

Dharmette: The Importance of Failing

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 29, 2011

I thought I would talk some more about the importance of failing. Hopefully some of you have had the chance to fail properly this morning. I think some people are so focused on success that it becomes a hindrance in their spiritual practice. They're measuring themselves. "Have I succeeded? Have I gotten as far as I'm supposed to get?" Or they have some abstract idea that there is something called success. If they are successful, then they're a certifiably approved person especially if they succeed in their religion of choice. People want to be certifiably approved. We should pass out certificates stating that you are a person in good standing and are certifiably approved in Buddhism. People also feel that they need to do something in order to succeed in some way or reach a certain level of practice. So the advantage of failure, or learning to be relaxed around failure is essential if you're going to do meditation or mindfulness practice.

One of the great American sports is baseball. If you are an exceptionally good baseball player, you might end up in Cooperstown at the Baseball Hall of Fame if you fail only two-thirds of the time. If you have a 3.33 batting average, that's really hot, especially if you do that for several years in a row. But that means you fail two-thirds of the time when you're up at bat. A mediocre baseball player might fail four-fifths of the time. If we did batting averages for meditators – in how many meditation sessions were you successful? I think that it would be a very rare person whose batting average would be higher than .000 [laughter].

If success is measured by being in the present moment and not leaving it once during that sitting then it would be .000 for just about everybody. The idea that you're supposed to be completely present for 45 minutes (or however long you sit) is absurd. Most people don't hold themselves against that standard, but maybe sometimes they do unconsciously or subliminally. I mean I've sat down to meditate and felt bad about myself after 30 seconds [laughter]. Well, I guess that meditation is shot because my mind wandered off a little bit or I feel a little scattered or distracted.

There are a lot of things to be learned from having a good failure. One is to learn what our attitude is towards success and failure. What do we have at stake, and how much are we depending on some idea of success or obtaining something? Some people think they'll only be an approved person if they obtain something. I have known people who have told me that they're trying to have a good meditation on retreat so they can show-off when they come for interview. However, they don't say it that way. They're trying to figure out what I want as a teacher. They're trying to have the right experience so that they can get approved or validated.

So see what the attitudes are that come into play around failure when you have a sense that you've failed. What are the assumptions behind wanting to be successful? Spending some really good time looking at this is a very important part of life. In growing up, most people develop certain attitudes towards success and failure. A lot of people get elated or depressed depending on success and failure. One of the forms of equanimity in Buddhism or a way at being at peace is not have your heart – your sense of wellbeing or ease – dependent on success and failure. Everyone has success and failure all the time in many ways. So what's your attitude towards this?

The bigger the challenge, or the more difficult the goal you set for yourself, the more likely you can have a whole series of failures or setbacks along the way. So you tend to get easily discouraged. Does it tie into a belief system that says, "It just shows I can't do anything. I can't succeed, and this just proves it one more time"? Sometimes the attitudes around failure are self-defeating, or – to say it differently – self-fulfilling. If you have a belief system about failure, and then you will fail because it's self-fulfilling.

So look at the attitudes. When you have failed, one of the great opportunities is to look at what's behind that idea of failure. What are your assumptions and belief systems connected to it? Also what is the identity you have connected to that belief system of failure and success? By identity I mean the sense of who you need to be, how you want to represent yourself to others and to yourself, how you need to be represented in the system of your family of origin, or your Buddhist family. What's the identity that you're trying to play out, and how does that tie in to your idea of success and failure?

I've failed miserably sometimes in my Buddhist practice. It was only when I failed terribly that I was finally able to see how tremendously attached I was to self-identity issues. I saw it very dramatically in one of my first sesshins, a seven-day Zen retreat. I was a relatively new student. I think it was my second or third sesshin at Green Gulch. They had this custom back then that the last sitting of the evening would be open-ended. They'd only end it when the abbot came in to the room, and he would recite a poem or some other wonderful Zen thing. Then we would be given this hot barley molasses drink, which was supposed to sustain us so that we could voluntarily stay up late through the night and meditate beyond the last sitting.

