

Medicine For The Mind

Instructions for My Boston Dharma Brothers On Using Suffering and Obstacles for Mental Development

I want to say a few words for my very dear Dharma brothers here in Boston. It has been quite a few years since my friend Ed introduced me to you and I am very happy that we have become friends. Today, along with speaking about my root Guru, Kyabje Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, I wanted to say a few words about the kind of attitude that can help when obstacles and bad situations arise.

In general, life forms have various sufferings because of their own particular karma; that is natural. Hell beings have suffering of heat and cold. Spirits have suffering of hunger and thirst. Animals suffer from being used and from eating each other. Human beings experience suffering of birth, sickness, aging, and death. Demigods suffer from fighting. Worldly gods suffer from such things as falling from their state when they die. Suffering of the human world pales in comparison to suffering experienced in the three worse realms of existence. Yet the hopes and fears of human beings are stronger than those in other realms of existence which causes them to suffer even more. The stronger our attachment to hopes and aversion to fears, the stronger we will be afflicting our emotions; and the stronger the afflicting emotions, the greater the suffering we will experience. As long as they wander in the cycle of death and rebirth called samsara no one is free from suffering.

Many people, when you say 'suffering', view it as something completely negative and faulty, to get rid of. The Kadampa Geshes, however, who practice holy Dharma as it should be practiced, don't view suffering as something to get rid of; rather, they willingly accept it. Suffering actually has many good qualities. For instance, experiencing suffering yourself can cause you to have more compassion for others. When you experience suffering it uses up your bad karma. It can cause you to renounce the suffering of samsara and develop a sincere wish for Liberation. It makes you want to avoid creating bad karma. It stops you from being arrogant. Suffering can have all these positive effects and more.

If we don't want suffering we must abandon its causes: the delusions. Deluded afflictive emotions arise from being mistaken about things, which in turn is caused by ignorance not seeing things as they actually are. It is very important for us to abandon all causes of suffering.

We should try not to let ourselves get too mentally disturbed by slight physical suffering. We may experience physical difficulty as a result of karma and obstacles that are out of our control, but the mental attitude we develop in response always depends on us.

Since what I'm talking about today is Dharma-related I want to give a brief account of the time my root Guru spent in prison. In 1959 all of Tibet was seized by Mao Tse Tung and the Chinese Communists. At that time many innocent Tibetan lamas and tulkus were put in prison. My root Guru was also put in prison. All the lamas were put together in one part of the prison. The prison became like a monastery completely filled with many lamas and monks, but they were beaten and tortured beyond measure every day. Many lamas and tulkus died in prison of starvation. My root Guru was in his thirties at this time. He had to spend twenty-one years in prison. During that time he not only practiced Dharma, he focused single-pointedly on nothing else but the practice of love and compassion for others in a meditation of giving and taking called 'tong-len' in the Tibetan language.

When you give, you mentally send to others your body, possessions, and all of the positive actions that you have created or will create in the past, present, and future. You even send it out to undesirable enemies, demons, and obstructers, and so on. When you take, you mentally take upon yourself others' pain and suffering, sickness, bad karma, hindrances, and everything negative. Even though you have the wish to take away their suffering, however, this does not mean that you will receive all of their suffering and bad karma. Rather, because of your strong compassion wanting to take away their suffering, it will destroy all the causes of your own suffering, and you should visualize this happening as soon as you take away the suffering and its causes from others. Your only wish is to take away others' suffering but the result is that your own suffering is lightened and ultimately eradicated.

Because of Rinpoche doing this very practice, the prison naturally became like a retreat house for the Dharma. Many lamas and spiritual masters from different areas were placed together, so they secretly exchanged teachings

with each other and had many discussions about their experiences and realizations of Dharma. Because of this it became a very good, conducive place for the practice of Dharma. The Communist Chinese thought that if they could throw all the lamas in prison they could wipe out Tibetan Buddhism. Not only was this intention of the Chinese government not achieved, the lamas had found a place that provided many years of unexcelled conditions for the practice of Dharma! Finding the bad conditions to be a blessing in disguise, it became like a spiritual center for them all, and their experience and realization of Dharma grew more and more vast and profound. There were signs around Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche that revealed his realizations. For example, one day five groups of people saw Rinpoche in different places at the same time. Some saw him outside while others saw him meditating inside. Some saw him in the kitchen, some saw him talking with others, and some saw him drinking tea; he appeared to different people in various aspects at the same time! These were signs of his developing realized qualities of the paths and stages of spiritual practice. By the power of his mind he was able to transform an impure prison into a sacred temple, a buddha-land. Lacking such knowledge, your body could actually be in a holy temple while, mentally, you are still in prison. In Dharma it is said that everything arises through the power of your mind. You now have the chance to use your mind in a similar way. Not only does being unhappy and resentful not help; it also harms yourself.

