

The Path of Mistakes

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An essential aspect of Buddhist practice is that we have to learn how to make use of things we'll eventually have to learn how to let go of. We know that at some point the practice involves letting go of desire. But we need to cultivate skillful desire to get to that point. Ultimately the practice leads to the total end of fabrication, but the noble eightfold path is a type of fabrication. As the Buddha once said, it's the ultimate level of fabrication. In fact when you look at the factors of the path you realize that they're made up of the aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness.

These all have to play a role in the path, which means we have to learn how to change our attitude toward the aggregates. Instead of just clinging to them as us or ours, we learn how to use them as elements in the path. The important point here is to realize that these things have to be used in a skillful way.

When you come to the path, it's useful to reflect on skills you've developed in the past—as an artist, a cook, a carpenter, or a musician. Whatever skills you've worked on in the past, it's good to reflect on how you became skillful, and particularly how you learned how to deal with mistakes.

Learning from your mistakes is essential to developing any kind of skill. It's expected that you're going to make mistakes. The teacher tries to help you avoid the really unnecessary ones by pointing them out in advance. In other words, some mistakes are more avoidable than others. But a large part of the practice lies in learning how to learn from your mistakes and not get knocked off course by them.

We all like to hear that there's a stage in the practice when you finally attain a certain level of awareness, a certain level of insight, and it's guaranteed that from that point on nothing you might do would be a mistake. You may have heard about the "choicelessness" of the path: You finally get on the path and realize that there's only one thing to do. If you just do what the path tells you to do, or what seems right at any one time, you're guaranteed that there will be no mistakes. But that's not the way it works. Even arahants make mistakes. Their virtues in terms of the basics of a virtuous life—the five precepts—are unshakeable. They don't make those mistakes any more, but simple mistakes in saying the wrong thing to the wrong person: That's human. It has nothing to do

with defilements of the mind. It's simply the fact that we're human beings with limitations.

What's different about arahants is that they continue to learn from their mistakes. They don't get knocked off course by them because they have no conceit that's going to be challenged by the mistake, destroyed by the mistake, or feel threatened by the mistake. But for those of us on the path, that's an issue we still have to deal with: this issue of conceit, our narcissism. We don't like the thought of having to make mistakes, but there's no other way we're going to learn. This is why the Buddha gives so many instructions on how to learn from your mistakes, how to deal with a mistake so that it actually becomes an important element in the path. There are the instructions to Rahula: When you realize you've done something that's been harmful, you resolve not to repeat it. You also go talk it over with other people who are on the path to see what insight you can gain from them. In other words, you admit the mistake, you learn how to recognize it, and that involves developing a certain amount of perceptiveness right there.

And as for learning from the counsel of others: We sometimes assume that the Buddha's instructions to the Kalamas tell you to go by your own sense of right and wrong. But in fact, if you look carefully at his words, you realize that this assumption has nothing to do with what the Buddha actually said. He said that you can't go totally on the instructions of others, but you can't go on your own preconceived ideas about what's right and wrong, either. You have to look at what you're doing, along with the results of what you're doing and what you've done. Then learn to recognize when you've caused harm and when you haven't.

At the same time, you take into consideration the counsel of the wise. That, of course, requires you to learn how to recognize who's wise and who's not. So in one way it does throw the whole issue back on you, but it's not that you have to totally reinvent the Dhamma wheel as you practice. There *is* guidance, and when you learn how to make the best use of guidance, it gives you quite a leg up.

There's another passage where a student of the Jains comes to the Buddha. The Jains were teaching that whoever kills, steals, has illicit sex, tells lies, or takes intoxicants is going to go to hell. This person wanted to know what the Buddha had to say about that, and the Buddha replied that if you hear that teaching and you realize you've done these things in the past, that pretty much consigns you to hell right there; it makes things hopeless.

This is why the Buddha taught in a different way. He taught that these activities are unwise. They should be avoided because they cause harm. You look at what you've done and you realize you've made mistakes like this. So what's the proper attitude to develop toward those mistakes? It's to resolve not to do

them again. At the same time, you realize that if you let yourself get tied up in remorse about your past mistakes, it's not going to undo the old mistake and it's going to make it less likely that you're going to do well in the future—because remorse saps your strength. The proper attitude is to learn how to recognize a mistake and simply resolve, "I'm not going to repeat it."

The next step is to develop the sublime attitudes: limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. Learn how to cultivate these emotions, because they help keep you on the right track, strengthen your resolve not to be harmful, and also teach you where your limitations are: what you can do, what you can't do in terms of correcting the situation within yourself and the world around you.

Again, these attitudes, too, are fabrications. It's not that our nature is innately kind or innately bad. These attitudes are things you have to learn how to cultivate. They're fabrications. So what happens when you come up against some ill will inside you, some resentment, or an inability to accept the situation as it is? When you look at that emotion, you realize it's composed of all the different elements of fabrication. There's the way you breathe. There are the directed thoughts: the way you direct your thinking around that topic. There's the way you evaluate what's happening, and there are also your feelings and perceptions about what's happening. These are all the elements of fabrication that go into any thought, any emotion.

