

Mistakes

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They tell of a medical school where they taught brain surgery. And they were trying to figure out what questions to ask at the interview for the students who were applying to study. Everybody who applies to a school like that has straight A's, but just because you have A's doesn't mean you'll be a good surgeon.

So they interviewed the students who didn't do well, the ones who had to quit. And they found that two questions were really good at weeding out students like that from the applicant pool. One was, "Could you tell us about a mistake you made recently?" And if the student said, "I can't think of any mistakes I've made recently," they'd immediately disqualify the student. Because they'd interviewed some of the students who had failed and they were appalled at some of the mistakes these students had made and yet the students didn't even recognize that they were mistakes. So the first thing they were looking for was someone who would recognize a mistake and admit it.

And the second question was, "How would you do it differently the next time around?" If people really want to learn, they should recognize a mistake and then immediately try to figure out how not to make that mistake again. If you don't, you're not really serious about not making a mistake. So any student who hadn't done that would be disqualified as well.

The same principles apply to the meditation, to the practice as a whole. We come here because we make mistakes. We're attached to wrong ways of doing things. When they talk about attachment, it's not so much that you're attached to things. You're usually attached to what you can *do* with the things. You're attached to actions. After all, the mind doesn't have a hand that can grasp onto things. But it does have intentions, the intentions lead to actions, and we have certain ways of acting that we do over and over and over again. They become habitual.

And the Buddha's pointing out that we do these things in ignorance, and because we're in ignorance, we cause suffering for ourselves, for the people around us. In other words, we're making mistakes. The attachment itself is a kind of mistake. We do something, thinking we're going to get good results out of it, but we're not getting good results and yet we do it again and again and again: either thinking that there's no real problem; or the reason that things don't come out well is due to factors beyond our control; or having the magic thinking that "Maybe if I do it one more time, this time it'll be different"—as in Einstein's definition of insanity.

So this is the habit we've got to work on. As the Buddha said, the way you deal with a habit like that is to figure out why you do it. To figure out why you do it, you've got to be careful to see, "When the original impulse comes, what's coming along with it?" In other words, what's its origination?—as the Buddha calls it. These impulses don't come out of nowhere. They may *seem* to come out of nowhere because a lot of them come from your past kamma, but then the decision to go along with an impulse, to run with it: That's a present-moment decision. It's

present kamma, but all too often we're not even present for it. So if we want to learn why we're doing things, we have to be more present. This is why we have to get the mind really still, so we can see what it's doing and why.

Then when the impulse leaves, why does the impulse leave? In other words, your desire to do that suddenly goes away. What made it go away? Why did you decide it wasn't worth it? Sometimes it's simply because another desire comes along that seems better. Sometimes you forget. But sometimes you begin to see, "This is going nowhere," and you drop it. But then you forget that you had seen it was going nowhere and you come back to it again. So this process of origination and passing away is something you want to look at very carefully.

In addition to that, the Buddha says you want to look at the allure, "Why do you like doing this?" Here again, it may be something you're not all that aware of. You may have your formal reasons, the reasons that you would present to other people. But then you can also have your informal reasons, the ones that actually get the work done inside—the ones that say, "I like this because of this," or, "Let's go with it, this looks like fun, this looks like it's going to be worthwhile." And again, the mind has to be really clear to see that.

Because if you don't see what the real allure for something is, you're never going to let it go. No matter how much you see the drawbacks—which is the next stage—no matter how much you see the drawbacks, if you don't see the actual allure, you're going to be shooting in the wrong direction. In Ajaan Lee's analogy, it's like shooting at the shadow of something or stabbing its shadow. You don't hit the real thing. So you have to be very careful to see, "What do I really think I'm really getting out of this? Why does it seem to be worth it? Or more than worth it?"

Then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks: "When I actually do this, what are the real results?" This requires a lot of honesty and an ability to gauge that something is a drawback. There are a lot of things we put up with in life, thinking they're okay, yet from the Buddha's point of view they're not okay. They're things that he would never rest content with. So you have to learn to recognize your mistakes—seeing that "What I did actually had these consequences."