After Mao had died, it was announced that the prisoners in Tibet would be released. Around that time one of the Chinese prison guards said to my root Guru, 'Your time in prison was over days ago! Why have you still not left for your monastery?' This guard was a young man who had seen signs of Rinpoche's spiritual realizations and had developed great faith in him. He had served Rinpoche in prison and had become Rinpoche's very close friend.

Rinpoche said very sadly, 'Oh! I heard the bad news! If only I had the chance to remain in prison a few more years, then my practice would probably have become fully qualified! In any case, today I want to convey my deepest heartfelt gratitude to the Chinese government! For twenty-one years I have stayed in meditation retreat with my food, clothing, bed, and everything kindly provided! In our Kagyu tradition every monk must do at least a three-year, three-month meditation retreat. I had done a three-year retreat before, but I had always wanted to do a longer retreat, but my responsibilities in the monastery had given me absolutely no time for that. Now I have been able to

spend twenty-one years in retreat! In its true nature, this is a retreat hut, not a prison cell! Today I give my most sincere thanks to Mao and the Chinese government!' Rinpoche even composed a short 'doha', a song of spiritual realization, about how his practice had been greatly boosted and enhanced by his prison experience. I don't remember it in its entirety but it was very eloquent and beautiful.

In any case, it is very important not to let our mind be disturbed by physical suffering. Physical sickness, frustration, and obstacles are not something newly arisen, that have never existed before. It is just the nature of samsara. Buddha called samsara 'an ocean of suffering.' The important thing is that we become able to transform it into happiness, with suffering acting as the causal condition.

Bodhisattva Togme Zangpo said,

When things are good, send it out to all beings.
May the benefit and bliss fill all of space!
When things are bad, take away the sufferings of all;
May the ocean of samsara be dried up!

Patrul Rinpoche said,

If I am sick, that sickness makes me happy:
It exhausts the bad karma I've previously committed.
If I'm not sick, not being sick makes me happy:
My virtuous practice will flourish in this life for a long time.

At this time you must also be patient and try not to be disturbed no matter what kind of pain, loss and hardship you encounter; there is no other choice. It doesn't help to just grieve and worry.

As said in Guide to the Bodhisattva Conduct,

If something can be fixed
Why should you be unhappy about it?
If something cannot be fixed,
How does it help to be unhappy about it?

Take this prison for example. By getting angry with others and causing them to suffer, not only will you harm them; you will also add to your own suffering. You will be tormented in body and mind, both. Instead of it hurting others it will definitely hurt you, yourself. There is no real 'winning' through the force of anger. Better than that is to absorb yourself in love and compassion; then the ultimate victory will be yours.

In The Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas, it is said,

If you don't conquer the enemy of your own anger
Outer enemies will only multiply even if you conquer them.
Therefore it is the practice of Bodhisattvas
To control their own mind with the armies of love and compassion.

That verse changed my life. When I was young, my mother, uncle and other family members were killed by the Chinese government; my root Guru had been put into prison for twenty-one years, and so forth. Because of this I was constantly angry at the Chinese government. I thought I should take off my monk's robes and get revenge against the Chinese communists. I was young at that time and had a youngster's mentality. I didn't know how I should retaliate. One time, at my father's insistence, I was brought to meet Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche. He had just been released from prison. He handed me a copy of The Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas and had me read it right then and there. When I came to this verse, I think it's the twenty-second, it was like the boiling water of my hatred had been poured into a cool lake of love and compassion (bodhicitta) and a balmy feeling of bliss enveloped me. Ever since then I vowed never to hate and be resentful towards the Chinese people, and I went back to the path of a monk as before. That verse changed my whole life. It is thanks to those words that I am still wearing the robes of a monk today. If Dharma strikes the right point you don't have to know many teachings for it to captivate your heart and mind. The smallest practice of Dharma can definitely transform your mind.

