

Transforming Difficulties into the Path of Joy Public Talk , 2/4/2022

<https://youtu.be/J4HenOjAswU>



[Aaron Joseph's Introduction]

Good evening everybody; friends, sangha and first time guests. If you have not joined us before for a teaching session with Khenpo Karten Rinpoche. My name is Aaron Joseph and I'm a student of Khenpo Karten but also acting as the Board President for the past two years. I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity and I just want to welcome everybody to this Public Talk tonight which is kicking off our Two days Annual Winter Retreat; which has been virtual for the past couple of years. This evening Khenpo Karten Rinpoche is joined by our very wonderful translator David Molk so please welcome him as well.

The theme for tonight's talk is how to transform difficulties into the path of happiness which is really the essence of what Buddha has taught. Trying to

eliminate suffering and find happiness that is actually lasting and not just dependent upon pleasurable external circumstances. It's very important if we want to find lasting happiness that we can actually use adversity and difficulties on our path. And not see them as something to be constantly avoided or rejected. So Rinpoche himself has a long life of experiences with difficulties which he might be able to share some of his as well as his teachers have. And have been able to use that to really remarkable effect. As so many great Tibetan saints and masters in the past have done as well. Of course we've all been dealing with pandemic and all of the associated effects of that over the last couple of years among all of our usual life circumstances. And it's not over yet so this coming year we can use the teachings that Rinpoche is about to bestow to make sure that we are living the best life that we can. And using this opportunity to become better as Rinpoche likes to say "a good person, better person, best person." So with that I'd like to introduce to you our venerable teacher Khenpo Karten Rinpoche.

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Greetings to everyone, Westerners and Tibetans wherever you are; here it's evening. I'd like to welcome everyone to our public talk this evening on taking bad circumstances onto the path of happiness. So I won't do extensive prayers in the beginning but I'll do just a short prayer for auspicious reasons. So our subject for this public talk is one that I think it's very profound and important. As to how we can transform difficult circumstances into a path to happiness. I'd like to say a few things about my own personal thoughts as well as some stories of my own life. From our buddhist point of view, as soon as we take birth in samsara, or the cycle of death and rebirth we take on the aggregates of being in such a state. Which are form, feelings, recognition, compositional factors and consciousness. We really are dealing with a continuous stream of sufferings and frustrations. There may be different degrees from lighter to heavier but basically there's a continuous stream of difficulties and hardships that we face once we have taken birth in this kind of form.

Given that we're facing many different kinds of problems and suffering, there's differences in how we deal with those. From a Buddhist perspective, our way of dealing with it is once the cause for problems and frustrations have been created and we're experiencing that, then we should accept it . And recognize that there are benefits that can be derived from it. For one thing, when we experience suffering ourselves, it makes us much more empathetic and compassionate towards others. We can really feel their suffering. Then from the Buddhist perspective, when we experience a lot of suffering, pain and frustration, it can also galvanize our determination to attain liberation. It can become a cause for us going to the lasting happiness of liberation and increase our motivation. Furthermore if we've been too prideful it can cause our pride to be lessened and there's great benefit in that. So there are many benefits that can be derived from the suffering that we experience.

As far as remedying suffering goes, then it's again from our Buddhist perspective. It's much more appropriate to try to counter that or prevent suffering at their causal stages. If we can stop creating a cause for suffering, then we can stop the resultant suffering from arising. But otherwise once the seeds have already been planted, like if we planted a poisonous seed in the ground, then that poisonous plant is going to come up. So once negative karma has been created, we're dealing with the causes of suffering which is the second noble truth. If we can counter these delusions and disturbing states of mind of pride, jealousy, aversion and anger when they are at the causal stage, then we can prevent suffering from arising.

Another benefit of accepting suffering from our Buddhist perspective is that whenever we experience pain or suffering, we always recognize it as a result of some karma of our own that we have created in the past. So when we experience the results of it, those causes are exhausted. But we accepted because we realize that it is something that we created the causes for in the past. As far as preventing future suffering, again it is to intervene at the point of the causal stage when the causes for that suffering

are being created. That is the point where we can prevent suffering from arising.

We have this practice called bad conditions arising as friends. When we experience suffering and if we just try to fight it off or just resist, we won't be able to get this kind of benefit. Of really transforming those negative circumstances into very positive ones such as the famous yogi of Tibet named Milarepa . He had many kinds of hardships in his life but it pushed him to practice and turned that into causes for great benefit; of obtaining full bliss of complete enlightenment. So this is the kind of thing that can be done when difficult circumstances are really used as aids on the path. That suffering which we regard as the enemy, Milarepa took as a friend and a helper on his way to full enlightenment. The best kind of benefit we can derive from negative circumstances and hardships is to gain control of our own mind. And as Shantideva said in the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, a verse that Rinpoche quoted to the effect of "Mindfulness and introspection or alertness are tools for meditation. I beg you to subdue your own mind and gain control or direction of your own mind even at the cost of your life." This is the most important thing we can do.

