

Trying and Failing

presented by Rafe Martin, Sensei at Endless Path Zendo,
10/27/2018

Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by the difficulty of ongoing Zen practice. We realize how immature we are, how little wisdom and compassion we might actually be able to embody in our ordinary daily lives, how weak our aspiration, how thin our courage, how shallow our commitment to deepening realization. Or we may doubt ourselves when stuck for a long time on a particular koan – if we're doing koan practice. It can be difficult. Especially in dokusan in koan work. We all want to be successful. We want to show our smarts. We're conditioned to this by parents and by school. How hard it is to fail, and to fail not once, but again and again, as our efforts to awaken to the koan and demonstrate it's deepest reality, all seemingly come to naught. It is hard to show our shortcomings. Zen's view is that if you can't demonstrate it, you haven't had genuine insight into it. Not really.

And so, we may at times think, "I can't do this. It's beyond me." And yet, let's remember that, in reality, our Zen Ancestors were originally just like us.

You may think, "The Way of the Buddha patriarchs distinguishes individuals and capacities. We are not up to it." . . . Who among the ancients was not a body born of a mother and father? Who did not have feelings of love and affection, or thoughts of fame and fortune? However once they practiced [Zen], they practiced thoroughly [thereby achieving enlightenment].

Keizan Jokin, teisho, transmission case # 3,
Denkoroku (Record of Transmitting the Light), Francis
Dojun Cook, trans, p.45.)

In another sense though, we are right. We *can't* do it. It *is* beyond us. There is truth in this, but not shameful truth. WE can't do it. It IS beyond us. Shoyoroku (Book of Serenity) Case # 37, *Isan's Karmic Consciousness*

Kuei-shan (Isan) asked Yang-shan (Kyozan), "Suppose a man asks you, 'How about one who says all sentient beings are in a disorderly karmic consciousness, and have no base to rely upon.' How would you treat him?"

Kyozan said, "If a man appears, I call to him. When he turns his head, instantly I say, 'What is that?' I wait while he hesitates, and then I say to him, 'There is not only disorderly karmic consciousness, but there is no base to rely upon.'"

Isan said, "Oh, good."

This somewhat disconcerting truth, that there is nothing to rely upon, nothing at base that all in short, *is* empty – can actually give us heart. *En-courage-ment*. It *is* beyond us. Hooray! All we need do, (ha!) is get out of our own bondage, drop our ancient, habitual self-concern. If we do – and it will take work to achieve this – we find that we are right where we have always been, and always need to be. Right now! Awake! Rejoice!

The effort needed to bring us to the end of that road, to do the work and do our utmost and fail – and fail and fail – as we do, is not without merit. Roshi Kapleau used to say, "No sincere effort is *ever* wasted. If you don't let the Dharma down, the Dharma will never let you down."

How do you know but that in that trying and failing you are setting in motion the very thing you hope to accomplish? How do you know, but in that trying and failing lies the maturing, courage, determination, and insight you've been seeking from the first. That it is exactly why you got into Zen. For as you fail, in time, self-concern about failing itself gets wiped away, embarrassment about failing, about not being so smart, or so successful gets taken from us. We no longer even think of it AS failing. We learn to just work hard, work purely and forget about consequences. We learn to do our best regardless of how it unfolds from there. Isn't that in itself worth pursuing to the limit?

How easily the world gives us strokes for smarts and talent, and all the while we know, deep down, we're really not all that wise or mature. Zen practice and koan work puts us in touch – at the least – with this truth, for real. We can't fudge it. It doesn't give way to us because of how we look, or our grades, and so on. It puts it in our face: either you are clear or you're not. If you're not, there's only one answer. Go back to work. Go deeper. Go further. To do that we do the work required. We sit. We question. We come to dokusan, come to teisho, come to zazenkai, come to ceremonies, come to sesshin. We make vows. We are motivated by our own inabilities and in this intimate facing into reality, begin to uncover our own deepest aspiration. Layers of pretense get stripped away. Practice becomes more genuine, and we become more authentic. Isn't this what maturing is about? As Wu-men puts it in the *Wu-men kuan (Gateless Barrier)* in a somewhat different context, "the failure is wonderful indeed."

There is a story in Buddhist tradition that points to the maturing, development of strength, commitment, insight, and

skill that comes from trying and trying and trying again. It is The Legend of Avalokitesvara and it can go like this:

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, "Hearer of the Cries of the World, " looked down into the hells and saw them filled with suffering beings. "I will liberate all the beings in the lower realms!" he vowed.

Through countless ages he labored, descending into hell after hell, emptying hell after hell. After eons of heroic exertion, the Bodhisattva stood up and wiped the diamonds of sweat from his brow. He looked down into the now empty silent hells, and smiled. It was done. All living things had been freed.

Here and there a curling wisp of smoke rose. Now and then, in some vast cavern below, faint echoes sounded as a loose brick toppled from a pile of rubble. But the raging fires had been quenched and the great iron cauldrons of boiling blood were quiet. Sweet silence flowed through the dark halls. Even the raging demons were gone; the horse-headed, the tiger-headed, the horned and fanged ones. They too, in the end, had been released by the mighty efforts of the Compassionate One.

Suddenly there came a wailing scream and, then, another. Flames leapt, smoke whirled, blood-filled cauldrons once again bubbled madly. Whips cracked, chains clanged, demons roared. The radiant smile faded from the Bodhisattva's face. In less than an instant all was exactly as before. The hells were again completely filled.

The heart of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara filled with sorrow. His head broke into eleven heads. His arms shattered into a thousand arms with an open eye of wisdom in each palm. With his eleven heads the Bodhisattva could now look in every direction to see the sufferings of every being. With one thousand wisdom-guided arms he could now reach into any realm to save those in need. Rolling up his one thousand sleeves the Bodhisattva once again got to work.

(Adapted from “The Legend of Avalokitesvara” in *The Hungry Tigress*, by Rafe Martin. Yellow Moon Press, 1999)

Such failure is “wonderful indeed!” By continuing on, over time we gain the strength to become the people we were meant, in the sense of having the potential, to be.

To gain insight quickly is not necessarily the best thing. And to take a long-ish time is not necessarily bad. Sometimes what is

quickly won is never deeply honored, and such quick-gainers may fade from practice without having developed the inner strength to benefit others. When Britain stood alone against the rising Nazi tide, Winston Churchill stood up in Parliament and announced, "Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts."

It is the courage to continue that counts. Awake! Rejoice!