

“On Zen and Failure” — an excerpt from a chapter in *A Zen Life of Bodhisattvas* by Rafe Jnan Martin (Sumeru 2023)

In a koan in a central Zen training text, *The Gateless Barrier*, Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, fails both to get close to the Buddha as well as to bring a young woman out of her samadhi. Wu-men (compiler of the Gateless Barrier koan collection 1,000 years ago,) adds a verse for that koan that says that his failure was “wonderful indeed.”

A Buddhist legend says that Avalokitesvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, gained the great power and skill of her 1,000 arms and 11 heads also through *failure*. And in various jataka tales, the Buddha in past lives as the Bodhisattva, makes mistakes and fails, and then, and then, by correcting course, comes to an even fuller understanding of and commitment to his Great Vow of realizing enlightenment for the sake of all that lives. Through failure his commitment to the Path of the Bodhisattva matures and deepens.

For many reasons this is simply the way of things and is only natural. Failure is a necessary part of the Bodhisattva Path because it is a necessary part of anyone’s growing up, a necessary aspect in gaining any kind of skill—musical, artistic, athletic, and so on. No one starts off where they want or hope to be. We see what’s possible, and then from there, it takes work to reach that lofty goal. And work means coming up short again and again. Which is how we improve. Zen Buddhist tradition says that to achieve *full* understanding and *unlimited* compassion (which, paradoxically, Zen also says is already ours, though we don’t yet know it), will require even more than one lifetime’s work. In fact, it is likely to be a many lifetime effort. When Roshi Kapleau passed someone on an initial koan, he would point to the edge of the sitting mat and say, “Congratulations. You have gotten onto the edge of the mat. Your journey all the way across the mat—a journey of lifetimes—now begins.” So we should expect failures along the Way, each offering a new opportunity to improve and mature in understanding, in ability, in character. What was once good enough, in time is outgrown, and turns out to be, “not yet enough.” The bodhisattva suffers from a divine discontent. Our failure is wonderful, indeed.