

Transforming Suffering and Happiness

by Dodrupchen Jigme Tenpe Nyima

Homage

*I pay homage to Noble Avalokiteśvara, recalling his qualities:
Forever joyful at the happiness of others,
And plunged into sorrow whenever they suffer,
You have fully realized Great Compassion, with all its qualities,
And abide, without a care for your own happiness or suffering!¹*

Statement of Intent

I am going to put down here a partial instruction on how to use both happiness and suffering as the path to enlightenment. This is indispensable for leading a spiritual life, a most needed tool of the Noble Ones, and quite the most priceless teaching in the world.

There are two parts:

- 1) how to use suffering as the path,
- 2) and how to use happiness as the path.

Each one is approached firstly through relative truth, and then through absolute truth.

1) How to Use Suffering as the Path to Enlightenment

i. Through Relative Truth

Whenever we are harmed by sentient beings or anything else, if we make a habit out of perceiving only the suffering, then when even the smallest problem comes up, it will cause enormous anguish in our mind.

This is because the nature of any perception or idea, be it happiness or sorrow, is to grow stronger and stronger the more we become accustomed to it. So as the strength of this pattern gradually builds up, before long we'll find that just about everything we perceive becomes a cause for actually attracting unhappiness towards us, and happiness will never get a chance.

If we do not realize that it all depends on the way in which mind develops this habit, and instead we put the blame on external objects and situations alone, the flames of suffering, negative karma, aggression and so on will spread like wildfire, without end. This is what is called: "all appearances arising as enemies."

We should arrive at a very precise understanding that the whole reason why sentient beings in this degenerate age are plagued by so much suffering is because they have such feeble powers of discernment.

So not to be hurt by the obstacles created by enemies, illness or harmful influences, does not mean to say that things like sickness can be driven away, and that they will never occur again. Rather, it simply means that they will not be able to obstruct us from practising on the path.

In order for this to happen, we need: first, to get rid of the attitude of being entirely unwilling to face any suffering ourselves and, second, to cultivate the attitude of actually being joyful when suffering arises.

Dropping the Attitude of Being Entirely Unwilling to Suffer

Think about all the depression, anxiety and irritation we put ourselves through by always seeing suffering as unfavourable, something to be avoided at all costs. Now, think about two things: how useless this is, and how much trouble it causes. Go on reflecting on this repeatedly, until you are absolutely convinced.

Then say to yourself: “From now on, whatever I have to suffer, I will never become anxious or irritated.” Go over this again and again in your mind, and summon all your courage and determination.

First, let’s look at how useless it is. If we can do something to solve a problem, then there is no need to worry or be unhappy about it; if we can’t, then it doesn’t help to worry or be unhappy about it either.

Then, the enormous trouble involved. As long as we don’t get anxious and irritated, then our strength of mind will enable us to bear even the hardest of sufferings easily; they’ll feel as flimsy and insubstantial as cotton wool. But while we are dominated by anxiety, even the tiniest problem becomes extremely difficult to cope with, because we have the additional burden of mental discomfort and unhappiness.

Imagine, for example, trying to get rid of desire and attachment for someone we find attractive while continuing to dwell all the while on their attractive qualities. It would all be in vain. In just the same way, if we concentrate only on the pain brought by suffering, we’ll never be able to develop endurance or the ability to bear it.² So, as in the instructions called ‘Sealing the Doors of the Senses’, don’t latch onto all kinds of mind-made concepts about your suffering. Learn instead to leave the mind undisturbed in its own natural state, bring the mind home, rest there, and let it find its own ground.

Cultivating the Attitude of Being Joyful when Suffering Arises

Seeing suffering as an ally to help us on the path, we must learn to develop a sense of joy when it arises. Yet whenever suffering strikes, unless we have some kind of spiritual practice to bring to it, one which matches the capacity of our mind, no matter how many times we might say to ourselves: ‘Well, as long as I’ve got roughly the right method, I’ll be able to use suffering and obtain such and such a benefit’, it’s highly unlikely that we’ll succeed. We’ll be as far from our goal, the saying goes, as the earth is from the sky.

Therefore, use suffering as the basis for the following practices:

a. Using Suffering to Train in Renunciation

Sometimes, then, use your suffering in order to train your mind in renunciation.