The reason for this is that when we look for the causes of our problems we're constantly pointing outwards but we don't look inside. In fact the real source of our problems is primarily within ourselves in our mistaken ways of thinking. If we look at it, 90% of the problems we face are because of our own mistaken perceptions or mistaken trains of thought. Now if we're going to achieve happiness in our life, when are we going to do that? Like me for instance I'm in my 50s now and I've got another maybe 20 years or so ahead of me. Can I create happiness in those 20 years? No. The only thing I can only affect is now; the present moment. What can I do right now to bring about happiness? If we can do meditation and practices, that's wonderful. But I think one of the primary factors we need to look for is contentment. Having contentment in the moments of our lives as we experience them. With the understanding from the Buddhist perspective of samsara, when we see sufferings you think yes this is the way samsara goes and everybody goes through these things.

But to develop a sense of contentment in ourselves moment by moment in our life. That's where we can do something right in the present moment. We can start with small things like even just making our breakfast in the morning. Making it tasty and enjoying it.

KKR: I always make my own breakfast and this is my best time in the morning. I make my breakfast and at the same time I listen to the radio or music. I dance in the kitchen and I am very happy. I say to myself "wow it's so delicious, lama you did a good job!".

I think we can create our own happiness second by second, minute by minute and minutes turning into hours and days. So I think by cultivating a sense of joy and happiness within ourselves moment by moment, we can then extend that. We need to accustom ourselves to experiencing happiness.

So by cultivating a sense of happiness in this way, we can develop an attitude that is very light hearted, open minded and easy going. One that is very accepting of different circumstances. Thinking 'we got something it's great but if we didn't get it that was great also.' Or maybe we're feeling good that's fine or maybe we don't feel so well we say 'well that's fine too'. We develop a much more easy going and light-hearted kind of approach to life. Sometimes when we start into endeavors; it's like our mind becomes our own enemy. We worry about how it's going to turn out and we put ourselves under too much pressure. There's too much clinging and grasping but we can let go and be more light hearted. This is the direction which is good for us to go into.

Looking at my own life, I've gone through a lot of hardships. At the age of 3 months my mother was killed and we were under the oppression of the chinese communists. It was a very frightening situation that I was born into in Tibet and later on I had to leave and escape my monastery as a refugee to India. I had to leave my friends and family but do I see that as having been some kind of terrible influence? No, there's been benefit and I don't

think that if that had not happened, I wouldn't be where I am now. I'm in a very fortunate position where I'm able to practice dharma and bring great benefit to students around the world. Without the hardships that I'd gone through, I don't think that I would have had this kind of benefit.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama also went through great hardship in Tibet and had to escape as a refugee at a very young age. We might think that this is such a terrible thing but it was a gift to the world. If he had just stayed in Tibet it would have been the Dalai Lama of the Tibetans. But now because of these 'bad circumstances' he has become a sun and a guide for the whole world. So I don't think we should really look at hardships and sufferings as solely painful and problematic. Because they can bring all these benefits such as greater compassion for others as I've mentioned. More of a determination to attain liberation and the lessening of pride that prevents us from learning and developing.

So again, problems and suffering may be seen in general in the world as just bad altogether. But in our Buddhist practice the use of suffering can increase our compassion and renunciation and also to lessen our pride. If we are going to prevent sufferings from arising, we need to get to them in the causal stages. Because that's where we can prevent them from arising and what this means is that we shouldn't primarily look to external means to protect ourselves. We want to protect ourselves and others; our body and especially our mind. We go about doing that through taking care of our mind through meditation. I've written a couple of verses about this:

1. Don't look for shows outside, watch the show inside.
2. If you are lucky you'll discover a show like you've never seen before.
3. Don't dig for others' faults.
4. Don't point your finger outward, point your finger inward.
5. Correct your own mistakes please.

Even if we don't know meditation like I mentioned, cultivate a sense of contentment and understanding that transitoriness is the nature of

everyone's life. Then taking care of our own mind and going inwards, we may discover that there are all sorts of things to be discovered inside.

Rinpoche wanted to use something that he's written before for our public talk today and wants me to read it:

**Transforming Difficulties into the Path of Joy:
*Buddhist Wisdom for the New Year***

In *A Dharma Gong to Wake Us from Ignorance*, I wrote:

*Don't be like a mother, searching in the West,
for a child she has lost in the East!
Having turned the mind inwards,
don't seek happiness outside!*

So now, what can we do about it? It is only the first step to stop seeking outside for happiness. The next step is to identify the methods to unveil inner happiness. Here, I would like to offer a suggestion that came to me while reflecting on this piece. This is a practical and simple contemplation that anyone can do with a little bit of discipline and consistency.

