

Failing and imagining¹

We can say the most basic ideas of the Buddha's teaching are the experiences of failure and of imagination. The first truth of life that we need to act on is that, whether we are conscious of it or not, we can never get exactly what we want. Conversely, when we do get exactly what we want, there is, as a rule, a momentary taste of fulfillment, followed almost immediately by a sudden feeling of emptiness.

Now we must look for something else to want. And as long as we do not attain that elusive goal, we find our life still unfulfilled. We have failed. But we need to ask ourselves, at least, what do we mean by "failure"? We need to ask ourselves, how have we failed?

Not attaining our goal is *not* failure: it is simply just *that* – we have not yet attained our goal. The next question we need to ask is: How have we come to set such a goal for ourselves? Why have we defined ourselves in terms of such a goal? Why have we limited our imagination to only such a goal? Have we been missing out something essential? We need to work ourselves on such questions.

"Failure meant the stripping away of the inessential," says J K Rowling. We can say that this means that we should not get lost in comparing ourselves with others. They may seem to have a lot or they may be many things to many people, but the reality is that they are not really happy because of these things. We need to get down to the basics.

Before we can rise above our limitations, we must know what the "essentials" really are. The Buddha's 4 noble (or real) truths remind us to know our limitations, to understand the conditions that limit us, to envision what we can do, and start walking that path. These are the 4 most important tasks of our life.

The first real truth is that some failure inevitable in life. It is almost a universal reality nowadays that we are unlikely to be fully happy with the first job that we get, and that we are likely to break up with the first serious love that we have. The real failure here is to think that we are the only one to have suffered so. We may try to avoid failure by living so cautiously or so dishonestly that we might as well not have lived at all: we have then failed by default!

So the first great failure we are likely to fall into is the notion that we will or we must never fail. I don't think any of us have ever met a person who has never failed. The other great failure is when we do not exercise our **imagination**. Here, imagination does not mean thinking or trying the impossible. It means that we should see what is beyond ourselves, seek outside the box we call our "self." This is, in fact, the essence of the third noble or real truth.

Let us take a step back for a moment as we consider what it means *not* to have a healthy imagination. This is where we have failed or refused to exercise our imagination at all. We choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of our own experi-

¹ One of the greatest speeches of our times must surely be J K Rowling's commencement address to the 2008 Harvard University graduates: <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/06/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination>. This reflection is inspired by that speech. Thanks to Lucas Liew of Singapore.

ence, within our own comfort zone: our ideas of happiness, of success, of friendship, or love, even of religion or spirituality.

We have already decided what our life is, even before we have taken our first step of real adventure. We refuse to wonder what it would feel like to be other than the way we are. We are unable to fearlessly look into the darkness or to listen to the cries of loss and disappointment to learn something from them. We close our hearts to any suffering that does not seem to touch us. We feel entitled not to know them.

We think that there are such entitled people who are untouched by failure, or who seem to have fewer nightmares than we do. When we live in such a narrow space, we begin to fear the open spaces of real opportunities. We fail to see that to work is to grow and mature. We think that we merely *work to live*, that we never live to work. Yet, when we fall in love with something or someone, we put all our energy and life into it.

When we lack imagination or refuse to exercise it when we can, our unimagination creates its own monsters. It is the fear of these monsters that makes us more afraid than even those who have failed. At least they have learned from their failure, and have risen again. We bluff ourselves with the notion that to be perfect is never to do a wrong or fall into a bad state. The reality is that perfection comes from understanding the imperfect. Indeed, we must say that perfection here is not a state but a process.

Imagination, says Rowling, “is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.”

Rowling spoke of her experience working with the African research department at Amnesty International’s HQ in London, in the years before she started writing the *Harry Potter* series. The point here is that we can learn a lot from various situations, especially where the human spirit is involved. This can be something as simple as initiating a gentle smile to an unfriendly neighbour, or something more committed and involved, such as volunteering in an old folks’ home or hospice.

When we are deeply into helping others, and we try to see the meaning of it all, we notice some of our own weaknesses and strengths: we learn more about ourselves. When we accept all this unconditionally, with lovingkindness, we are then strengthened to be even kinder to others – even when they do not deserve it. Then, we, too, share the joy of another’s success and happiness. Even when people fail us, or the world seems not to change, we do not fret or falter: we have done our best, and now for the rest. These are the essence of the 4 divine abodes: the making of heaven on earth, wherever we are.

We may experience great moments in external actions and events, but the real learning and change must occur within ourselves. We are ourselves transformed by the goodness we see around us, and strengthened by the bads that challenge us. When

we are able to hold and grow this inner light and force, then what we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.²

Our radiance will light others up, our kindness inspire others to be kind, too. We move others to emulate our goodness with the active silence of our example. Some may see difficulty in every opportunity, but we see opportunity in every difficulty.³ We learn from suffering and failure, as we do from the words and actions of the wise. We are then truly happy and we inspire happiness in others, too. Let that be this very moment.

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² The underscored remark is attributed to the Greek Platonist philosopher, Plutarch (46-120).

³ The saying, "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty," is attributed to Winston Churchill (1874-1965), Britain's prime minister during World War 2.