Say to yourself: “As long as I wander, powerless and without any freedom, in samsara, this kind of suffering is not something unjust or unwarranted. It’s simply the very nature of samsara.” At times, develop a deep sense of revulsion by thinking: “If it’s already so hard for me to bear even the little suffering and pain of the happy realms, then what about the suffering of the lower realms? Samsara is indeed an ocean of suffering, fathomless and without any end!” Then turn your mind towards liberation, and enlightenment.

b. Using Suffering to Train in Taking Refuge

Say to yourself: “Life after life, again and again we are continuously plagued by these kind of fears, and the one and only protection that can never fail us is the precious guide, the Buddha, the precious path, the Dharma, and the precious companions on the way, the Saṅgha: the Three Jewels. So it is on them that I must rely, entirely. Whatever happens, I will never renounce them.” Let this become a firm conviction, and train in the practice of taking refuge.

c. Using Suffering to Overcome Arrogance

As I explained before, [as long as we are in samsara] we are never independent or truly free or in control of our lives. On the contrary, we are always dependent on and at the mercy of suffering. So we must eliminate ‘the enemy that destroys anything that is wholesome and good’, which is arrogance and pride; and we must do away with the evil attitude of belittling others and considering them as inferior.

d. Using Suffering to Purify Harmful Actions

Remind yourself and realize: “All this suffering which I’m going through, and suffering which is greater still—all the boundless suffering that there is—come from nothing but harmful, negative actions.”

Reflect, carefully and thoroughly, how:

1. karma is certain—cause and effect is infallible;
2. karma multiplies enormously;³
3. you will never face the effects of something you have not done;
4. whatever you have done will never go to waste.

Then say to yourself: “So, if I really don’t want to suffer any more, then I must give up the cause of suffering, which is negativity.”⁴ With the help of ‘The Four Powers’, make an effort to acknowledge and purify all the negative actions you have accumulated in the past, and then firmly resolve to avoid doing them in the future.

e. Using Suffering to Find Joy in Positive Action

Say to yourself: “If I really want to find happiness, which is the opposite of suffering, then I have got to make an effort to practise its cause, which is positive action.” Think about this in detail, and from every angle, and dwell on the implications. Then in every way possible, do whatever you can to make your positive, beneficial actions increase.

f. Using Suffering to Train in Compassion

Say to yourself: “Just like me, others too are tormented by similar suffering, or even much worse...” Train yourself by thinking: “If only they could be free from all this suffering! How wonderful it would be!” This will also help you to understand how to practise loving kindness, where the focus of the practice is those who have no happiness.

g. Using Suffering to Cherish Others More Than Yourself

Train yourself to think: “The very reason why I am not free from suffering such as this is that from time immemorial I have cared only about myself. Now, from this moment onwards, I will only cherish others, as this is the source of all happiness and good.”

It is extremely difficult to use suffering as the path when it has already struck, and is staring us in the face. That is why it is crucial to become familiar in advance with the specific practices to be used when misfortune and difficulties befall us. It is also particularly helpful, and will really count, if we use the practice we know best, and of which we have a clear, personal experience.

With this, suffering and difficulties can become a help for our spiritual practice—but that alone is not enough. We need to gain a sense of real joy and enthusiasm, inspired by a thorough appreciation for our achievement, and then to reinforce this, and make it stable and continuous.

So, with each of the practices outlined above, say to yourself: “This suffering has been of tremendous assistance; it will help me to achieve the many wonderful kinds of happiness and bliss which are experienced in the higher realms and in liberation from samsara and which are extremely difficult to find. From now on too, I know that whatever suffering lies in store for me will have the same effect. So however tough, however difficult the suffering may be, it will always bring me the greatest joy and happiness, bitter and yet sweet, like those Indian cakes made of sugar mixed with cardamom and pepper.” Follow this line of thought over and over, and very thoroughly, and get used to the happy state of mind that it brings. By reflecting like this, our minds will be so suffused with happiness that the suffering we feel through the senses will become almost imperceptible and incapable of disturbing our minds. This is the point at which sickness can be overcome through forbearance. It’s worth noting that this is also an indication as to whether difficulties brought about by enemies, harmful spirits and so on can be overcome.

As we have already seen, reversing the attitude of not wanting to suffer is the whole basis for transforming suffering into our spiritual path. This is because we simply won’t be able to turn suffering into the path as long as anxiety and irritation continue to eat away at our confidence and disturb our mind.

The more we arrive at actually transforming suffering into the path, the more we will enhance and reinforce all our previous practice. This is because our courage and good humour will grow all the more, once we can see from our own experience how suffering causes our spiritual practice and qualities to blossom.

