

2015-11-02 Benefits of Failure

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SPEAKERS

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So what I thought of trying to talk about this evening is the benefits of failure. And I say trying because maybe I'll fail at doing it. The benefits of failure. And I think part of the motivation to kind of explore this a little bit with you is that I stayed up late last night, I mean, two o'clock at night more with my teenage son who went through a very dramatic failure. And it was pretty dramatic and that stuck with him and there was a lot of emotions and stuff and, and it was kind of tragic for him, but, but I didn't say this to him. But I said, You know, I think that this is gonna be it's gonna be so much better For him, this was actually a good failure, and all kinds of good things happen in the process of it. And then, miraculously by the next day today, the very thing that was seemed like a failure got rectified, it became a success. And but I was so glad for you know, looking back at these few hours of failure, and that the he had to you know, that's he learned a lot about himself. And, and, but I was I didn't sleep much last night. It was a big, big event at home. And so they're all come down here and fail and giving Dharma talk and tired and who knows what I'll come out. So I'll tell you a story. There was a one of the pioneering women teachers in America of our tradition, there was a woman named Ruth Dennison, who died a few years ago. And she started teaching in the 1960s taught for many years down in Southern California and she got to be pretty Elderly and she Maybe her mind wasn't quite as quick as it used to be. And she was taking care of her husband or ex husband who had Alzheimer's. And she was the primary caretaker and she would stay up, wouldn't get much sleep taking care of him long hours. And then she was going to teach up in Oregon. And so she took, I think, on a Friday evening or something for a weekend weekend, so we can retreat and she so she drove from Southern California, all the way up to Oregon, I think in just in one day, just you know, so lady. And there was gonna be this big public event before the retreat where all the people in public were invited to this big auditorium where this famous teacher was going to teach. And she got up on stage and she started teaching and she started telling a story. I think of her husband caring for him and she taught for While and, and then she told the story again. And then she talked for a while and then she started telling the story again. And, you know, people repair if they choose to tell the story to group of us, but people are getting restless and the audience and then one person started getting up to leave. And she said, wait to start your talk, wait. you're witnessing something very special. you're witnessing one of the senior American Buddhist teachers fail. He sat down. And what I liked about that story was, you know, she knows it wasn't a failure that she couldn't remember what you said and she was repeating herself. But what seems to be the way she told her story was her ease or her relaxation. He wasn't defensive. If she wasn't, you know, defending yourself or explaining it away or denying it or something, but she said this, she called it a failure. And in this kind of very open public way in front of I don't know how many people in the auditorium. I was inspired by that. So maybe if I fail tonight, maybe the benefit is hopefully you'll see someone fail in a relaxed way and it will be okay. Sometimes I've occasionally I've had some of those moments here teaching and sometimes I've forgotten what I'm saying. And in the middle of it, it happened a couple times over these, you know, this doesn't have that many years. But over the last 25 years, in the middle of a

sentence that was I say, and usually I just, I just become quiet and sit and wait for something to happen and then run of people Realize that I've forgotten what I'm saying. But I'm just sitting here.

