to cling to, but it was still clinging. I might still have a little of that, come to think of it. And this gets to another piece: even the most wholesome goals, if there's clinging, become problematic. That's why it's so important to assess how I'm relating to my practice, and relating to the process of maturation itself.

This brings me to assessments over the arc of practice, as I mentioned at the beginning. This part of the talk is especially aimed at those people who have taken on a deeper or wider goal, something profound in their practice—perhaps even awakening as a goal, or at least held it as a possibility. Those in search of that heartwood that Shaila talked about in the first talk. And that involves assessing beautiful experiences that can arise on the path.

Some people can feel more ease, joy, even sometimes extraordinary bliss or calm can arise. Their presence or their absence can be an aid or an impediment to practice depending on how I relate to it.

What I mean by that is when these kinds of lovely experiences arise—even if it's just that sit where you felt like you were just in it, the whole sit until the bell rang—let it nourish you. That's an important part of this practice. Soaking in the good. And recognize that if it's clung to, it becomes a tripping point. With strong, mature awareness, the inclination to crave these states or to hold on to them tends to fade, and eventually the wish to hold on to them past their usefulness dissolves entirely. That can take some time.

Some practitioners have goals to cultivate beautiful qualities—the brahma-viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity. Absolutely beautiful goals. Or the paramis, everything from generosity to wisdom, the perfections of those qualities. The same holds true, however, for those goals. Clinging to them, meeting them or not, can be painful. And allowing them to arise either as a result of hard-won practice or as a natural part of the progress can really be beautiful. In my experience, these beautiful qualities do arise as part of the maturation of the path itself. Either way, when they emerge, it's helpful to celebrate them. It's okay to be happy about being happy.

I'd also like to take a few minutes to talk about assessing insights. Here I'm talking specifically about Buddhist insights, not the psychological insights that colloquially we discuss, which are also very important. But here, more opening to the path unfolding in certain ways that the Buddha pointed to in the early teachings—noticing the arising and passing away of phenomena, or noticing disenchantment with things that used to enchant the heart and mind that aren't so useful anymore. Those kinds of insights.

To start, I'm going to offer what you could call a metaphor, but you can take it as a visualization if you want to. If you want to close your eyes and come along, you can.

Imagine traveling, maybe on the Pacific Crest Trail—a beautiful hiking path. The path goes up sometimes. It goes down sometimes. It wanders through shady forests of majestic redwood trees and pine and fragrant bay laurel. This path itself is more ancient still than even the massive trees, and the light in the canopy above is luminous and diffuse all around. At times the way is rocky, narrow, and difficult. Other times you can travel with ease through bright verdant meadows where birds sing and butterflies flutter.

After one particularly long ascent through the woods, you turn a corner, surprised by a magnificent vista ahead of you. Perhaps it's even a glimpse of your destination. One might wonder how far you've come towards that destination. There's no map, but off to the side you see a milestone, a signal of progress.

How might one relate to this whole scene? Is it more important to focus on the scene or the milestone? The pleasure of the moment, the awe, or the marker? You could even be a bit silly and pick up the milestone and take it with you to show other people that you've found it. Imagine how that makes the rest of the hike.

I bring that up because some of the most beautiful and inspiring moments along the path, these experiential insights, can have that quality. You just have to be there to feel it. And I'm here to tell you from personal experience that if you try to pick up that milestone and haul it along with you, it's nothing but trouble. It'll weigh you down.

This happened in my own practice fairly early, actually. It's common enough—many people have had this happen. One insight I had was very powerful and moving. It had a huge impact on my life. At first I didn't see it as anything I had done, and it kind of percolated through my system. But over time I was exposed to more and more skill-based teachings, and I started looking back to it more and more, with a little bit more

attachment, a little bit more clinging. I reified this experience, tried to get back to it. Friends, that is a recipe for suffering.

So that's a very common pitfall of assessing insight. Don't lug around that rock if you can possibly avoid it.

