

Mistakes

March 27, 2018

Focus your attention on the breath and look after it: both the breath and your attention. Looking after the breath means noticing where you feel it, how it feels when it comes in, how it feels when it goes out, and checking to see if you can figure out what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing is best for the body right now. You can experiment: longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. Or you can simply pose the question in the mind each time you breathe in: What kind of breathing would feel good *now*? And see how the body responds. Other times, you have to force the body to breathe longer for a bit to stretch the muscles that have been tightened. There are various ways of looking after the breath. Try to figure out what works for you right now.

Then look after your attention to make sure that it stays. It's very likely that after a while it won't. Something else will come in and pull you off. You have to learn how to deal with that sort of thing without getting frustrated. Very patiently bring your attention back. Be firm but patient. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Each time you come back, try to reward yourself instead of punishing yourself. If you punish yourself, the mind won't want to stay. It'll find even more reasons to get away. But if you reward yourself with some very pleasant breathing, then the mind will be more and more inclined to *want* to come back.

This is an important principle in the meditation: learning how to deal with your mistakes, how to correct them without getting upset. First, of course, it's important that you recognize you've made a mistake. Some people say you can meditate and just let the mind wander around, and as long as you know where it's going, it's okay. But it can go into all kinds of places where it shouldn't be going. You won't get the benefits from the meditation nearly as much as when you get the mind to stay in one place and finally settle down. So first recognize a mistake as a mistake.

As the Buddha said, when you see your own foolishness, you're to that extent wise. Notice, he's not saying when you see that you are a fool. It's when you see that your *actions* have been foolish. It's an important difference. If an action has been foolish, you can change the way you act. If *you're* a fool, it's hard to change. So the first thing to do is recognize that the action is what was foolish, recognize that it was a mistake, and do your best not to repeat it.

The Buddha's way of rewarding yourself—this deals with mistakes in any area of life—is to spread thoughts of goodwill: goodwill to others, goodwill to yourself. For goodwill to others, if your action that was a mistake had a bad impact on others, you want to make sure, "I don't harm anyone again." That's because you know that that the harm's going to come back to you. So a good way of making up your mind not to repeat the mistake is to try to cultivate goodwill as much as you can.

Goodwill for yourself, of course, is important in that if you're down on yourself, if you really berate yourself heavily, you lose your enthusiasm for the practice, you lose your morale, and then it's difficult to pick yourself up again. So remind yourself: You really do want true happiness. Sometimes the question comes in, "Do you deserve true happiness?" That's a question you've got to put aside. As far as the Buddha's concerned, that question doesn't enter into the equation. When he taught the end of suffering, he didn't ask you first, "Are you suffering because you deserve to or not?" Whether the suffering is "deserved" or not, this is the way out.

After all, he himself came from mistakes. He realized that getting down on yourself, being really remorseful about the mistake, is not going to undo it, and it can often weaken your resolve. Look in the Jataka tales, the stories they tell about the Buddha's previous lifetimes leading up to his becoming Buddha. It's interesting to notice that in some of those stories he breaks the precepts, except for one: He never lies. But the four other precepts get broken here and there.

The Mahayana explanation of that is that he broke the precepts out of compassion, but it's obvious in the stories that breaking the precept was not a compassionate act. It was a stupid act.

So the Buddha himself is coming from a place where he had made mistakes. He began to learn from his mistakes, and that's how he became Buddha: by recognizing his mistakes and making a resolve not to repeat them.

Even in his last life as Buddha, he made a big mistake when he went off for those six years of austerities. He'd gotten a vision about the importance of getting away from sensual pleasure. The vision concerned getting fire out of a log. If you leave the log in the water, there's no way that it can act as timber to start a fire. Even if you take it out of the water but it's still wet inside, you can't make a fire out of it. Only when it's away from the water and thoroughly dried out: That's when you can use it to make a fire. Being in the water, of course, meant indulging in sensuality. Being out of the water but still wet means you may not be indulging in sensuality but you're thinking about it an awful lot. It's only when you're dried out and not thinking about sensuality: That's when you can have a fire.

He made a mistake in interpreting that vision. He thought it was referring to all pleasure, so he did everything he could to get away from pleasure of every kind. He starved himself, forced himself not to breathe, tried this for six years, and then finally he realized it was a mistake. The image was not saying that all pleasure was bad, simply pleasure that's taken up with fascination with sensuality, the fantasies we have, the plans we make for sensual pleasures. These things make it difficult for the mind to gain awakening. But there's another pleasure, the pleasure of concentration, that's blameless, and it's actually part of the path.

So did the Buddha berate himself for those wasted six years? No. He just recognized it was a mistake, picked himself up, and moved on. We have the advantage that he made a lot of

those mistakes for us, so that he can show that there is a way out. He himself didn't have that guarantee. For him it was constantly having to use his ingenuity. Once he'd realized he'd made a mistake, what would be an alternative step? What would be an alternative path of action? Only through trial-and-error did he finally reach trial-and-success.

But even though we have his guidance, still we can still make a lot of mistakes. Because part of the mind says, "Well, I can go off someplace else, I can have my own path. Or I can take some time off from the path, enjoy myself on the side with my fantasies." But then we realize: That's a mistake. He shows us that there is another way. It doesn't have to involve suppressing your breath or starving yourself. You develop an alternative pleasure, the pleasure of concentration, as your nourishment along the path.

The same principle applies in all areas of life. When we make mistakes, we have to find an alternative source of well-being inside so that we don't beat ourselves up over the mistakes we've made. Developing goodwill not only puts the mind in the right space but also gets the mind into concentration. It's one of the topics of concentration.

You can combine it with the breath, thinking about how, when you breathe in a way that's comfortable for the body, you're really showing yourself goodwill. Learning how to work with the breath energies in the body is good for your health, which means you'll be less of a burden on other people. There are diseases that come from the flow of energy in the body being blocked, but you can breathe through those blockages. You feel better inside and you're less of a burden on others.

So it's important that when you recognize a mistake, you resolve not to repeat it, but you also give yourself the strength not to repeat it. And part of the way of giving yourself that strength is not beat yourself up over the fact that you may have wasted years doing something really foolish, or maybe just one time you did something foolish but it was really weighing you down. *Don't let it weigh you down.* Recognize that we're all coming from mistakes.

As a famous philosopher once said that we live forward but we understand backward. In other words, we can look back on our lives and see a mistake but when we're looking forward into the future, it's hard to see what will be a mistake. We're fortunate that we have the guidance of people like the Buddha to warn us, that certain things are going to be mistakes regardless. That's why we have the precepts. That's why we have all the teachings of the Dhamma.

It's up to us to learn to take on that guidance and say, "Yes, that really does apply to me. I'm not a person who makes exceptions. I'm a person who's willing and able to practice." As I said last night, develop healthy conceit, the attitude that "Other people can do this, I can do it. They're human beings, I'm a human being. They can do it, why can't I?" Your ability is there, and as for the question of deserving, as I said, that's something you can just put aside. You may have made mistakes in the past, but you can do something right in the present moment. We should cultivate that freedom of choice, because that's where the path lies.