And it just kind of just waiting. And usually something comes back. But I'm not trying to sort of come back, but it kind of circles because it's circling around in there and comes back. I don't know what it was. I don't know what happens in there. And but as some people have told me that they've noticed that that there was very meaningful then for them to see me be relaxed, no circumstances, I didn't know what I was saying. So it was a failure of a certain kind, and some people would probably get tripped up and feel bad. And the fact that I've stayed relaxed was meaningful for people. So benefits of failure. And one of the things thinking about it, I thought about meditation practice now, I hope there's no one who's new to meditation here today. If there is someone new to meditation, just realize this is a very peculiar perspective and would offer and so you know, just take it lightly. If you don't like it, just you know, leave it here. So one of the wonders four aspects of meditation practice is that it's a great place to place to fail. In fact, maybe meditation is maybe a lot of what meditation is about is failing. And learning from those failures. And there's a lot to learn about feeling wise meditation, you know, people probably fail at meditation more than they succeed. And, but maybe it's like baseball, you know, some of the best batters baseball batters fail more than they succeed, right? When they have been a really good bad are really, you're pretty good. If you succeed. You're really good if if you succeed a third of the time to third failure. That's pretty good, right? So but meditation, it's actually usually it's worse than that. So you sit down to meditate, and say you're going to meditate on your breathing. And so you're set. That's what you're going to do. You planned it all day long, you're gonna sit down, you're gonna follow that breath, you're gonna kind of stay with it, the whole sitting, whatever. And you sit down and you get to two breaths. The mind wanders off, you failed at your grand plans of spiritual enlightenment. And you know, and after two, two breaths, your face fails, so you must throw up more efforts, you're going to grow, I'm going to get to three, and you get to one. But maybe some point you settle in and you get to four or five or 10 or sometimes it goes further. But, you know, the mind drifts off, which can conventionally be seen as a failure in what you're doing. So what do you learn from that? What are the benefits from that? One of the benefits is that we can learn, it's like a little laboratory, little kind of just study ourselves, and we can study how we relate to failure. Failure is a big part of life where what we expected when we expected what we wanted, what we set out to do, didn't succeed. So, in little microcosm some of our reactivity, some of our judgments, some of our relationship to those kinds of small fields in that meditation are a way to study how we relate to failure. We get disappointed. We get angry with ourselves, we tighten up and try harder. We give up, we get we despair. We check out into fantasy, this is too hard. I might as well fantasize. There's all kinds of things that we can learn about our, our kind of mechanism for relating to failure. And you get to do it many times. And I've benefited a lot from that myself. My early years of practice, I was a, you know, a regular failure in meditation. And, but it took me a while to learn, really learn what I was doing, because I thought that my judgments I thought, My judgment that I'm Failing was true. And my judgments of myself as a failure was true. And there's a thing where when we think what we're thinking is true. We don't often see it clearly. It's kind of like we take it for granted. It's just like, well, this is true. So another question that I have to be mindful of it, to kind of turn around and observe it, and hold it lightly. It's kind of like it's true.

So therefore, it has to kind of be there to affect everything to kind of rule over everything, you know, naked search mints. And so it took me a while to realize that how much I was angry that I couldn't follow my breath sometimes. And how much my response to that was to try harder by getting tighter and bear down. And you know, I'm going to do this and kind of beating my head against the wall kind of idea. And it and I had to do it so much that I started actually suffering a lot and you know, The way meditation works is the harder you meditate, the less you can meditate. So the people who want to succeed by trying harder, you know, don't do it. There were times I also tried, not meditating. But for me

back then what that meant was fantasizing and be a little bit relaxed. It kind of worked out some of the kinks of the anger and frustration, but it didn't really succeed either either to be golfing fantasy, and, and so that escape route, you know, was not a good scene for me. So I had to learn how to fail and be relaxed about it. I had to learn to fail and not take it so personally not judged myself. You know, I'm a bad person because I failed at you know, following three breasts in a row, wherever whatever I set myself up to do. I had to learn to to not be slowed down by it not to not have that at a speed bump. Not to get this Let's say okay, let me try again. Let me try again, the very Matter of fact way. In fact, one of the things I learned to do in meditation was not so much they started. You start again, but you know, just start over like the beginning. Let me start from the beginning. And I find it very much more peaceful for me to kind of think, okay, I'm starting my meditation now. Rather than I'm, you know, 30 minutes into meditation, and this is not going well and I better really, I have 15 minutes left, I better really kind of go all out. But rather to just start over again from this from the start from the beginning, and much more relaxed about that. I've seen in meditation that I have all kinds of ideas of what's supposed to happen, and that I'm measuring myself against not just following the breath, but you know, I'm supposed to get calm I'm supposed to have inside. I'm not supposed to be certain way You know, here I am a meditator for many years and I'm supposed to, you know, not get grumpy. You know, I'm not supposed to be, you know, in an irritated mood or something. I'm not supposed to be despairing, you know, whatever was going on last night with my son. You know, there were a period of time where he was pretty distraught and, and as his father, I was kind of distraught as well. And, and, you know, so, but you know, I'm a Buddhist teacher and in medicine for a long time, I should not be distraught. You know, I'm failing at this too. And it's easy to have those thoughts. And, but the whole idea of labeling something a failure is itself a problematic thing. So can we ask the question, what does it mean to call something a failure? When we it's that idea of failure is a magnet For all kinds of associated ideas, values, judgments, fears, expectations, and it becomes much really heavy for some people. When you see kind of consciously or unconsciously we call could we do a failure? And is it possible to change the language or change the view of it? The mind drifts off quickly. Rather than calling it a failure, just say mind has drifted off. And now it's time to start again. Is it a failure is a failure at all. An understanding I have of breath meditation, coming back to the breath, that I often teach as a way of helping people not to get caught up in success and failure is I'll teach about rhythms. That life is made up of a lot of rhythms. There's a realism of day and night, being awake and going to sleep. There's the rhythm of eating getting hungry and eating and being hungry. There's the rhythm of working and resting. There's always a rhythm things we alternate and do this over time. There's also the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. And there's also the rhythm and meditation, of being present for what you're paying attention to being present for the breath, and drifting off.

