

Fail Brilliantly

By Gwen Gordon

I came to Buddhism because I knew there had to be more to life than working, eating, sleeping, having friends, going to movies, buying clothes, and staying in shape. Besides, I was driving myself crazy trying have, be, and do it all. When I started meditating and doing yoga, sitting with a sangha, listening to inspired teachings, and studying the dharma, I started feeling a lot better. I had more moments of joy, a loving community, good conversations, greater peace and well-being. Life was better. I figured I'd found an essential ingredient to a balanced life and was grateful for the increased peace and pleasure.

Then I found out about the Buddha's teaching on the "Faults of Samsara." We are supposed to contemplate all the forms of suffering, the root of which is the suffering of conditioned existence itself, and decide once and for all that we've really had enough of it. In fact, according to the Buddha, we should be revolted by the whole samsaric enchilada, all the grasping for pleasure and aversion to pain, all the storm and drang in the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Yuck.

Suddenly, my strategy of using meditation as a way to decompress from my busy life, so I'd have more energy and poise as I launched through another "to do" list, seemed a little superficial, and well, just missing the point...like exercising so I would have the energy to go on a big junk food binge afterwards. Sure, when you meditate, you give the ego/mind a little vacation and it feels great. But then, off the zaphu, the happily refreshed and renewed ego is ready to jump right back into the fray, albeit with a little more

spaciousness, and go about its business grasping and pushing away. The Buddha tells us to divest entirely from the whole pursuit of pleasure. After all, pursuing pleasure creates suffering.

You'd think everybody, pounded as we all are by "the relentless fury of the waves of the infinite ocean of samsara," would be absolutely miserable. If that's true, then how do we explain all those people who seem to be genuinely happy but who have no spiritual path whatsoever? How dare they!? I marvel at a couple I know with their two children who seem utterly delighted and fulfilled by each other's company; a life of gardening, homemaking, family and friends. They are not stupid or superficial. They're just happy. What do they know that I, or maybe even the Buddha doesn't? Maybe they're just well-adjusted and we poor maladjusted spiritual seekers need to stop looking for deeper forms of happiness. Or perhaps what we really need is a vacation, some medication, or a good therapist, not a spiritual path that declares as life as suffering to be the first noble truth. Maybe it's a self-fulfilling prophecy and we should be looking for a path that declares Life is Good.

This can be a very confusing line of thought. I mean, if the first noble truth is correct, and life IS suffering and the only way to be free of suffering is by awakening to our true nature, then how do you explain those darned happy people who haven't got a clue that they are, in fact, suffering. In fact, I myself have even been happy on occasion (I have pictures). Is ignorance bliss? If so, I'm turning my zaphu into a plant stand and going to the mall. So, I did a little research in the Commentary on the "Treasury of Abhidharma." Here's how the Buddha explains these annoying, enviably happy people

A single hair lying on the palm of the hand

Causes discomfort and suffering

If it gets into the eye.

Immature beings are like the palm of the hand:

They do not recognize the hair of the suffering of conditioned existence.

Noble ones are like the eye:

They see that what is conditioned is suffering.

There you have it; my happy friends are the palm of a hand and I, along with all the miserable suffering fools of the world, are eyes. They might be happy, but I'm Noble! So, does that mean that the more we awaken, the more we suffer, the more motivated we become to awaken, the more we suffer? According to the Buddha, the more we mature spiritually, the more we become aware of the inherent suffering of conditioned existence, which is a good thing. The more we become repulsed by samsara, the more dedicated we become to our spiritual practice, the more likely we are to risk it all and wake up to our true nature. If we are to wake up, get off the wheel of samsara and be free of the endless cycle of death and rebirth, we need to develop a strong distaste for samsara. The total surrender required for our total awakening requires extraordinary motivation, far more than a simple desire to be relatively happy. In case you're not sure what a strong distaste might mean, the Buddha clears that up as well. He tells us to:

“Cultivate a feeling of renunciation for the faults of samsara: the activities of this life, the sufferings, busyness, and distractions of your home. Desiring to be liberated from all of that, you should flee quickly, in a state of panic, like an animal in a burning forest. Cut through any longings and flee, like a bird escapes

from a freezing lake. Cut through any attachments and flee in dread, like a captain freed from an island of cannibals. Flee to the other side of samsara without sullyng the three vows with faults, just as you would preserve the life-raft that will carry you across a river.” (37)

This is serious business. Who wants to be an animal stuck in a fire, a bird stuck on a frozen lake, a captain eaten by cannibals, or a person with a life-raft drowning in a river? That’ll get you to your zaphu in a hurry.

