

The Six Stages of Practice

The path of practice is clear and simple. When we don't understand it, however, it can seem confusing and pointless. It's a bit like learning to play the piano. Early in my piano training a teacher told me that to become a better pianist, I should practice the sequence of C, E, G over and over again, five thousand times. I wasn't given any reason; I was just told to do it.

Since I was a good girl when I was young, I probably did this without understanding why it was necessary. But we're not all good girls and boys. So I want to present the "why" of practice, by going through the steps of the path we have to take—why all the tedious, repetitive work is necessary. All of my talks are about aspects of this path; this is an overview, to put things into that perspective in an orderly way. Most persons who have not engaged in any sort of a practice (many people are practicing in their own way, whether or not they are students of Zen) are in what I call the prepath. That was certainly true of me before I began to practice. To be in the prepath means to be wholly caught up in our emotional reactions to life, in the view that life is happening to us. We feel out of control, stuck in what seems a bewildering mess. This may often be true for those who practice as well. Most of us revert at times into this painful confusion.

The Ox-herding Pictures illustrate this point; we may work through the later stages and then under stress still jump back to an earlier stage. Sometimes we jump way back to the prepath, where we're totally caught in our reactions. This reversion is neither good nor bad, just something that we do.

To be caught wholly in the prepath, however, is to have no inkling that there is any other way to see life. We step onto the path of practice when we begin to recognize our emotional reactions—for example, that we are getting angry and beginning to create chaos. We begin to discover how much fear we have or how often we have mean or jealous thoughts.

The first stage of practice is this process of becoming aware of our feelings and internal reactions. Labeling our thoughts helps us to do this. It's important to be consistent, however; otherwise, we will miss much of what goes on in our thoughts and feelings. We need to observe it all. The first six months or year of practice can be quite painful because we begin to see ourselves more clearly and recognize what we're really doing. We label thoughts, such as "I wish he'd just disappear!" and "I can't stand the way she fixes her pillows!" In an intensive retreat, such thoughts are likely to multiply as we become tired and irritable. In the first six months to a year, opening up to ourselves can be a major shock. Though this is the first stage of practice, elements of it continue into ten or fifteen years of practice, as we continue to see more and more of ourselves.

· The Ox-herding Pictures: a traditional series of drawings depicting the progress of

In the second stage, which typically begins from two to five years into practice, we are beginning to break down the emotional states into their physical and mental components. As we continue to label and as we begin to know what it means to experience ourselves, our bodies, and what we call the external world, the emotional states slowly begin to break down. They never entirely disappear. At any point we can—and often do—dive right back to the previous stage. Still, we're beginning the next stage. The demarcation between stages is never precise, of course; each flows into the next. It's a matter of emphasis.

Stage one is beginning to recognize what's going on and the harm it does. In stage two, we're motivated to break down the emotional reactions. In stage three, we begin to encounter some moments of pure experiencing without self-centered thought, just pure experience itself. In some Zen centers, such states are sometimes called enlightenment experiences.

In stage four, we slowly move more consistently into a nondual state of living where the basis is experiential, instead of being dominated by false thinking. It's important to remember that there are years and years of practice involved in all of these stages.

In stage five, eighty to ninety percent of one's life is lived from an experiential base. Life is quite different than it used to be. We can say that such a life is one of no-self, because the little self—the emotional stuff that we've been seeing through and breaking down—is largely gone. Prepath living, being caught in everything and stuck in one's emotional reactions, is now impossible. Even if one wanted to revert from stage five to a prepath state, one couldn't do it. In stage five, compassion and appreciation for life and for other people are much stronger. At stage five, it's possible to be a teacher, helping others along the path. Those who have reached stage five are probably already teachers in one way or another. Sentences such as "I am nothing" (and "Therefore I am everything") are no longer meaningless phrases from some book, but things one knows intuitively. Such knowledge is nothing special or strange.

Theoretically, there is a sixth stage, that of buddhahood, where purely experiential living is one hundred percent. I don't know about that, and I doubt that anybody fully achieves this stage.

By far the most difficult jump to make is from stage one to stage two. We must first become aware of our emotional reactions and our body tension, how we carry on about everything in our lives, even if we conceal our reactions. We have to move into clear awareness through labeling our thoughts and beginning to feel the tension in the body. We resist doing this work because it begins to tear apart who we think we are. At this stage it helps to be aware of our basic temperament, our strategy for coping with pressure in our lives. Therapy can also be useful at this stage, if it's intelligent therapy. Good therapy helps us to increase our awareness. Unfortunately,

truly good therapists are somewhat rare; much of therapy is not intelligent and even encourages blaming others.

On this battleground of struggle from stage one to stage two, we begin to realize that we have a choice. What is that choice? One is to refuse to practice: "I'm not going to label these thoughts; it's boring. I'm going to just sit here and dream about something pleasant." The choice is to stay stuck and continue to suffer (which unfortunately means that we will make others suffer also)—or to find the courage to change. Where do we get the courage? The courage increases as our practice continues and we begin to be aware of our own suffering and (if we're really persistent) the suffering we're causing other people. We begin to see that if we refuse to do battle here, we do harm to life. We have to make a choice between living a dramatic but self-centered life and a life that is based upon practice. To move with any degree of solidity from stage one to stage two means that our drama slowly has to come to an end. From the standpoint of the little self, that's a tremendous sacrifice.

