How to Learn from Your Mistakes

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Close your eyes and watch your breath. See if you can stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Make it a game. If you wander off, you just say, "Okay, No. Come right back." Wander off again, "Come right back." Try to breathe in a way that feels good all the way down through the body. Give the mind a place to rest for a bit. See if you can keep some control over it. It's going to sneak out, but you have to say, "No, No, No. I want to stay here."

You need to learn how to control your mind. If you can't control your mind, it means you can't control your mouth, you can't control what you do. And then you make a mess of your life. Because before you do something you want to ask yourself, "Why am I doing this? What do I expect?" And if you expect that it's going to harm anybody, you have say, "No. Can't do that." If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, if any harm comes up, you have to stop. But if you don't see any harm, you can continue. And then after you're done, you have to look at the results: What happened as a result of your action? Was it a good thing or a bad thing? If it was bad, you say, "I'm not going to do that one again." Then you talk it over with someone you trust to see if you can get some good ideas about how not to repeat that mistake.

After all, we're all going to be making mistakes in life, but the question is: Do you know how to learn from your mistakes? There's that famous line about the Bourbons, the monarchy in France: "They never forgot anything but they never learned anything." In other words, they just kept old grudges but they never learned from their mistakes. As a result, they came to a bad end. You have to ask yourself, "Do I want to come to a bad end or a good end?" For a good end, you have to learn from your mistakes.

And this is how you do it: You look at your actions and you take responsibility for them. That means you have to get your mind really clear, because sometimes it's very easy to tell yourself, "Well, what I did was not bad." You can lie to yourself very easily. This is why being truthful is *the* primary virtue. You do something, you own up to it, because then you can learn from it. If you hide your actions from other people, you start hiding them from yourself. That way you never get to learn.

So the Buddha's instructions on this point are really basic but they go all the way through the practice: that you've got to look after your intentions and look after your actions to make sure they're not harmful. Then you learn over time from your mistakes so that you get better and better at being a harmless person: You don't harm yourself, you don't harm others. After all, whatever harm you do is going to come back. We don't like to be harmed and yet we harm other people. It's not fair and it's not the way the world works. You harm other people, the harm comes back. You help other people, the help comes back.

It's all very basic but it's the kind of thing we tend to forget sometimes. So try to remind yourself that you're here to be responsible for your actions. It's through your actions that you're going to either make yourself miserable or make yourself happy. That's your choice. So look after your actions well.

And it starts by learning how to train your mind like this so that it can stay in one place. You tell it to stay and it'll stay. You tell it to go, it'll go. That's when your mind is your friend.