When you can balance the allure with the consequences and see that the allure isn't worth it, that's when you find the escape: a sense of dispassion. You've seen through why you did this and it wasn't worth it. That's when you can really let go. If you let go because you're told to let go, of course you're going to sneak back and try to pick it up again. But when you let go from having seen that something really is harmful, that's when you've gotten beyond that mistake.

This pattern of comparing the allure with the drawbacks is something you can see all the way through the Buddha's teachings. Even before he would teach people the four noble truths, he taught something called the Graduated Discourse. It starts out with generosity, the joy that comes with generosity and then the long-term benefits. Virtue was the next topic, and again, the joy of being virtuous, of looking at your behavior and seeing that there's nothing in your behavior that you could criticize yourself about. Then he would talk about the long-term

benefits of generosity and virtue in this life and then also on into heaven. That was the third topic, the joys of heaven.

But then he would focus on the drawbacks of sensuality. Even heavenly sensual pleasures have their drawbacks, and those drawbacks can hit pretty hard. Once you've gotten used to things being really comfortable, you fall from heaven, and it's not a comfortable fall. Sometimes you fall really hard, really far. It's not the case that all devas, when they pass away, go floating to another deva realm or even come back to the human realm. They can drop down to something that's really undesirable: animal realms, hell realms.

At this point, after having shown the drawbacks of sensuality in really strong terms—both in the sense of what you have to do to get these sensual pleasures, and how unstable and unreliable the sensual pleasures are, how they intoxicate the mind and then lead to these uncertain ends—that's when you're ready to see that renunciation might be a good thing: having a mind free from sensuality, free from a need to keep fantasizing about sensual pleasures. After teaching you about the benefits of renunciation, the Buddha would say that you were ready for the four noble truths.

So even here, as he's introducing you to the main strategy of his teaching, he's already teaching you to look at things in terms of their allure and their drawbacks. And this five-part questionnaire, "What is the origination? What is the passing away? The allure? The drawbacks? And the escape?": These are the questions for insight. Some of the basic questions of insight are, "How should fabrications be viewed? How they should be regarded? How they should be let go?" And this five-part questionnaire is the answer to those questions. Anything that the mind might fabricate—in other words, anything that it would put together in terms of its thoughts, the way it talks to itself, the decisions it makes, the intentions it formulates—you've got to learn how to look at it in terms of this five-part questionnaire. That's how you gain insight so that you're not stuck on things.

And particularly so that you don't keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again, including the mistake of not admitting that you've made mistakes. A lot of people don't want to admit mistakes, but that makes them impossible to teach. It makes it impossible for them to learn. As the Buddha said, the people he was looking for were people who were truthful and observant. If you keep on making mistakes over and over again and don't recognize them as mistakes, you're not truthful and you're not observant. You're living in an alternative reality with alternative facts, but also causing a lot of real harm in the real world.

So develop the maturity where you can recognize a mistake and admit a mistake, because that's the only way you're going to learn. That's the only way your Dhamma practice is going to progress. Otherwise, it's just a lot of theories, theories that take you nowhere. Whereas if you learn how to learn from your mistakes, they can take you far.

Look at the Buddha himself. He made many mistakes in the course of his path. But he was able to recognize them as mistakes and he tried to find another way of doing things. He didn't have a teacher to tell him the right way. So he had to cast around many times. But it was by

looking at his own actions, learning from his own actions, that he was able to develop more and more skillful actions—to the point where he could even understand what it means to act and what it means to find something in the mind that doesn't act, something that's not fabricated. It's only when he really understood action that he understood what it meant not to fabricate things. And the only way to understand action is to try to be more and more skillful in the way you act, to see a mistake as a mistake and to try not to repeat it.

So this is a principle that starts from the very beginning of the teaching and goes all the way. If you allow this principle to inform your own practice, you have a chance.