And then you come back, and then you wander off, and you come back and there's a rhythm of that. And that's just as maybe as a natural rhythm as anything else. And that rather than fighting it or feeling as a failure, what we're doing is learning to work the rhythm. And just realize, Oh, you're part of the rhythm is to come back. And so it's more like a massage for the mind, rather than a failure of the mind. If you think you've failed, probably the mind gets brittle. But if you think of wandering off as the mind's contribution to the message, You know, that alternating kind of kneading of the brain matter, here, what goes on in there, the, you know, the mind, that's what the mind does, it goes away, it's a natural thing. And your job is to come back, the quicker you come back, the better massage you get. And the more you come back, the less you're giving fuel to that tendency to wander off. And so you're working the rhythm. So the rhythm begins to be in your favor. And you spend a longer period of time on the breath, or in the present moment, and less time wandering away. So that kind of view that it's a rhythm, you just learn to work the rhythm and participate in it and you have a role to play to come back. Rather than seeing that wandering away as a failure. You saying, of course, and I have to I have my role. Let's come back, let's come back. And over time, that kind of much more generous kind of attitude, I think is

much more conducive to sex, successful meditation, then The idea or I failed, I failed the guy try harder. failure in life in general, one of the great benefits of failure is that sometimes the only by failing, do we see the principles values, desires, fears that we're operating under. Sometimes our quarter we're trying to do in life the underlying motivations underlying values that behind it might be invisible. And when we're frustrated and what we want, only then can we stop and look and see and learn what's going on for us. The there been times when I've done things, and I failed at doing them. Only then that I realized I was doing it to try to please someone. I was doing it in order to get someone's praise. I didn't realize how important I was for me. I thought I was just, you know, doing this activity that was asked to do and fight exceeded, I would have maybe gotten the praise. And I wouldn't have kind of realized what a strong drive that does that the desire for praise actually was. So that's maybe a little example of you know that the benefits are failing, we get to see ourselves more deeply what's really going on. There was sometimes we can see if we succeed, and we just kind of barrel ahead and go on to the next thing. Also, failure gives a gives us a time to reevaluate what is important for us and choose different things perhaps. I feel very great because you should all be squarey I think so those people who come here and appreciate hearing me teach here or something, you should be glad that I failed when I was in college. Because I was thinking about becoming a mathematician. And it turned out I wasn't very good at math or good enough. So conventionally, I failed. And so you know, I went off in different directions. And that different direction than coming here to do this new study? Could it come? If I hadn't, you could have come and studied math with me, you know, some University. So was it a failure that I couldn't succeed in that was that I benefit from it? The benefits of failure. So maybe that's enough, just kind of evoking this idea of the benefits of failure for you. I'll tell you one, just one more story. And then what I thought I would do is take about 10 minutes for you to form those groups of four. And share something that you've learned in your life so far, about how you've benefited from failure. This doesn't have to be true confessions. And it probably is not such a good time wise be to give a long story about how you failed. Maybe, you know, if you want to tell the story at all, maybe no more than a sentence. But the main thing is how did you benefit What did you learn? From that, that was useful for you. Some people leaving now, as soon as they hear we're going to transform loan groups. And because that's not what we're here for, but most people find that that you don't have to do it, of course, but most people find that when they do this, it's really beneficial to kind of stay and explore this together. And not that often we have a chance to be in community and talk this way. So, I'll tell you a story and then we'll divide you up.

