

Erring and Erring, We Walk the Unerring Path

Ponlop Rinpoche

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If we use them as opportunities to work with our mind, all our mistakes, confusion, and difficulties become an unerring path of awakening. This is the essence, says the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, of the Buddha's wisdom for difficult times. Across much of the nation and the world, people have been losing their jobs and homes due to the global economic decline. Everyone is asking: how much worse will it get; how soon before it gets better? The ghost of the Great Depression hangs over us like a bad dream that scares and fascinates at the same time. Meanwhile, the bickering of politicians entertains and annoys us nightly.

We are clearly living through a time of great challenges, and yet Mother Earth has witnessed the rise and fall of humanity's fortunes many times over. I recall that during the Cold War years someone once asked the Sixteenth Karmapa, a great Tibetan teacher, to comment on that time's worst-case scenario. His Holiness simply smiled and said, "The world has always been this way." We've endured through cycles of prosperity and poverty, peace and war, confidence and doubt. Life is a journey, and it is full of adventures. Some of these may be hard to appreciate in the beginning, but they all contribute to the richness and depth of our journey—they offer the knowledge and vision that can transform our dreams and aspirations into reality.

It is our basic instinct to search for happiness. Everything we do is for that: we work, play, create art, join churches, wage wars, count our money, and occasionally make clowns of ourselves. The irony is that we often end up sacrificing our sense of joy in life in our pursuit of this happiness. Since that is the case, we should ask ourselves, "What is this happiness to which I am so devoted that I am willing to sacrifice so much?" A greater mystery is that we do not seem greatly concerned to know what this happiness is. We think money, prestige, and relationships will bring us happiness, but time and again, we experience disappointment and boredom in the midst of having it all.

The Endless Cycle of Discontent

At some point, our life can become machine-like. We find ourselves running on automatic pilot, without any clear sense of purpose—our momentum is fueled by a chronic sense of need, a vague feeling that something is missing in our life. Nothing we have is enough to relieve the pressure we feel. So we keep on with our superhuman efforts to design a life that looks like the happiness we imagine. We've read all the recipes and assembled the right ingredients, but the meals we prepare don't look like the pictures in the cookbook. When happiness depends on material things or external valuations, it has a history of being short-lived.

When we are looking at failed hopes, expectations, and desires, that is a perfect time to see our underlying poverty mentality, because it is so vivid. Our mind of poverty and the actual condition of our pocketbook are usually not the same. Our capacity to experience happiness and contentment depends more on a sane mind and a kind and generous heart than on wealth. Yet our discontent is like a hunger that can never be satisfied, and to relieve our sense of emptiness, we consume endlessly. We will buy, beg, or steal whatever makes us feel better, if only for a moment. Stuck in discontentment, we become collectors of stuff. At some point, our garage becomes full, but we go on collecting. We don't stop until our basement is full, our attic is full, and we are paying for public storage. Then we have a garage sale. But our precious collection, which we have hung onto for years, is worth only a few bucks.

Similarly, when we approach the spiritual journey with the attitude of poverty and unchecked discontentment, we collect instructions and practices, but despite possessing such spiritual wealth, we still feel insufficient. When one practice doesn't pay off, we go to another. When that doesn't work, it's on to the next. Eventually, we end up back at the beginning for another try. We spin in a circle that has no end, which is the very definition of cyclic existence, what is known as samsara.

This is not a path to enlightenment but to deeper confusion. When will it stop? It goes on and on, in your spiritual journey and in your life, until you can transform your discontentment into contentment: the state of being happy and at ease with what you have, and using it the best way you can. That is the practice of contentment, which, in itself, is a seed of enlightenment. As far as samsara is concerned, our dissatisfaction will continue forever if we let it.

When we've truly discovered the happiness we are searching for and have found a genuine purpose to our life, temporary environmental changes do not have any disastrous impact. According to the wisdom of the historical Buddha, true happiness can only be found within. Outer conditions such as wealth and friendships can serve as supports for our happiness and as instruments to connect with an inner experience of joy, but if we see them as our only source of happiness, we are in deep trouble.

Instead, with a calm and clear mind, and with an attitude of kindness, we can acknowledge the reality of impermanence, which is simply that change is inevitable, and move forward with confidence. As we say in the West, "Where there's a will, there's a way." To exercise our will is to engage the power of mind to accomplish our purpose. First we think, and second, we act. This coincides with the Buddhist teaching that mind is the primary agent, the instigator of all actions. When mind is calm and stable, we can think more clearly and precisely, so when conditions are difficult and we must act, there are a few basic things we can do to support our decision-making.