But, as it turns out, it’s not so easy to give up the idea that, if I’m smart enough about the precise pleasures I grasp onto, I’ll finally have the life I want. I’ll meditate, exercise, eat right, become a good listener, discover my life purpose, take leadership trainings. Eventually, with enough therapy and spiritual workshops, I’ll heal that sense of deficiency at the core of the ego. Then I can find my life partner, earn a good living, get the house, and be happy gosh darn it.

One of my teachers, an enlightened yogi named Adyashanti, described how he used to be obsessed with bike racing. He’d train all year long so that he might one day be the first person to cross a little line. He did this year after year, training harder and harder until one day he actually succeeded. For about 5 seconds, hands raised over his head, he was happy. For those 5 seconds he was actually present, not training or racing, seeking or aspiring, just present. Then the moment was over and he started thinking about the next race. He had to win enough times before he was able to feel the limitations of this lifestyle.

Adyashanti recommends that we go whole hog after the things we think are going to bring us some ultimate satisfaction. Then, once we’ve achieved them, we might have a

fully embodied knowing of how hollow and impermanent they really are. Only then do we have a chance of leaving the whole project behind, give up and surrender to our own true nature.

The motivation required for awakening might come from this kind of empty success, or it might come from more direct failures, having your life fall apart; losing your job, partner, health, and home. I remember sitting at a retreat and discovering to my horror that my whole life had been a string of failures. Every attempt I had ever made to get my deepest needs met through the world had been utterly futile. It was tragic, actually. And a little nuts. I had been using the same strategies over and over again without any results, like a bug knocking itself against the window in an attempt to get outside. Recognizing the utter futility of my efforts to create a happy story and a happy self, was very good for my practice. Seeing the futility of my efforts to be happy helped me begin to give up and pull the plug on the mind's endless chattering.

Once we've failed brilliantly and start to disengage from the egos schemes, we find ourselves in a very tricky spot. Neither here nor there. It's as if the rickety little make shift raft we've been using as a self has finally fallen apart, but someone is still there struggling and splashing to keep our heads above water. We no longer have worldly ambition, nor are we enticed to hook ourselves onto some delusional steamship of illusive happiness, but we just can't seem to let go of the world completely. It's exactly what we can't do.

It takes grace. Recently, I experienced a string of losses. My best friend and I had a serious falling out, my ex-boyfriend got married, I left my job, and lost my roommate of three years. I was pretty overwhelmed and disoriented but assumed I'd find the energy

and enthusiasm to reconstruct a life. But somehow, when the ice cream truck pulled up with job offers, I just wasn't interested. It wasn't resignation or depression that stopped me, it was more the sense that no matter what the flavor, it was still ice cream, which might taste good and give me a buzz for an hour, but ultimately wasn't very nourishing. I couldn't fool myself anymore into thinking the next thing would satisfy me or be any different from the last.

This kind of distaste for the ephemeral pleasures of the world is good news for spiritual life. It puts you right on the edge of surrender. But even though I had lost my appetite for superficial fixes, I wasn't able to let go fully, either. I felt like I was treading water, keeping my attention on the surface without being very interested in them, but not yet willing to just sink. Finally, I had to ask myself why I was fighting so hard to stay above water.

To be clear, letting go is not about dropping out of or rejecting worldly life. That would be more aversion and more samsara. Letting go means ceasing the effort it takes to hold ourselves back from the truth of our own nature. Why don't we just let go, then? I had to face the fact that I wasn't letting go because I couldn't imagine giving up the opportunity to prove myself to the world and earn the love and esteem I had missed as a child. Letting go looked a lot like giving up and admitting defeat, unworthiness, failure. The ego would not stand for that. Besides, I still wanted to yell and shake my fist at the world for having rejected me and been such a disappointment.

I've had a recurring dreams in which I'm driving a car and the breaks don't work. I've associated this with an inability to end or leave situations at the right time. I stay in jobs, relationships, conversations, or bad movies far too long! Recently, I went to see the

Martin Scorsese film, *The Departed* recently. It had an all-star cast: Jack Nicholson, Matt Damon, Leonardo Di Capria, Martin Sheen. With all this talent and Scorsese directing, not to mention, great reviews, I figured this had to be a good film. From the very first scene the violence was horrific. I kept, cringing and turning away. Finally, about half way through, when it was clear that things weren't going to lighten up, my friend said, "Hey Gwen, we can leave. You don't have to suffer. Let's GO!"

