

No Mistakes Are Fatal

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January, 2003

Our minds are pretty chaotic systems, which is why following the middle way is so difficult. It's so easy for a chaotic system to get knocked out of equilibrium, to veer off to the left, to veer off to the right. Staying in the middle is difficult; it requires a lot of balance.

So it's no wonder that when psychologists describe the workings of the mind, they tend to use fluid mechanics as their main analogy. In other words, the mind acts like water: the way water swirls around and forms eddies, the way it gets pushed down here, goes underground, and comes out over there. Sometimes it builds up into huge waves. I was reading the other day about enormous waves, called rogue waves, that suddenly form out in the ocean. Things come together just right – this little wave adds on to that little wave – and all of a sudden they build into enormous rogue waves that flow through the ocean and then after a while, mysteriously dissipate. It's the same with the mind. Sometimes rogue waves come crashing through the mind and you wonder where they came from.

It's easy for tiny little things to set them off. This is why we have to be careful in our practice. Don't regard the little details or little distractions as totally unimportant. Ajaan Mun used to say that it's very rare that a whole tree gets into your eye, but sometimes just a little sawdust can get into your eye and blind you. Sometimes the little things are the ones that set you off, so you have to be careful.

On the other hand, though, you have to be confident that even if the mind does get knocked off balance you can bring it back. Otherwise the practice would be full of fear all the time – afraid of tipping off too far to the left, too far to the right, toppling upside down. There's only one way of learning what the balance point is, and that's through experimenting. And you can experiment only when you're not afraid. So you have to develop the confidence that even when you do go far off the path to one side or the other, you can pull yourself back. There's always that new opportunity in the mind to give yourself a fresh start.

In this way you can experiment and gain a sense of where the balance is because you know that no mistakes are fatal. You come back and you put yourself on the path again. You fall off... well, you put yourself back on the path again. Ajaan Mun once said at another point, "It's normal for people to go off on the side." You get stuck on the right side of the path looking at the flowers, sniffing the breeze, or on the left side on the path where you're stuck in the mud. But you can extract yourself from both sides.

This is why we have techniques in meditation. This is what they're for. They assume that you're going to go off on either side, and so they give you paths for

bringing yourself back. When the level of energy in your mind is too strong — your mind starts bouncing around like a ping-pong ball — there are calming practices. When your energy level goes weak — you start getting bored, nothing seems to interest you, nothing seems to be worth doing — there are practices for energizing you. Think about your motivation — why you're practicing — and that can help get you going again.

And then there's the factor the Buddha calls "analysis of qualities," which means really looking carefully at what's going on. Often we get bored with the meditation because we've grown sloppy, we're not really paying careful attention, and nothing new seems to be coming along. Look very carefully at what you're doing. Look very carefully at each breath, and you'll begin to see things you didn't notice before.

This is why mindfulness and alertness are qualities appropriate at all times. Remind yourself why you're on the path and then be very careful to look at what you're doing, be very precise in watching, watching, watching what's going on. You begin to see that there's *a lot* going on here in the present moment. After all, you're creating a world here in the present moment, and that's not a simple activity. There's lots to observe, lots to notice, starting with the simple building blocks: the breath, and the mental qualities that are called "directed thought" and "evaluation," the ones that do all that chattering in your mind. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you think about it, you evaluate it. You say, "This is this, and that's that, and this is good, and that's bad."

So you take those very basic building blocks and you put them together in a new way. Instead of chattering about things outside, you direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath. Then there are the final set of building blocks, feelings and perceptions: feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain, and the labels you put on all these things. You apply all those to the breath as well.

So you've got all the building blocks for your experience right here, and instead of building them into elaborate worlds, you very consciously *don't*. You build them into something very simple: a focused state of mind. Now, "simple" doesn't mean "easy." As I said, there are all these other currents going on in the mind. But as you keep coming back, coming back, you're coming back to these building blocks on a simple level. Keep it basic, but be very observant.