So, to begin with, you want to learn how to take your unskillful emotions apart. When you find yourself thinking in an unskillful way, when an unskillful emotion comes up with regard either to yourself or somebody else, ask yourself, "What kind of breathing is going on here? How does the breathing affect that emotion? What if I were to make the breath more skillful—making it smooth, making it full, making it restful: Will that help get the body out of the grip of the emotion?"

Then look at how you're thinking about the issue. Is there some way you could change your thoughts about the issue? Look at it from a different perspective. A lot of the Buddha's teachings, say, on anger, are just that. Look at the situation from another angle. Look at the good in the people who make you angry. After all, you need their good as much as they do. If all you can see are the bad traits of other people, it's like being in a desert: You're hot, tired, trembling, thirsty, and the goodness of other people is like water. You're not in some Olympian position where you can look down on the human race and say, "Well, they're bad, and these people are bad, and those people are bad," and it doesn't affect you at all. It does affect you to be constantly focusing on other people's bad habits. It's like that *New Yorker* cartoon of the two female poodles sitting at a bar with grim, sneering looks on their faces, saying, "They're all sons

of bitches.” When everyone is a son of a bitch, what does that make you? So try to think about the situation in a way that helps you realize that you need the water of their goodness. This waters the goodness of your own heart, this change in the element of perception along with directed thought and evaluation.

As for the feelings that come up, learn not to identify with them. Just watch them: “Okay, these feelings are results of actions. They, in and of themselves, are not skillful or unskillful, but the way you perceive them and the thoughts you build around them—*those* can be skillful and unskillful.” So learn how to step back.

In this way you use your understanding of fabrication to deconstruct unskillful emotions, unskillful mind states, and then to develop skillful emotions and skillful mind states in their place. We don’t usually like the idea of constructing an emotion, or fabricating an emotion: It seems too artificial. But we do it all the time. It’s simply that we’re not conscious of it.

So as you’re meditating, what are you doing? You’re working with the breath. That’s one form of fabrication. Try to make the breath comfortable. When there’s a sense of tension anywhere in the body, learn how to breathe around it, or breathe through it, to relieve as much of the tension as you can without totally losing focus. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath: “What kind of breathing feels good right now?” This is an important part of the practice because it teaches you how to develop your powers of observation on a subtle level. You’re learning to recognize your actions and their results. You’re learning how to *read* those actions, *read* those results. And if the results aren’t what you want, you can think of ways of improving them. That all comes under evaluation.

Then there are feelings. You try to work with the breath in such a way as to develop feelings of ease and fullness. There are also perceptions. How do you perceive your breath? What mental picture do you have of the breath? How does that mental picture affect the way you actually breathe? Can you think of the breath as an energy field in the body, that your whole awareness of the body right now is all breath, different levels of breath energy? If you apply that perception, hold that label in mind, and explore the way you feel the body from the inside, what does it do? You can think of the body as a big sponge—lots of holes for the breath to come in and out from all directions. The breath comes in and goes out without any sense of blockage, no problem at all. If you perceived it that way, what impact would it have on how you actually experience the breath? In other words, you learn to take these aspects of fabrication and use them to your advantage.

And of course you're going to make mistakes, but you can learn from them—by learning how to notice things on your own, knowing how to seek advice from other people, learning how to apply their advice in a skillful way.

So, on the one hand, the Buddha gives you a lot of instructions on how to avoid mistakes, but he also is very open to the fact that we're still going to make mistakes on one level or another. Instead of forbidding you from making mistakes, he gives you advice: When you make a mistake, this is how you handle it; this is how you learn from it so you can become more skillful.

This is how the process of fabrication can take you to the threshold where there's the unfabricated. You develop your tools, and, as with any art, you're not developing the tools because you want to take the tools with you. Say, for instance, you have some paint brushes. You're not painting for the sake of paint brushes; you use the paint brushes for the sake of the art. And as you master the use of those paint brushes, there comes a point where you've finished your artwork and you put the brushes aside.

It's the same with the path: You work on developing these elements of the path. Learn how to notice when you've done it well and when you haven't. In that way you develop your skill.

This skill, though, is special. It takes you to the threshold of the unfabricated. But you can't use the unfabricated to get to the unfabricated. It can't be used as a cause at all, for it lies totally outside of the realm of causality. But you can get there through causality, through learning fabrication as you learn to fabricate states of mind more and more skillfully.

So don't be afraid of mistakes. Try to avoid them as much as you can, but don't be afraid of the idea that there will be mistakes down the line. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "No matter what happens in the meditation, there's always a cure for it—if you develop the right attitude." So the conceit that says, "I don't want to make any mistakes," and simply wanting to *will* your way to a mistake-free life without doing anything: That you've got to put aside. The narcissism of not wanting anyone to be able to criticize you: That you've got to put aside. As the Buddha once said, "If someone points out your faults, regard that person as someone who's pointed out treasure."

So learn to live with the fact that, yes, we all make mistakes. Even arahants make some mistakes. But a mistake is not the end of the world. It's a start. It's a treasure in that it's your opportunity to learn.