First, connect with your basic heart of sanity, calm your mind and relax. Then, within that, contemplate what you truly desire and what your options are for accomplishing it. Finally, translate that into action, step by step, with an attitude of kindness toward yourself and

others. In this way, you can start to bring a sense of clear seeing and equanimity into stressful situations.

Sometimes our view of our spiritual path can be overly theoretical. From the Buddhist point of view, there is no reality outside the set of experiences we go through every day. While our spiritual theories may be quite impressive, they can also be somewhat vague when it comes to practical matters. We may be able to speak coherently about the enlightened nature of mind and all phenomena, but when it comes to our experiences of daily life, it can be hard to see the connection. To get to the reality of all that—to actually taste the pure nature of mind—we have to be open to all experiences of life, especially those we regard as negative.

The Moment of Opportunity

There are positive flashes of awakening going on all the time, in the midst of the ups and downs of our daily grind. We may be wishing for something more, or better, or wanting desperately to escape what we feel is a dire predicament. But whatever our situation looks like, there is tremendous value in simply being present with it. Why? Because no experience ever repeats itself. Each is a once-in-a-lifetime, singular moment that is as precious as meeting the Buddha. This is our only chance not to miss the reality of being who we are and where we are, beyond all our speculations and theories. That is the whole process of the path and spirituality.

Being who we are begins with being where we are. Being where we are is easy when the experience is pleasant. When we are in the Bahamas, lying down on a nice beach or going for a swim, it is easy to say, “Oh yeah! I can be here. I don’t want to be anywhere else.” We can be present perfectly in that situation. However, it is more difficult to be where we are when we don’t want to be there. That’s when we have to try our best to experience reality and be where we are.

When we encounter adverse circumstances, we often take the situation personally, and we lose confidence and faith in ourselves. Yet, when we can work with unfavorable circumstances, that is the very time when the quality of our life as a path, rather than a fixed destination, can manifest. In these moments, we can take full advantage of the situation by turning it into an opportunity to reconnect with our basic heart and see the interdependent nature of our existence. Of course, when we are in situations of joy, of pleasure, of appreciating the beauty of the natural world, we should be there as well. If we miss those moments, we are missing another big opportunity. The sunset you see will never reoccur. The sky you see will never happen again. The formation of clouds, the waves, the tide, whatever you are experiencing now, will not come again. It only happens once. Appreciating and being fully present for each moment without either hanging on to it or rejecting it is a powerful practice.

It’s not a question of whether we have opportunities to work with our mind. We have plenty of opportunities, which is why in Buddhism we talk about a “precious human birth.” When the Buddha taught the practice of reflecting on our precious human birth, he

didn't mean that we should just be grateful for having a human body instead of some other physical form. From the Buddhist perspective, not every human life possesses the same opportunities. Our birth becomes a precious birth only when we possess the skills and wisdom to understand and apply the instructions for taming and training our mind; in other words, when we have an opportunity to realize the true nature of our mind, which is in the state of primordial buddhahood. In this sense, we have in our hands a rich treasure. Once we realize the preciousness of our opportunity, we should definitely take advantage of it.

We have two choices, always. We can just sit around and do nothing as our mind slips under the influence of one disturbing emotion after another, or, when an opportunity presents itself, we can relate to our experience and make the best use of it. That's what we call "working with the thought of impermanence." When we realize how ephemeral each moment is, how quickly it comes and goes, never to repeat, then we're inspired to make our time meaningful, rather than wasting it. In this way, our emotions become useful; we are not wasting them.

When a confused thought or emotion arises and we make use of it, instead of throwing it away, we become a real practitioner. We are genuinely practicing, because we are working with our mind. Then our life is meaningful. We are not caught in a vicious cycle of habitual patterns—we are working with our mind to break those patterns, and at this point, our emotions are no longer ordinary emotions; they are sacred. Why? Because we are taking them onto the path, which is a sacred dharma journey. We are not talking about just intellectual dharma here, or the physical forms of the practice. We are talking about dharma that is alive in the movement of our thoughts and emotions. This is how we make the dharma present in our ordinary life, and it is how we can actually see a real transformation taking place.

