

# On Making a Mistake

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***Enlightenment means there is no anger left in your heart. There are no personal desires or delusion left in your heart.***

In this life that we have we often forget that it's no great thing to make a mistake. In Buddhism it's all right to make a mistake. It is all right to be imperfect. Isn't that wonderful? This means that we have the freedom to be a human being, rather than thinking of ourselves as someone wonderful and great who never makes mistakes. It is horrible, isn't it, if we think we are not allowed to make mistakes, because we do make mistakes, then we have to hide and try to cover them up. So the home then is not a place of peace and quiet and comfort. Of course most people who are sceptical say: "Well if you allow people to make mistakes, how will they ever learn? They will just keep on making even more mistakes". But that is not the way it actually works. To illustrate this point, when I was a teenager my father said to me that he would never throw me out or bar the door of his house to me, no matter what I did; I would always be allowed in there, even if I had made the worst mistakes. When I heard that, I understood it as an expression of love, of acceptance. It inspired me and I respected him so much that I did not want to hurt him, I did not want to give him trouble, and so I tried even harder to be worthy of his house.

Now if we could try that with the people we live with, we'd see that it gives them the freedom and the space to relax and be peaceful, and it takes away all the tension. In that ease, there comes respect and care for the other person. So I challenge you to try the experiment of allowing people to make mistakes - to say to your mate, your parents or your children: "The door of my house will always be open to you; the door of my heart will always be open to you no matter what you do." Say it to yourself too: "The door of my house is always open to me." Allow yourself to make mistakes too. Can you think of all the mistakes you have made in the last week? Can you let them be, can you still be a friend to yourself? It is only when we allow ourselves to make mistakes that we can finally be at ease.

That is what we mean by compassion, by metta, by love. It has to be unconditional. If you only love someone because they do what you like, or because they always live up to your expectations, then of course that love is not worth very much. That's like a business deal love: "I will love you if you give me something back in return."

When I first became a monk I thought monks had to be perfect. I thought they should never make mistakes; that when they sit in meditation they must always sit straight. But those of you who have been at the morning sit at 4:30 am, especially after working hard the day before, you will know that you can be quite tired; you can slump, you can even nod. But that is all right. It is all right to make mistakes. Can you feel how easy it feels, how all that tension and stress disappears when you allow yourself to make mistakes?

The trouble is that we tend to amplify the mistakes and forget the successes, which creates so much of a burden of guilt and heaviness. So instead we can turn to our successes, the good things we have done in our life; we could call it our Buddha nature within us. If you turn to that, it grows; whereas if you turn to the mistakes, they grow. If you dwell on any thought in the mind, any train of thought, it grows and grows, doesn't it? So we turn our hearts around and dwell upon the positive in ourselves, the purity, the goodness, the source of that unconditional love - that which wants to help, to sacrifice even our own comfort for the sake of another being. This is a way we can regard our inner being, our heart. Forgiving its faults, we dwell

upon its nobility, its purity, its kindness. We can do the same with other people, we can dwell upon their goodness and watch it grow.

This is what we call *kamma* - actions; the way we think about life, the way we speak about life, what we do with life. And really it is up to us what we do, it is not up to some supernatural being up there who says whether you will be happy or not. Your happiness is completely in your hands, in your power. This is what we mean by *kamma*. It's like baking a cake: *kamma* defines what ingredients you have, what you have got to work with. So a person with unfortunate *kamma*, maybe as a result of their past actions, has not got many ingredients. Maybe they have just got some old stale flour, one or two raisins, if that, and some rancid butter, and - what else goes in cakes? - some sugar... and that is all they have got to work with. And another person might have very good *kamma*, all the ingredients you could ever wish for: whole wheat flour, brown sugar and all types of dried fruit and nuts. But as for the cake that is produced in the end... Even with very meagre ingredients some people can bake a beautiful cake. They mix it all up, put it into the oven - delicious! How do they do it? And then other people might have everything, but the cake they make tastes awful.

So *kamma* defines the ingredients, what we have got to work with; but that does not define what we make with it. So if a person is wise, it does not matter what they have got to work with. You can still make a beautiful cake - as long as you know how.

Of course the first thing to know is that the last way to make a good cake is to complain all the time about the ingredients you have. Sometimes in the monastery, if there is an ingredient missing the people who are cooking look in the pantry and just use whatever is there. They have to be quite versatile and you get some very strange cakes, but they are all delicious, because people have learned the art of using what they have and making something of it.

So where is *kamma* heading? What are we actually making of it? Is it to be wealthy or to be powerful? No. This meditation, this Buddhism, the direction we are going in, is towards enlightenment. We are using the ingredients we have to become enlightened. But what does enlightenment actually mean? Enlightenment means there is no anger left in your heart. There is no personal desire or delusion left in your heart.

At one time there was a Russian teacher called Gurdjief who had a community in France. In his community there was one fellow who was just absolutely obnoxious. He was always annoying people and giving them a really hard time. So the community would meet together and they would ask Gurdjief to send him away, to get rid of the fellow, because he was always creating arguments and making people unhappy. But Gurdjief never would. However later on, after he died, they found out that he had actually been paying the fellow to stay there! Everyone else would have to pay for board and lodging. But Gurdjief was actually paying the fellow to be there -- to teach the people a lesson. If you can only be happy when you live with the people you like, your happiness is not worth anything, because you are not being stirred up. It is like a glass of muddy water, when it is not stirred up it looks clear, doesn't it? But as soon as it is agitated, the mud comes from the bottom and is stirred up. It is good to stir up your glass just to see what is in there really. So Gurdjief used to pay this fellow to stir up everybody to see what was there.

