

Bouncing Back

December 7, 2011

When you're sitting here focused on your breath, you want to put away any thoughts of the past or the future. You can't bring back the past, and as for the future, you don't know what's going to happen at all.

The one totally predictable thing is that someday we're going to grow old and die. So you have to prepare for that. What's the best way to prepare for that? Getting your mind in good shape right now, because you're going to need certain skills at that point: skills of mindfulness, skills of alertness, using your discernment.

And keeping your confidence up that you can face whatever comes your way. You don't have to be blown away by it.

Of course, those are skills that are useful not only for aging, illness, and death, but also for any difficult situation that may come up in the future. So instead of sitting here plotting and planning about how you're going to deal with this eventuality or that problem or that disaster that could happen, just remind yourself, "You don't know if any of these things are going to happen, but you *do* know when they do happen you're going to need these skills."

So drop the particulars about what you're worried about and just focus on right here, right now, developing the mind so that it is strong.

It's like knowing that you're going to have to lift a big weight, so you go practice lifting the weights beforehand. That way, when the time comes, whatever comes your way, you're prepared. In the same way, you keep your mind prepared by developing your mindfulness, developing your alertness, and developing the confidence that you can do these things.

This is probably *the* most important part of the practice. It's so easy for the mind to tear itself down and say, "I don't know if I'll be able to do that, and this might get in the way and that might be a problem." The mind's eating itself up when it does that, destroying its own strength. So you have to realize that you *can* make a difference simply by changing your attitude.

It's like being lost in the forest. If you're lost in the forest and you don't think you'll be able to find a way out, then after a while you're going to give up very easily. But if you figure, "There must be a way out because there was a way in to begin with. There must be a way out," you'll keep looking and looking and looking and you have a chance of finding it. That determination and confidence is what makes all the difference.

So have some confidence in your skills, in the quality of mindfulness, the quality of alertness, that whatever comes up, you'll have the mental skills to deal with it—and that this practice that we're doing here right now is what confirms that that's going to be true.

Now, there may be times when there are setbacks, but that's a normal part of dealing with anybody's mind. It's not the case that the Buddha never had any setbacks or the great arahants never had any setbacks. We've all had setbacks. It's our ability to bounce back that makes all the difference. And that comes from a basic confidence.

So try to keep that attitude in mind: that no matter how bad the problem gets, there is a way around it. Other people who've had more weak points than you do have been able to get around it, so you can do it, too.