It is said that by training gradually with smaller sufferings, ‘step by step, in easy stages’, then in the end we’ll be able to handle big suffering and difficulties too. We must go about it like this, because it is extremely difficult to have an experience of something which is beyond our level or capacity.

In the breaks between sessions, pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels that you may be able to take suffering onto your path. When your mind has grown a little bit stronger, then make offerings to the Three Jewels and to negative forces and insist: “Please send me misfortune and obstacles, so I can work on developing the strength of my practice!” At the same time, always, always stay confident, cheerful and happy.

When you first begin this training, it is vital to distance yourself from ordinary social activities. Otherwise, caught up in everyday preoccupations and busyness, you will be influenced by all your misguided friends, asking questions like: “How can you bear to put up with so much suffering...so much humiliation...?”

Besides, the endless worrying about enemies, relatives and possessions will cloud our awareness, and upset our minds beyond all our control, so that we inevitably go astray, sliding into bad habits. Then, on top of this, we'll be swept away by all kinds of distracting objects and situations.

But in the solitude of a retreat environment, since none of these are present, your awareness is very lucid and clear, and so it's easy to make the mind do whatever you want it to do.

It is for this very reason that when practitioners of Chöd train in 'trampling right on top of suffering', at the beginning they put off doing the practice using the harm caused by human beings and amidst distraction, but instead make a point of working with the apparitions of gods and demons in cemeteries and other desolate and powerful places.⁵

To sum up: Not only so that your mind will not be affected by misfortune and suffering, but also to be able to draw happiness and peace of mind out of these things themselves, what we need to do is this: Do not see inner problems like illness, or outer troubles like rivals, spirits or scandalous gossip, as something undesirable and unpleasant, but instead simply get used to seeing them as something pleasing and delightful.

To accomplish this, we need to stop looking at harmful circumstances as problems and make every effort to view them as beneficial. After all, whether a thing is pleasant or unpleasant comes down to how it is perceived by the mind.

Take an example: someone who continually dwells on the futility of ordinary, mundane preoccupations will only get more and more fed up as their wealth or circle increase. On the other hand, someone who sees worldly affairs as meaningful and beneficial will seek, and even pray, to increase their power and influence.

With this kind of training then:

- our mind and character will become more peaceful and more gentle;
- we will become more open (and more flexible);
- we will be easier to get along with;
- we will be courageous and confident;
- we will be freed from obstacles that hinder our Dharma practice;
- we will be able to turn any negative circumstances to our advantage, meet with success, and bring glory and auspiciousness;
- and our mind will always be content, in the happiness born of inner peace.

To follow a spiritual path in this degenerate age, we cannot be without armour of this kind. Because if we're no longer tormented by the suffering of anxiety and irritation, not only will other kinds of suffering fade away, like soldiers who've lost

their weapons, but even misfortunes like illness will, as a rule, vanish on their own.

The saints of the past used to say:

“If you are not unhappy or discontented about anything, then your mind will not be disturbed. Since your mind is not disturbed, the subtle wind energy (Tib. *lung*) will not be disturbed. That means the other elements of the body will not be disturbed either. As a result, your mind will not be disturbed, and so it goes on, as the wheel of constant happiness turns.”

Also:

Horses and donkeys with sores on their backs
Are an easy prey for scavenging birds.
People who are prone to fear,
Are easy victims to negative spirits.
But not those whose character is stable and strong.

Thus it is that the wise, seeing that all happiness and suffering depend upon the mind, will seek their happiness and well-being within the mind. Since all the causes of happiness are entirely within themselves, they will not be dependent on anything external, which means that nothing whatsoever, be it sentient beings or anything else, can do them any harm. And even when they die, this attitude will follow, so that they will always, always be free and in control.

This is just how the bodhisattvas attain their meditative stabilization (*śamādhī*) called ‘overwhelming over all phenomena with bliss’.

However, foolish people chase after external objects and circumstances in the hope of finding happiness. But whatever happiness they do find, great or small, it always turns out like the saying:

You’re not in control; it’s all in others’ hands.
As if your hair were caught up in a tree.

What you’d hoped for never comes to be; things never come together; or else you make misjudgments, and there is only one failure after another. Enemies and thieves have no trouble harming you, and even the slightest false accusation will separate you from your happiness. However much a crow looks after a baby cuckoo, it can never turn it into a baby crow. In the same way, if all your efforts are misguided and based on something unreliable, they will bring nothing but fatigue for the gods, negative emotions for the spirits, and suffering for yourself.

