

Learn from Your Mistakes

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There are three ways that we learn.

One is through listening to other people, or reading what they have to say.

The second is thinking things through, trying to find some pattern to what you've heard, seeing where things fit together and where they don't. And when they don't fit together, you ask yourself why. You think it through.

The third way is learning from your own actions. Ultimately, the third way teaches you your most important lessons: how to think in the long term, how to look at your actions in terms of where they come from, where they go. And when you make a mistake, you have to be willing to learn from it. Otherwise, there's no way to learn from your actions. But by and large we're pretty bad at learning from our mistakes.

I don't know if you know anything about French history, but the Bourbons, were the kings who were overthrown in the French revolution and had their lineage restored after Napoleon. Talleyrand, the French diplomat who had lived through the whole period, made a comment about the Bourbons one time: They never forgot anything, he said, but they never learned anything. In other words, they remembered all their old grudges—who had wronged them, who had betrayed them, who they wanted to get back at—but they never learned from their own mistakes. And sure enough, the restoration didn't last very long, precisely because of that blindness.

That's a lesson you want to bear in mind. If you're going to learn from your actions, you have to be willing to admit mistakes and not throw the responsibility off on other people. You have to take responsibility for what you've done. But at the same time, you have to be confident that you don't have to repeat the mistakes. This means you have to take a very matter-of-fact attitude toward them. Because after all, as human beings we live forward but we understand backward. In other words, we see our past but we can't see the future, but that's where we're headed, and it's for the sake of the future that we act. So we'll inevitably make mistakes—but we can learn from them. Looking backwards skillfully is precisely what gives you some ideas of what you might want to look for as you look forward.

So don't let your sense of who you are, or how perfect you think you should be, or how perfect you want to be, get in the way of learning from what you've actually done. If you want to develop a skillful sense of self as a practitioner, the

attitude has to be, “I’m the kind of person who’s always able and willing to learn.” That sense of self is resilient, because it can co-exist with your mistakes. Otherwise, you feel that you as a person are blotted out by the mistakes and so in order to maintain your identity you blot the mistakes out. Or you get tied up in regret about all the many years you’ve wasted over a mistake, because sometimes mistakes do take up a lot of your life.

Think about the Buddha: six years of austerities that were a big mistake. But he didn’t let the fact of the mistake get him down. He simply said, “There must be another way.” He kept at it. He had thrown away six years of his youth. He had learned some lessons, but it was in the learning of the lessons—how it was a mistake—that’s why it wasn’t wasted. Otherwise, those six years would have been a total loss. But his whole attitude, all the way throughout his quest for awakening, was that there must be something skillful.

He characterized his quest as the search for what is skillful, in other words, a path of action, a course of action that would lead to the deathless, that would lead to what he called “the rest from the yoke,” the ability to take off the burden of suffering. That’s a pretty tall order, but notice that the focus was on looking for what was skillful. It was a path of action that he was constantly focused on. He never thought that maybe some god would come down and save him, or that his own innate goodness would carry him through.

And that meant that when he noticed he was not getting where he wanted to go, he had to look back on his own actions: What could he change? What was he doing wrong? And the resolve not to repeat the mistake, and also to try to use his ingenuity to think of another path, because he didn’t have any guidance: That carried him through.

Nowadays we have guidance. The path that he found works. So we’re not quite in the same situation as he was, but we still have to learn from our own actions. If we refused to learn from our mistakes in the past, refused to admit them, or couldn’t live with the idea that we made a mistake, then it would be impossible to make any progress. You’d just keep making the same mistakes over and over again. You’d be left with what you want right now, and you’d forget that there’s a long term you can look back on that you can learn from—and a long term that you have to look forward to.

There are so many times that we make mistakes simply because we’re looking in too short a time span, not taking the long view. This is why what you might call the master narrative of Buddhism is so useful: countless lives in the past, and potentially lots of lives in the future. And the future’s very uncertain, so you have to provide for the future.

Think of that old fable of the grasshopper and the ant. The ant keeps working through the summer. The grasshopper says, "Why are you working in the summer? The weather's so nice, just the time to sing and enjoy yourself!" And the ant says, "No, I've got to prepare for the winter." Of course, the ants are the ones who survive the winter. The grasshoppers all die out.

So you have to think about the long term to minimize your mistakes. But thinking of the long term also helps make mistakes a little bit easier to take. Don't think about how long you've been making the mistakes. Think instead of how you've got the chance in the future to make good, to act skillfully the next time that kind of situation comes around. So there is time to learn, but the best learning comes from what you've observed in this lifetime, so don't be complacent.

Now, sometimes some habits will carry over from one lifetime to the next. You think about those kids in that famous experiment where they put them in a room with a little donut and say "We're going to come back in five minutes, and if the donut is still here we'll give you another donut. But if you eat up the donut in those five minutes, you're not going to get the second donut." Some kids are able to sit there perfectly calmly waiting for the five minutes. Others can't. Even for five minutes they can't delay their gratification. Well, that comes from habits: either habits they learned in this lifetime or habits they carried over from the past. So for your happiness in this lifetime and future lifetimes, try to learn some delayed gratification, realizing that the pleasures that last for a long time are much more satisfying than the ones that you get simply from going for the immediate hit.

The pleasures that come from taking into account mistakes you've made in the past and then you learn to do something right: Those pleasures are really satisfying. As the Buddha says, people who were heedless in the past but then change to become heedful, brighten the world like a moon at night when released from a cloud. So don't be ashamed of the fact you've made mistakes, in the sense of not letting them get you down.

But at the same time, don't deny them. They *were* mistakes and you don't want to repeat them. So you have to go back and figure out: How did you make that mistake to begin with? The ones that really hurt are the ones where you actually knew better but you went ahead and did them anyhow. So look into the mind and see what in the mind goes for things that it knows will be harmful? What's the allure? What was it that distracted you from your focus on the path? And then learn how to see the drawbacks of that distraction, so that it doesn't get you the next time around.

What this means is that you've got to learn how to be mature. Buddhism is a religion for adults: not that we necessarily have to be adults to follow it, but that it's going to make us adults if we follow it. We live in a very immature society right now, so don't let the society determine what you're going to do and say or think. Learn to think and observe for yourself. And learn from what you're doing. That's the only way out.