

How to Fall

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A frequent question is: How can you tell if you're making progress in your meditation? And one of the answers is: When the mind slips off its object, you get faster and faster at bringing it back. Notice, the answer isn't: The mind doesn't slip off at all. It's: You're expected to slip off; it's a normal part of the practice, a normal part of the training. The point lies in being more alert to what's going on and quicker to remedy the situation when you've slipped off the breath.

So an important part of learning how to meditate is learning how to fall. They say that when you start learning Aikido, the first thing they teach is how to fall without hurting yourself. The purpose is that it makes you less and less afraid to fall, less and less damaged, of course, by the fall, and also less likely to fall, more willing to take chances.

So the trick when you meditate is learning how to bring the mind back with a minimum amount of recrimination, a minimum amount of self-criticism, with just the simple observation, "I haven't come here to think about next week's schedule or last night's fiascoes or whatever. I'm here to focus on the breath." Simply leave those other things and come back. Learn how to do it without tying your mind up in knots.

In our modern educational system, we're quickly channeled into the activities where we have a natural talent. As a result we don't learn how to become good at things that *don't* come easily. So when we make an effort at something that doesn't come naturally, the easiest thing in the world seems to be to slip and fall and then just go with the fall and plop down, fallen. That's called *not* knowing how to fall. The trick, when you fall, is to notice that there is a certain amount of momentum, but you don't have to give in to the momentum.

You can notice this when you've made a vow to give up something for a particular period of time. Last summer it was popular here at the monastery to give up chocolate in the evening. But then came the temptation: "What's wrong with a little bit of chocolate?" Well, there's nothing really wrong with chocolate per se, so it was easy to rationalize and come to the decision to drop the vow, to go for the chocolate. The problem, of course, is that the important part of

the vow wasn't the chocolate, it was the training in sticking to your vow no matter what. All too often we assume that once that decision to drop a vow has been made, it can't be unmade; you're powerless and have to follow through with the momentum. But it *is* possible to unmake that decision — in the next moment or two moments later, three moments later. This is called learning how to fall properly. In other words, you don't give in to the momentum that leads you away. You realize that you're always free to change your mind immediately and come back.

When you notice yourself slipping off the breath, don't just give in to the momentum of having slipped. Catch yourself: "I can just turn around," and you'll be amazed at how quickly you *can* turn around. Now, the mind may come up with other reasons: "Oh no, you can't turn around now; you've committed yourself." Well, that's interesting! You've suddenly committed yourself to the distraction — which isn't committed to you — and you don't feel you've committed yourself to your meditation. This is one of the many tricks the mind plays on itself. The important point is learning how to see through those tricks, not to believe them, and to have a few tricks of your own.

There's a part of the mind that says it's a lot more natural to take the easy way out, but that begs the question of nature versus nurture. If you go to a psychotherapist, you learn very clearly how your particular habits got developed by a particular way your parents raised you or by particular experiences you had when you were a kid. That means those habits are not necessarily natural. They were learned. They're there, they're ingrained, but you can unlearn them. You can nurture the mind in the other direction, which is what we're doing as we train it in meditation. We're re-educating the mind.

And not only are we teaching it how to stay on one topic as we stay with the breath, but we're also teaching it how to come back to the breath more quickly: how to catch yourself as the mind begins to let go of the breath and latch on to something else, and to just turn right around, without any problem at all, and latch back onto the breath. This way you learn to discipline yourself without the harshness that we usually associate with the word "discipline." We're learning a more matter-of-fact way of dealing with our own mind.

You find that this cuts through a lot of the garbage. And as a result, there are fewer hooks for your defilements to hang on to. Instead of dealing with abstractions such as "my personality," "my character," "the way I am," just keep focused on the present moment. Whatever decision was made, it was made in total freedom, and if you see it's a bad decision, you have total freedom to make another decision. When you clear away your self-image — which is

another hiding ground for all kinds of defilements — the playing field is a lot clearer, and there are a lot fewer places for the defilements to hide.

A woman I know in Laguna Beach once went to a meditation retreat where she was taught to bring meditation practice into daily life by viewing daily life as an interplay between the absolute and the relative. Those are pretty big abstractions, about as big as you can get. And after trying to think in these terms for a week, she came to the Sunday sitting group with a very convoluted question about how to manage her life in those terms. I must admit the question was so convoluted that I couldn't follow it, but the problem was obvious: The more abstract the abstraction, the more difficult it is to see your way clearly in the path, and the easier it is to get tied up in knots. We tend to think of abstractions as being clean and neat and Mondrian, but actually they leave room for lots of convolutions. They place lots of veils over what's really happening. When you clear away the abstractions, you have the mind right here with the breath. It can decide to stay with the breath or it can decide to move away. It's as simple as that.

The same principle applies throughout the practice. Once you've made up your mind to stick with the precepts, you keep deciding with every moment whether you're going to stick with that vow. Once you've made up your mind to stick with the breath, you keep deciding with every moment whether you're going to stick with that intention. And the more you keep things on simple terms, basic terms, down-to-earth, no-nonsense, straight-talking terms in the mind — without bringing in issues about your past, without bringing in issues about your self-image to complicate matters — you find it's a lot easier to stay on the path. It's a lot easier to bring yourself back when you fall off, because there are fewer convolutions in the terrain you're falling on. So not only when you're meditating, but also when you're practicing every aspect of the path, try to keep things as simple as possible, as down-to-earth, moment-to-moment as possible.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang he would sometimes ask me to do things like, "Tonight sit up and meditate all night long." "Omigosh," I responded the first time he said that, "I can't do that; I didn't get enough sleep last night and had a long, tiring day." And so on. And he said, "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it."

As simple as that. Of course, it wasn't easy, but it was simple. And when you keep things simple, they eventually do become easier. You just stay with that moment-to-moment decision, not thinking about, "All night, all night, I've got to keep this up all night." You just think about, "This breath, this breath, this

breath." Find ways to keep yourself interested in each breath as it comes, and you'll make it to morning.

That's how you bring the meditation into daily life: Keep things simple, strip them down. Once things are stripped down in the mind, the defilements don't have many places to hide. And when you do fall, you fall in a place that's easier to get up from. You don't have to give in to the momentum of the fall or get stuck in a quagmire. You catch yourself and regain your balance right away.

My mother once said that the event that first attracted her to my father happened during a meal at her home. My uncle, her brother, had invited my dad home from college for a visit. Then one day, during a meal, my dad knocked a glass of milk off the table but he caught the glass before it hit the floor. And that's why my mother married him. I know it sounds kind of crazy — I owe my existence to my father's quick reflexes — but it says something very interesting. And it's the kind of quality you want as a meditator: If you knock yourself over, well, you can pick yourself right back up. If you can do it before you hit the floor, so much the better. But even when you're flat on the floor, you're not a glass. You haven't shattered. You can still pick yourself up.

Try to keep it as simple as that.