There was one time when the abbot was giving a very long private interview to one of the students. This interview went on and on, and so he came really late. What that meant was that the last sitting was not just 40 minutes long, which is what it was supposed to be. After 50 minutes he wasn't there. After 60 minutes he wasn't there, and after 70 minutes he still wasn't there. In Zen we weren't supposed to move until the bell rang.

I've been told that the difference between Zen and Vipassana is that in Zen if no one rings the bell, no one moves. In Vipassana if no one rings the bell, someone gets up and hits it [laughter].

So I was sitting there in a tremendous amount of physical pain. I was sitting right in front of the door into the meditation hall so anybody who came into the hall would come through a door and basically run into me sitting there. I was just miserable in the pain of sitting there. Then finally it was too much for me – poor little Gil. I completely collapsed in a most un-Zen like way. It was not a pretty sight if you're a Zen student. And just as I collapsed, the door opened up and the abbot walked in. I was a total Zen failure, and I actually went back to my room and sobbed. Only then could I see how much identity was going on that I hadn't been aware of – how much I was invested in how I wanted to be seen and in the idea of success. It was so dramatic and in my face that I had to pay attention and learn from it. Having a good failure is sometimes the best thing that can happen to people.

Participant: [indecipherable]

So I could fail better? Yeah, I was too successful at Zen, so I had to find something I'd fail at better. And I failed equally in both.

One of the things I learned at Tassajara about failing was from working in the kitchen there for a year. Kitchens are very forgiving because you can fail at making a meal. You can burn the food, put in too much salt, or make a lousy meal. The meal gets served. It gets eaten, thrown away or whatever, and then the next day you start all over again. So I just loved it. No matter what happened the day before I would show up the next day in the kitchen and say, "Great, I get to try again." That is the idea of just letting go and saying, "I get to try again," rather than being dragged down by yesterday's failure. One of the ways to use failure is to say, "Okay, what can I learn from this and how can I do better in the future?" That's much more inspiring, I think.

One of the core things about failure is to learn, "What do I need to let go of? I'm miserable, upset and feel pulled down by this sense of failure – what am I holding on to?" Perhaps what's more important than success in meditation is letting go of the attachments we have.

It has happened that sometimes I haven't been successful at getting concentrated. So I'm a concentration failure. But in trying to get concentrated and seeing that I've failed, I was successful in letting go of a lot of the beliefs, attachments, and self-identity issues that I had around getting concentrated. I actually became much more peaceful because I learned to let go of those.

The more relaxed you are at failing, the easier it is to be successful in meditation. You realize that there are all kinds of ways you're not going to be successful – your mind wanders off, you're reactive. You see these things as part of the ecosystem of what arises and passes, and hold them more and more lightly. Be at ease with the so-called failures, and don't let the judgments and belief systems around failure get in the way. Don't assign meaning to it. Just accept that you'll try to get better in the future, and hold it lightly and easily. The practice will unfold better with that attitude.

Also that's really part of the whole function of Buddhist practice to begin with. It's not to get concentrated, or necessarily to get more mindful, but to hold our life more easily, and not cling to it or grasp at it. Sometimes

failing is a great teacher in learning to let go and holding things more and more easily, and becoming freer and freer.

So look very carefully at the ways in which you see your life through the framework of success and failure. There might be a lot of unexamined assumptions behind those judgments. The very notion of success and failure is so black and white. It's not really useful if you hold it in an all or nothing way. If it's all or nothing when you sit down to meditate – either I'm going to be completely present the whole 45 minutes or not – then your batting average will be .000. But if your idea of success is, "Whenever I can remember, I'm going to come back to the present moment," then you're more likely to feel that you've succeeded than if you set yourself up to be mindful the whole time. "Whenever I remember, I'll do my best with this."

I've known a lot of practitioners over the years. Some have it relatively easy in their practice, and others have tremendous challenges and difficulties. I tend to be most inspired by the people who struggle and in conventional ways maybe fail. The persistence, strength of character, willingness to come back, and the way they get mellowed and matured through all their difficulties is quite profound. So if you're the failing type, take heart. It's okay.

And if you're not the failing type, then don't try to fail for my sake now because I said that I'm inspired by the people who fail [laughter]. Anyway, have fun.