

# Success and Failure: Trial and Error

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

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I am not sure I should be confessing this, but my life is a catalogue of failures. Failure, of course, is what happens when you don't succeed. It's a pretty depressing state. As the realisation of failure dawns on you or hits you between the eyes, there's that shock moment when your stomach sinks. And then the nausea. Then there's the anger and hatred towards those or the system that beat you, succeeded where we failed. Then there's the soul searching, the self-recriminations, followed by the further woundings of guilt and shame and into the yawning chasm of despair. Indeed, failure is always a painful experience. We shouldn't be surprised at this. After all it's a mini-death. And it can at worst lead to suicide, such the French chef who did not get his Michelin stars. When we come to define failure, it is always a measurement against success. Always a comparison to how it ought to have been. But what did we set ourselves? If you're a sanguine character, you tend to overreach. Even the most circumspect and morose often expect what is beyond their capabilities or the capabilities of the situation to deliver. In Christian spiritual language, however, this failure is known as a humiliation. Not a humiliation in the belittling sense, but a sharp correction to 'the way it is'. To be humble did not mean to be weak and worthy of beating, it meant to know oneself. Humility is another word for 'know thyself'. Aiming at success will always be in danger of overreach because it is the self trying as always to accumulate. And the more it has, the safer it feels whether riches, power, fame or simply pleasures. It invests itself in the project and defines itself by its success. You'll always find these three factors : over-aiming, emotional attachment and identity. When we fail, we suffer to some extent an identity crisis, emotional turmoil and loss. In despair we may give up, become despondent. And life stagnates. Is there another way we can approach our goals for we do not want to lose our aspirations, be it relationships, work, spiritual aims? Suppose we change the language. Suppose we look at life as a challenge and an exploration, rather than success, competition and possible failure. Suppose we talk of trial and error. Surely now the world changes. We are no longer in a world of conflict. We are working on a hypothesis like any scientist. We are co-operating with the world to see if our idea will work or not. It may work out, it may not. No matter. Samuel Becket is renowned for his sayings and the one I truly like is: Fail. Fail better. (I'm presuming Becket is here using the word 'fail' as in trial and 'error'.) Writing is an exacting art. Indeed so is all creative pursuit. One never quite expresses what one wants. True art is all trial and forever error, for the real never meets with the ideal, not that a piece of work may not give satisfaction. Yet try again we must. The Buddha tried in so many ways to express the Dhamma. People were forever misinterpreting his words. He tried all sorts of ways depending on who he was talking to. Yet we say all the teachings are just pointing the way. The finger points to the moon. There's nothing to be gained by looking at the end of the finger! Seeing life as trial and error excludes us from the pains of failure. Once the error has played itself out, there often follows a fallow

period. I say fallow for this was a time when fields were left to regenerate. I do not say barren! And that former desire to explore possibilities arises again. Creativity is natural to all nature. Nature isn't into success and failure. Nature is about finding growth in any given situation. We are embedded in a world that is forever creating. How foolish not to join the party!

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