I was frozen. I could not leave. I kept thinking it would redeem itself eventually and I wouldn't want to miss a great film. I was glued to the story, the idea that this was a significant film, and after all, nobody else was leaving, not even the 6 year-old girl in the row in front of me. Am I just a wimp? So I stayed. The violence never let up. Every single character except one died. There was no redemption. Nothing. On the way home, with a knot in my stomach and my eyes glazed over, I finally understood that this is the same grip the endless drama of samsara has on my will. I'm glued to the story, the cast is irresistible, and I keep thinking that in the end, my investment in the nightmare will be worth it. Only a wimp or a loser would leave. Meanwhile, I'm cringing with my eyes closed.

There's a riddle an eight year old boy passed on to a friend of mine. It goes: "Imagine you're stuck in a box and all you have is a mirror. How do you get out? Give up? You look in the mirror and see what you saw. You take the saw and saw the mirror in half. You put the halves together to make a whole and you climb out of the hole." Simple enough? But he wasn't done yet. Then he said, "imagine you're in a box and you don't have a mirror, how do you get out?" "Easy. You stop imagining."

Stop imagining, walk out of the theater, put the breaks on, let yourself sink into the ocean. Whatever it takes, just let go. Surrender! But the ego does not know how to die. It needs help. Cute little desperate deficient pea! The thing about the ego that really caught me off guard as I attempted to teach it to surrender is its total and complete inability to receive.

Here's what happened. I'm in a Tibetan Buddhist retreat with Lama Palden receiving the White Tara empowerment. She guides me to imagine White Tara in full regalia sitting right over my head radiating pure enlightened mind, heart, and body, and just pouring her gifts into me. I'm going along with this as best I can, tuning in and out with a fair bit of static, like a hologram that needs a tune up. Palden describes the luminous gifts being bestowed through this emanation of the divine and then instructs us, matter of factly, to simply "know that this is true." This is where I get a little stuck. How do I know this is true? Aren't I just making it up using a guided visualization? It's all in my mind, like any other thought, right? I struggle until for one nano second I knew it was true, and then, lo and behold, a flood of luminous clear light and knowing poured into me. Holy moly! Then Palden described the moon stone necklace that White Tara wears and that she's now offering these jewels to me and I'm supposed to simply receive them. First thought: I can't take those, they're way too nice. I was resisting imaginary jewels and empowerments from an imaginary deity that I conjured up my own self. They were being offered freely and I wouldn't take them.

The ego doesn't know how to die because it doesn't know how to receive. It knows only how to strive from a sense of deficiency. To surrender the ego is to receive. It's that simple. This is the good news. Everything that I ever wanted for Gwen; meaning,

love, purpose, play, celebration, joy; would only be available if I let go once of ever getting. My attempts to get it only reinforced the illusion I neither had nor deserved it. To receive everything I ever wanted meant, instead, letting go of Gwen. Surrender isn't mysterious. It's very simple. Surrender is the very same thing as receiving. We don't have to imagine we're letting go into nothingness, we can imagine we're opening up into everything. It's safe to leave the theater and the egos dramatic attempts to get what it already is.

I recently discovered another idea, which the Buddha must have overlooked, but is also very good for practice – Letting go of Samsara is good for the world. Holding little Gwen above water, treading and flailing frantically, isn't just prolonging my own suffering, it's prolonging the world's suffering. By holding on, I'm depriving the world of an awakened Gwen. Who knows what beauty and kindness and unique gifts she might bestow the world if allowed? Somehow, this insight touched me beyond my desire for personal freedom to my love of the world and for all beings to be free of suffering.

I let go of the world to serve the world. This is a more mobilizing motivation for some of us than letting go solely for our own personal development and relief. But my ego is petty and self-centered. It wants only to prove itself, get love and keep it. This noble impulse could not be hers. It must be coming from under water where my own true nature, its generosity and compassion not only awaits me, but lures me to itself. Whether we let go out of revulsion for samsara or attraction to the truth, the results are the same. The dismal failure that's inevitable at the level of the ego makes us ripe for the calling of our true nature. May we all fail brilliantly.