To contemplate happiness in the course of a single day, it is helpful to think of it in the very moment you find yourself. For instance, to begin your day, you can relish your first meal. If you are having it with your family, you can take a few moments and truly appreciate that time for however long your breakfast is. In essence, you have created happiness for that duration. Then after breakfast as you begin to meet people, you can direct your attention toward appreciating the positive traits in the individuals with whom you interact. Even when you find troubling aspects in someone, if you redirect your mind to your own faults before finding one in the other, and genuinely appreciate the person before you, then in that moment, you experience happiness.

Psychologists say now that perhaps 95% of what we see in another person is based on our own mental projections imputed onto them. Actually, the great Buddhist saint and philosopher Nagarjuna was saying just about the same thing in the second century!

As your day progresses, pause to appreciate your lunch, whether at home or at a restaurant. Even if lunch is unsavory at a restaurant, at that moment if you are able to think of all the homeless, migrants or refugees, and countless others literally starving to death, it will, in that instant, help transform your mental disposition, and bring gratitude and happiness. Arguing or complaining over it, on the other hand, will only cause you distress.

Likewise, after lunch, if you engage mindfully with your body, speech and mind during dinner, or any activity for the rest of the day, then you are able to establish happiness within a 24-hour period: a day with inner happiness. If you go with the whims of the untamed mind, you will never be able to find contentment, you will never find happiness. There is always cause for self-made discontentment that must be watched and constantly corrected.

Conversely, if you repeat the above meditations from one day to the next, you will become the cause of your own happiness. Practice this repeated shifting of perspective away from noticing flaws or distraction, and towards appreciation, gratitude, and the moment-by-moment beauty of life. Don't take my word for it. Try it and see what happens!

Rinpoche goes on to say:

Dealing with Difficulty

When we meet with frustration and difficulties, if we are overly sensitive and very resentful of it, our frustration and pain will only become stronger until it feels like there is a mountain oppressing our body and mind. Although we have physical and mental hardship, if we are less impatient and don't

develop resentment; the discomfort, while it lasts, can become lighter, like a dandelion seed puff, and easier to bear.

Again, when we meet with difficulty we should realize that it is our karma and not let it bring us down; rather, we should seek a means to dispel it. If there is nothing at all that we can do about it, ruminating and worrying about it, that will only add another layer of suffering to the frustration we already feel. A better alternative is to look inward, and, if we can transform our mind, we can definitely dispel frustrations.

As said in Guide to the Bodhisattva Conduct,

*Troublesome beings are present throughout space;
there is no way I could overcome them all!
If I can just overcome my mind of anger
It will be just like overcoming all enemies.*

*Though I try to cover the whole earth in leather,
Where could I get the leather to do it?
But leather on the soles of my feet
works the same as covering the whole earth.*

When we meet with difficulty we shouldn't just try to deal with it on an outer level; we should learn methods to inwardly transform our mind. Difficulties don't arise without causes and conditions; we should check what those causes and conditions are. Many of our difficulties we may find are produced by mistaken ways of thinking.

When we meet with difficulties, everything is relative, and we should think about it in perspective. If we compare our difficulties with someone who seems to be free from these challenges, it will make our suffering appear greater; whereas, if we compare it to someone destitute who is tormented by suffering, our own difficulties may seem quite small. When we

experience hardship, we should always think of the less fortunate and especially those who are currently undergoing suffering.

If we always think about Dharma, impermanence, selflessness, interdependence, and so on, it will make a big difference when we meet with hardship; we will be less disturbed by it. If we can henceforth plant instincts in our mind for the Dharma, even if we don't believe in reincarnation, it can make a big difference in how we deal with the many difficult things we encounter during the course of our lives.

I would like to translate one thing that Rinpoche said which wasn't in the English version before, which is in the context of cultivating contentment and enjoying life moment by moment. A lot of our problems come from pride and thinking that we are right. If any problems come up it's because of the other person or it's their fault. Nagarjuna said that when this kind of thing happens, don't see the person as the enemy but the delusion in their mind as the enemy or the problem. When you have an encounter with someone who is angry, see that delusion in their mind as the problem and feel compassion for them. They are being disturbed by this demon of this disturbing affliction of the mind. And think "how fortunate that I am not experiencing this". So in that way having compassion for them as another living being just like oneself.

