

Recovery Skills

February 9, 2009

Worry is one of the hindrances that gets in the way of the mind's settling down. And so we have to learn how to deal with it so that it doesn't take over.

One way of trying to deal with it is to tell yourself things will all work out in the end. But that's not a very effective approach because when you look around, you see a lot of things not working out. Think of the economy or the general state of the world. In an even more general state of the world, everybody's getting older. People get sick. Everybody dies in the end. And that can't be glossed over by saying, "Well, it's all for the best." It's hard to see how aging, illness, and death are all for the best for anybody.

A better way of dealing with worry is to remind yourself that no matter how bad things can get, you can handle it. But that requires that you develop some skills. And it turns out that precisely the skills you need are the ones that you develop by meditating.

And the Dhamma throws in a few other extra skills as well. The first is having the right attitude toward mistakes. When the Buddha was teaching his son, the very first principles were: One, be truthful; and two, if you make a mistake, this is what you do. He told him to try to avoid mistakes, but we're born into a world where we don't have a guidebook. There's no way that every possible situation in the world can be mapped out beforehand and you can be told what to do. So if something in your head says that mistakes are not an option, you have to reprogram yourself.

Mistakes can be the way you learn. In fact, the best lessons often come from having the right attitude toward dealing with a mistake. Don't see it as the end of the world. See it as an opportunity to learn a new lesson. First, once you recognize it, you resolve not to repeat it. Then you go talk it over with someone else, someone who's more experienced on the path.

After all, remember the Buddha said that our intentions have to be skillful. He didn't say just good: They have to be skillful as well. You try to start out with good intentions, but then you learn that sometimes your good intentions are not good enough—at least, not skillful enough because they contain some delusion inside them. The only way you can get past your delusion is to look at your actions, look at your intentions, and see what actually happens as a result when you act on good intentions.

It's like learning how to walk on a tightrope. It's not the case that you get up on the tightrope and you just slide across the tightrope perfectly balanced with every step. The first thing you do is you have to learn how to fall so you don't hurt yourself, and then you learn how to get back up on the tightrope. Then as you walk down the tightrope and you're beginning to lose your balance a little bit, you learn how to recover your balance. That's what walking down the tightrope is all about.

When you watch someone walking down a tightrope, someone who's professional, a lot of the drama lies in watching them as they seem to be losing their balance but they regain it. They seem to lose it again, but they regain it again. Their skills of recovery make all the difference: seeing a mistake, catching it as quickly as you can, and then figuring how not to repeat it. Or if you find yourself heading off in the direction of a mistake, you figure out how to redirect yourself.

So if you set up the expectation that everything you do is going to be perfect, and there's no room for mistakes, you're setting up a situation in which you can't learn—and in which you're bound to fail. The right attitude is that there will definitely be mistakes, but there's always a way to recover from them. Ajaan Fuang would often say this to his students that no matter what comes up in the meditation, no matter what weird state you get yourself into, there's always a solution. There's always a way out.

In the beginning, you have to depend on the teacher to help you find a way out. But part of your skill as a meditator is learning how to develop that sense for yourself on your own, so that even though the mind does get off balance or you make mistakes, you can recognize the fact. And you can figure out how to bring it back into balance, how to recover from the mistake.

A lot of this comes down to your idea about what kind of person you assume you are. If you have to carry around the assumption, "I'm the sort of person who cannot make a mistake," you're setting yourself up for failure. That sense of yourself is going to be very fragile. A more resilient sense of self is the one that's willing to learn from mistakes and wants to learn how to recover so that whenever you sense yourself going off balance in one direction, you bring it back in the other direction. You learn how to read what's going on more and more carefully. This comes in learning from the mistakes you've made in the past so that you can recognize what "off balance" is.

Look at the Buddha himself. He was off balance for quite a long time. In the early part of his life, he was off balance in the direction of self-indulgence—indulgence in sensual pleasures and desires. Those things ruled his life. Then, when

he began to realize their drawbacks, he went over to the other extreme, to self-mortification. So he spent a lot of time being wrong, but he recovered.

In the first case, he was developing a sense of how he wanted something more solid, something better than those sensual pleasures. They were actually beneath him. Then he took that attitude of pride and ran with it in another direction—the pride of not being willing to let his mind be a slave to pleasures, of not being afraid of pain—inflicting a lot of unnecessary pain on himself. Pride was what kept him going, but then finally he had to realize that pride, too, was ignoble; it was a mistake. Then he was willing to experiment. It was having that attitude, the willingness to experiment and to try something else: That was what got him on the path.

So it's normal that we make mistakes in our practice. The important part is that you not allow them to defeat you. We're here to learn the skills of recovery: how to catch yourself slipping off balance and bring yourself back into balance in the same way that those old-fashioned balances used to work. They'd swing from one side to the other. It wasn't the case they would stay perfectly balanced all the time. Even if you put two identical weights on the trays on either side, they would sway back and forth for a bit and finally come to balance.

Learn how to expect that on your path and don't allow yourself to get discouraged by what seem to be setbacks, because progress on the path is not linear. It's like you're training a whole committee of people in here. Sometimes you train one person and he performs in a stellar way, but the whole rest of the committee is just sitting there watching. They're not playing along yet; they learn how to pull things back. So when you find yourself with what seems to be a lot of advancing in the practice followed by a lot of retreating, well, maybe the retreating is due to the fact there are some lessons that hadn't been learned by the whole committee. You've got to go back and relearn them.

The mind does have its rhythms. It has its ups and downs. You have to learn how to read them and make allowance for them. You can't map out the practice and set a timetable for yourself. Again, you have to try to develop that resilience to take what looks like a setback and see if you can turn it into something positive. Check to see what new lessons can be learned given the situation.

In all these cases, it's your ability to develop recovery skills that makes the difference. Those are the skills that allow the mind to grow.