

Living Forward, Understanding Backward

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As a famous thinker once said, the basic problem in life is that we live forward but understand backward. In other words, we make decisions that are going to have an impact on the future, but we don't know the future, and often we don't know what that impact will be. All we know is what's happened in the past, and sometimes we don't even know that very well, because our memory gets fogged, distorted. Psychologists have observed that most people tend to repeat decisions they made in the past even though the decisions didn't really make them happy. We forget, we thought it would make us happy the last time around, and it didn't. Well, we try it again and again. In other words, it's Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing but expecting different results.

So it's a normal part of our lives that we're going to make mistakes, make decisions that we hope will lead to happiness, to good situations, and then they turn out leading to something else. If we don't want to be insane, we have to learn how to learn from our mistakes. The first step in doing that, though, is to prevent as many mistakes as possible. We do that by being as observant as possible.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to get rid of as much delusion as we can, to try to be more mindful, more alert. Mindfulness is basically the ability to strengthen your memory—in this case, your active memory. If you want to do something, you keep reminding yourself to do it. You sense that it's going to be a good thing, that it will be in your interest, so you don't forget. Don't get distracted by other ideas or other intentions.

As for alertness, that's what enables you to pay close attention to what you're actually doing.

So while we're focused on the breath, we're developing mindfulness and alertness, and a quality called *ardency*, which means the desire that, whatever you do, you try to do skillfully. In this case, try to relate to the breath in a skillful way. Try to notice what in the past worked in getting the mind to settle down with the breath, what didn't work, and see if the same observations apply now. Sometimes they will; sometimes you begin to realize that what you observed the last time around was a different situation or you didn't observe it carefully enough. So you've got to be more observant this time around. But the basic principle is as long as you're observant *now*, you can judge these things as to what's working, what's not.

As you get clearer and clearer about what you're doing in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, it's a lot easier then to see the connections between your actions and their results. When the Buddha gave instructions to his son, he told him: First thing, before you do or say or think anything, ask yourself what the results are going to be. If it's something you've done before, you can pretty much anticipate the results. If you realized in the past that that kind of action led to harm, don't do it again. If you remember that it led to harm but you go ahead anyhow, that's the kind of mistake you really regret, because it's going to lead to harm again even though you should have known better.

There are essentially two kinds of mistakes: blameworthy mistakes—the ones where you knew better but you went ahead and did it anyhow—and mistakes that are blameless, because you didn't know. When you don't know, you try to figure it out and then act on what you think is your best intention, what seems most likely to lead to happiness and least likely to lead to harm. Now, if you notice that, as you're following through with the action, it does actually lead to harm, you stop. You're not committed to continuing with a mistake. If you don't see any harm coming from the action, carry through with it. When it's done, reflect back on what the actual results were. If you see that it led to any unintended harm, you make the resolve not to repeat that mistake, and talk it over with someone else who is further along on the path, to see what insights they have to

offer. If, however, you see that there was no harm at all, take joy in the fact that you're on the path and training yourself well. Then keep up with the training.

So, on the one hand, you try to prevent the repeat of past mistakes, but at the same time you realize there is the possibility that you're going to make further mistakes in the future, because there are lots of conditions, lots of situations that you really can't foresee, in which case you try to go with your own skillful intentions as much as you can. This is another reason why we meditate: to strengthen the skillful intentions in the mind, the intentions that are not wound up in greed, aversion, or delusion. Greed and aversion are fairly easy to see. Delusion is hard—because after all, when you're deluded, you don't *know* you're deluded. You don't really know the truth. The only way around that is to keep your past mistakes in mind and to learn from them.

So a large part of the practice is learning how to take mistakes in stride. The Buddha says you should feel shame over your mistakes, but not the kind of shame where you feel you're a horrible person. He advises healthy shame: the shame where you realize you did something that was beneath you, that was not appropriate for you. You don't want to repeat that mistake. This kind of shame is a facet of healthy pride. It's not debilitating.