One of the reasons things don't stay basic in the mind is that we're so good at whipping things up out of these building blocks. It's like a meringue, or whipped cream: You take a little tiny bit of cream and you whip it up into this big blob of whipped cream. There's a lot of air in there, a lot of fabrication going on. So what you want to do is keep things basic but be very observant, because you've got a lot of tricks up your sleeve for creating something out of nothing, making mountains out of the tiniest molehills. So, keep it on the level of molehills, very simple, very basic, and keep your eye out for those other tricks.

That's where things get fascinating, realizing how you deceive yourself all the time. Sometimes it comes down to a basic level of dishonesty in the mind. One part of the mind is very good at lying to another part of the mind. So you can start asking yourself, "Who's actually fooling whom here?" "Where's the curtain, the window shade, the wall that allows one part of the mind to fool another part of the mind?" Or, "Does it depend on the other part of the mind's willingness to be fooled?" There are lots of interesting political maneuvers going on in the mind, so watch out for those.

Fortunately, the best way of dealing with them is to keep things basic. Just refuse to play along. When things do come up in the mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, try to cut them off as quickly as possible. When a thought comes into the mind – you remember this person, you actually see this or that person's face – just say, "Goodwill for that person," and that's enough. You don't have to get involved in the stories associated with those faces. And in the beginning you don't have to trace those faces back: "How did that image come?" Just let it go.

This principle of keeping things simple is what enables balance to come more and more easily to the mind, for you can see the little movements that otherwise might set things off. It's what they call the butterfly effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in Hong Kong and a jetliner, as a result of the change in the currents of air, later crashes in Texas. So keep things simple so that you're aware of those little butterfly flutterings in the mind. But fortunately when the mind crashes it's not like a Texas airplane; it doesn't die unless you let it die. You can always pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.

This is a good thing to remember in the practice. There's the story of King Ajatasattu. He killed his father and later felt a lot of regret, but there's a tradition that he's going to become a Private Buddha someday, even though he's got some really bad karma to pay off first. Even Mara, who's the figure of temptation in the early Buddhist texts: There's a tradition that he, too, will someday become a Private Buddha.

So no matter how much your mind may seem ready to crash, or if it has already crashed, you can always take heart, pick yourself up, because there's always new karma, always new things you can do, with every moment. No mistakes are fatal.

When you have that confidence, you can experiment in the mind. Find out how much effort is too much, how much effort is too little, how too much activity in the mind gets you all stirred up, how too low a level of energy starts you falling asleep. These are all questions of balance and they can be answered only by experimenting, testing for yourself, finding out for yourself – What's too much? What's too little? What's too far to the right? What's too far to the left? – with the confidence that no matter what your mistakes, you can always correct them, you can always learn from them. That's the important thing.

Don't view a mistake as a really bad thing that you have to make up for afterwards. Use it as a learning experience. When you approach everything as a learning experience then no meditation is wasted. Every meditation becomes an opportunity to learn. It's just a question of whether you take that opportunity or not.

The Buddha talks about the bases of success in meditation: concentration based on desire and Right Effort; concentration based on persistence, or energy and Right Effort; concentration based on intentness and Right Effort; and concentration based on the mind's powers of analysis and Right Effort. And he talks about how important it is to reach a balance in all these factors, because your desire can be too strong, too weak. Your persistence can be way overboard or way too lax. The same with intentness and your powers of analysis: Sometimes they go way overboard and sometimes they dribble away into nothing. There's only one way to learn balance in all these things, and that's through trial and error.

Yeah, I know. We here in America are all busy people. We want things to be packaged easily so we can get the most out of them and move on to our next ... whatever. But the practice isn't like that. There isn't a "next whatever" to move on to. This is the most important issue facing the mind right now: the fact that it's creating suffering for itself. Its every action is aimed at happiness, but it's creating suffering for itself. That's the big problem in life. Only the practice can solve it. And the practice is an activity that gives results only when you're willing to be patient and experiment and learn from your mistakes. So that's what you've got to do.

But take heart. Even the Buddha made mistakes. Big mistakes. Six years of self-torture. *All* the noble disciples have made mistakes. It's just that they were willing to learn from them, and they didn't let the mistakes get them down.