Rinpoche wants me to read another account of an incredible example of taking hardship into the path which is about his root guru Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche. Rinpoche says "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 Ze Dong and the Chinese communists. At that time many innocent Tibetan lamas and tulks were put in prison. My root guru was also put in prison and 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 of starvation in prison. My root guru was in his thirties at this time and he had to spend 21 years in prison. During that time he not only practiced

dharma, he also focused single pointedly on nothing else but the practice of love and compassion for others in a meditation of giving and taking called Tonglen in Tibetan.

When you give, you mentally send to others your body, possessions and all of the positive actions that you have created in the past or will create in the present and future. You even send it out to undesirable enemies, demons and obstructors and so on. When you take, you mentally take upon yourself others sickness, pain and suffering, 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 and wanting to take away their suffering, it will destroy all the causes of your own suffering. 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 and conducive place for the practice of dharma. 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, 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. 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, 5 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 him

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 and 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 Ze Dong 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 “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 21 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 my monastery had given me absolutely no time for that. Now I’ve been able to spend 21 years in a retreat and 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 greatly been boosted and enhanced by his prison experience. I don’t remember it in its entirety but it was very eloquent and beautiful.

Rinpoche added one little point and mentioned some of the signs around the prison. Sometimes there were many rainbows that would appear which was a sign of many holy beings there in prison.

It is so important that we take care of our mind. The nature of human beings is so funny, as soon as something goes wrong we are immediately pointing our fingers at others. It's their problem or they made the mistake but this point of view is a big mistake. As I always say, we really want to experience happiness and it's so important to watch our minds and take care of our minds. So I always speak about the benefits of meditation but meditation doesn't happen just while sitting down. It can also happen while we are moving around or walking and in fact, it's crucial that we are always paying attention to our mind. Because our mind is so quick either on the side of negative things or positive things. It can quickly do many things and it's constantly pulling us in different directions. Our subdued peaceful mind is leading us to liberation whereas our turbulent mind of delusions is dragging us down into worse states of being.

We don't pay attention to what would be really good to pay attention to and we try to take care of a lot of things that aren't that important. External things like gathering wealth and property and so on. Whereas what would really be important is to take care of our own mind; we don't pay attention to that. It is sometimes difficult to see the problems that are created by pride, anger or great attachment, our selfish and self-centered kind of attitude in our own mind. It is sometimes difficult to see the problems inherent in those because we have so much attachment to ourselves. We think that we're perfect or fine and we need that pride in order to get ahead and provide for ourselves and so on. I think it is important to see how these afflictions of the mind actually do disturb us and there's negativity around them. They are like garbage in our mind and if we let garbage pile up around our house, it would start to stink. And we wouldn't be able to bear right so if we have these kinds of harmful disturbing attitudes in our mind, our mind is just filled with them. Then we're going to have a lot of problems so we need to look at the faults that occur because of these excessive self-important attitude. The attitude of pride, anger and so on.

KKR: I want to say thank you to everyone and I request everyone to please meditate every day for at least five minutes every morning, five minutes in

the afternoon and five minutes in the evening. There are so many types of meditation but the meditation on impermanence is the best kind of meditation. Today we talked about happiness but I know people do not like to hear about death or impermanence.

But we have to accept that one day, all of us are going to meet up with the gross impermanence of death at some point. As a way of preparing for that, to be aware of the constantly changing nature of existence and the transitory nature of impermanence. If we continually contemplate that and make ourselves aware of it, Rinpoche says “I guarantee that it will bring us happiness.”

So if anyone has a question or two we could entertain those.

Question from Aaron Joseph:

Rinpoche I have a question. Thank you so much for the teaching. It's always a really important reminder for me to practice when things are difficult. But I also find it very difficult to practice when things are going really well. Because I feel like ‘oh things are going really well and then I don't feel that urgency. Out of the sense that I need to practice and I get a little bit lazy.’ So do you have a recommendation for how to best practice when things are going very well?

Answer: So we do want to maintain a steadiness of practice through good times and bad. Practice of dharma is like adding drop by drop and it's most effective if it's continuous. When things are going well, we need to realize that this is a result of good karma and merit that we've created in the past. But it gets used up so quickly that just having this good fortune now is using up tremendous amounts of merit. So if we don't create more merit, we are not going to see anything like this again in the future. Let it be a reminder that this comes about from the creation of merit and good karma. And that there is every need to create more of that if we have any hope for such kinds of good conditions in the future.

If there are no more questions then we'll stop here and as we announced that our yearly retreat is starting from 9 o'clock tomorrow. So please everyone, you're welcome to join us.

Conclusion Prayer:

May all beings minds turn towards the dharma

May dharma become the path

May the path be clear of deception

May deception arise as innate wisdom