The Buddha teaches the same attitude around issues of remorse. You realize you've made mistakes in the past. He doesn't have you dwell on them beyond just recognizing that they were mistakes. You remind yourself that however guilty you may feel about the mistake, the sense of guilt is not going to go back and erase the mistake. The best you can do is to resolve not to repeat it. If you dwell on the guilt, it'll sap your resolve. So, instead, you try to strengthen skillful qualities in the mind—in particular, the attitudes we chanted just now: unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. In other words, put yourself in a position where you can maintain these attitudes toward anybody at any time, whenever appropriate. Don't let these attitudes be limited by your likes and dislikes.

Basically you start out with goodwill. Remind yourself that there's no need to see anybody in the world suffer, because when people are suffering, that's when they tend to do evil things. They feel threatened; they feel attacked; they feel they're in a weak position and so they strike out. So no matter how much you may dislike a particular person, there's really no good reason to wish ill for that person. The wise attitude is to wish that that person find true happiness. If he or she could find true happiness within, the disagreeable behavior that he or she is engaging in would fall away. At the same time, if you can develop goodwill for everybody, it's a lot harder for *you* to harm people, yourself or anyone else. It strengthens your resolve not to repeat your mistake.

The same with compassion: You want to be able to feel it for anyone, regardless. Compassion is what goodwill feels toward people who are suffering, or who are creating the causes for suffering. You don't want to pile more suffering on top of them. If you find yourself in a position where you can help, go ahead. You're happy to help. If you're not in a position to help, you extend that wish—may they be relieved from suffering—so that maybe someday, if you do find yourself in a position where you can help, you can carry through.

As for empathetic joy, that's what goodwill feels for people who are happy or who are creating the causes for happiness. You remind yourself not to be jealous of their happiness. You don't resent their happiness. Try to put yourself in their place. As the Buddha once said, if you see somebody really miserable and suffering, remind yourself: You've been there. If you see a leper on the side of the road, sticking a burning stick into his wounds because they hurt so much, trying to numb the sensation of the itch, remind yourself: You've been there. When you see someone who's really wealthy and powerful, remind yourself: You've been there, too. This should provoke a sense of dismay over the ups and downs of this wandering on.

But what it also means is that when you see somebody suffering, remind yourself that you're not necessarily a better person than they are. And you're not immune to that suffering in the future. So you do what you can to help. When someone's happy, remind yourself that you've been there, too. Whatever the happiness may be, it's bound to pass. And the happiness you see in other people is not a sign that they have

more good kamma than you do. There's no such thing as a single kamma account for each person, and what you see is not the running balance in that single account. We all have lots of different actions in the past, and those actions are like seeds that will sprout at different times. Some of them take a long time; some of them take a short time. When you look at your present condition, or anyone else's present condition, you don't see the unsprouted seeds. There's no telling what they'll yield when they sprout. So a person's present happiness is no indicator of what karmic potentials he or she has in store—which means that there's no need to be jealous of anyone else's present happiness.

Finally, equanimity is for the situations you really can't help, as when someone is really suffering and there's really nothing you can do for them. You have to develop equanimity. This is not a hardhearted equanimity, it's just that you realize you can't let your happiness rise and fall with theirs, because you've got other things you need to do, other areas where you *can* be of help. You want to focus on those.

The trick with all these emotions is learning how to develop them when you need them. All too often our attitude toward our emotions is that they're a given. But, as the Buddha pointed out, you're already shaping your emotions, which means you can change the way you shape them. This is an important skill: that you be able to feel goodwill for anyone at any time when it's called for; that you can feel compassion and empathetic joy any time for anyone when it's called for; that you can develop equanimity even in cases where people are close to you, you want very much to help them, but you can't. You've got to develop equanimity for their suffering. And this requires skill.