Another pitfall is framing concentration states, insights, or even the process of awakening itself as attainments. I'm going to own my own perspective here. Some people find attainments to be very inspiring—the idea of certain levels of practice can really help focus one's efforts. For someone like me, however, it's not a useful way of framing the process of awakening. The concept of attainment can inspire so much energy, but it also has a strong tendency to evoke this problematic view of and focus on me, mine, I. My attainment. Not my attainment. I didn't get that attainment. Getting. The problem is in the word *getting*.

As Andrea Fella mentioned, the word "enlightenment" itself, just like "attainment," is not a very accurate translation of the Pali. Nirvana means something closer to extinguishing or cooling fire. That's nirvana. Attainment—I don't know the Pali for it, but I'm pretty certain it doesn't carry the same ring it does in English. These attainments can be a big obstacle to integrating the wisdom of insight, and they can very effectively block further spiritual maturation.

Our choices do matter a lot. Our effort and practice matters a lot. But it doesn't make much sense to take credit for it, particularly as the practice matures. So what's the alternative? The alternative is to consider conditions. Conditionality, conditioning the mind—you've heard those words before, many of you, I know you have.

While even insights can be dead weight if we try to cling to them or identify them as personal accomplishments, the same insight viewed as a process of unfolding conditions becomes something quite different. Yes, there is skill in choosing what part of the path to take. There's skill in helping to unfold our practice. We have our part to play. It's a bit more though—here's a metaphor I like a lot, one Susie Harrington introduced me to. It's like a kayaker going down whitewater rapids. Yes, there's choice and there's definitely skill. But the water, the rocks, the weather, the snow melt—all of those things are conditions too. We can take some credit for our skill, but wiser still to look at the whole river and see the conditions and understand how we interact with them. This kind of perspective is wisdom, and it can help reinforce wholesome development in addition to making for a wiser assessment.

Conditionality can also help to undercut another problematic way that many practitioners identify with goals. I spoke before about falling short of a goal. That too is conditions. It doesn't need to be a story about me, how bad I am, the things I've done wrong. Instead, it might simply be the conditions in my life. Did I drink too much coffee before I got on the cushion this morning? Did I not get enough sleep? Is my job stressing me out? This is a more compassionate way to hold falling short of those goals.

When assessing assessment for yourself, you might consider criteria that make sense for you and your

practice. I look to the suttas for ideas about how maturity is assessed. If you examine the end of the path as described in the discourses, they offer some pretty clear guidelines. Ethical purity is a significant one. How we relate to what's happening in our minds. And absolute trust in the Dharma.

I'm going to read a little bit from the Samyutta Nikaya. It's a conversation between one of the Buddha's biggest lay disciples, a man named Anathapindika, and Sariputta, one of the Buddha's most trusted senior disciples and teachers. In this particular vignette, Anathapindika is experiencing such severe pain he feels like his head is being crushed. He's not having a good day. Sariputta consoles him by reminding him that as a stream-enterer—someone who's already partially awake—he's utterly free of the bad qualities that lead to states of woe. And then he reminds Anathapindika that he possesses four very important factors.

Unwavering confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and the virtues dear to the noble ones—which means following all the lay precepts of not killing, not stealing, not becoming intoxicated, not using sexuality in an unwise way, and not lying. Moreover, he's certain to reach the fruits of the path.

I quote that briefly because it gives a picture of what's valued here: trust, ethical development, and a commitment to awakening itself are some of the pieces that are held there.

For me personally, I've got some others that I use, based on that framework. I assess my level of altruism—my willingness to serve, to offer, my generosity. I look at the strength of greed, hate, and delusion in my mind, as Andrea Fella talked about. It's usually rather humbling to examine. And I notice whether that's weakening, and how I'm relating to it. Can I just be with it compassionately and notice what's happening? Or does there have to be judgment—second, third, fourth arrows in addition to the clear seeing? The ability to meet suffering with compassion, to either do that or not, is for me a very good marker of how my practice is progressing on any given day.

And perhaps most important of all: What is the trail I'm leaving behind me in the world? What is my wake, inside my heart and outside? That's a pretty good one for me. It doesn't matter how good I feel on the cushion if what's happening off the cushion isn't so helpful.

The most important thing these days, though, has become to hold things lightly. Any more, it's just more and more about the joy of being on the path itself and noticing the contentment of that.

