

A failure, am I?

Failure simply means we have not achieved a goal we have aimed for or told by someone to aim for. That task may have failed, but “we” have not failed. If we do not own our failure, then failure cannot own us. A simple way to do this is not to use “I,” “me” or “mine,” in such situations. Identify the problem, not a person: there is no “problem person,” only a person “with” a problem. In other words, we need to deal with the problem: that’s the real issue.

If we think we have in some way failed, it is a good time to turn to the Discourse on Unattainable States. Just read the Buddha’s words here and notice their simple joy and healing beauty: enjoy and be healed:¹

- 1 Neither by grieving nor by weeping,
does he gain any benefit here, not even a little.
Knowing him to be grieving and suffering,
enemies become delighted.
- 2 But he who is wise, when facing misfortunes,
is unshaken, knowing how to analyze himself.
His enemies are afflicted,
seeing his face of old untroubled [unaffected].
- 3 If by speech, wise thought, well-spoken words,
by regular giving, or tradition,
by which he would gain his goal,
he should exert himself through such means.
- 4 If he should know, “Not to be attained
is this goal by me, nor by any other,”
then, ungrieving, he should bear it thus:
“What shall I do now with resolve?”²

The first three verses build up to verse 4, the key verse, which we should constantly reflect on. Of course, if you like some other verse, then you should reflect on that, and then see what verse 4 means to you. And what you are going to do about it.

In most worldly systems, especially in educational, management, financial and power-based circles, we are, as a rule, taught how to excel and succeed in our task. We are almost never taught how to face failure. We are made to understand as if it is a terrible thing to fail, and, if we were to fail, we might even be punished in some way. Then we have been dehumanized and turned into unflinching cogs and wheels in a huge lifeless machine.

Some of us are motivated by such sayings as “Failure is not in my dictionary.” This is the language of power, of using others and exploiting resources. It might seem to work for a while, or even for a single person. But many more will suffer, and a lot of damage is incurred. We might conquer “the world” but we have lost ourself.³

Such an attitude only makes the pain of failure more real and more acute. The reason is simple enough: we are thinking in terms of the absolute duality of success and failure.

Whatever we do in life may or may not have a purpose. There is no purpose, for example, in our waking up in the morning or feeling tired, or worrying or being happy, or falling sick or being healthy:

¹ **Alabbhanīya Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 5.48), SD 42.1: [link](#).

² Lit, “What firm action do I take now?”

³ Dh 178 says “Better than rulership [sovereignty] over the earth, | or going to heaven, || or becoming lord of all the world, | is the blessed fruit of streamwinning.” Streamwinning is our first step towards self-awakening, settling down in the boat going down the stream to nirvana.

they occur or do not occur when the conditions are right. Of course, we often plan some actions, like studying hard to do well in an exam, or looking for a good or suitable job, or seeking a proper life-partner, or even writing something like this. Again here it is not a question of success or failure, but of conditions that allow us to do something to our joy and satisfaction.

In other words, success and failure are really subjective, depending very much on how we view life or what we want at the moment. When we change our minds, our views of success and failure change accordingly. Furthermore, we are also influenced by others in how we look at success and failure. The same conditions apply to others, too. So there are no real good reasons to take others as our absolute measure of success or failure.

This, of course, does not mean that success and failure are not real, that is, they do have some kind of effect on us, especially where our actions would affect our happiness and that of others. The wisdom here is to see success and failure for what they really are: to define them, to understand the conditions behind them, to envision an accomplished state, and work towards that goal. (This is in fact an application of “the 4 noble truths” teaching model.)

A shorthand version of what we have said here is found in this truly instructive verse 4:

If he should know, “Not to be attained is this goal by me, nor by any other,”
then, ungrieving, he should bear it thus: “What shall I do now with resolve?”

But even this verse is only our starting-point or launching-pad towards higher goals. We best begin our spiritual journey from where we are, or with what we are most comfortable with, and move on from there. What we believe in, what we habitually do, how we habitually speak, are trying to tell and teach us something about ourselves. We simply need to listen carefully to them and to move on.

To “move on” means not to be caught up with any stereotype, especially of ourselves. An effective step in moving on is to ask, “From whom have I learned that I am a failure (a loser, a nerd, or whatever)?” Maybe we take what we perceive as success in others to define our failure. Next question: How did we learn to think like this? Maybe someone said something negative to us or behaved negatively towards us.

Then we should ask: What do I really want for myself? Or, what is happiness to me? Or, perhaps we should follow the resolution of one of the most wonderful young professional I’ve met recently. He told me that his new year resolution was: “Be nice to myself.” He submitted his resignation to his boss so that he could have more time for himself, and not just work and live for others just for the money.

Now, for a deeper reflection on “I am a failure.” The “I” is the failure, and the mother of all failures. It keeps us down with the weight of comparing with others. Free the “I,” and the notion of failure fades with it. Without an “I,” we are always a new person, every moment. To say “I” is to relegate oneself into an entity, a fixed unchanging thing. (Is there ever such a thing?)

The reality is that we are still unfinished, a work in progress. We are still evolving – it means we always have choices.⁴

Once again, let us reflect how we should move on with our life:

If he should know, “Not to be attained is this goal by me, nor by any other,”
then, ungrieving, he should bear it thus: “What shall I do now with resolve?”

What shall I do now?

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⁴ See Reflection, “Man, the unfinished,” R204 110817 in *Simple Joys* 3 no 18: [link](#).