When we struggle between stages one and two, we make emotional judgments: "He really makes me angry!" "I feel rejected." "I feel hurt." "I feel annoyed and resentful." "I feel vengeful." Such sentences come shooting out of our emotions. It's all very juicy and even seductive: we get a first-rate drama going about our victimization in life, what's happened to us, how bad it all is. Despite our misery, we really love being the center of it all: "I feel depressed." "I feel bored." "I feel irritable." "I feel excited." This is our personal drama. We all have our versions of a personal drama, and it takes years of practice before we're willing seriously to consider moving away from them. People move at different speeds because of differences in background, in strength, and in determination. Still, if we're persistent, we will begin to shift from stage one to stage two.

As we move increasingly into the second stage, there begin to be more and more periods when we find ourselves saying "Oh, it's okay. I don't know why I thought that was such a problem." We find that we see everything with increasing compassion. That process is never complete or final; at any point we can dive back into stage one. Still, on the whole, our appreciation increases, and we find that we can enjoy people whom formerly we couldn't stand. In a good practice there is an almost inexorable movement, but we must be willing to spend as long as it takes at each step. The process cannot be rushed.

So long as we insist upon the emotional judgments I mentioned above (and there are endless variations), we can be sure we haven't moved firmly into stage two. If we still believe that another person makes us angry, for example, we need to recognize exactly where our work is. Our ego is very powerful and insistent. As we move next into stage three, we're slowly moving out of a dualistic state of judging—having thoughts, emotions, and opinions about ourselves and others, and about everything else in the world as well—toward a more nondual and satisfying

life. Husbands and wives fight less with one another; we begin to let our kids alone a bit more; problems that we're facing ease as we more readily sense what is the appropriate thing to do. Something is really changing. How long does all this take? Five years? Ten years? It depends on the person.

The continuum of practice could be divided in different ways. We could simplify the analysis with an analogy: first there is the soil, which is whatever we are at this moment in time. The soil may be clay or sand, or rich with loam and compost. It may attract practically no worms or many worms, depending on its richness. The soil is neither good nor bad; it's what we are given to work with. We have practically no control over what our parents gave us in the way of heredity and conditioning. We can't be anything else than what we are, right at this moment. We have things to learn, of course; but at any given point, we are who we are. To think we should be anything else is ridiculous. We simply practice with what we are. That's the soil. Working with the soil—cultivation—covers what I have called stages two through four. We work with what the ground is—the seeds, the compost, the worms— weeding, pruning, using natural methods to produce a good crop.

From the soil and its cultivation comes the harvest, which begins to be strongly evident in stage four and increases thereafter. The harvest is joy and peace. People complain to me, "There's no joy in my practice yet," as if I should give it to them. Who gives us that joy? We give it to ourselves, through our unrelenting practice. It's not something we can expect or demand. It shows up when it shows up. A life of joy doesn't mean that we're always happy, happy, happy. It means simply that life is rich and interesting. We may even hate certain aspects of living, but it's more and more satisfying to live on the whole. We no longer fight life.

To summarize: The first stage is becoming aware of what we are emotionally, including our desire to control. The second stage is breaking down the emotions into their physical and mental components. When this process becomes a bit more advanced, in the third stage we begin to have some moments of pure experiencing. The first stage is now quite remote. In the fourth stage, we move more fully from the effort of practice into experiential living. In the fifth stage, the experiential life is now strongly established. One's life is eighty to ninety percent experiential. Prepath living—being caught in our emotions and taking them out on others, thinking that others are to blame for our troubles—is impossible in this stage. From stage two on, compassion and appreciation begin to grow.

STUDENT : Your description of the stages of practice is helpful. It's like a map: it doesn't tell us how to get there, but it lets us know where we are along the way.

JOKO : How one "gets there" depends on the individual. We're all different, and ego patterns differ from person to person. Still, it's helpful to have a picture of the overall pattern. What I have described is similar to the ten Ox-herding Pictures of classical Zen, but it's couched in more psychological terms because psychological

approaches are more familiar to us in this day and age. Fundamentally, however, practice is practice; it takes everything we've got. We simply have to do it. C, E, G. C, E, G. C, E, G.

Dharma Discussion:

1. "To be in the prepath means to be wholly caught up in our emotional reactions to life, in the view that life is happening to us. We feel out of control, stuck in what seems a bewildering mess. This may often be true for those who practice as well. Most of us revert at times into this painful confusion."

Is this observation consistent with your own experience with practice? If so, how?

2. "To summarize: The first stage is becoming aware of what we are emotionally, including our desire to control. The second stage is breaking down the emotions into their physical and mental components. When this process becomes a bit more advanced, in the third stage we begin to have some moments of pure experiencing. The first stage is now quite remote. In the fourth stage, we move more fully from the effort of practice into experiential living. In the fifth stage, the experiential life is now strongly established. One's life is eighty to ninety percent experiential. Prepath living—being caught in our emotions and taking them out on others, thinking that others are to blame for our troubles—is impossible in this stage. From stage two on, compassion and appreciation begin to grow."

-Joko

Overall, do you agree with Joko's student that her description of the "6 stages of practice" are helpful? One critique, for some, might be that this psychological developmental model of practice creates too many expectations about practice. What do you think?