Your physical pleasure and pain depend on good and bad karma created in the past, as well as temporary conditions. As for your mind, however, no one else can ever control it. It is always in your own hands. If your mind is happy, even if you are in a prison, it is not a prison; it is like a sacred temple. If your mind is unhappy, even if you have all the wealth in the world, it won't help. There are many wealthy people these days who are not at all happy. Real happiness

must come from the mind. Such happiness arises in dependence upon Dharma practice; there is no other way.

If you think in a good way, experiences of hardship and suffering can act as a cause for the positive energy and practice in your mind to increase, as in the account of my root Guru's time in prison.

Geshe Langri Thangpa said,

When I see people of bad nature,
Who are oppressed by intense pain and negativity,
May I cherish them like coming across a mine of jewels
That was extremely difficult to find.

When others, out of jealousy,
Unjustly abuse me
May I take the loss,
And offer victory to others.

Contemplating and meditating as much as you can on extremely blessed instructions like these will be of great benefit.

Panchen Lozang Chokyi Gyaltzen said,

Selfishness is the way that everything gets worse
While cherishing my mothers is the basis for everything good.
Bless me to make the yoga of exchange
Of my own happiness for the sufferings of others, the core of my practice.

Therefore, compassionate Guru bless me
That my wandering mothers' harms, hindrances, and suffering,
All whatsoever may ripen upon me now,
And, that by sending my joy and virtue to others,
All beings may come to have happiness and bliss.

Though beings and lands are filled with evil's fruits,
And unwanted sufferings fall like rain,
Seeing that they exhaust bad deed's fruits,
Bless me to take misfortune on the path.

In brief, whatever happens, good or bad,
May I transform it into the spiritual path
By means of 'tong-len', essence of Dharma,
And meditate in nothing but blissful mind.

There are many very potent teachings like this which are definitely beneficial to read and meditate upon.

When we encounter difficult situations we should keep a broad perspective. If you are a monk you are urged to transform bad situations, delusions, and suffering into positive factors for the path to Enlightenment, and to be thankful for sickness, demons, obstructers, enemies, and so forth for being a condition to purify negative karma. Even if that's not possible, we mustn't let temporary slight physical suffering cause us to become so mentally disturbed that we commit suicide, etc.

Real happiness derives from the mind. Happiness of the senses that comes from outer pleasures and wealth is a deceptive kind of happiness, like a fish being fooled by the bait on a hook. People believe that the pleasant feelings they experience through their senses are real happiness, but Buddha says that it is the suffering of change. No matter how much external pleasure we enjoy it can't dispel inner suffering of the mind. Not only that, because of the hopes and fears it causes, it only adds to our mental suffering. If the mind within is happy, even without much pleasures and wealth, the mental happiness is conducive to good health, long life, less sickness, and so on; it can bring this kind of direct benefit. Mind is like a king that creates everything. When that is experienced, no person could put you in prison. Neither can they control you; it is always under your own control.

I will never forget you. We can meet every year. Be happy!

Tashi Delek

*Even if your pleasure equals that of the gods,
Mind suffers from the sickness of hope and fear.
This body beset with many sufferings when viewed
As a bad condition to aid the path, becomes medicine for the mind.*

*The mind's nature is stainless clear light
Forever free of concepts, bad karma, and suffering,
Not realizing this, alas! sentient beings are deceived,
And therefore wander in a suffering round of existence.*

*Harmed by enemies, tortured by sickness of delusion,
Deprived of livelihood, and so on, this suffering of the body,
Is dispelled by the supreme medicine of bodhicitta.
The essential instruction is 'tong-len', giving and taking,
Exchanging your own happiness for others' suffering.*

*This bad disease of holding on to resentment,
And the evil spirit of unwanted situations and obstacles,
Is pacified by the supreme medicine of bodhicitta;
Don't forget! Practice it! I will help you.*

*I, Khenpo Karten, respectfully wrote down here some of my thoughts for the
convenient practice of Dharma for my very dear Dharma brothers in Boston.*

California Manjushri Dharma Center, May 12, 2017. May goodness flourish!

Translated by Jampa Tharchin/David Molk