If you grab every opportunity to work with your mind—at home, at school, at work—you'll end up with many more chances to work with strong emotions than in one hour of sitting on your cushion with some vague idea of "meditation." In fact, your practice of working directly with your mind moment to moment will be much more powerful, because it will really change your mindstream. When you recognize an emotion with mindfulness, and penetrate it with some recognition of the nature of mind, that process is self-transforming. There's nothing more you need to do. When you can work with your mind in this way, you will clearly see its effect, not just in you, but in the environment—on your family and on your community.

The Unerring Path

From the point of view of our own journey, the practice of dharma is nothing more than the practice of working with our mind. And particularly in challenging times, we need to remember that the path is a mixed bag. On one hand, there is a process of transformation taking place: in some areas, we are indeed overcoming obstacles and experiencing some level of psychological liberation. In other areas, however, we are still struggling, still engaged in negative, unproductive actions, and therefore experiencing the negative

results of that. We are not always perfect and our life includes blunders and burdens of various kinds. One of the greatest yogis of our time, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, says, “Erring and erring, we walk the unerring path.”

So, when we realize that we have made some mistakes in this life, or that we are caught up in a fit of emotion or fear, we should not take that to mean that we’re not progressing on the path or being successful in life. We are likely to feel that we’ve failed, but so long as we are working with our mind, applying the dharma in whatever way we can, that is regarded as a success. As long as you make an effort to recognize and work with your emotions, thoughts, and any tendency to commit negative actions, you are doing your work. Whether you fail or succeed in a particular instance, in either case you will actually have been successful. From this perspective, failure is part of what makes up our accomplishments. We usually don’t see this.

Success on the path and in life does not come only with being perfect. You cannot expect that each time a turbulent state of mind arises, the “normal” thing is to immediately realize its true nature. You cannot say it’s not possible at some point, but it is not the “norm” on the path. In the same way, if you expect that each year your income will increase and your business will grow, that your next home will be larger than your last, and that you are building toward a more and more secure and comfortable future, as befits the American Dream, you are mistaking the ideal for what’s normal. That is not only a mistake, it sounds somewhat boring, like a feel-good movie where you know from the beginning exactly what’s going to happen. In actual life, anything can and does happen. That is the truth of impermanence and change, and it is what makes our life such an adventure. Remembering this and taking it to heart allows us to be more pragmatic and courageous at the same time. We need to move away from chasing after an impossible ideal and connect as closely as possible to our life as a personal journey, one that is full of surprises and fresh opportunities to make it meaningful.

We need warrior-like courage to be able to face and accept defeat from time to time, and to transform our suffering and confusion into liberation and awakening. Like champions in boxing or the martial arts, we have to accept some defeats and be willing to learn from them in order to be victorious in the end. Sometimes, when we’re down, it feels like the world sees us as a punching bag, and we are taking hits from all sides. That is when we need to remember that loss, disappointment, sadness, and pain are part of our life, and the lives of everyone. We are no exception. Many others are in worse shape right now, and when we have some sense of guidance, when we have some skill in working with our mind, we are better off than most. Let that thought touch your heart and bring you the resolve to “work out your own liberation,” as the Buddha taught.

You make your own path. It is your journey to take, and how it goes and what it looks like is up to you. Be patient about getting to the fruition, however, and let the result come in its own time. You cannot see a minute-by-minute change in your heart or mind; it takes a little time. On the other hand, don’t think of success as being too far away. Then you might think, “I’ll never reach it, so forget it.”

It is helpful to remember, too, that as much as acute intelligence, insight, or prajna, is critical to our journey, we need to bring our understanding into the world with genuine compassion. It is only through compassion that we can manifest in the world what we know and understand in a way that will benefit others. No matter how sharp your intelligence is, don't forget to filter it through the heart of compassion before you manifest it in the suffering world. Don't push your wisdom onto others. It doesn't work. If you really want to help someone, simply let your compassion blaze.

If you want to get something across to another person, whether it is the wisdom of enlightenment or how to do a job more efficiently, compassion seems to be the gateway to communication. When your heart is lit with compassion and you are beyond self-interest or self-gratification, your message will get through. Your colleague will listen to you. The world will understand you. Your aspiration to benefit others will actually be realized. That's why compassion is often referred to as "a wish-fulfilling gem"—it can fulfill all your desires. When wisdom and compassion are together, it brings heart to your path and the path to your heart. Therefore, when the road gets rocky and your way uncertain, make your journey personal, not theoretical. Make it genuine, not philosophical. Make it ordinary, not religious. Then you can really embark on the path to enlightenment.