A very good indicator of where one is in the spiritual life is to see how well you get on with other people - especially the difficult ones. Can you be peaceful when someone else is giving you a hard time? Can you let go of anger and irritation towards a person, a place, or towards yourself? Eventually we have to, otherwise we are never going to get to enlightenment, we are never going to get peaceful.

Imagine what it is like to say: "No more will I get irritated, no more will I fight or reject a person or their habits. If I cannot do anything about it, I will learn to peacefully coexist with that which I do not like. I will learn to peacefully accept the pain, instead of always turning my head away from the pain and seeking the pleasure." Imagine that!

Sometimes people think that if you do not get angry then you just tend to be a vegetable, you just allow others to walk all over you, you will just be someone who sits here and does nothing. But ask yourself: "What do you feel like after you have been angry? Do you feel full of beans, very energetic?" We get worn out when we are angry; it just eats up so much of our heart energy. Even when we are irritated or negative towards a person or a place, that eats up energy. So if we do not want to feel so tired and depressed, we can try, as an experiment, not getting irritated. See how much more wide awake and zestful we feel. Then we can send that energy out into caring for others, and to caring for ourselves as well. It is in our power to do that. If you really want to get on the fast track to enlightenment, try giving up irritation and anger.

So how do you give it up? Well, first of all, by wanting to give it up. But a lot of us do not want to give up our anger and irritation - for some obscure reason we like it. There is a wonderful little story about two monks who lived together in a monastery for many years; they were great friends. Then they died within a few months of one another. One of them got reborn in the heaven realms, the other monk got reborn as a worm in a dung pile. The one up in the heaven realms was having a wonderful time, enjoying all the heavenly pleasures. Then he started thinking about his friend, "I wonder where my old mate has gone?" So he scanned all of the heaven realms, but could not find a trace of his friend. Then he scanned the realm of human beings, but he could not see any trace of his friend there, so he looked in the realm of animals and then of insects. Finally he found him, reborn as a worm in a dung pile... Wow! He thought: "I am going to help my friend. I am going to go down there to that dung pile and take him up to the heavenly realm so he too can enjoy the heavenly pleasures and bliss of living in these wonderful realms."

So he went down to the dung pile and called his mate. And the little worm wriggled out and said: "Who are you?", "I am your friend. We used to be monks together in a past life, and I have come up to take you to the heaven realms where life is wonderful and blissful." But the worm said: "Go away, get lost!" "But I am your friend, and I live in the heaven realms," and he described the heaven realms to him. But the worm said: "No thank you, I am quite happy here in my dung pile. Please go away." Then the heavenly being thought: "Well if I could only just grab hold of him and take him up to the heaven realms, he could see for himself." So he grabbed hold of the worm and started tugging at him; and the harder he tugged, the harder that worm clung to his pile of dung.

Do you get the moral of the story? How many of us are attached to our pile of dung? When someone tries to pull us out we just wriggle back in again because that is what we are used to, we like it in there. Sometimes we are actually attached to our old habits, our anger and our desires. Sometimes we want to be angry.

So next time you get angry, stop and watch. Just take a moment of mindfulness just to see what it feels like. Decide, remind yourself: "Next time I am angry I am going to feel it, instead of trying to be clever, to get my own way or to hurt the other person." Just notice how it feels. As soon as you notice how anger feels with your heart - not with your head - then you will want to give it up; because it hurts, it is painful, it is suffering.

If only people could be more awake, more aware - know what it feels like, instead of thinking about it, there would be no problem anymore. They would let the anger go very quickly because it is hot, it is burning. But we tend to see this world with our heads rather than with our hearts. We think about it, but very rarely do we feel it, experience it. Meditation starts to get you in contact with your heart again: and out of thinking and complaining, where all anger and desire starts from.

When you come from the heart, you can feel for yourself, you can be at peace with yourself, you can be caring to yourself. When I come from the heart, I can appreciate other peoples' hearts as well. That is how we can love our enemies, when we appreciate their hearts, seeing something there to love, to respect.

People get angry because they are hurting, they are not at ease. But if we are happy, we can never get angry at someone else; it is only when we are depressed, tired, frustrated, having a hard time; when we have got

some sickness in our hearts, that is when we can get angry at other people. So when someone is angry at me I feel compassion and kindness towards that person, because I realise that they are hurting.

The first time I went to see someone who was supposed to be enlightened, I thought, "Crikey! I had better make sure I meditate before I get within ten miles of him, because he is bound to be able to read my mind, and that would be so embarrassing!" But an enlightened person is not going to be cruel and hurt you. An enlightened person is going to accept you and put you at ease. That's a wonderful feeling, isn't it: just to accept yourself. You can just relax, no anger and irritation. There is that great understanding, great enlightenment, that you are all right. What a lot of pain that would take away from human beings' lives; what great freedom it would give the people to participate in the world, to serve in this world, to love in this world, when at last they realise that they are all right. They do not have to spend so much time getting themselves right, changing themselves, always afraid of making mistakes. When you are at ease with yourself you will be at ease with other people, no matter who they are.

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