This ‘heart advice’ brings a hundred different essential instructions together, into one crucial point. There are many other pith instructions on accepting suffering and

hardships in order to practise the path, and on transforming illness and destructive forces into the path, as taught for example in the ‘Pacifying’ tradition. But here, in a way that’s easy to understand, I have given a general outline of how to accept suffering, based on the writings of the Noble Śāntideva, and his wise and learned followers.

ii. Through Absolute Truth

By means of reasoning, such as ‘the refutation of production from the four extremes’,⁶ the mind is drawn towards emptiness, the natural condition of things, a supreme state of peace, and there it rests. In this state, let alone harmful circumstances or suffering, not even their names can be found.

Even when you come out of this state, it’s not like before, when suffering arose in your mind and you would react with dread and lack of confidence. Now you can overcome it by viewing it as unreal and nothing but a label.

I have not gone into detail here.

2. How To Use Happiness as the Path to Enlightenment

i. Through Relative Truth

Whenever happiness and the various things that cause happiness appear, if we slip under their power, then we will grow increasingly conceited, smug and lazy, which will block our spiritual path and progress.

In fact it’s difficult not to be carried away by happiness, as Padampa Sangye pointed out:

We human beings can cope with a lot of suffering,
But very little happiness.

That’s why we need to open our eyes, in whatever ways we can, to the fact that happiness and the things that cause happiness are all actually impermanent, and are by nature suffering.⁷

So try as best you can to arouse a deep sense of disillusionment, and to stop your mind indulging in its usual apathy and negligence. Say to yourself:

“Look: all the happiness and material wealth of this world is trifling and insignificant, and brings with it all kinds of problems and difficulties. Still, in a certain sense, it does have its good side. Buddha said that someone whose freedom is impaired by suffering will have great difficulty attaining enlightenment, but for someone who is happy, it is easier to attain.

“What good fortune then to be able to practise the Dharma in a state of happiness like this! So, from now on, in whatever way I can, I must convert this happiness into Dharma, and then from the Dharma, happiness and well-being will continuously arise. That’s how I can train in making Dharma and happiness support one another. Otherwise, I’ll always end up where I started—like trying to boil water in a wooden saucepan.”

The main point to get here is that whatever happiness, whatever well-being, comes our way, we must unite it with Dharma practice. This is the whole vision behind Nāgārjuna’s *Garland of Jewels*.⁸

Even though we may be happy, if we don’t recognize it, we will never be able to make use of that happiness as an opportunity for practising the Dharma. Instead we’ll be forever hoping that some extra happiness will come our way, and we’ll waste our lives on countless projects and actions. The antidote to this is to apply the practice wherever it is appropriate, and, above all, to savour the nectar of contentment.

There are other ways of turning happiness into the path, especially those based on recalling the kindness of the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha, and on the instructions for training in *bodhicitta*, but this will do for now. As with using suffering as the path, so with happiness too, you need to go to a solitary retreat environment and combine this with practices of purification and accumulating merit and wisdom.

ii. The Absolute Dimension

This is the same as for turning suffering into the path.

What this Training Brings

If we cannot practise when we’re suffering because of all the anxiety we go through, and we cannot practise when we’re happy because of our attachment to happiness, then that rules out any chance of our practising Dharma at all. That is why there is nothing more crucial for a practitioner than this training in turning happiness and suffering into the path.

And if you do have this training, no matter where you live, in a solitary place or in the middle of a city; whatever the people around you are like, good or bad; whether you’re rich or poor, happy or distressed; whatever you have to listen to, praise or condemnation, good words or bad; you’ll never feel the slightest fear that it could bring you down in any way. No wonder this training is called the ‘Lion-Like Yoga’.

Whatever you do, your mind will be happy, peaceful, spacious and relaxed. Your whole attitude will be pure, and everything will turn out excellently. Your body might be living in this impure world of ours, but your mind will experience the splendour of an unimaginable bliss, like the bodhisattvas in their pure realms.

It'll be just as the precious Kadampa masters used to say:

Keep happiness under control;
Put an end to suffering.
With happiness under control
And suffering brought to an end:
When you're all alone,
This training will be your true friend;
When you are sick,
It will be your nurse.