This is another thing we learn through meditation. As the Buddha once said, our emotions are a fabrication. They're created in the mind. They're not necessarily a given. What are they made out of? Physically, they're affected by the breath. Inside the mind, they are affected by the kind of conversations the mind has with itself, and also by feelings of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and perceptions—the labels we put on things. As we meditate, we're learning how to be more conscious of these factors so that we can turn them in the right direction. If you breathe with more knowledge and alertness, it helps to develop more skillful emotions. Because what is an emotion? It's a thought that gets in your body. It has an impact on your heart rate and other physical processes. Well, the impact comes through the breath. So if you can learn how to get in touch with your breath and can smooth out the breath, soothe out the breath when it gets erratic or disturbed, then you have a grounding for developing skillful emotions and *embodying* skillful emotions, so they're not just thoughts. You feel them in your body.

As for your perceptions: You learn to look at the world in a way that makes it easier to develop these attitudes. This is also a process that you learn how to master through the meditation as you perceive the breath, say, in the different parts of the body, perceive how it can be spread around, perceive how the breath can be a whole-body process, perceive various ways of visualizing the breath, visualizing the way you relate to the breath. If you learn how to change these things consciously, it gets easier to consciously change other perceptions in day-to-day life as well. That way you can actually turn your emotions in the proper direction.

This has an impact on the issue of mistakes in several ways. One, if you can get more skillful in how you relate to other people, how you relate to yourself, you're less likely to make the particular kinds of mistakes that would obviously do harm. As for mistakes that you can't help simply because you couldn't see what was going to happen in the future, there's a passage where the Buddha said that those kinds of mistakes, if you learn how to develop these unlimited attitudes, don't carry that much karmic impact, because your basic attitude doesn't have limits. There are no limits on your goodwill, no limits on your compassion, no limits on your empathetic joy, or your equanimity. When your mind is broadened in this way, then the impact of limited past events just doesn't hit it so hard.

Even more so as you develop more concentration and discernment: You began to separate the mind from its objects. In other words, when pain arises, you're aware of the pain, but you don't have to identify with the pain, or with the perception that says, "my pain." You can cut right through it and you find that letting it drop makes a huge difference.

Or even just the perception of “pain”: You learn how to question that. You learn to see when a particular perception comes when, for example, there’s pain in your legs. How do you visualize that pain? How do you relate to the pain? Where are you in relationship to the pain? Start asking these questions, and you begin to realize how strange some of your perceptions are. Many times you come up with unexpected answers, where you catch yourself portraying the pain in your mind as something with a will of its own. When you stop and think about it, you realize that, of course, it doesn’t have a will, it’s just there, it’s a malfunction of the body. And it doesn’t have a shape. The pain also moves around quite a lot, changes a lot more quickly than we tend to assume. You begin to see how your assumptions shape your experience of things. That means you can consciously change your assumptions, change your perceptions, so that you don’t have to suffer so much.

This gives you the skill to deal with whatever comes. When you have that kind of skill, you can have a lot more confidence, knowing that even if you do make unintended mistakes, you have the skill to deal with the results. In other words, the more mindfulness, the more alertness, the more concentration and discernment you can develop now, the less likely you are to make mistakes. Even when you *do* make mistakes, you can live with them more easily without being harmed by them.

Buddhism is unusual among the world’s religions in admitting that it was founded by someone who knew he had made mistakes. The Buddha was a human being just like us. Through many years of his many lives, he knew he had made lots of mistakes but he learned how to learn from those mistakes. That’s what made all the difference. This means that he knew what it’s like to make a mistake, to regret making mistakes, to be in the position of living forward but only understanding backwards. And so from his experience of learning how to overcome those difficulties, he gives us wise advice on not only trying to prevent as many mistakes as you can, but also learning how to live with mistakes, because that’s what life is full of. We often make mistakes. If we take them as an opportunity to learn rather than a reason to go into strong guilt or strong denial, we can benefit from them. The more clearly you see and understand what’s going on right now, then the less likely it is that the choices you make right now are going to cause harm on into the future.

So instead of focusing forward or backward, we learn something from looking back and then focusing back on Now as much as possible, because everything comes together right here and now. Everything comes out of right here. So as you go through life, try to bring as much attention as possible to the quality of mind that underlies your decisions right here, right now. Make it as skillful as possible, remembering past mistakes, remembering past right decisions, and learning how to live skillfully with the results of both.