As could be seen as a story of failure. It's a story from the Chinese tradition. In Zen monasteries, they eat their meals lunch, in the meditation hall. So they usually they sit around the edges and a big, you know, like this square room, they sit, you know, around the edges of the square, and there's an author in the middle and servers will come in and serve the food and into bowls. And then when time when coppers are hit, people start eating the bowls and eating the food and kind of meditative way. It's all very meditative, very contemplative, very peaceful kind of event for eating but and so they had that day and they had something like turtle soup for lunch. And somehow, we're the head of one of the turtles that ended up in this soup. And the person who got that in his boat was the abbot. So they had been picked up the bowl and saw the head floating in the in, in the soup. So the abbot in the abbot asked for the cook, to come into meditation or something, all the other monks are sitting around the has to come right in the middle and go up to the habit. And that's pretty public, right? Public failures and demonstrated so the ad But push, pointed his finger into the ball. And the cook came over it and looked in the bowl, saw the head, picked it up with his fingers and swallowed it and walked out. And in zen, this is called eating the blame. So, you know, there's no, it didn't defend himself, it didn't explain himself. He didn't apologize. He just ate the blame and went back to the kitchen. So you can think about that problem it. So for 10 minutes or so, I'll ring a bell and we stop. And so the idea is, if you would, we'll be willing, or you can sit quietly and wait until you finish up, but form groups of four people near you and just share a little bit and only share one benefit of how you've benefited from failure. And then go

around and have everyone offer one. If there's more Time, then you have a chance to offer more. And it's something interesting happens when you don't you go around hear other people and they make you think of something new that you hadn't thought about before. So don't you know just do one thing and go around. No long stories. Okay.

So was that nice to have that conversation with the interesting for you to consider it and was anybody surprised by what came out of that or discover something new about the benefits of failure?

hearing other people or hearing yourself anything was new for you

Ma'am, just referencing last week, topic on conflict that came up for me now, how I'm okay with failure, but the conflict is a challenge and I think there's a relationship to the to

avoiding conflict to avoid and but but failure no I don't have the frame of failure I frame everything as.

okay to go through as a failure.

Okay as the path to something else just, you know,

I'm not sure how to explain it. So you're okay with failure? Yeah, but you're not okay with conflict. Right. Great. Great to see that. You get to look at that more. Thank you. Someone else. Anybody else want to share a little bit? That's the here a few examples of something for the wider group to hear a little bit about.

Yeah, well, talking to everybody. I just realized that failure is just a word like this just a word. It's like a thought construct that doesn't occur in nature or

the universe is reality.

That's great.

Yeah, I read a little quote today yesterday that change is a natural phenomena. Progress is an ethical judgment. So I guess maybe that quote would apply to failures as change is a you know as part of life. So for example, one of the great powers People one of the great failures is precisely as to people's use of dying. But you know, people have been dying successfully for for a very long time I knew a man who was dying and he was he was afraid he was gonna die the wrong way. And as he bought all these books on dying, so he could do it right. And yes, so failure is a kind of judgment concept we have put on top of things. Anything else?

So in our group, I was struck by how many of the examples There was something that we called a failure, but then it opened up the possibility of something else that actually turned out to be better. So failure opens new possibilities.

So then yeah, one more here and she can take the mics and mic down the stage behind you. The green light

is interesting how

how much gravity there is that we place on failure before it happens, and how little we place on it after it happens, how easily we forget.

Interesting. Thank you. One more here, okay.

I think I was tapping into some gratitude because I'm currently in the midst of some failure, what feels like failure at work, and it's like, Oh, right. There's going to be a benefit. Some time later, I'll be curious about that benefit. So I had some gratitude and

hopefulness about this current failure.

Great, lovely. So thank you for some of those comments because I wanted to end with this. That kind of way kind of connects to all these comments that I think it's fair enough to say that for most so called failures, they are things that happened in the past, could be a second ago, it could be a minute ago, a day ago, something but failures are something we evaluate after the fact. Otherwise, we're failing. We say in English, you know, failing rather than failure. So failure means it's happened. And I think a very useful approach to living a wise life is to learn from the failures, to learn from our mistakes. But to have a very keen interest in what's next? What's happening now? Given that what's happening now, what's next? And while that happened, but what's going to happen now? Let's see what happens now. And that kind of interest and kind of openness to the what's happening next to the future can be summarized in a little statement. The story's not over yet. The story isn't over. So sometimes when people have kind of such a suffer under failure, it's like the story's over this is it. But the story is not over. Stories continue. So what happens next? How does the story develop and continue as a way of going through failure graciously, and perhaps learning how to get the most benefit from it? And learning to turn that failure into benefit? You know, I think is one of the gifts of life. failures are only failures, life is much more limited. So I hope that all of you can notice your failures and turn your failures into the treasure into some new possibility. So thank you