Goldsmiths first remove the impurities from gold by melting it in fire, and then make it malleable by rinsing it over and over again in water. It is just the same with the mind. If by using happiness as the path, you become weary and disgusted with it, and by taking suffering as the path, you make your mind clear and cheerful, then you will easily attain the extraordinary *samādhi* which makes mind and body capable of doing anything you wish.

This instruction, I feel, is the most profound of all, for it perfects discipline, the source of everything positive and wholesome. This is because not being attached to happiness creates the basis of the extraordinary discipline of renunciation, and not being afraid of suffering makes this discipline completely pure.

As they say:

Generosity forms the basis for discipline;
And patience is what purifies it.

By training in this practice now, then when you attain the higher stages of the path, this is what it will be like:

You will realize that all phenomena are like an illusion, and
To be born again is just like walking into a lovely garden.
Whether you face prosperity or ruin,
You'll have no fear of negative emotions or suffering.⁹

Here are some illustrations from the life of the Buddha. Before he attained enlightenment, he abandoned the kingdom of a universal monarch as if it were straw and lived by the river Nairañjanā without a care for the harshness of the austerities he was practising. What he showed was that in order to accomplish our own ultimate benefit, the nectar of realization, we must have mastered the one taste of happiness and suffering.

Then after he attained enlightenment, the chiefs of humans and gods, as far as the highest realms, showed him the greatest reverence, placing his feet on the crown of

their heads, and offering to serve and honour him with all manner of delights. However, a brahmin called Bhāradvāja abused him and criticized him a hundred times; he was accused of sexual misconduct with the impudent daughter of another brahmin; he lived off rotten horse fodder for three months in the land of King Agnidatta, and so on. But he remained without the slightest fluctuation in his mind, neither elated nor downcast, like Mount Meru unshaken by the wind. He showed that in order to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings, again we have to have mastered that equal taste of happiness and suffering.

Afterword

A teaching like this should really be taught by the Kadampa masters, whose very lives enacted their saying:

“No complaints when there’s suffering,
Great renunciation when there’s happiness.”

But if it’s someone like me who explains it, then I’m sure that even my own tongue is going to get fed up and cringe with embarrassment. Still, with the sole aim of making one taste of all the worldly preoccupations¹⁰ my second nature, I, the old beggar Tenpe Nyima, have written this, here in the forest of many birds.

| This edition was prepared especially for Lotsawa House by Adam Pearcey, 2006, based on earlier versions by Rigpa Translations.

1. By Candragomin. ↩
2. བཟོད་སྒྲུབ། (*bzod sran*): the ability to bear suffering—fearance, endurance, patience, fortitude, and stability. ↩
3. Alak Zenkar Rinpoche: “You might complain: ‘I didn’t do anything bad, or very little, in this life, so why do I go through such suffering?’ It’s easy for karma to increase. Just as how from a tiny seed in the earth, a lot of fruit can grow. The results of one action (*karma*) can multiply enormously, as they themselves spawn further consequences, like a family tree.” ↩
4. What is the difference between harmful actions (*sdig pa*) and negativity (*mi dge ba*)? ‘Negativity’ is a general term to denote the unvirtuous and immoral. ‘Harmful action’ is more intense; not only are such actions unvirtuous, but they are destructive and cause harm. To have an unvirtuous thought is only in the mind, and it is not necessarily acted out. In general ‘harmful action’ is connected to physical action. ↩

5. གཉེན་ས། (*gnyen sa*): the eerie places in Tibet, where people would be afraid to cause any kind of disturbance. For example, on top of a high mountain, where you would not dare make a noise for fear of offending the spirits of the place. ↩
6. Things are not produced from themselves, from something other than themselves, from both or without causes. See Mipham Rinpoche, *The Four Great Logical Arguments of the Middle Way*. ↩
7. This is a reference to the ‘suffering of change’. When a pleasant situation changes, it becomes a source of suffering. Consider, for example, the sorrow caused by the death of a child. It is because we were so happy when the child was alive that his or her death causes us such pain. ↩
8. Nāgārjuna wrote the ‘_Garland of Jewels_’ (*Ratnāvalī*) as advice for his friend who was a king living in great luxury, so he suggested how to use his situation and turn it into the path of Dharma. ↩
9. Maitreya, *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras (Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra)*. The first line is connected with wisdom, the second with compassion. ↩
10. The ‘eight worldly concerns’ of happiness and suffering, praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and insignificance. ↩



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