So in closing, I want to encourage you, in considering assessing your practice or setting new goals, to keep in mind conditionality. Notice how you're relating to your practice. Hold things lightly. Thanissaro Bhikkhu once told me to hold insights as sticky notes, so they can always be revised later. And above all, notice those choice points. And don't take it personally—any of it.

After sitting quietly for a few minutes, someone asked about wise reflection—one of the terms I had used—and whether it comes about through invitation or naturally emerges in meditation.

It can go either way, in terms of being invited or just emerging. What I've found for myself is that when the mind gets quiet enough, a certain kind of reflective capacity is just naturally there, and I allow space for that. So that's one form of wise reflection.

One of the most useful things in my practice—it happened sometime when I was in Burma, I don't actually remember which teacher invited this—was being told to take a few minutes at the end of meditation and schedule a date with yourself for wise reflection. Reflect back on how that meditation was, not from this point of I, me, and mine, but asking: What conditions arose? What went away? What strengthened? How was whatever you're working on? How was the concentration? How was the awareness? Allow time to use our natural intelligence as part of this practice.

It felt very liberating for me at the time to be invited to use that part of our minds that often just sort of gets quieted down—to reflect back after the fact.

Another question came about the Buddha's very succinct teaching that there are three goals in Buddhism: to abstain from evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify the mind. "This is the teaching of all the Buddhas" is sort of the ending refrain. The question was essentially: this is too many goals—how can we simplify this?

I think it's a beautiful question. I would encourage you to ponder for yourself if any of those goals hold the other two inside of them, and if you can use one as your North Star. I'm saying that not to be tricky, but because I've found that the practice is kind of holographic. If you look deeply enough into sila, the rest of the path unfolds. If you look deeply enough into bhavana, or what you were calling samadhi—meditation—the rest of the path unfolds. And so it is for all of them.

To allow yourself one simple goal can be a beautiful thing if it unfolds enough of what's important to you.

One of your challenges in the past has been considering goals, whatever they are, to be about I, me, and mine—having them be something concrete that's about your experience, your insight, your attainment. And what you've discovered, it sounds like quite beautifully, is that instead of thinking in terms of mine, you think in terms of this reservoir of peace, this reservoir of freedom from suffering that is available if you simply stop practicing clinging, if you stop practicing suffering. So there's a sense of abundance, right? That's very much about the letting go process.

I'm curious—does anybody else have thoughts on how you've used assessments or goals that's been helpful or not so helpful?

So you're noticing some clinging with your daily life practice, and it's around an app that gives you the number of days you've practiced in a row. You're noticing that if you don't sit today, it's going to ruin your record, your number of consecutive sits. I'm not sure how much that's clinging and how much it's skillful means. It sounds like a little bit of both, and that's it—that's exactly right.

There's craving that leads to the end of craving. There's desire that leads to the end of craving. The entire Eightfold Path is based on having certain kinds of desires, some of which are more wholesome than others at any given point. And in general, the principle is this: anytime we can trade a form of clinging or craving for a more wholesome form, we're going in the right direction. Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls this "trading candy for gold"—slowly trading the less virtuous motivation or the less virtuous feedback or experience for the more virtuous one.

We start where we're at. And if having an orientation towards making it to 365 days straight is helpful for you, that's where you're at. You're also commenting that using this technology and this form of motivation has helped you meditate every day, and that short periods many times accrue more benefit than sporadic longer sits—which has been my experience over time as well.

The observation here is that another way of relating to a milestone, besides picking it up and hauling it with you, is to be nourished by the fact that it happened and to allow it to build confidence. This is incredibly helpful. To me, conditionality and confidence can go hand in hand. It's confidence in the practice as it moves through your body, your heart, your mind. All of us are the Dharma. The Dharma expresses through each of our bodies and hearts and minds. And it's completely wholesome to have confidence in that, to let it be something that buoys you. It doesn't have to be a form of clinging. It can simply be growth in understanding the capacity of this individual to embody the Dharma.

Thank you all so much for your time and attention. It's been a pleasure to be with you.

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